



Russia's Military Deployment in Syria and the Israeli Challenge - Special Report

May 2022

Executive Summary

Until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Syria was the most extensive arena the Russian military was deployed permanently. Nevertheless, Russia will not abandon the Syrian arena, which it considers a strategic arena, leaving it in the hands of the Iranians. Before the outbreak of war in Ukraine (February 24, 2022), the Russian military force in Syria consisted of around 10,000 soldiers in 12 bases (two main ones: Tartus and Hmeimim, and ten smaller ones) and various assorted field outposts. As of now, it is not clear whether, in light of the war in Ukraine, Russia has substantially reduced the number of troops in Syria and transferred them to fight in Ukraine. It is clear that Russian forces have been transferred from Syria to Ukraine, but the extent of the forces redeployed is not clear to us.

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and in the days and weeks that followed, the Russians seemed to have gone to great lengths to exhibit "business as usual" and were not neglecting their activities in Syria. There is a Russian trend towards an increased "marketing" perception of their activities in Syria. The "marketing" is both in the context of military activity and civilian-humanitarian activity vis-à-vis the population.

Israel faces two challenges within the framework of the Russian presence in Syria. The main Israeli challenge stems from the deployment of Russian soldiers throughout Syria while implementing the Campaign Between Wars (CBW) activity without physically harming Russian soldiers and interests. The second challenge stems from the war in Ukraine and the redirection of Russian attention there. Before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Russians actually sought to achieve momentum at the expense of the Iranians in the race for influence in Syria. However, there is no "vacuum" in the Middle East, even for a moment, i.e., elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran immediately take advantage of Russia's attention-turning to Ukraine and try (and succeed) to achieve accomplishments over the Russians in the race for influence in Syria. Such achievements come at Israel's expense and harm Israeli interests.

If Russia should become "unsatisfied" with the Israeli CBW's (Campaign Between Wars) activity in Syria in particular and with Israeli policy in general (also in the context of the war in Ukraine), its response poses a challenge for Israel. The Russian responses can be conveyed, as we have already expressed in our assessment in the past, in the passing on of: preliminary intelligence regarding Israeli attack intentions to the Syrians and/or Iranians, after-the-fact publicity regarding the details of an Israeli attack, the transfer of advanced conventional weapons to the Syrians (S-300 air defense batteries for example) and "turning a blind eye" when conventional Russian advanced weapons are transferred from Syria to elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran, with an emphasis on Hezbollah (as was done with the Sa17 / SA22 / OSA air defense batteries and highly likely also the Yahunt missiles). In addition, scenarios of lower likelihood in the figure of a direct threat on IDF forces on Syrian soil should be taken into account, emphasizing threats to the Israeli Air Force.

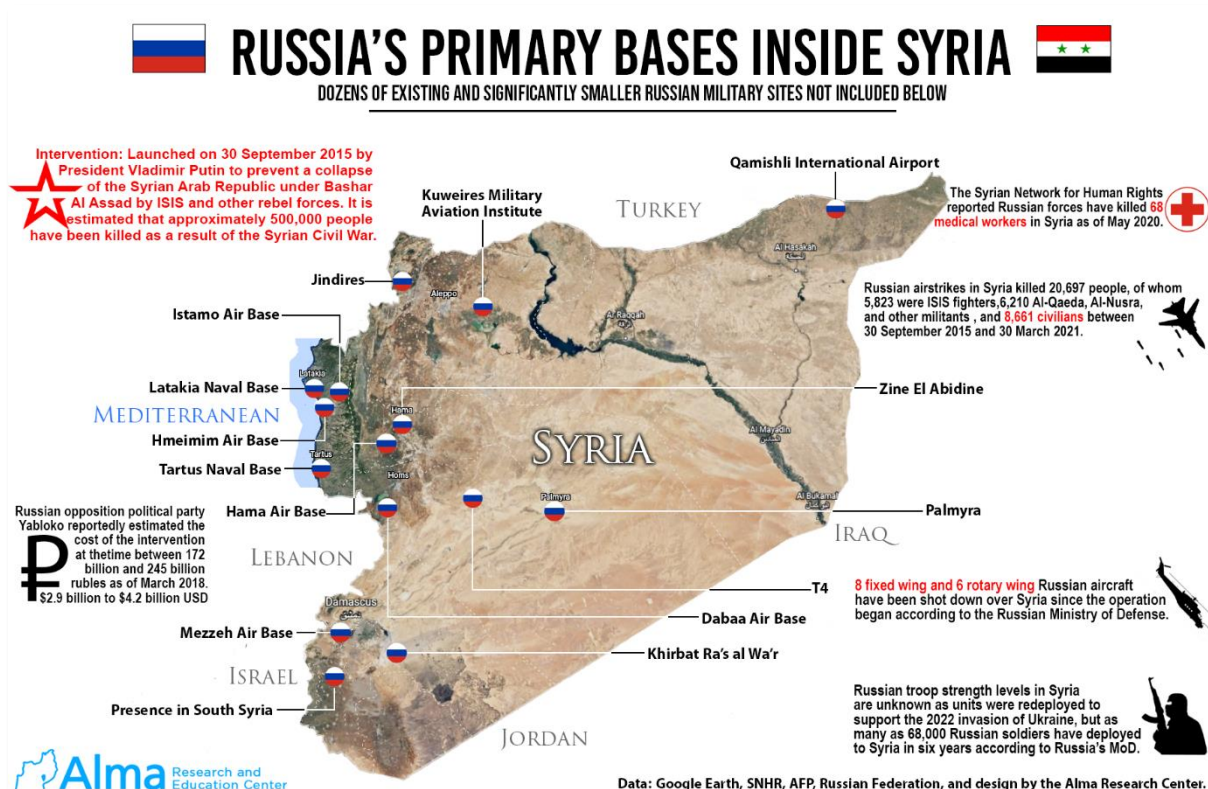
Israel needs to set the rules of the game in the region. The countries on Israel's northern border should be considered one arena, and Israel should establish a central rule: any threat to Israel's security will be met with an independent response from Israel, and the other

"players" should take this into account. On their part, they need to manage their risks concerning this Israeli principle.

