

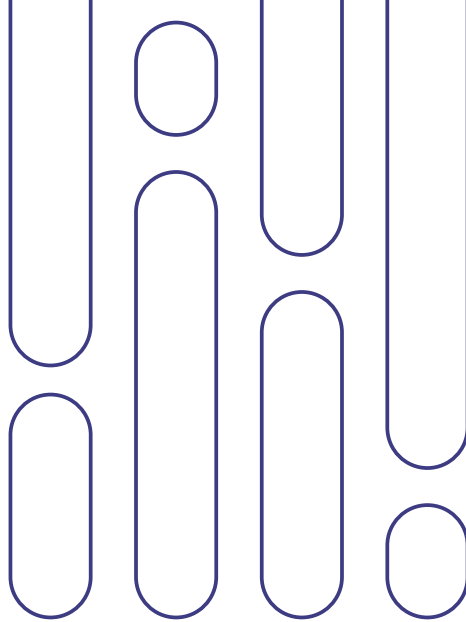
POSITION PAPER

US Troops on Military Alert at the Iraq-Syria-Jordan Border Triangle: Motives and Scenarios

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There are leaked videos and reports widely circulating on social media platforms and in Arab and global media outlets about US military arrangements and reinforcements. These reflect US military movements on the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle, which coincide with counter terror operations. These videos and reports have sparked extensive and ongoing debate among observers about the objectives, implications and final outcomes of US military movements in case the United States pursues the path of military escalation. These US moves are against the backdrop of regional and global shifts and in the context of forecasts indicating that a potential battle in the Middle East might erupt, especially as the clashes between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and local fighters who are close to the Arab tribes escalate. This is in addition to the protests that broke out in some Syrian provinces in response to deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

Signs of US Military Buildup in the Border Triangle Region

Observers of the developments in Syria believe that US military preparedness on the border triangle between Syria, Iraq and Jordan is reflected through the following:

Intensity of New US Military Arrangements

US military deployments in the border triangle region in particular and in eastern Syria, including the regions east of the Euphrates such as al-Hasakah and Raqqa, are diverse and on high alert compared to previous US military reinforcements. These include mobilizing forces toward the Qaim border crossing with Syria, and the deployment of armored vehicles and military equipment to enhance the US military presence in the Syrian regions close to Iraq's borders. In addition, US forces carry out military exercises as part of the Global Coalition Against

Daesh that involve fighter jets based at the Conoco base, which is close to the Conoco gas field, Syria's biggest gas field in Deir ez-Zor. These US moves have extended beyond merely posturing to address Daesh, according to many analysts.

The United States has stepped up reconnaissance operations that target Syrian depth in general and the eastern Euphrates in particular. The al-Tanf base, located at the border triangle, has received military columns coming from Ain al-Asad airbase. Unusual aircraft movements over the base have also been noticed, and al-Hasakah has received new convoys of US military trucks loaded with weapons coming from Iraq. In September 2023, a video was posted on Twitter that showed a military column featuring military trucks belonging to the Jordanian army and the US-led coalition at the Syria-Jordan border. Additionally, reports have revealed that the coalition forces intend to link the governorates of Sweida and Daraa with the eastern Euphrates and al-Tanf, which would help in encircling Damascus from the south and the east. Some observers have linked this with the visit by Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley to Jordan on August 23, 2023, suggesting that there is a US plan to enhance its military presence at the border triangle and the eastern Euphrates.

Continuation of Previous US Military Reinforcements

The current US military buildup also represents the continuation of previous reinforcements. Two military bases were established in Raqqa. The first was set up in the western Raqqa countryside at the end of 2022 while the second was established in Raqqa's southern entrance in February 2023. Reports in May 2023 indicated that Washington supplied its forces deployed at a military base near al-Omar oil field as well as at the Conoco gas field, both located in the eastern Euphrates, with [HIMARS](#) missile systems. The United States provided Ukraine with the

same system in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, allowing Ukrainian forces to carry out precision strikes against long-range Russian targets.

