



Is Russia Getting Entangled in Southwest Syria?

OE Watch Commentary: After retaking Daraa Province last summer, the Syrian government and its Russian backers hoped that former rebels and other military-age males would help kickstart stabilization efforts by joining a regional branch of the “5th Corps,” a Russian-led formation through which “reconciled” armed rebels are brought under the command of the Syrian Armed Forces. A string of assassinations that began in early 2019 and has mostly targeted reconciled commanders from Daraa, however, hints that the province is becoming a semi-anarchic site of competition between and among Syrian security agencies, Iranian-backed militias, and recalcitrant rebels. The accompanying excerpted articles describe these dynamics and the challenges they pose for Russia.

The first two accompanying excerpts, one from *al-Araby al-Jadid* and the other from *al-Modon*, claim there is a growing presence of Iranian-backed forces in Syria’s southwest. These forces, according to the articles, are under “strict orders” to conceal their identities and avoid mixing with local residents; they fly Syrian flags over their checkpoints and facilities, dress in Syrian military fatigues and even carry Syrian military ID cards. The deception is purportedly aimed in part at Russian forces, given Moscow’s pledge to prevent Iranian forces from digging in near the border with Israel.

The clandestine presence of Iranian-backed forces is hardly Russia’s only problem in Syria’s southwest. According to the third accompanying excerpt, also from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, the government’s return to Daraa has unleashed a turf war between various security agencies, with local media reporting widespread instances of arbitrary detentions and the prevention of IDPs from returning home. Living conditions are, for many, worse than they were under rebel control, leading some local residents to openly resist the reconciliations. A group calling itself the “Popular Resistance” has taken credit for various hit-and-run attacks, including the one on the alleged Hezbollah position mentioned above. In a rebellious neighborhood of the provincial capital Daraa, where the only formal government security presence consists of occasional patrols by Russian military police, anti-government protests broke out in early March.

As the third excerpt notes, many residents in reconciled communities see Russia as the only party that can resolve their problems, even though Russia does not have the capacity to do so. According to the article, Russian officers are routinely manipulated by Syrian government agents, who feed their Russian counterparts “false information” and make promises that go unfulfilled. They do so with an awareness of “the Russians’ inability to follow up on every single detail” and their lack of experience “in dealing with local issues.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“Most of the time Russian officers are manipulated by regime officers...”

Source:

تواجد جديد لـ“حزب الله” بالسويداء وتوسع في جنوب سورية
Rayan Mohammed. “New Hezbollah Presence in Suweida and Expansion in Southern Syria,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*. 28 January 2019. <https://goo.gl/RmiJpD>

It appears that Hezbollah and Iranian groups are redeploying in southern Syria, first of all with the goal of having a presence near the Syrian occupied Golan Heights and second to avoid the danger of Israeli strikes. They are especially doing so in Suweida Province and its environs, which is majority Druze.

The movements of these militias in southern Syria, from Suweida to Daraa to Quneitra, is taking place despite all the talk about a Russian-Israeli international agreement to clear the area adjacent to the occupied Syrian Golan of any Iranian or Lebanese Hezbollah presence at a depth of 80 to 100 kilometers...

“Hezbollah and Iranian militias are present in Daraa and Quneitra. They are not visible as in Damascus, for example, since they do not raise flags or chant slogans that identify their sect...”

... the reason Hezbollah and Iranian militias cannot be noticed in southern Syria is the strong orders they were given to conceal their identities. They wear military uniforms like those of the regular military and they have even been provided with military ID cards. They are forbidden from mixing with and speaking to people, so no one finds out they are not Syrian.

Source:

دراعا: المقاومة الشعبية تستهدف مقرّاً لحزب الله
“Daraa: Popular Resistance Targets Hezbollah Base,” *al-Modon*, 6 February 2019. <https://goo.gl/mcUIdj>

The video shows a checkpoint with the Syrian flag flying above, in order to conceal the Hezbollah facility. This is a new strategy being used by Iran and its militias in the south, in order to prevent being targeted or disclosing their location. Russia has tried to prevent the presence of Iranian militias near the border with the occupied Golan, and Russia previously sent its military police to Tel Hara to strengthen its presence there, after a visit by leaders of Iranian-backed militias in October 2018. Several checkpoints in the villages of Nahta, Dael and Mahja have been recently targeted with light and medium weapons, without any casualties. Activists believe these attacks are a new Russian message to Iranian militias seeking to further expand in the region and recruit local residents. They do not discount the possibility of “reconciliation factions” backed by Russia carrying out the attacks with tacit agreement from Russia, in order to combat the danger of Iranian militias and hold up their pledge to protect the security of Israel and Jordan...