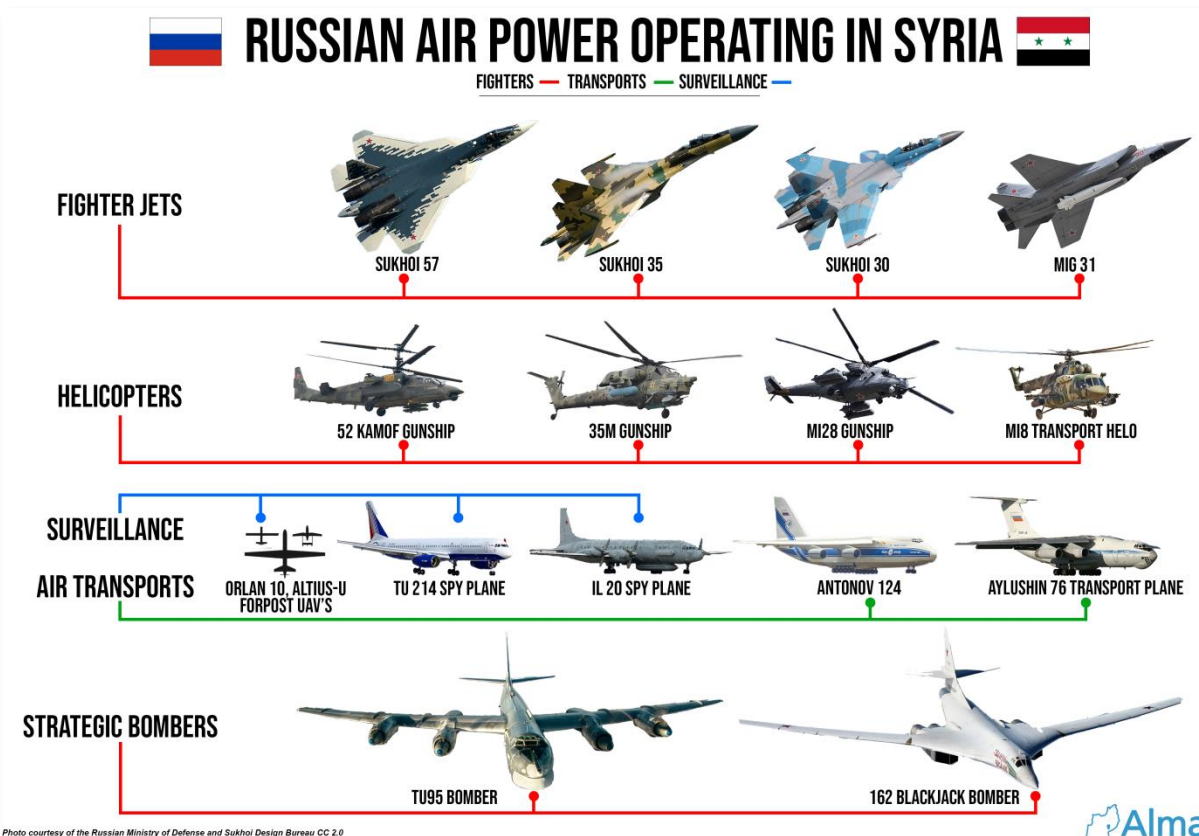
In the Middle East, everything is connected; sometimes, the interests of opposite sides become common interests. On the one hand, the Israeli CBW serves the Russians in their race for influence against Iran in Syria. On the other hand, the Russian presence in Syria serves Israeli interest by pushing the radical Shiite axis led by Iran out of Syria.

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This report aims to map Russian forces in Syria, which number about 10,000 soldiers deployed throughout the country and analyze the Israeli challenge resulting from the Russian presence in Syria. In Syria, the Russian forces are located in two large central bases (Tartus and Hmeimim) and in another 12 smaller bases (see Appendix A, p. 16). In addition, there is a Russian presence in small outposts. They are also deployed, among other places, in southern Syria, where forces of the Russian "military police," which are actually combat infantry forces, operate. The "military police" bear the broad burden of the Russian military deployment in Syria; among other things, they are tasked with securing the Russian bases.



The Russian military force currently operating in Syria comprises forces from the Russian air force, Navy, air defense, intelligence, armor, infantry, engineering, special forces, and "military police". The Russian forces in Syria utilize aircraft (combat, bombers, transport, refueling, and intelligence), helicopters (combat, rescue, and transport), UAVs, vessels attached to the Russian Black Sea fleet, air defense systems (Pantsir, S400, S-300, S200), electronic warfare systems, tanks, rocket launchers (*Smerch* and *Uragan* 27) and armored vehicles.



We have several indications regarding the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria and their redeployment in Ukraine and evidence from Ukraine regarding Russian soldiers previously stationed in Syria operating in Ukraine. Some of the evidence points to the deaths of Russian soldiers on the Ukrainian battlefield, some of which were transferred there from Syria. A notable example of this is Georgi Patronin, who served as a senior officer in the "Military Police" and held the position of Chief of Security at Hmeimim base. Petronin was killed in Ukraine after being deployed there. He was part of a Russian family with a military history that originated from the city of Volgograd (Stalingrad). He served in the Russian Army in the late 1990s during the wars in Chechnya. In Syria, he served in one of the most senior positions at the Russian Hmeimim base.



Above: Petronin in his office at the Hmeimim base in Syria.

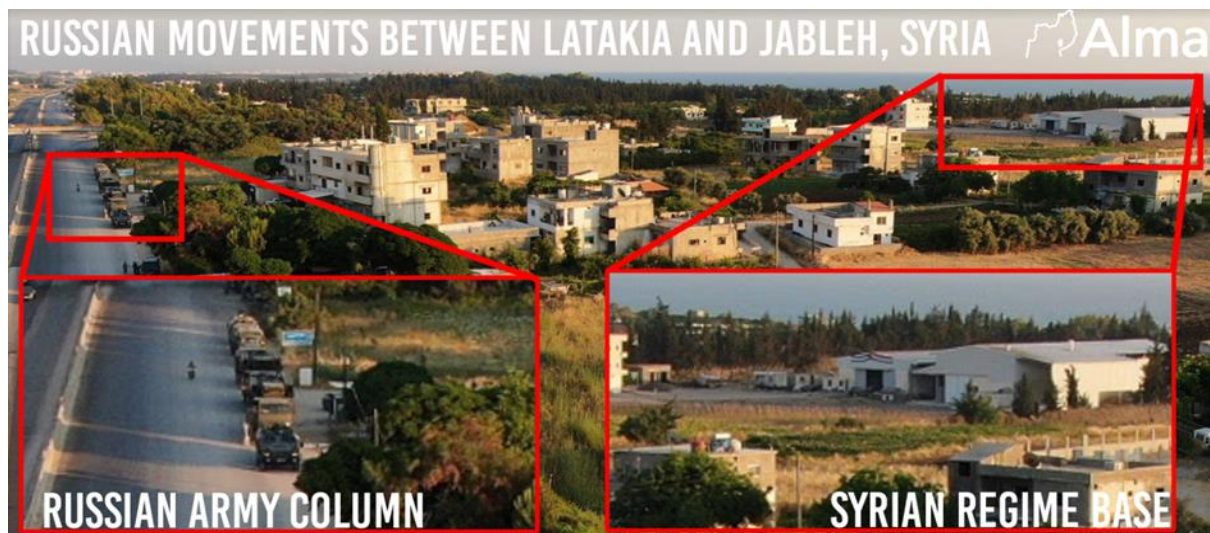
According to some reports, the need for skilled soldiers in Ukraine has led to the Russian military withdrawing some of its positions throughout Syria, including positions opposing ISIS, which continues to operate in Syria. The Russians evacuated positions, including in the desert east of Homs, in Hama, in Raqqa in the northeast of the country, and in the Deir ez-Zor region.

Elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran increased their forces and strengthened their presence and influence in the areas where the Russians withdrew from. One indication of this relates to an area east of the city of Homs, where elements of the radical Shiite axis have taken up defensive positions against ISIS due to the departure of the Russian forces on their way to war in Ukraine.

The strengthening of the presence and influence of elements belonging to the radical Shiite axis led by Iran in areas controlled by the Russians until recently has had a severe impact on the local population. Elements of the radical Shiite axis are known for exploiting the weak local population and taking over their resources (homes, property, agricultural fields, workshops, etc.) as ISIS did in those areas before them.



Israel faces two challenges concerning the Russian presence in Syria. The main Israeli challenge stems from the deployment of Russian soldiers throughout Syria while implementing the Campaign Between Wars (CBW) activity without physically harming Russian soldiers and interests. The second challenge stems from the war in Ukraine and the redirection of Russian attention there. It is possible that by turning its attention to Ukraine, Russia will "neglect" the race for influence against the elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran in Syria, which is contrary to Israeli interests.