In June 2023, the coalition forces sent reinforcements to their military bases in eastern Syria. These reinforcements included a military column consisting of [40 armored vehicles](#) coming from Ain al-Asad airbase in western Anbar near the Iraq-Syria border. The move came a few days after sending a 25-armored vehicle military column. During the same month, Washington deployed [advanced](#) F-22 Raptor fighter jets in the region in response to Russian air harassment in Syrian airspace.

Washington's Deployment of Allied Military Formations

A number of video clips have shown the Free Syria Army's fighters, a resistance group opposed to the Assad regime and loyal to the United States, on high alert around the vicinity of al-Tanf base in anticipation of any potential attacks targeting it. Some analysts consider this high alert to be part of US preparations for the coming period. In June 2023, reports disclosed that there is US coordination with the [3,000-strong](#) al-Sanadid Forces, one of the groups that make up the SDF in al-Hasakah. This is reflective of a palpable change in US strategy toward the eastern Euphrates. The United States also called on the al-Sanadid Forces to collaborate with the Free Syria Army to counter Iran-backed militias. It appears that US coordination with al-[Sanadid](#) Forces and the Free Syria Army is real, particularly after Washington received information that Iran and Russia planned to strike US targets in Syria. The Free Syria Army has reiterated its [preparedness for coordination with the SDF](#) that includes the al-Sanadid Forces.

The Border Triangle Is Prioritized When It Comes to Military Reinforcements

A series of reports indicate that most arrangements are being undertaken inside Iraq, with the Syrian interior targeted, par-

ticularly the enhancement of the US military presence at the border triangle. This includes the checkpoints set up by US forces in Anbar and Dahouk — near the Qaim border crossing that is located on the opposite side of Syria's Abu Kamal city to the east of Syria on the Eastern bank of the Euphrates River that is controlled by the SDF. The United States is attempting to link al-Tanf base with the eastern Euphrates inside Syria.

The border triangle is of huge significance in the US, Iranian and Israeli strategies — given that it is located at a point where geopolitical interests intersect. It is a geographical extension of other regions containing diverse sectarian and demographic makeups as well as strategic commodities. Additionally, it is a crucial geopolitical region in the Iranian project, a transit point for transferring and smuggling arms to Iran's paramilitaries in the Iranian spheres of influence. Therefore, whoever controls the border triangle will inevitably possess levers as well as multiple and highly influential geopolitical tools.

The United States is fully aware of this triangle's importance and the leverage it provides in the standoff against the Russians and Iranians. US reinforcements in this region are also part of Washington's efforts to enhance the US presence in the eastern Euphrates, which is of strategic importance in terms of location as it houses US military bases as well as strategic commodities such as oil and gas. Tel Aviv considers the border triangle to be one of the most dangerous locations that threaten Israeli national security as it is the point of transferring Iranian weapons to the Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran, which does not believe in legal boundaries in its vital spheres, considers the border triangle to be of crucial importance and non-negotiable.. It considers the triangle as a strategic linkage point to its wider geopolitical project. Losing control over it would cut the links between the regions making up the project, thereby causing Tehran to lose its potency and effectiveness.

More Threatening Compared to Previous US Military Reinforcements

Unlike previous US military arrangements, these new positions pose greater threats to Russia and Iran in Syrian territories. They reflect US intentions to create a new reality at the border triangle, including the possible closure of the border. Previously, there had always been joint mechanisms through which Washington and Moscow could manage things to avoid collisions in Syria. In addition, Iranian activities against US forces were of a limited nature. However, it seems that the current tensions could lead to the existing rules of engagement being sidelined, signaling an imminent escalation in a region classified as highly dangerous as a result of diverging positions, tools and objectives as well as overlapping spheres of influence.