Amidst a Russian-Iranian disagreement on dividing the gains and extending their influence in the region, a disagreement which may develop into a long-term conflict in the near future, and amidst calls by local residents to continue the revolution until its goals are met, the one thing that remains firm is the chaos and instability in Daraa and its negative effects on the lives of people, which warns of more attacks and assassinations.

(continued)



Continued: Is Russia Getting Entangled in Southwest Syria?

Source:

Adnan Ahmed. "The 6th Corps: Russian Containment of Daraa's Residents or of Iran and its Militias?" *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 1 March 2019.

<https://goo.gl/drGBTk>

الفيلق السادس: احتواء روسي لأهالي درعا أم لإيران ومليشياتها؟

Last February 19, the spokesman for the Russian Reconciliation Center, Colonel Igor Federov, said that the people of Daraa are resorting to Russians to solve many of their affairs, which they cannot address themselves, including knowing the whereabouts of their relatives and problems relating to residency, housing and real-estate. Naturally, even if Russia has authority over the regime, it does not have the experience that the regime and the Iranians have in dealing with local issues. It also does not have sufficient staffing to deal with such tasks. Most of the time Russian officers are manipulated by regime officers who present them with false information or put off things they promise to do, relying on the Russians' inability to follow up on every single detail. In the meantime, the regime's security agencies compete to regain their former influence in any way possible, including assassinations which often target members of prominent families and for which they accuse members of other prominent families, with the goal of stirring up tribal and familial disputes in the province and making that particular security service the one to resolve the dispute, in order to increase their influence in the province.

Iran Diverting Money from Development to Military

OE Watch Commentary: President Hassan Rouhani, whose administration is now approaching its sixth anniversary, has repeatedly increased the Iranian military budget. According to the accompanying excerpted article from *Tasnim News*, an outlet close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Iranian government may soon increase its military budget by raiding the National Development Fund. The article suggests that the Iranian parliament has agreed to withdrawal around \$2.7 billion from the fund and will direct \$1.7 billion of it to the Iranian military. If Iranian budget statistics are taken at face value, this would represent more than a ten percent supplement to the current budget. The parliament would allocate the remaining billion dollars for a variety of sectors. Beyond that excerpted in the accompanying translation, the article provides additional funding for Iranian state television and film, water (potable and for irrigation) and various academic programming.

The justification for the diversion from the National Development Fund lies in the government's desire to fulfill the sixth development plan, which itself was approved by the Supreme Leader. Article 106 of the development plan demanded the strengthening of national defense.

The notion of a national development fund, much like other regional states' sovereign wealth fund, is to invest in the future and expand and diversify a government's wealth. That the Iranian government now withdraws money from its fund suggests that international sanctions are impacting the Iranian economy and that the Iranian government is increasingly looking for new ways to fund its current operations. Given the reality of power inside Iran and the influence of both the Supreme Leader and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, utilizing the National Development Fund to supplement the budget seems more realistic in the short-term than taxing properties linked to Iran's most influential power centers. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“...1.5 billion euros to strengthen the defense base.”



The Iranian government appears prepared to increase spending on the military.

Pictured is one of Iran's Fateh-class submarines.

Source: Defa News, http://www.defanews.ir/sites/default/files/NAME-A-971128-1030_6.jpg.

Source: "Majles 1.5 Milliard Euro baraye Taghvit Beneyeh Defa'-ye Etesas Dad (The Majlis allocated 1.5 billion euros)," *Tasnim News*, 24 February 2019. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/12/05/1954812>

According to the parliamentary correspondent of the Tasnim News Agency, at the public meeting of the Islamic Consultative Assembly on Sunday evening [24 February], the legislature passed two supplementary notes and four budget bills that authorized the government to withdrawal 2.375 billion euro [\$2.674 billion] from the 2019-2020 development fund in the form of foreign exchange and with the government's guarantee, and it is determined that these resources will be expended subject to the following decisions:

- Up to 150 million euros for pressurized water and modern irrigation schemes
- Up to 150 million euros for watershed and aquaculture
- Up to 100 million to counteract the destruction effect of pollutants and their impact on powergrids.
- Up to 1.5 billion euros to strengthen the defense base in fulfillment of Article 106 of the 6th Development Plan.
- Up to 40 million euros for laboratory and workshop equipment for the universities of the ministry of science...