The main Israeli challenge, in the midst of waging the Campaign Between Wars, which is the safekeeping of the Russian soldiers, is enhanced because the Russian soldiers are usually deployed in central areas near where the radical Shiite axis forces led by Iran are positioned, areas in which the Israeli CBW activity is directed. Many Russian forces are located closely and even in the same compound where forces and interests of the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran are located.

As part of the response to this challenge, a coordination mechanism was established between Israel and Russia, in which a "hotline" is operated between the IDF and the Russian headquarters located at the Hmeimim base, near the port city of Latakia in northwestern Syria. The "hotline" aims to coordinate the Israeli CDC's activity with the Russians. This is not an authorization mechanism with the Russians but only a coordination mechanism designed to prevent physical harm to Russian forces. In addition, not all CBW activity is coordinated through this mechanism, but only activities with potential harm. However, it is very likely that in the past, the Russians have, in some cases, exposed Israel's intentions in advance to radical Shiite axis forces headed by Iran.

The first and only case to date in which Russian forces were harmed due to CBW activity in Syria occurred on September 17, 2018. During an airstrike near Latakia, Homs, and Tartus, the Syrian Army's air defense systems attempted to shoot down the Israeli aircraft but accidentally hit a Russian Ilyushin IL-20M intelligence reconnaissance plane carrying 15 Russian military personnel. All the Russian crew members were killed.

In response to the downing of the plane, Israel's ambassador to Russia was summoned for an inquiry. According to Israel, the coordination mechanism worked well, and the blame and responsibility resided with the Syrian regime. Former Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called Russian President Putin and expressed his sorrow at the loss of the plane and its crew. Putin noted that Israel did not intentionally shoot down the plane, and it was a tragic chain of mistaken events. On September 20, 2018, three days after the incident, the Commander of the Israeli Air Force left for Moscow to present the Russians with the IDF's investigation findings. On September 23, 2018, the Russian Defense Ministry determined in its investigation that the incident was caused by a mistaken Israeli update. The next day (September 24, 2018), the Russians announced that they would provide the Syrians with S-

300 anti-aircraft batteries that were already on Syrian soil but had not been transferred to them so far due to Israel's request...

The handover of the S-300 batteries to the Syrians (located now in the area of Masyaf, in northwestern Syria) constituted a sharp Russian message/"punishment" against Israel. The transfer of these batteries to the Syrians enabled the direct use of advanced weapons against the Israeli Air Force. By turning over the anti-aircraft batteries, the Russians made it even more difficult and challenging for Israel. This forced Israel to change its course in terms of attack tactics and defense measures of an attacking force and dealing with a missile-safe/missile-stricken area. With the transfer of the S-300 to the Syrians, the range of threats deriving from the Syrian Defense Forces missiles increased.

In several cases after the downing of the plane, the Russians publicly released the operational details of the airstrikes carried out. The publications included the type of attacking aircraft, their number, the direction of the attack, how many missiles were intercepted, and occasionally the type of weapon used in the attack. The purpose of the Russian publication was to send a message of Russian dissatisfaction with Israeli activity in Syria in particular and sometimes also from overall Israeli policy in general. The last case of such publication was on April 16, when the Russians published the details of an airstrike carried out on April 14 west of Damascus. The purpose of this publication can be linked to the message that the Russians wanted to convey to Israel in connection with Russian dissatisfaction with Israeli policy regarding the war in Ukraine. When examining the details of the Russian publications, it seems that they did not publish any novelty or substantive details of what had already been published in the Arab networks (Osint/Webint).

Israel will know how to conduct itself militarily in Syria, even without coordination with the Russians. This would require more intelligence efforts to rule out a Russian presence while carrying out CBW activity and additional risk management.

The Russian responses can be conveyed, as expressed above, in the passing on of preliminary intelligence regarding Israeli attack intentions to the Syrians and/or Iranians, after-the-fact publicity regarding the details of an Israeli attack, or the transfer of advanced conventional weapons (ACW) to the Syrians. As to the transfer of advanced conventional weapons, it is our assessment that there is a possibility that the Russians will allow the Syrians to transfer Russian advanced weapons to the elements of the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran, especially Hezbollah in Lebanon. Such a process has probably been carried out, and Hezbollah holds the type OSA, SA22, and SA17 anti-aircraft systems. This is in addition to advanced *Yakhont* surface-to-sea missiles, which we believe were delivered to Hezbollah by the Syrians while the Russians "turned a blind eye." Note that the Russians even used powerful electronic-warfare systems that affected and disrupted air operations over Syria and even over Israel and hampered Israeli civilian air traffic.

Alongside the reactions that have already materialized in the past, there are other scenarios for Russian responses which are less likely to occur:

A scenario in which a Russian Army air defense battery stationed in northern Syria would "lock" on an Israeli Air Force plane during an attack is feasible. In such a scenario, in which

we estimate its likelihood at low to moderate, the Russian battery will, in all probability, not fire. However, as part of risk management, Israel needs to assume a strict assumption that there is also a possibility that the Russian battery will fire. In such a case, the Israeli response will depend on Israeli strategic policy, the end result (whether the Israeli plane was hit or not), and the conduct of the coordination mechanism.

A scenario in which Russian Air Force planes stationed in Syria will take action against Israeli air force planes in our assessment is a scenario with a low and even very low probability. However, should such a scenario occur, the Russian pilots would have to deal with technology and pilots of a different standard than they have come up against to date. In such a case, this would not be the first time Russian pilots would fight directly against the IDF in general and against the Israeli Air Force. About fifty years ago (the late 1960s and early 1970s), Russian soldiers and Russian pilots acted directly, within the framework of the Egyptian Army, against Israel.

The additional Israeli challenge is the directing of Russian attention to the war in Ukraine and "neglecting" the Syrian arena in favor of elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran. However, this is a temporary attention deviation; Russia does not intend to abandon the Syrian arena, a historic strategic arena for it. Nevertheless, there is no "vacuum" in the Middle East, even for a moment. i.e., elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran immediately take advantage of Russia's attention-turning to Ukraine and try (and succeed) to gain achievements in the race for influence against Russia. Such achievements come at Israel's expense and harm Israeli interests.

It seems that before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Russians actually sought to achieve momentum at the expense of the Iranians in the race for influence in Syria. This momentum can be attributed to three main examples of Russia's desire to increase its influence at the expense of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran and in connection with the Israeli CBW.

