



Iran, Russia, and the Syrian Regime are Coordinating to Expel US Forces from Syria

Andie Parry, Ashka Jhaveri, Johanna Moore, and Brian Carter

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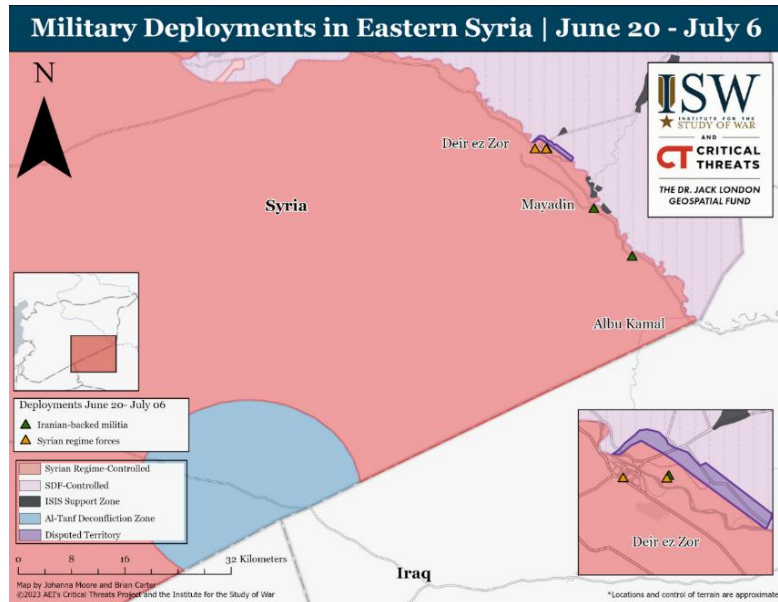
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Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria. This campaign poses serious risks to US forces in Syria and US interests in the Middle East.[1] Iran and the Syrian regime surged forces and materiel to the line of contact with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria from July 7-12.[2] Both have deployed additional forces and materiel to the area since then at lower rates. The deployments to eastern Syria have occurred alongside growing operational coordination with Russia.[3] Russia has provided intelligence to Iran while conducting more aggressive flights against US forces in Syria since mid-March.[4] Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime also coordinated an information operation that falsely claimed the deployments were to protect against a US-SDF attack into regime-controlled territory.[5] US forces are in Syria under Combined Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve, which aims to militarily defeat ISIS with the SDF and International Coalition partners.[6]

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) directed militia deployments to Deir ez Zor Province, primarily to lines of control with the SDF in Deir ez Zor City, beginning in early July.[7] The IRGC-QF also oversaw the deployment of Iranian-backed militias to areas in the central Syrian desert near the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison.[8] Unspecified Russian forces transferred 17 trucks of weapons to Iranian-backed militias in Deir Zor City between June 19-20.[9]
- Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Syrian Republican Guards units, including the Russian-backed SAA 5th Corps, deployed to Deir ez Zor Province from July 7-20 near Iranian-backed forces and along the line of control with the SDF.[10] The Syrian defense minister and IRGC QF officials coordinated the deployments in Deir ez Zor City on July 13.[11] The SAA also conducted a military exercise with Russian forces between July 16 and 18 in the Syrian desert near the 55-kilometer exclusion zone around the Al Tanf Garrison. The exercise simulated a US chemical weapons attack to frame the United States as a hostile force in Syria.[12]
- Iranian and Syrian regime-affiliated sources have circulated false claims since late June that the United States and allied forces in Syria intend to launch an offensive to retake regime-held towns.[13] The SDF has stated publicly and to Russian and Syrian regime officials that its operations in eastern Syria are non-emergency operations to eliminate ISIS cells.[14] There are no indications that the SDF has been planning incursions into regime-held territory. There is considerable evidence of a growing ISIS threat in Syria, however, including an ISIS support rally on July 7 in Izba, a town near the line of control.[15]

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Pro-Regime Deployments to Eastern Syria, June 20 – July 20

