

The Iranian Corridor to Syria & Lebanon



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Table of Content

<u>Introduction</u>	3-15
<u>Chapter A:</u>	
The Land Corridor - The transit routes from Iran to Iraq and the routes in Iraq.....	16-25
<u>Chapter B:</u>	
The Land Corridor - The main route between Iraq and Syria.....	26-33
<u>Chapter C:</u>	
The land corridor routes in Syria up to the border with Lebanon.....	34-44
<u>Chapter D:</u>	
The Land Corridor - Future Plans.....	45-46
<u>References</u>	47-48

Introduction

The Iranians are effectively implementing the corridor from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, using three alternatives: land, air, and sea. The land alternative is considered central, while the air and sea options serve as complementary alternatives. It seems that over time, the Iranians have been able to prioritize their preferred corridor option based on operational risk management from time to time. The corridor is used for the transfer of weapons, operatives, commercial commodity, and religious pilgrims.

As of 2017, the Iranians made considerable use of the land corridor. An extensive military infrastructure was established along the land corridor routes, to secure and support it logistically. Part of the infrastructure is based on existing military bases in Iraq and Syria, and part of the infrastructure is new and has been manned mainly by Shiite militia forces controlled by the IRGC.

According to various publications, this "military environment" also became a significant vulnerability of the land corridor, enabling intelligence surveillance on it and subsequently allowing the execution of the Campaign Between the Worlds (CBW) activity against it.

Among the many factors that forced the Iranians to re-route the Lebanon-Syria corridor through the air and the sea are:

- Intensive CBW activity.
- Logistical difficulties.
- The "blocking" of a potential route (faster and shorter) through al-Tanf in southeastern Syria by the Americans and A local opposition force opposed to the Shiite axis ("Maghawir al-Thawra").
- The "blocking" of a potential route through northern Iraq towards northeastern Syria by the Americans and the Kurds.

The Iranian corridor to Syria and Lebanon by land, air, and sea operates continuously. Sometimes it works at high intensity, and sometimes at low intensity. The operation of the Iranian corridor includes smuggling weapons to Syria and Lebanon and the infrastructure for producing and assembling advanced conventional weapons on Syrian soil. The precision missile project is a prime example of this. As part of the CBW, attacks are carried out aimed at thwarting, disrupting, and delaying the smuggling of weapons and the production infrastructure. It seems that the damage to the routes of the air and sea corridor is the most severe. In contrast, the land corridor was less affected. According to reports in Israel, there is a success of about 70 percent in impairing the transfer of weapons and of about 90 percent in damaging the weapons production infrastructure on Syrian soil. This is a Sisyphean campaign. The more damage is done, the more the other side makes changes, finds alternatives, and rehabilitates infrastructures. In our assessment, the attack on the CERS 4000 institute in Masyaf on August 25 struck a fatal blow to the advanced weapons production infrastructure. However, as we have already published, the rehabilitation processes at the site, led by the IRGC, have already begun.

However, it appears that as of this writing, the Iranians are once again making extensive use of the land corridor from Iran via Iraq to central-eastern Syria in the geographical area of Al-Bukamal-Deir ez-Zor. This is due to the operational difficulties they encountered in the air and at sea because of the exposure of this activity, even though it was carried out under full civilian coverage.

Based on open sources, this research aims to present in detail the current land corridor routes from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. The research analysis is based on four main parts detailed in four parts in this report:

The first part of this research (see Chapter A) deals with the land corridor routes from Iran to Iraq and the routes on Iraqi soil. It focuses on the different land corridor routes starting in Iran, the border crossing into Iraq,

and the routes running through Iraq. These routes are actually divided into two main sub-routes: the "northern" (this does not refer to the geographical area of northern Iraq that is apparently "blocked" to the Iranians) and the "southern" route. In addition, the first part of the study deals with whether the route in northern Iraq/north-eastern Syria and the al-Tanf region in south-eastern Syria are currently relevant for use within the framework of the land corridor. This section also deals with the question of how secure is the border between Iraq and Syria. Currently, the geographic area of northern Iraq is very limited for the use of the land corridor since the American "obstruction" in the al-Tanf area is effective. **As for securing the border between Iraq and Syria, this is a border that, for the most part, is breached.**