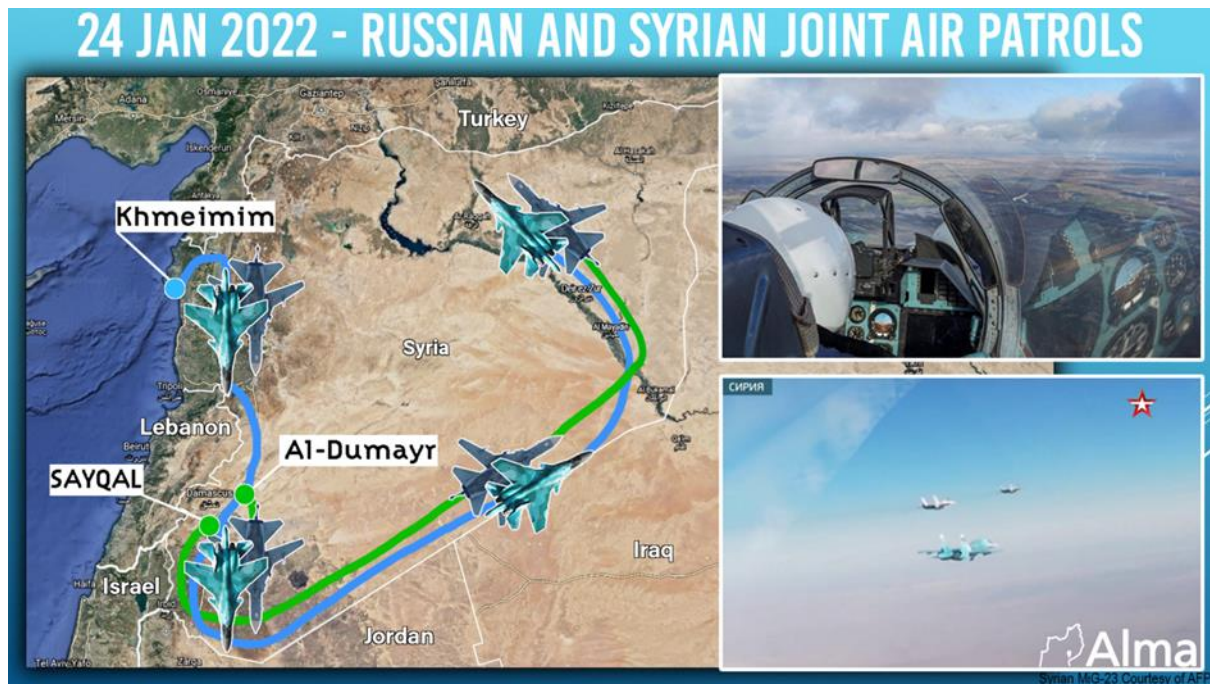
The first example is related to the two airstrikes carried out on the naval port of Latakia on December 07 and December 28, 2021. In both attacks, the container complex in the port was damaged. The attack was likely directed against several containers containing advanced conventional weapons that came by sea from Iran and were intended for Hezbollah. Until these attacks occurred, it seemed that the Iranians could have done as they wished in the port. Following the airstrikes, in January 2022, a Russian force entered the port, establishing a permanent presence there.



The second example occurred on January 24, 2022. The Russians conducted joint air patrols with the Syrian Air Force. The joint air patrol was accompanied by Sukhoi 34, Sukhoi 35, MiG-29, MiG-23, and A-50 aircraft. The role of the Syrian aircraft in the patrol was to back up and conduct aerial surveillance while the Russian planes practiced airstrikes.

The Russian planes (Sukhoi 34 /35) took off from the Hmeimim base in northwestern Syria. The Syrian MiG-23/29 aircraft took off from Seikal and Dumayr airports near Damascus. Most of the publications reporting the air patrol explained that it was actually a Russian

message intended to limit Israel in the context of the CBW. However, it is our assessment that it was a Russian message intended toward Iran: The air patrol route included the area of southern Syria, the Euphrates River area, and the northern Syrian region. These are distinct areas where the radical Shiite axis led by Iran operates. In these areas, the Shiite axis is entrenched civilly and militarily. In southern Syria, the Shiite axis establishes itself civilly and militarily near the border with Israel, the Euphrates River area, the geographical areas of al-Bukamal, al-Mayadeen, and Deir ez-Zor, are central in the land corridor. Finally, the area of northern Syria, emphasizing the Aleppo area, where there is a growing Shiiteization movement and the Iranian influence race there, is at high intensity.



The third example is related to Hezbollah's activities against Israel in southern Syria. Recently, there has been an increased Russian involvement in the 1st. Corps in charge of southern Syria. The Russians appear to be trying to increase their influence over the 1st. Corps deployed in southern Syria at the expense of the influence of Hezbollah's Southern Command Unit. Members of the Southern Command unit are deployed in all units of the corps and their purpose, among other things, is to inaugurate and assist the commanders of the corps. So far, the Russians have tried to influence southern Syria mainly through local proxy forces ("the 5th. Corps") and through small "military police" forces. Due to Israel's CBW activity in southern Syria, the Russians have accelerated their efforts towards their influence in southern Syria. The Russians have concluded that to increase their influence in southern Syria, they must strengthen their influence and involvement in the 1st. Corps, which is in control of the southern Syrian sector.



Above: A Russian training exercise of a Syrian unit from the 1st Corps. near Tel Nabi Yusha, which has a constant Iranian and Hezbollah presence.



Above: Russian officers visit the Syrian 1st Corps. Headquarters.

With the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and in the days and weeks that followed, the Russians seemed to have gone to great lengths to exhibit "business as usual" and were not neglecting their activities in Syria. There is a Russian trend towards an increased "marketing" perception of their activities in Syria. The "marketing" is both in the context of military activity and civilian-humanitarian activity vis-à-vis the population.



Above: Distribution of aid packages during Ramadan, to the civilian population, by the Russian military in the Damascus region (April 09, 2022).



Above: Rehearsals in the Hmeimim Base for the WWII Victory Day Parade (an additional opportunity for the Russian military to showcase its strength in Syria)

In conclusion, as a regional power, Israel should set the rules of the game in the region and not let hostile regional "players" (the radical Shiite axis led by Iran) or guest "players" (casual or permanent) even those considered as a superpower like Russia, to establish rules and equations that directly affect Israel's security. The countries on Israel's northern border should be considered one arena, and Israel should establish a central rule: any threat to Israel's security will be met with an independent response from Israel, and the other "players" should take this into account. On their part, they need to manage their risks concerning this Israeli principle.

Increased Iranian activity in Syria at the expense of the Russians will increase Israeli activity within the framework of the CBW and the likelihood that Russian interests in Syria will be harmed. In our assessment, the enhancement of the Israeli CBW will urge the Russians to intensify their influence in Syria against Iran in parallel with the war in Ukraine. Russian leadership and a Russian victory in the race for influence in Syria align with Israeli interests. In the end, the Russians do not want Israeli activity to harm their interests in Syria.

Appendix

The deployment of Russian bases in Syria:

The Russian naval base in Tartus:

The Russian base in Tartus was established in 1971 as part of an agreement between Syria and the former Soviet Union. The base served the Soviet Navy as a logistical and technical support center of the Black Sea fleet located in the Mediterranean Sea. The base was allegedly abandoned following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but despite its "abandonment," the port of Tartus in Syria remains a center for logistical support and supplies for Russian navy ships.

The Russians consider Tartus Base a strategically located base and a military "gateway" to the Middle East. When the Russians re-entered Syria (August 2015), they signed a long-term lease agreement with the Syrian regime on the geographical area of the port. The agreement allowed the Russians to establish a Russian-owned military base inside the port without any intervention from the Syrian regime. In addition, the agreement enabled the establishment of Russian bases outside the port areas, which purpose is to protect the base inside the port of Tartus from harm.

The base contains sheds and storage warehouses in addition to maintenance infrastructures. Four medium-sized ships can be handled at the base simultaneously using two floating docks, each 100 meters long, in addition to warships and aircraft carriers. Furthermore, this base is a center for intelligence gathering throughout the Middle East. The An S-300 anti-aircraft system is stationed on the base.