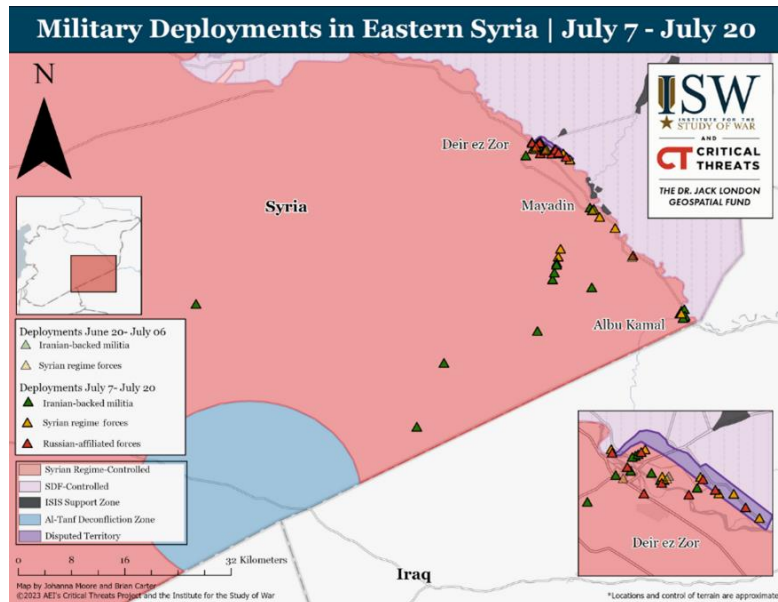


Iran and Russia began a coordinated information operation ahead of the surge in pro-Syrian regime forces.

Key Developments in Deir ez Zor Province June 20-July 6

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating military operations in eastern Syria likely as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.

- June 19-20**
Weapons Shipment
Russian forces sent 17 trucks of weapons to Iranian-backed militias.
- June 24**
Military Parade
Iranian-backed militants conducted a military parade in Mayadin.
- July 1**
Meeting
IRGC QF commander of Albu Kamal sought support from tribal leaders in case of a US-SDF offensive.
- July 3**
Information Operation
Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director accused the United States of preparing false flag attacks involving chemical weapons from Al Tanf garrison.
- July 4**
Military Parade
Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Iranian-backed militants held a military parade in Mayadin and Ashara.



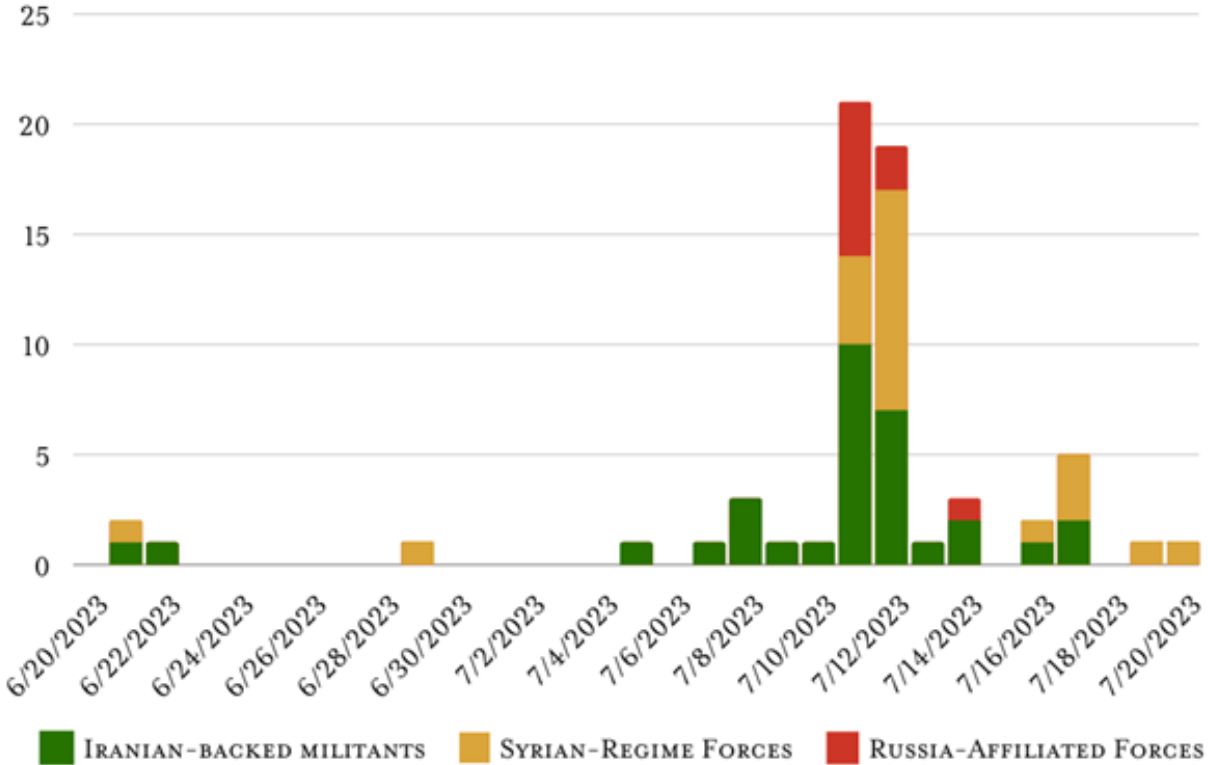
Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime surged forces to eastern Syria beginning on July 7 while accelerating their campaign to expel US forces from Syria by spreading information operations, growing a grassroots movement, and meeting at the senior level for operational planning.