The second part of this research (see Chapter B) deals with the route of the central land corridor between Iraq and Syria. It focuses on the central passageway between Iraq and Syria. The area of Al-Qa'im (Iraq) and Al-Bukamal (Syria), near Deir ez-Zor, is a major geographical cornerstone of the land corridor. In addition, this part of the research specifies the "Imam Ali" military base, the main military base provisioning the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran in the region, and the methods of disguising the weapons transferred to Syria as civilian goods. The second part also deals with the city of Al-Bukamal, which is actually a Syrian city under Iranian security control.



Above: General Michael E. Kurilla, commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), visits al-Tanf and meets with Maghawir al-Thawra personnel (July 2022).

The third part of this research (see Chapter C) deals with the main land route on Syrian soil to the border with Lebanon. This section focuses on the four main routes of the land corridor on Syrian soil towards Lebanon. All routes depart from the province of Al-Bukamal. The three main routes pass through the Deir ez-Zor, and Palmyra area, and from there, they part. One towards Damascus, the other towards Al-Qusayr, and the third towards the Syrian coast. The fourth route, the longest of them all (which in our assessment will be used only under operational constraints), makes a northern detour through the city of Aleppo, continuing south to Homs and from there to Lebanon. It is possible that Qeshm Air and Caspian Air, the two Iranian airlines (which belong to the IRGC), stopped their flights to Damascus following airstrikes against the airport there in June. It is also possible that Mahan Air (also affiliated with the IRGC) has increased its flights to the Aleppo airport. In light of the above, the Iranians may use part of the fourth route, i.e., the section from Aleppo southwards towards Homs and Lebanon.

The fourth part of this study (see Chapter D) refers to plans for future infrastructure projects within the land corridor. The Iranian land corridor to Lebanon is based on existing road infrastructure in the territories where Iran has "created" sovereignty (or partial sovereignty) on the routes from its territory to the Lebanese territory. This section focuses on plans for future infrastructure projects aiming to reinforce the land corridor by laying a railroad track and paving a highway. This refers to projects in the planning stages of connecting a railway between the ports of Imam Khomeini in Iran and Latakia in Syria and paving the Tehran-Damascus highway. Future plans for the infrastructural fortification of the land corridor by railroad and highway are not progressing.

Chapter One:

Following the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the return of most of Syria's territory to the Syrian regime and its allies from the radical Shiite axis led by Iran, including the Al-Bukamal border crossing, **the path** to a continuous land crossing between Tehran and Damascus via Iraq and from there to Lebanon, the Beqaa Valley and Beirut **was opened**. The general distance between the Tehran region and Beirut is about 1,850 km.

The military use of the land corridor began in 2017. The land corridor allows Iranian forces and the proxy forces of the radical Shiite axis to move through the geographical area from Iran in the east to Lebanon in the west, transporting forces and weapons between the arenas. Many publications regarding the land route over the past decade stemmed from "Israeli CBW activity," which thwarts, disrupts, and delays the transfer and production of advanced conventional weapons within the infrastructure of the corridor to Syria and Lebanon.

From an economic point of view, using the land corridor may make it easier for Iran to export goods to Europe while "laundering" them, if necessary, in Syria and Turkey, thus circumventing American and/or international sanctions. From a religious point of view, the use of the land corridor facilitates the movement of Shi'ite pilgrims to Shi'ite holy sites in Syria.

Both economic use and religious use can be a cover and are a cover for military use.