THE SEA FRONT OF TARTUS, SYRIA



The Russian airbase in Hmeimim:

The base is located about 4 km from the city of Jableh and 19 km south of the port city of Latakia, near "Bassel al-Assad" airport. The base was initially established to serve as a landing for civilian aircraft, but after Russian forces arrived in Syria in August 2015, the site became a major military base.

Russian military airstrikes are launched against the Syrian rebels from the Hmeimim base; nowadays, the attacks mainly target the area of Idlib province and in areas where ISIS operates in the eastern desert. Like Tartus, in Hmeimim, the Russians signed a lease agreement with the Assad regime. A 49-year agreement conferring full Russian control of the Hmeimim base with an option to extend for another 15 years without any compensation (part of the prices Assad had to pay when inviting the Russians to assist him in the civil war against the rebels, to preserve his rule).

The base was initially established in an area of about 70 square kilometers and was vacated from the facilities belonging to the Syrian Army.

A year after its establishment (2016), Russian forces expanded the Hmeimim base, and the number of aircraft and weapons systems doubled to turn the Hmeimim base into a central base with advanced means to support the fighting. The enlargement of the Hmeimim base included expanding the runway, widening it so that Russian giant planes such as the Antonov 124 could land at the base alongside advanced aircraft such as the Sukhoi-35.

The Hmeimim base is home to about 1,500 soldiers and another 200 sailors from the Russian Navy. The base contains all types of weapons deployed and operated by the Russian military in Syria: aircraft and helicopters of all kinds, UAVs, anti-aircraft systems, warehouses with large weapons, tanks, and armored vehicles, as follows:

1. 8 Sukhoi 24 aircraft.
2. 12 Sukhoi 25 (SM3) aircraft.
3. 4 Sukhoi 30 planes.
4. 6 Sukhoi 34 aircraft-
5. 8 Sukhoi 35 (Flanker S) aircraft.
6. 8 MiG 31.
7. Sukhoi 57 planes (Felon)
8. Tu-162 blackjack bombers.
9. Tu-22M3 bombers
10. Tu-95 bombers.
11. 12 Mi-24 helicopters.
12. 12 Mi-8 rescue helicopters.
13. 8 Mi-35 helicopters.
14. 10 Mi-28 attack helicopters
15. 8 KAMOF-52 attack helicopters.
16. 12 Mi-17 transport helicopters.
17. Intel. and E.W. IL-20 aircraft.
18. R214 and P214 aircraft.
19. Huge Strategic Antonov An-124 transport aircraft.

20. Ilyushin 76 MD90 transport aircraft
21. Ilyushin 76 refueling aircraft.
22. Forpost M, Altius-M, Orlan-10 – UAVs.
23. 1 S-400 anti-aircraft system.
24. 3 Pantsir SM anti-aircraft system.
25. BUK-M2 anti-aircraft system.
26. 6 T-92 tanks.
27. Smerch BM-30 rocket launchers.
28. 35 armored vehicles.
29. A large arsenal of armor-piercing anti-tank weapons - Malyutka, Cornet, Khrizantema (AT15), and 9M113 Konkurs.
30. A large warehouse of bombs and aerial missiles, including CAB smart bombs, CAB-250 / CAB – 500 / CAB-1500, OFAB-500 M62 bombs, and BetAB-500 bombs
31. A large warehouse of small arms.

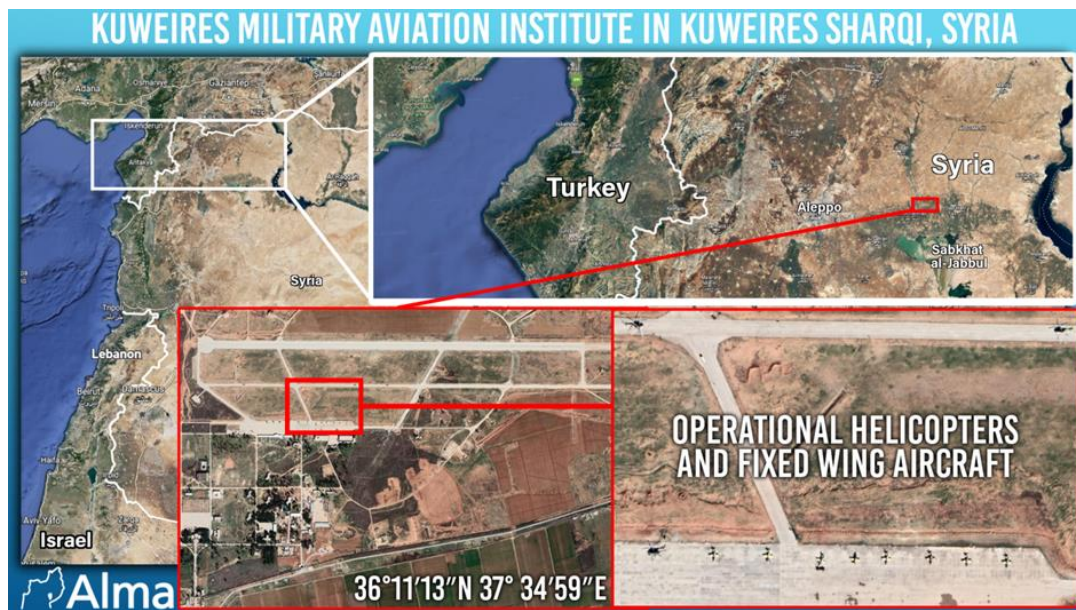


In addition to the two main bases in the port of Tartus and Hmeimim, the Russian Army is deployed in smaller bases throughout Syria:

The Military base at Kuweires Airport:

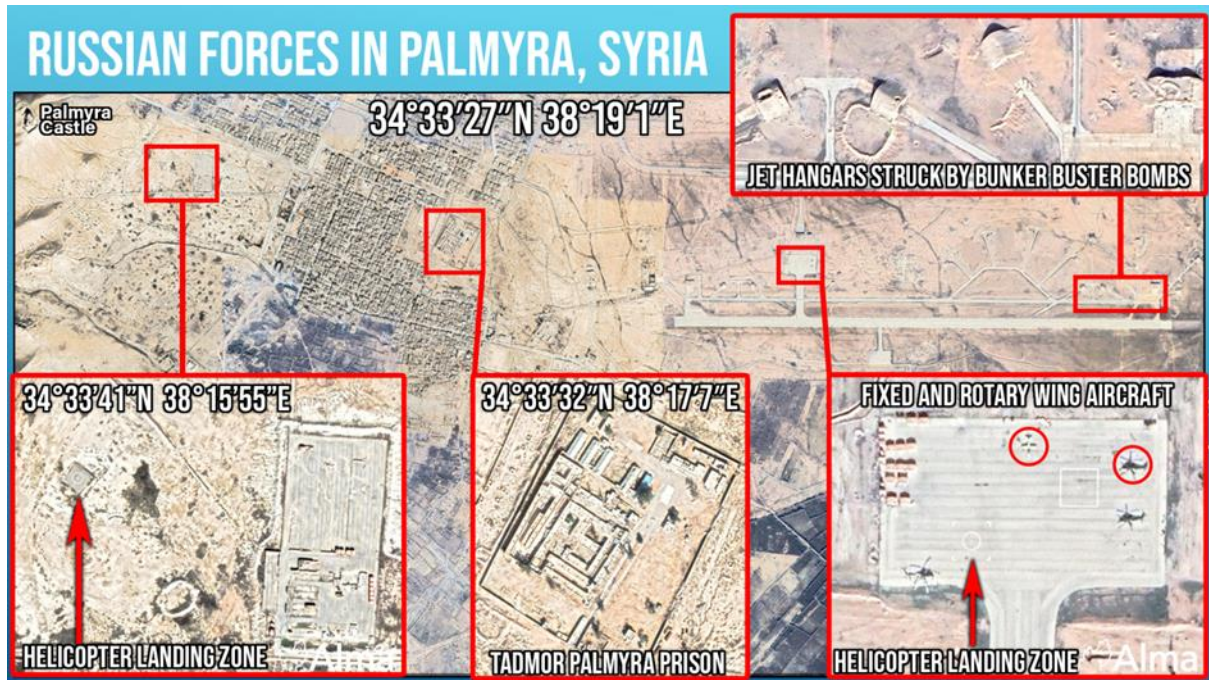
Located in the northeastern city of Aleppo and is considered the third-largest base of the Russian Army in Syria (Kuweires Military Aviation Institute).