What makes these US military reinforcements in Syria more dangerous are the official responses of the Russians, Iranians and Syrians. This is in addition to the positions of some militia leaders such as Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Chief Qais al-Khazali and the head of the State of the Law Coalition Nouri al-Maliki; they have implied counterthreats to US moves. More important is also the warnings issued by the US Ambassador to Iraq Alina L Romanowski — during her meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani, days before the arrival of US military reinforcements, according to reports — of any attacks that could be mounted by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) against US forces at the border triangle. She also called for withdrawing the pro-Iran PMF factions and fighters from Nineveh and Anbar in the coming period. Additionally, Damascus and Tehran are well aware of US aims, with both relocating military brigades to the Arab-majority province of Deir ez-Zor, through which the Euphrates River passes, and is jointly controlled by the Syrian

regime, with the help of Iran-backed militias on the western bank of the river while the SDF control the eastern part.

US Military Buildup: Motives and Objectives

The United States has denied any link between the increase in US military reinforcements and any planned attacks on Russian or Iranian interests, suggesting that the Russians and Iranians are circulating a false narrative. To counter this narrative, the United States says that the reinforcements are to help in the battle against Daesh. The following explains US motives and objectives with regard to the recent military buildup.

Create a Buffer Zone Through Geographical Isolation

Washington desires to establish geographical isolation, or a security buffer zone or a new reality in the Syrian equation through which it can enhance its presence, possess more levers against the Russians and Iranians and stem the threats arising from the Syrian camps close to the border triangle, particularly from the al-Hol and Roj camps, which house Daesh families, according to international reports. This aim could be achieved through cutting off the ground lines of contact between Iran and Syria via Iraq. This isolated region would extend to Daraa in southern Syria; to the east in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor up to al-Hasakah and Qamishli in northern Syria. However, this US objective is not welcomed by the Iranians and Russians, who have invested excessive finances and sacrificed blood to entrench their clout in this triangle region. This plan, if successful, would also weaken the Russian and Iranian roles in Syria.

Disrupt the Iranian Route to Deliver Supplies to Armed Militias

The United States seeks to disrupt or block Iran's route to deliver supplies to the Iran-backed paramilitaries in Syria and Lebanon. This would lead to severing what Iran calls the "Shiite Crescent"

as well as the Axis of Resistance in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond. The United States also seeks to throw the Iran-backed militias into a state of confusion so that they reshuffle their cards and reconsider their calculations through cutting the supply route and ending Iran's effectiveness in its spheres of influence. This is in the context of growing talk about [a new era of military escalation](#) on the part of the militias against US targets as well as efforts by the Lebanese Hezbollah to reposition and redeploy fighters in Syria. The militia has also restructured its chain of command in eastern Syria by appointing local commanders as part of an Iranian strategy to place Syrians at the forefront of any operations against US forces. The Iranians and Hezbollah want to create a pretext that their operations are part of the resistance against US forces on the one hand while hiding the fingerprints of Iran-backed militias on the other.

Countering Potential Russo-Iranian Threats to US Targets

There is a link between the US military buildup and strategy of deterrence to secure US interests and amplify the US presence in Syria and the growing Iranian and Russian efforts to strike US targets. This is based on some intelligence reports and leaked secret documents suggesting there is a [Russo-Iranian strategy](#) that aims to expel US forces from the region in general and from eastern Syria, including the eastern Euphrates, in particular. Moscow and Tehran intend to do so through military formations that would be formed under the umbrella of the Popular Army or [Popular Resistance](#). The Iranian supreme leader had previously called on Russian President Vladimir Putin during a July 2022 meeting in Tehran to [cooperate to expel US forces](#) from the oil-rich region of the eastern Euphrates.

There is also another objective, which is to change the rules of engagement with the Russians in Syria against the backdrop of the intensified international dispute between Russia and the

West in general and the United States in particular over the Russia-Ukraine war. There is also growing talk of a Russian role in opening “backchannel loopholes” in NATO defenses and the West’s interests in Africa through a series of military coups in Western Africa. The latter is the biggest uranium supplier to Europe; Washington’s strategic ally and Kyiv’s primary backer. Therefore, Washington wants to inflame tensions in the Syrian arena against Moscow in a way that impacts its war efforts in Ukraine. US deployments were reportedly attacked several times in the past months; however, Washington has not yet confirmed the attacks for unknown reasons.