As early as June 2017, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah declared that *"today everyone should know that the axis of resistance is stronger. The Israeli enemy should know that if it starts a war against Syria or Lebanon, it is not self-evident that the fighting will remain Lebanese-Israeli or Syrian-Israeli. This does not mean that I am saying that there are countries that will intervene directly. But the skies may open, and tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of jihad fighters and fighters from all over the Arab and Islamic world will come to participate in this battle – from Iraq, from Yemen, and from Afghanistan..."*

On July 25, 2022, Nasrallah gave a television interview marking the 40th anniversary of the founding of Hezbollah. Relating to tensions over the negotiations of the maritime borders with Israel and the "Karish" gas reservoir, Nasrallah noted that there is a likely possibility that if a war breaks out, it will not remain between Lebanon and Israel and that more elements will enter into it...

These two statements by Nasrallah show the purpose of the Iranian corridor - the transportation and transfer of forces and equipment during a war against Israel.

As noted, in addition to the land corridor, the Iranians have developed both air and maritime corridors as alternatives. Clearly, the air and sea corridors suffer from shortcomings: Defined traffic lanes that are visible and exposed to any civilian flight/cruise tracking app., as well as the sea routes, which are longer and slower, and more dangerous due to the monitoring and control of Israel and the United States, with an emphasis on crossing the Red Sea and the Suez Canal on the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

However, the air and maritime corridors have a central, large, and significant advantage. While the land corridor operates in a relatively identified "military environment" (a significant vulnerability), the air and sea corridors are operated by the Iranians in a fully civilian environment (civilian flights and shipping routes). The ships and planes used by the Iranians are civilian or disguised as such. In such a case, the risk management and the margin of error in a thwarting attempt are exceptionally considerable. Another benefit is the advantage of content and size. Using an airplane and especially a ship makes it possible to transport a relatively large/substantial content. In contrast, in the land corridor, where individual vehicles/trucks are used, the quantity and size of the contents are limited unless the weapons are broken down into several parts.

According to international law, a military attack and harm to an innocent civilian aircraft or ship constitute crossing a red line (even if unintentional). On the one hand, the Iranians are taking full advantage of this fact, and on the other hand, they are drawing conclusions regarding the operating environment of the land corridor, changing it as much as possible to a "civilian" nature, and its operation as part of "Human Shield".

It appears that in recent years the Iranians have increased their activity in the framework of the air and naval corridors to Syria, which serves as an "intermediate stop" on the way to Lebanon. This is an alternative to their activities in the framework of the land corridor. The main entrance gate of the air corridor into Syria was the international airport in Damascus, while the main entrance of the maritime corridor into Syria was the seaport in Latakia.



Above: The unloading of a Boeing 747 at Damascus Airport in January 2022. The plane is owned by the "Qeshm Fares Air" company, which belongs to the IRGC and operates under civilian cover.

Since 2021, it appears that extensive military activity and concentrated offensive efforts are being carried out to thwart and disrupt the Iranian air and naval corridor. In December 2021, two large airstrikes were carried out against the shipping container complex in the port of Latakia. It is our assessment that the attacked targets were Iranian shipping containers containing advanced Iranian weapons components intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon. These two attacks caused the Russians to deploy a force of their own in Latakia port. The Russian force is evidently interfering with the Iranian maritime corridor leading into Latakia and disrupting Iranian intentions.