The base contains infantry, special forces, and various anti-aircraft arrays such as S-200 and Panzer. This base also sustains advanced aerial detection systems.



Palmyra base:

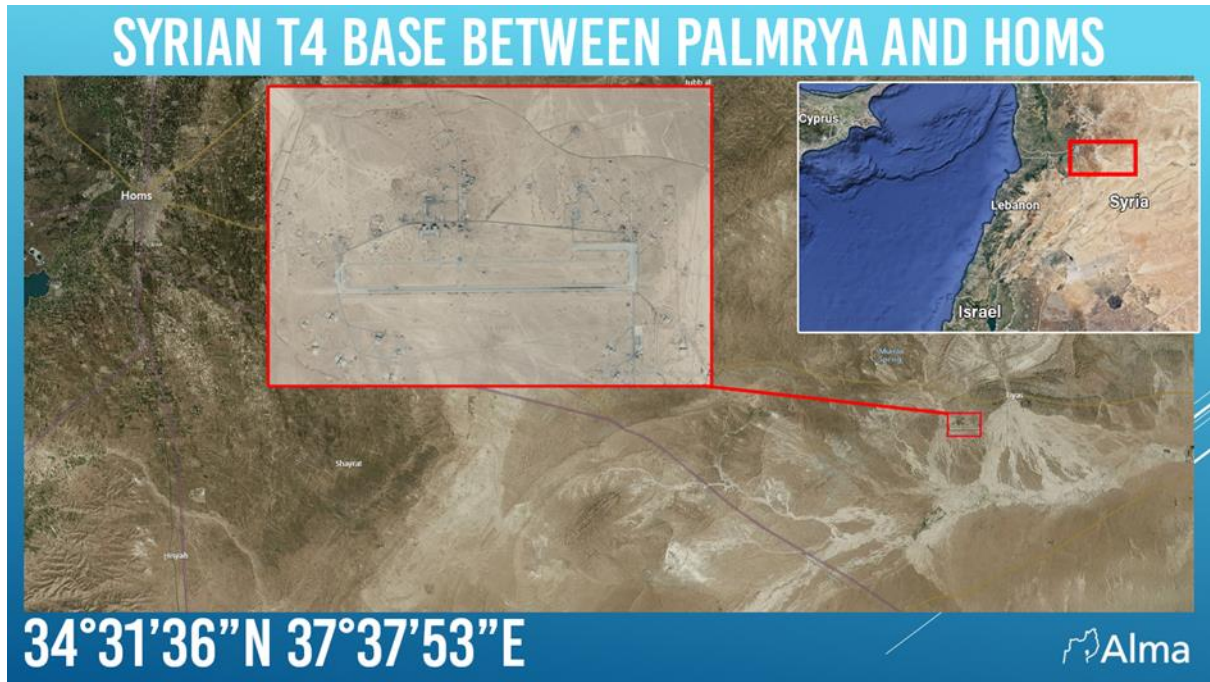
The base is located beneath the historic Palmyra fortress on the east end at Palmyra Airport. The base is considered the fourth largest of the Russian Army's bases in Syria. Helicopters, special forces, and engineering forces operate from the base, among other things, mainly against ISIS activity in the eastern Syrian desert.



Above: Russian building of Palmyra base.

Base T4 (between Palmyra and Homs):

The base operates, among other things, a Russian UAV array, mainly against ISIS forces in the eastern Syrian desert.



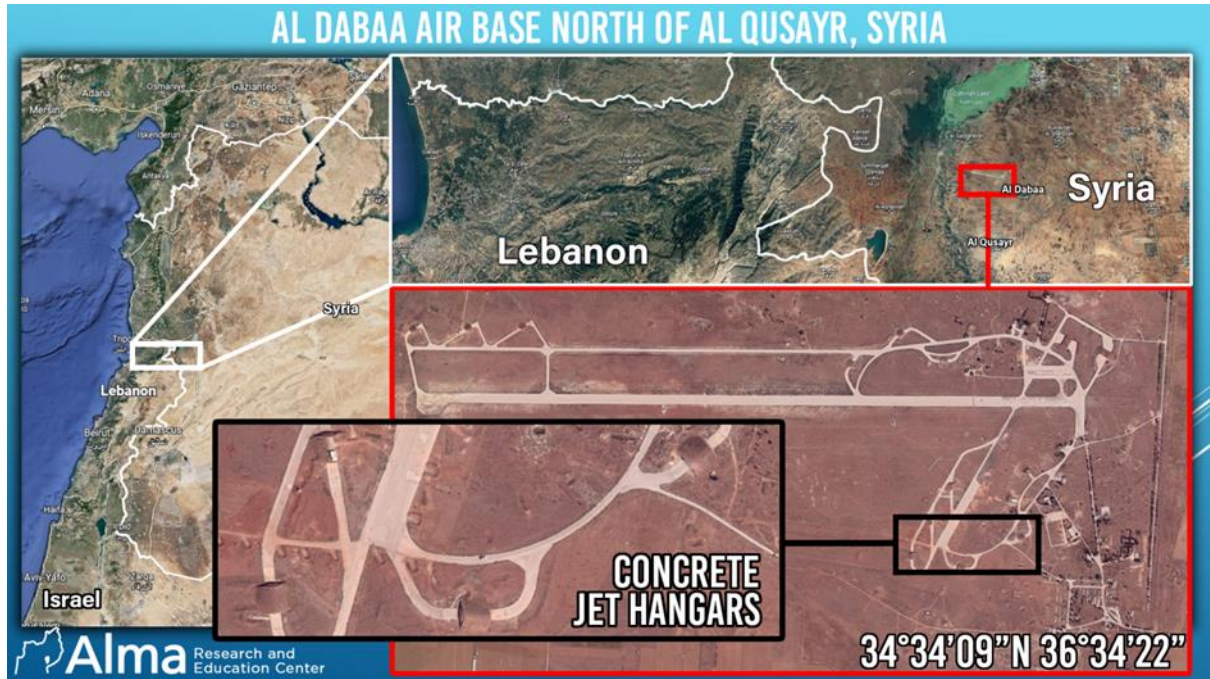
The Russian UAV unit activity at the T-4 field between Palmyra and Homs.