Key Developments in Deir ez Zor Province July 7 - July 20

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are coordinating military operations in eastern Syria likely as part of a coercive campaign to expel the United States from Syria.

- July 7**
Meeting
Iranian-backed militia met with LH to discuss formations in the region.
- July 7-20**
Deployments to Eastern Syria
 - IRGC QF directed its militia to deploy along lines of control with the SDF.
 - The Russian-backed Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps deployed to lines of control with the SDF.
 - The Syrian regime surged fighters to the province.
- July 11**
Meeting
Axis of Resistance leadership met near Damascus to discuss countering a US attack.
- July 13**
Deployments to Syrian Desert
Iranian-backed militia deployed to the Syrian desert near the Al Tanf Deconfliction Zone.
- July 13**
Meeting
Syrian Minister of Defense and IRGC QF officials discussed operational coordination in Deir ez Zor City.
- July 13**
Raised Salaries
Iranian-backed militia raised salaries for standard militia members in Mayadin and Albu Kamal Cities by 13 percent.
- July 17**
Information Operation
Iranian state media posted a video warning that the United States and its partners are preparing an attack in eastern Syria.
- July 16-18**
Military Exercise
Russian and Syrian forces simulated battle near the 55-kilometer exclusion zone in which US forces use chemical weapons.
- July 20**
Military Exercise
The SAA conducted a large-scale military exercise.

PRO-REGIME DEPLOYMENTS TO EASTERN SYRIA BY ACTOR



Pro-Assad forces rapidly deployed to eastern Syria in mid-July. ISW has not observed withdrawals of these forces.

The coordination between Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime is possibly part of a broader political-military campaign to bolster the Assad regime’s international legitimacy and expand Iranian-Russian control over Syrian territory. Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime have a shared interest in the departure of US forces from Syria. They have aligned their actions to advance this objective since last November when they agreed to establish a “coordination center” for a campaign to expel US forces from Syria.[16] Comments from pro-regime and Western sources note the alignment of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime efforts to expel the United States from Syria.[17] The normalization of ties between Syria and the Arab states this year has created opportune circumstances for strengthening the ability of the Assad regime to regain control over Syria in name while entrenching the Russian and Iranian positions there. Iranian and Russian information campaigns are amplifying fictitious rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory.

- The Syrian regime has been normalizing diplomatic relations with regional states since February.[18] Russia has advocated for the reestablishment of Syrian territorial integrity while expanding political, military, and economic ties in March during Assad’s visit to Moscow. [19] Iran has been supportive of the Assad regime’s reintegration into the regional order despite the Arab states’ opposition to the presence of Iranian militias in Syria.[20] Iranian militants remain in Syria and continue to build a presence there.[21]

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- Iran and Russia have been strengthening the capacity of the Syrian regime this year. Both have expanded institutional, political, military, and economic ties with the Assad regime while facilitating Syrian reconstruction projects.[22] Iran announced in February its intent to provide air defense systems to Syria to rebuild the Assad regime's defensive capabilities.[23]
- US military officials explain that the increase in Russian aggression against US forces in Syria is compensation for the decrease in Russian capabilities in the country and is a response to US support for Ukraine.[24] The shift in Russian strategy in Syria occurred late last year, however. Russia had restrained some Iranian efforts to expel US forces from Syria until then. [25]