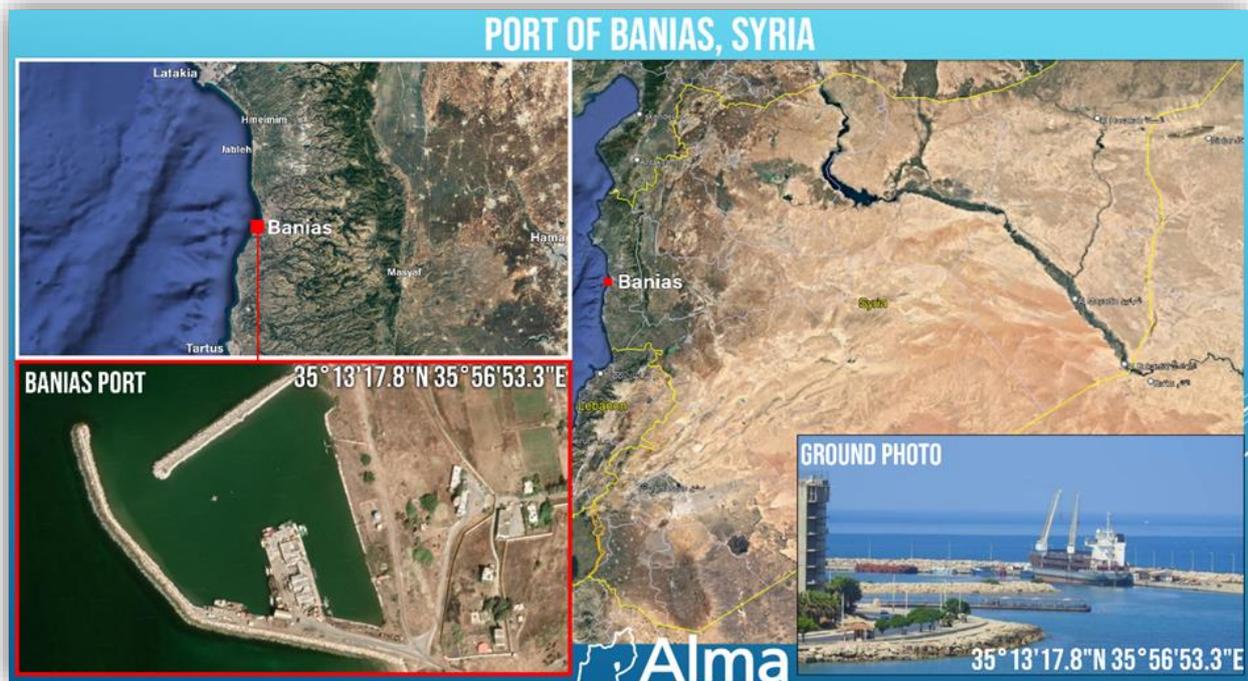


The container complex at Latakia port.