The military base in Jindires (northwest of the city of Aleppo):



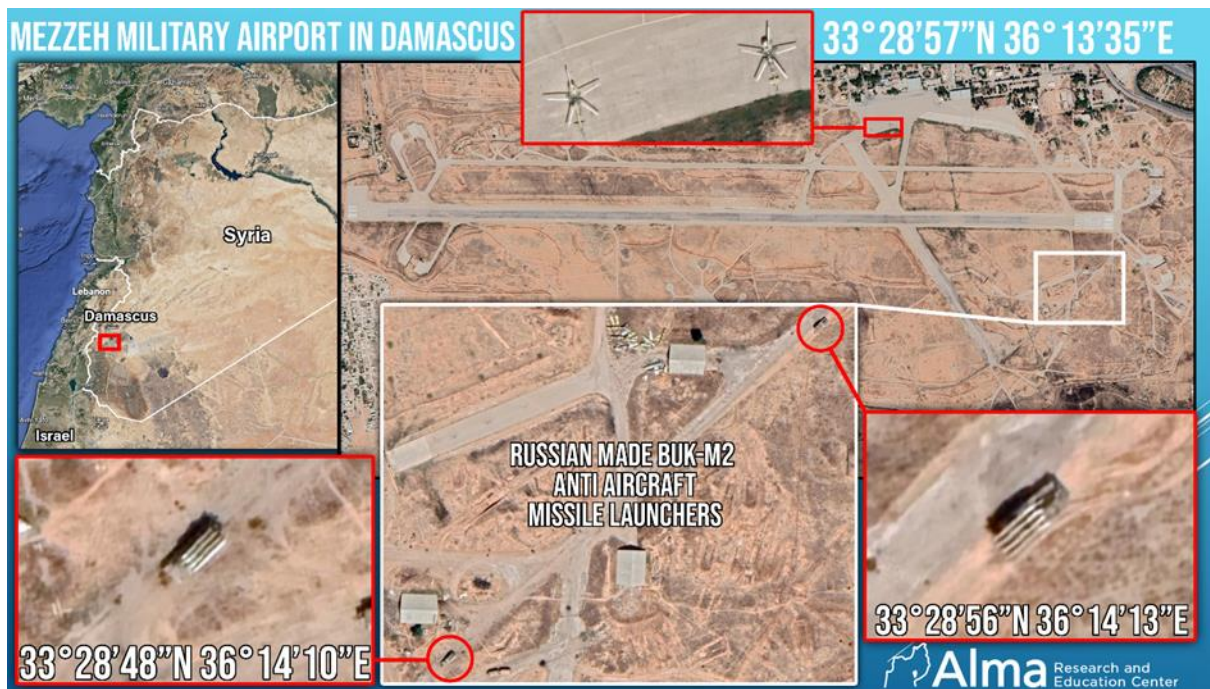
Al-Dabaa airport Base:

The base is located near the town of Al-Qusayr, near the border with Lebanon. The location of this base is important and strategic for the Russians and dominates one of the routes of movement between Syria and Lebanon within the framework of the land corridor.

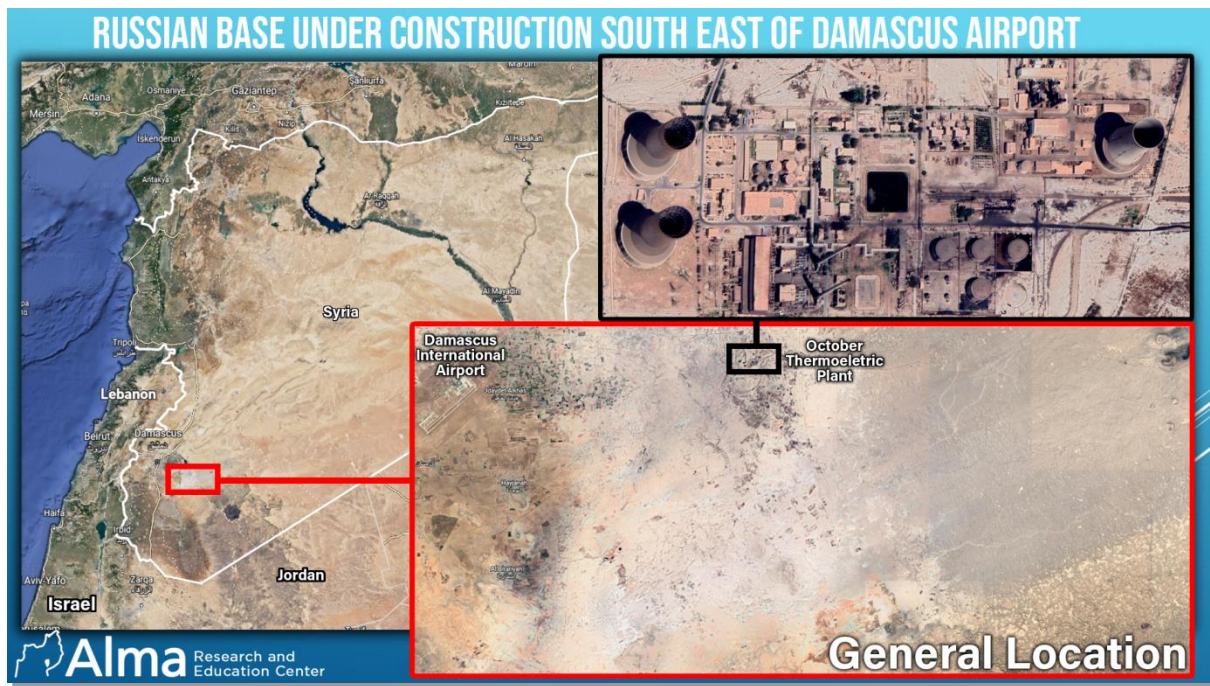


The al-Mezzeh Airport Base (western Damascus):

The base is mainly used for the Russian military's logistical needs.