Deployment of US Levers in Light of Regional Shifts

Perhaps US military movements reflect a desire to set in motion the wheels to maximize US interests in a new phase against the backdrop of regional shifts because of efforts to settle some crises. This includes the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal, Arab openness to Syria, the increasing likelihood of a thaw in relations between Damascus and Ankara, the desire by some countries to achieve some degree of independence in foreign policy and Tehran’s efforts to maximize its gains from the aforesaid shifts through escalating its hostility to the US presence in the eastern Euphrates. Hence, Washington seeks to rearrange its military formations to ensure that there is no adverse impact on its interests in the region.

Pressuring Iran to Make Concessions in the Nuclear Talks

Observers link the increasing US preparedness at the border triangle with Washington’s desire to step up pressure on Iran to accelerate the pace of the nuclear talks on the one hand and prompt Iran to make more concessions on the other. Some leaked reports have indicated that Iranian demands include the withdrawal of US forces from the eastern Euphrates as a condition for Iran to make concessions in the nuclear talks. This has

driven Washington to take advantage of its levers in the Middle East to deliver a strong message to Tehran that it needs to treat the US military presence in US spheres of influence as a separate issue from the nuclear talks.

Heightened US Military Reinforcements: Positions and Implications

The positions of the parties directly involved (Iraq, Syria, Iran and Russia) and the parties indirectly involved such as the Iran-backed militias in Iran's spheres of influence, all of whom are concerned about the increased US military reinforcements at the border triangle, reflect that the Syrian arena will be a scene of tensions and military escalation between the disputants over the coming period given that the region is central to all their agendas.

In comparison to the hostile remarks issued against Washington by Moscow, Tehran and Damascus, the Iraqi position has been rather balanced. Khaled al-Yaqoubi, the Iraqi prime minister's adviser for security affairs, has denied the mobilization of US forces inside Iraqi territory, and said that US forces and advisory missions have been strengthened at the border triangle on the Syrian side, not in Iraq.

Syrian, Iranian and Russian positions, on the other hand, were unanimous as they all rejected US military mobilization. Damascus has made it clear that Washington intends to close the borders. Meanwhile, Iran has denounced US military reinforcements at the Iraq-Syria border, and has questioned Washington's ability to shut the borders. Yet Quds Force Chief Esmail Qaani made a visit to Iraq to discuss the developments at the border triangle — given the importance of the region for Iran's geopolitical project.

In an escalatory tone, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan

Nasrallah announced his party's preparedness to fight against US forces. Qais al-Khazali also declared that the undeclared US aim at the border triangle is to establish a region (province) on the border with Syria. For his part, the head of the State of Law Coalition Nouri al-Maliki stated that the increased US reinforcements aim to shut the border with Syria, expressing concern that the border would turn into a scene for confrontations and the settling of accounts.

The Russian narrative is consistent with that of Syria and Iran with regard to the issue of expelling US forces. This position is against the backdrop of Iran's military support for Russia through the supply of drones to Moscow amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. The Russians need Iran in Syria to protect Moscow's spheres of influence given that the Kremlin has its hands full in the Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, Moscow has a strategic interest in cooperating with Tehran in opposition to the United States given its desire to impede the progress of the nuclear talks. One of the Western demands is for Iran to stop providing Russia with drones.

Potential Scenarios for US Movements at the Border Triangle

It is expected that the US escalation, in case the United States decides to escalate in Syria at the present time or in the future, will take the following forms in light of the nature, motives and objectives of US military reinforcements at the border triangle as well as Washington's awareness of the reactions of Russia, Syria, Iran and the latter's paramilitaries to its military buildup in the coming period.

Armed Force

This scenario will see Washington conduct large-scale military operations, targeting positions of the militias in scattered re-

gions in general and the border triangle in particular — toward the eastern Euphrates. It could also target influential commanders through air attacks with the aim of expanding the scope of its reach and enhancing its presence, thus diminishing the Russian and Iranian spheres of influence. It is expected that this scenario will see significant Israeli participation, with Tel Aviv conducting large-scale strikes against Iranian positions in the eastern Euphrates in particular and Syria in general.