The buildup of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime forces in eastern Syria may lead to unauthorized attacks on US or SDF forces that draw the United States into a conflict in the near term. The mobilization of pro-regime forces in eastern Syria has already led to clashes between pro-regime and SDF forces. Iranian and Russian information campaigns are amplifying rumors of International Coalition attacks into Syrian regime territory and stoking local tensions. Both dynamics are consistent with Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime plans to cultivate a grassroots opposition to carry out attacks against the United States in Syria.[26]

- ISW recorded four low level skirmishes between the SAA and SDF forces between July 10 and 13, after pro-regime forces rapidly deployed to locations along the Euphrates River in the vicinity of SDF.[27] Syrians in Deir ez Zor Province also clashed with Iranian-backed militias several times in July and attacked a bus carrying Shiite pilgrims through Albu Kamal on July 14.[28] It is not uncommon for the regime and SDF forces to engage in such clashes. The concentration of Iranian, Russian, and Syrian forces along the line of contact and the regime information operation raises the risk that a single clash could draw in nearby forces, however.
- Iranian-backed militants have conducted multiple military parades in major populated locations of Deir ez Zor Province between June 24 and July 20.[29] Iranian state media circulated the false narrative that the United States and its affiliated Kurdish militias are fortifying positions in eastern Syria to prepare for an attack on the Syrian regime's territory.[30] Iranian state media has reported throughout July on the deployments of US forces to eastern Syria on its Persian, Arabic, and English websites, which suggests that the targeted audience is both domestic and foreign.[31]

Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime are giving lower priority to counter-ISIS operations while mobilizing forces in eastern Syria, which very likely presents ISIS with the space to grow its capabilities and rest and refit over the long term. The Russian Air Force is conducting some air strikes against ISIS, but the increase in flights aimed at harassing US forces in Syria since March draws Russian resources from counter-ISIS operations.[32] Russia maintains a mixed air regiment in Syria, but the war in Ukraine has imposed some constraints on its assets, such as the withdrawal of a squadron of attack aircraft in March 2022.[33] Iranian deployments along the line of control (LoC) also pull resources from countering ISIS in the regime-controlled Deir ez Zor urban belt. ISIS has stepped up attacks and coercive efforts in the Deir ez Zor urban belt since early 2023, including intimidating locals by establishing shadow governance at night and hanging ISIS flags in Masrib, north of Deir ez Zor City.[34]

The coordinated Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime coercion campaign very likely would support an Iranian-directed attack campaign to compel US forces to withdraw from Syria. Iranian-backed militias have recruited, armed, and trained militias with the resources and capabilities necessary to conduct a prolonged offensive campaign on US forces in Syria. Iran,

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with support from Syria and Russia, has established the conditions to create an environment in eastern Syria that is hostile to the US forces. An Iranian attack campaign supported by Russia and Syria would hinder the United States' ability to effectively defend its forces and interests in Syria.

- Iranian-backed militias have laid the logistical groundwork to operate and conduct attacks on US forces from regime-held territory and from within the SDF's territory. ISW recorded Iranian-backed militias deploying along the line of contact with the SDF and into the desert in Deir ez Zor and Homs Provinces to positions militias have previously used to launch attacks on US forces.[35] Iranian-backed militias have also recruited locals from the SDF's territory to operate as sleeper cells, conduct reconnaissance, and plant IEDs along known International Coalition routes in SDF-controlled territory.[36]
- The Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime information operations aim to provoke animosity within the local population against the United States, which could motivate locals in eastern Syria to attack US or SDF forces. Cultivating an anti-US grassroots resistance movement that conducts attacks on US forces is one component of Iran's campaign to expel the United States from Syria.[37]
- Russian and Syrian regime support for an Iranian-backed attack campaign on US forces could provide protection from retaliatory strikes on militia positions. Iranian, Russian, and Syrian regime forces are stationed within proximity of one another. Russian forces have increased harassment of US jets and drones in Syria since March 2023, which has complicated US aerial operations.[38] Both factors could complicate and limit US retaliation against Iranian attacks.

Endnotes

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Iran, Russia, and the Syrian Regime are Coordinating to Expel US Forces from Syria

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