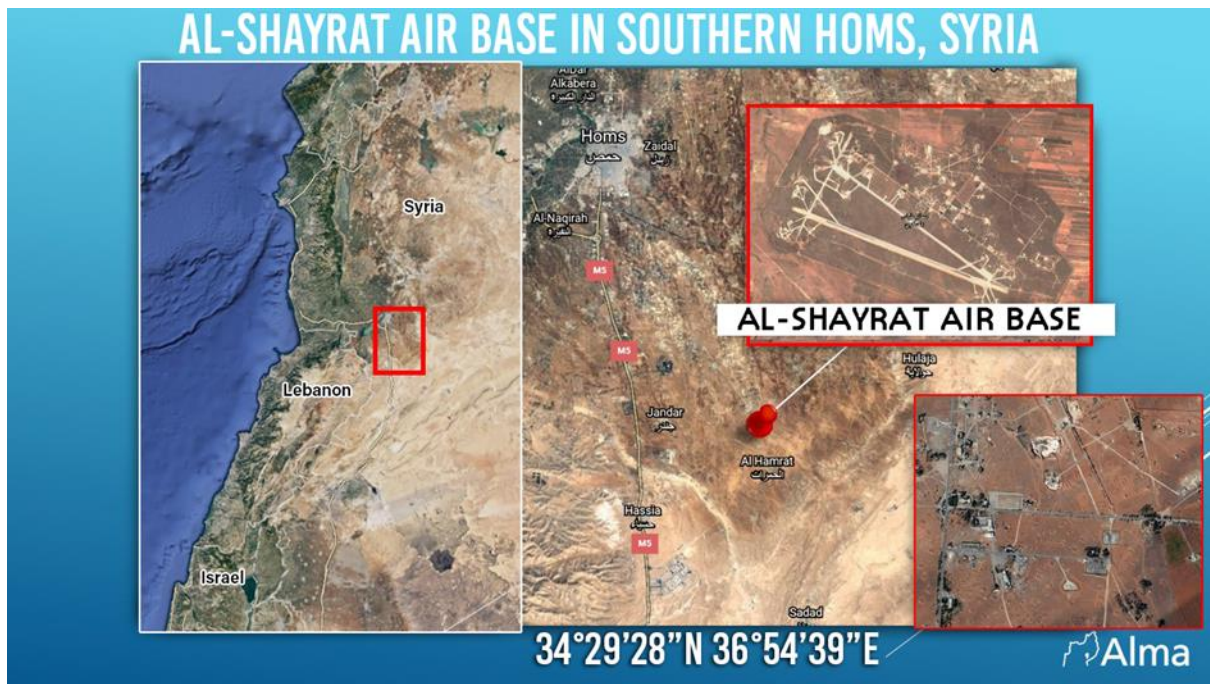


Khirbat Ra's al Wa'r base – east of Damascus:



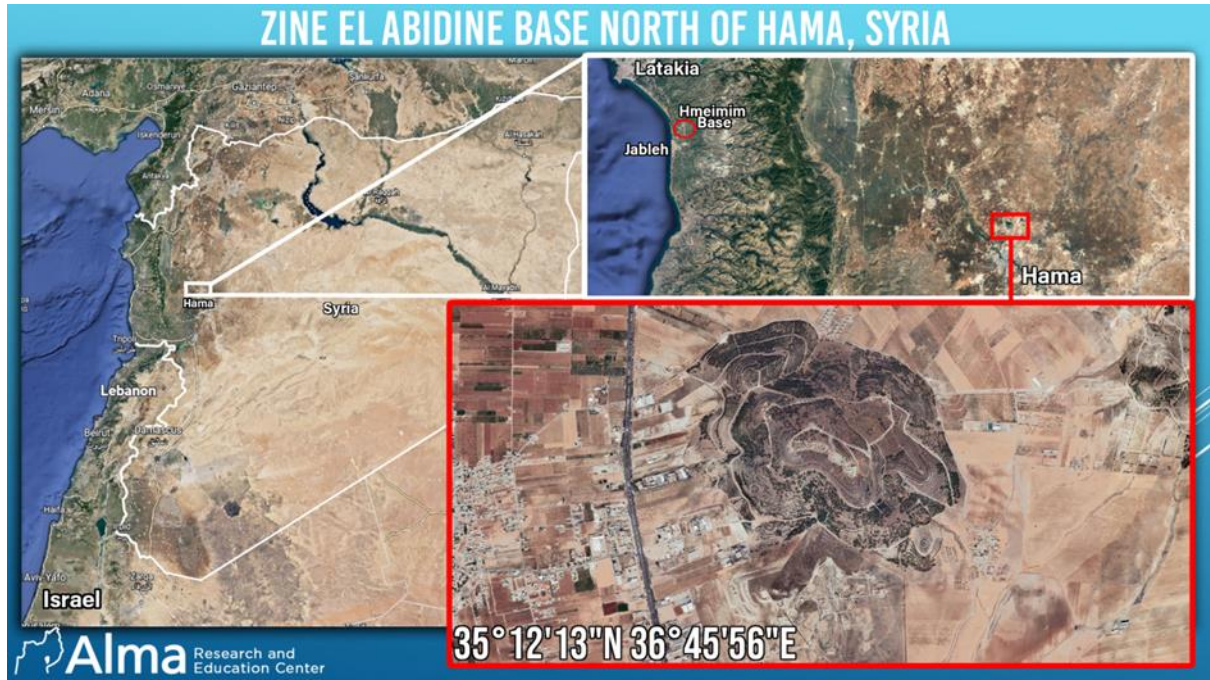
Shayrat airfield Base:

Located southeast of the city of Homs. The base is home to an array of helicopters and special forces operating out the base.



Mount Zine El Abidine Base:

The base is north of Hama. The base operates E.W. arrays in addition to Smerch and Uragan 27 rocket launchers capable of hitting targets up to a range of about 90 km.



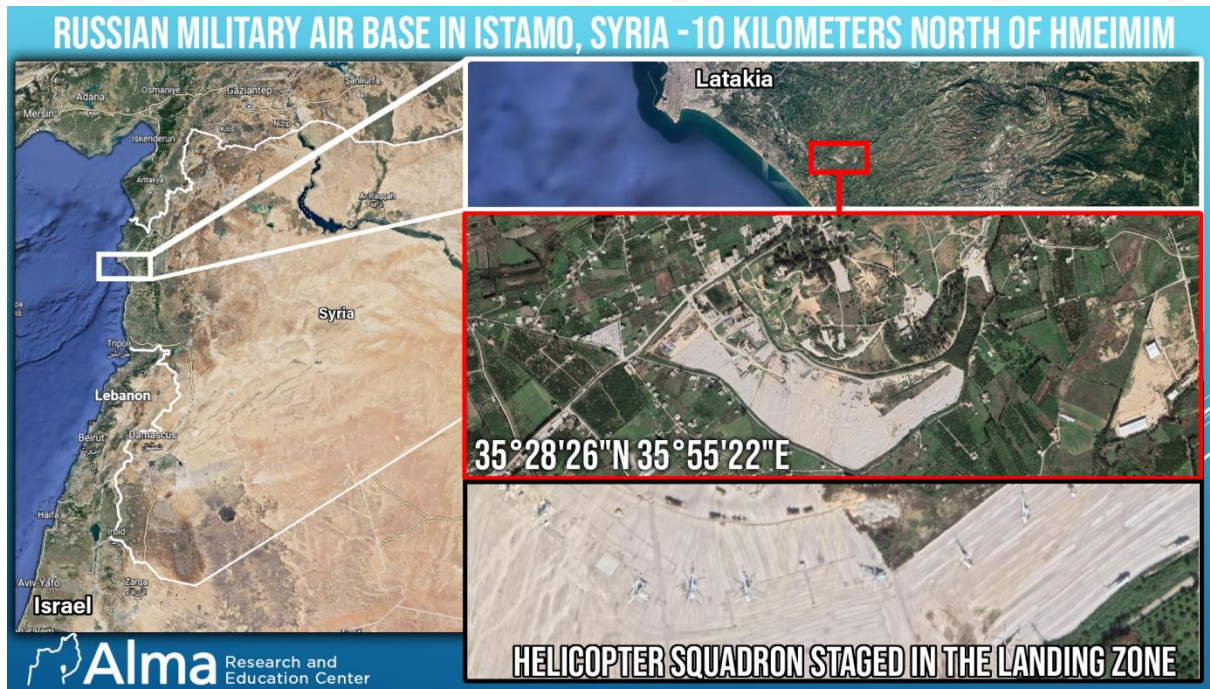


Qamishli Airport Base:

The base is located in the city of Qamishli in northeastern Syria. The base operates Mi-8 and Mi-35 attack helicopters to protect the joint patrols carried out with the Turks. There are also APCs, detection systems, and a field hospital at the base. Military Police forces are responsible for protecting the base.



The Istamo base is located about 10 km north of the Hmeimim base:



Hama Airport Base:

