



Russia and Iran Compete for Syria's Phosphates

OE Watch Commentary: Syria's most important phosphate reserves are found in the al-Khunayfis and al-Sharqiyya (aka al-Sawwanah) deposits, located approximately 50 kilometers southwest of the city of Palmyra. For much of the Syrian conflict these areas had been controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but in March 2017 loyalist forces reclaimed them with critical military assistance from Russia and Iran. Since then, Russia and Iran have competed to control these deposits, as described in the accompanying excerpted articles. Similar friction may develop in other domains, as the Assad government's main backers compete with one another for the rights to extract resources and rebuild infrastructure in government-controlled parts of Syria.

The first accompanying excerpt, from the Syrian opposition news journal *Ayn al-Madina*, somewhat hyperbolically characterizes Palmyra as an "Iranian Settlement." The article claims that Iran-backed militiamen who helped seize Palmyra from ISIS have settled there with their families, and at Iran's behest, Syrian government forces have prevented Palmyra's residents from returning. The article's author nonetheless claims that Russians ultimately call the shots in Palmyra, through a military presence numbering fewer than 300 and consisting of Russian "generals and soldiers" alongside "Ukrainian mercenaries" from the Russian private military company Wagner.

The second accompanying excerpt, also from *Ayn al-Madina*, explains how some weeks after ISIS seized the area for a second time in December 2016, the Syrian government signed an agreement granting Iran the right to extract, process, and sell Syrian phosphates. This irked Russia, and days later a high-level Russian delegation signed a memorandum of intent with the Syrian government for exploitation of the phosphate deposits. At some point in 2017, once the Palmyra countryside had been cleared of ISIS fighters, Iranian-backed militias took control of the al-Sharqiyya deposits. In March 2018, however, the Syrian newspaper *al-Watan* reported that the Russian company Stroytransgaz had been granted the rights to extract phosphates from the al-Sharqiyya deposits. Shortly before the agreement was announced, according to the accompanying passage from the Syrian opposition news website *Orient News*, Russia dispatched fighters from Syria's "Tiger Forces" to seize the mine from Iranian-backed groups by force. While infighting between Syrian loyalist militias is fairly commonplace, clashes over natural resources between clients of Russia and Iran is not. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

Source: تدمر مستوطنة إيرانية بزعماء روسية والنظام يمنع أهلها من العودة
Mohammed Hassan al-Aid. "Palmyra: Iranian Settlement Led by Russia; the Regime Prevents its People from Returning," *Ayn al-Madina*, 9 April 2018. <https://goo.gl/duk6kp>

Since controlling Palmyra in March 2017, Syrian regime forces have looted homes and prevented local government and opposition supporters from returning to their homes, apparently following directives from their Iranian allies who since entering the city have sought to colonize it by settling the families of fighters in civilian homes and establishing military bases in others. Russians, meanwhile, simply put some of their generals and soldiers there to monitor the activities of the regime and the Iranians present in force there, especially given that the area is rich in mineral resources (oil and phosphates), as well as the city's geographic and historical importance... The forces controlling Palmyra currently are local and foreign militias of various loyalties, including loyalist militias... and others who number twice as many as others and follow Shi'i ideology and receive direct orders from the IRGC... these militias have taken over Palmyra's northern and western neighborhoods... Russian forces in Palmyra are fewer than 300, including generals and soldiers as well as Ukrainian mercenaries working for the Wagner PMC. Their aim is to contain Iranian influence in the city and control natural resources and facilities... "Despite their small numbers vis-a-vis their Iranian allies, the Russians call all the shots in the area."

Source: روسيا تفوز بالفوسفات السوري والفتات المشع لإيران
Fawaz al-Faris. "Russia Wins Syrian Phosphates and Iran Gets Radioactive Crumbs," *Ayn al-Madina*, 29 April 2018. <https://goo.gl/mKuFvE>

Due to ISIS's control over the area, the Assad government... signed an agreement with Iran on 16 January 2017 to invest in the Khunayfis phosphate mines in rural Homs. The debt would be repaid by providing Iran with Syrian phosphates. A joint company was formed to oversee the extraction and export to Iran, through a land route linking Iran to the Syrian phosphate deposits via Iraq... Russia, Assad's strongest ally, was not pleased by the signing of an agreement with Iran and sent its deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozyn at the head of an economic delegation, only two days after Khamis's visit to Tehran. They went straight to Assad, after which Rogozyn told the Russian Interfax agency, on 18 January 2017, that his country would help Syria rebuild its energy infrastructure like no other... Russia has the lion's share of these [phosphate] agreements, which explains the quarrel between the two allies...

Source: النفط توقع عقداً لاستخراج الفوسفات في تدمر مع شركة روسية
"Oil Ministry Signs Phosphate Extraction Contract for Palmyra with Russian Company," *al-Watan*, 24 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/XQESVu>

Al-Watan has learned from a source in the oil ministry that contract number 66 was recently signed between Syria's General Geological Institution and the Russian company Stroytransgaz...

Source: بعد طرد ميليشيات إيران.. روسيا تستحوذ على عقود مناجم الفوسفات في البادية
"After Expelling 'Iranian Militias'... Russia Takes Control of Phosphate Deposit Contracts in the Syrian Desert," *Orient News*, 25 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/SwfFbF>

An anonymous source provided Orient.Net with new information on the Russia-Iran conflict over phosphate mines in Syria, claiming that Iran had sent its militias to take over the mines and carry out what was agreed to with Tehran. Russia, though, sent the "Tiger Forces" into the battle, and they in turn threatened to strike any vehicle emerging with cargo from the mine. He added that the "Tiger Forces" followed through on their threat, striking a cargo vehicle that emerged from the mine. After that they carried out an attack and seized control of the mine by force, expelling the Iranian militias. The source said that following this attack and seizure of the mine, Russia rushed to sign a contract with the regime through a Russian company... As Russian companies were able to take over the development of the Khunayfis and al-Sharqiyya mines in rural Palmyra, Iran hoped to take control of them and gain economically from them. This is part of a broader economic struggle between Russia and Iran for control over Syrian phosphate deposits...