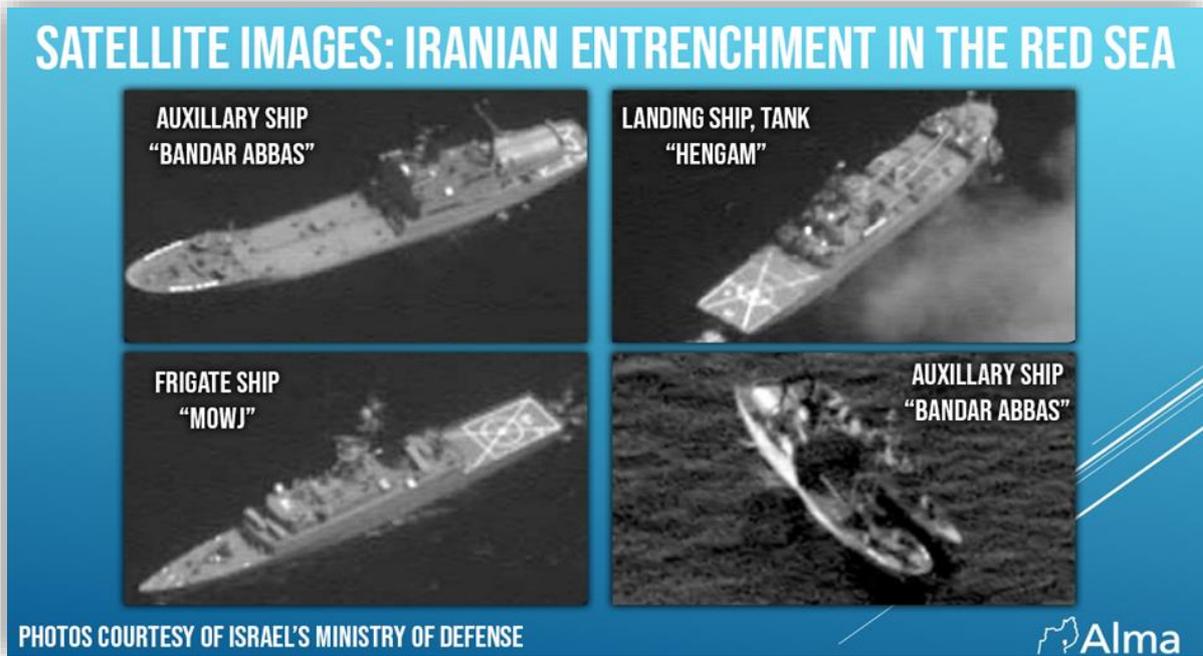


The Russian presence in the port of Latakia (a Russian military truck can be seen on the other side of the fence).

Despite the abovementioned, our assessment is that the Iranian maritime corridor to Syria has not completely ceased. In addition to civilian cargo ships, where it is convenient and natural to transport weapons, the Iranians also use oil tankers, which serve as a platform for transporting weapons. The Iranian marine traffic of oil tankers towards the Syrian port of Banias has never stopped. Every month, approximately two to three oil tankers reach Syria, some of which may be exploited to transport Iranian weapons.