This scenario is highly unlikely in the coming period since it puts US forces deployed in Iraq and Syria in a large-scale and continued confrontation against Iran-backed militias. These militias intend to step up attacks against US targets, according to reports. This is because closing the border means cutting off their supply routes and dealing a heavy blow to their black market trade that they depend on, particularly in light of diminishing Iranian financial support since the imposition of sanctions on Iran.

Washington is aware that any military confrontation will turn Syria into a hotbed of disputes, hence threatening its aims. It will bring together the Russians, Syrians and Iranians, all united against the United States, especially given reports suggesting the preparedness on the part of Russia and Iran to target US forces. This is a major concern for the United States, given that it is busy grappling with the fallout from the Russia-Ukraine war and its dispute with China over global leadership. Perhaps the dispute could be exploited by the Russians to distract US forces that are supporting Ukraine. The United States is aware that the collision could spill over into multiple arenas, thus further harming its interests. The main variable preventing the materialization of this scenario is the US awareness that the pursuance of this scenario will shut the door on the path of negotiations with Iran.

Deployment of Allied Military Formations

This scenario means that Washington would confine its measures to intensifying its military presence at the border triangle and the eastern Euphrates without resorting to armed force. In the meantime, there would be a focus on deploying allied military formations akin to a proxy war. This scenario remains likely in light of the fact that it suits all the parties to the dispute in Syria. Yet the chances of this scenario having an impact on the course of talks between Iran and the United States is insignificant — unlike the scenario of direct, open confrontation. But if this scenario comes to pass, it is expected that there would be intensive drone and missile attacks against US targets in Iraq and Syria on a scale that could lead to the first scenario materializing — with the United States and Israel responding militarily and striking Iranian and perhaps Syrian and Russian targets in the Iraqi and Syrian arenas.

Intensification of Pressures

This is the most likely scenario. It would see Washington content with the heightened military mobilization — to the point of limited skirmishes — without the first or second scenarios materializing. In addition, Washington would suffice with intensifying pressures and creating new tools of influence against the Russians and Iranians in Syria, with the aim of throwing their strategies into confusion and compelling them to reorganize, which would achieve several US strategic objectives. These objectives include forcing concessions from Iran in the nuclear talks, pressuring Tehran to dial down military cooperation with Moscow, escalating in the areas of tension against the Russians to undermine their war effort in the Russia-Ukraine war. The latter would be in response to Moscow's role in inflaming several fronts against Washington's European allies in the African continent.

This scenario considers the possibility of Washington changing its tools for exerting influence and pressure on its foes compared to the tools it deployed previously. This consideration is against the backdrop of regional and global shifts, which have caused all parties to the dispute in Syria to reconsider their objectives. Reports indicate that there is a Russo-Iranian agreement to expel US forces from Syria in general and the eastern Euphrates in particular. This aim has become an important and urgent interest for both parties, as part of Russia's strategy to set in motion countermeasures against Washington in response to its military support for Ukraine. What is more, Syria has turned into a strategic lever for Washington to put pressure on Russia and Iran regarding the Russia-Ukraine war and the nuclear talks. The old pattern of the dispute in the previous stages did not bear fruit for all parties. Thus, it is expected that different tools will be devised for the dispute in the Middle East by each party involved. The tools deployed will be equivalent to the balances and the "basket of objectives" of each party and in light of the implications of the ongoing regional and global shifts.

Conclusion

The aforesaid reflects the weight and influence of the geographical border variable on the strategies of countries in the context of maximizing gains and achieving national interests. On the other, this variable could be used as a lever against adversaries and to harm their interests and spheres of influence and enter into compromises with them over outstanding issues. US preparations for the border triangle and the Syrian arena have moved beyond the issue of fighting Daesh and against the backdrop of regional and global shifts, international actors have revised their strategic objectives in the region. The significance of the border triangle and the Syrian arena has increased, they could

be used by all parties to exert pressure for achieving geopolitical objectives. In the broader geopolitical context, US military reinforcements reflect a process of repositioning to counter the strategic dangers posed by its rivals.