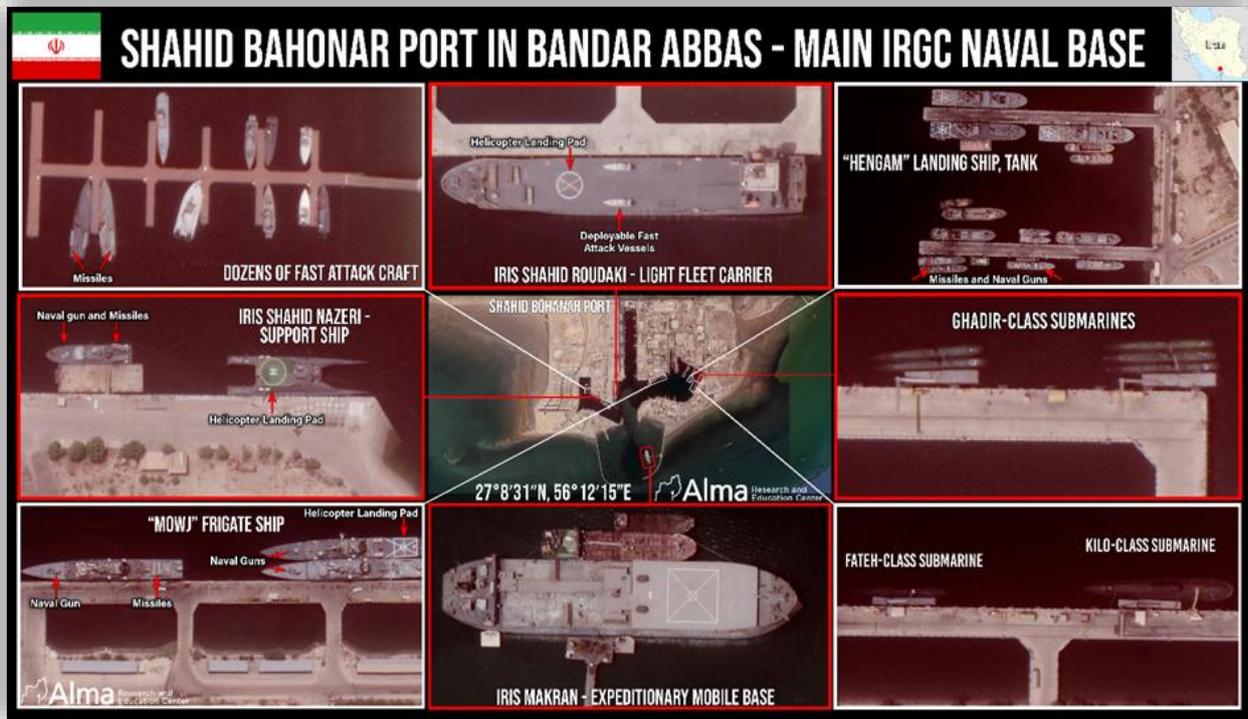


On July 05, 2022, the Israeli Defense Minister revealed that four military ships belonging to the Iranian navy have been cruising in the Red Sea on international trade routes. It should be noted that about 25 percent of the world's civilian maritime trade traffic passes in the area of the Iranian battleships' cruise route.



Above: Satellite images of the four Iranian military ships.

Such an Iranian naval military presence of this magnitude in the Red Sea is unusual. Presumably, one of its objectives is to secure the movement of Iranian ships crossing the Red Sea towards the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Syria. The main base from which the military ships depart is the "Shahid Bahonar" naval base of the IRGC in Bandar Abbas.



On May 20, 2022, Israel revealed that Reza Safi al-Din, the son of Hashem Safi al-Din, was in charge of the airborne smuggling of advanced weapons components for Hezbollah's precision missile project from Iran to Lebanon. His father, Hashem Safi al-Din, is the head of Hezbollah's executive council. The weapons components were smuggled on direct civilian flights from Iran to the international airports in Damascus and Beirut. From Damascus, the weapons components were transferred by land to Lebanon. These components were disguised in ordinary passengers' luggage on innocent civilian flights.



Hashem Safi al-Din



Reza Safi al-Din

In June 2022, two significant airstrikes were carried out against the runways and other infrastructures of Damascus International Airport. Both strikes severely damaged both runways. The southern runway was used for military activity, including the air corridor from Iran. The northern runway was used for civilian purposes, including domestic and international flights.

Initially, only the "military" runway was attacked. However, the "civilian" runway was also attacked when it began to serve the Iranian air corridor. The airstrikes in June caused a shutdown of aircraft traffic at the airport for 15 days. During the shutdown period, planes were diverted to Aleppo and Lattakia airports.



Above: Innocent baggage? (This is how the Iranian soccer team was photographed when it landed in Beirut about a year ago (why do they need so much equipment for a two-day stay?).



Damascus International Airport is fit to accommodate large cargo aircraft, such as the Boeing 747, which The IRGC customarily uses (see above). The shutdown of the Damascus Airport disrupts their activity. However, the Iranians can use smaller aircraft types despite the resulting limitations. Throughout Syria, some airports can receive small and medium-sized cargo planes, such as the airport in Deir ez-Zor.



Above: Renovated runways, Damascus Airport (June 22, 2022).



Above: An Iranian medium-sized Ilyushin-76 cargo plane was seen flying at a low altitude over Deir ez-Zor on June 30.

DER EZ-ZOR AIRFIELD, SYRIA AS OF JUNE 2022



On July 28, an Iranian opposition website, "Iran International," reported that the two Iranian airlines, Qeshm Air and Caspian Air (affiliated with the IRGC), stopped their flights to Damascus International Airport following the airstrikes there in June. A third company, Mahan Air, also affiliated with the IRGC, increased its flights to the international airport in Aleppo by nearly 30 percent.

On August 31 and September 6, 2022, airstrikes were carried out against the runway of Aleppo Airport and it was shut down for a few days. The message is clear: Aleppo airport will not become a substitute for the air corridor.

Given the concentration of offensive efforts to disrupt the maritime and air corridor described above, our assessment is that the Iranians will return and focus their efforts on returning to the "traditional" land corridor. Indeed, airstrikes were carried out in northwestern Syria on July 2, 2022, near the town of Al-Hamidiyah, and on August 14, 2022, near the village of Abu Afsa south of Tartus.

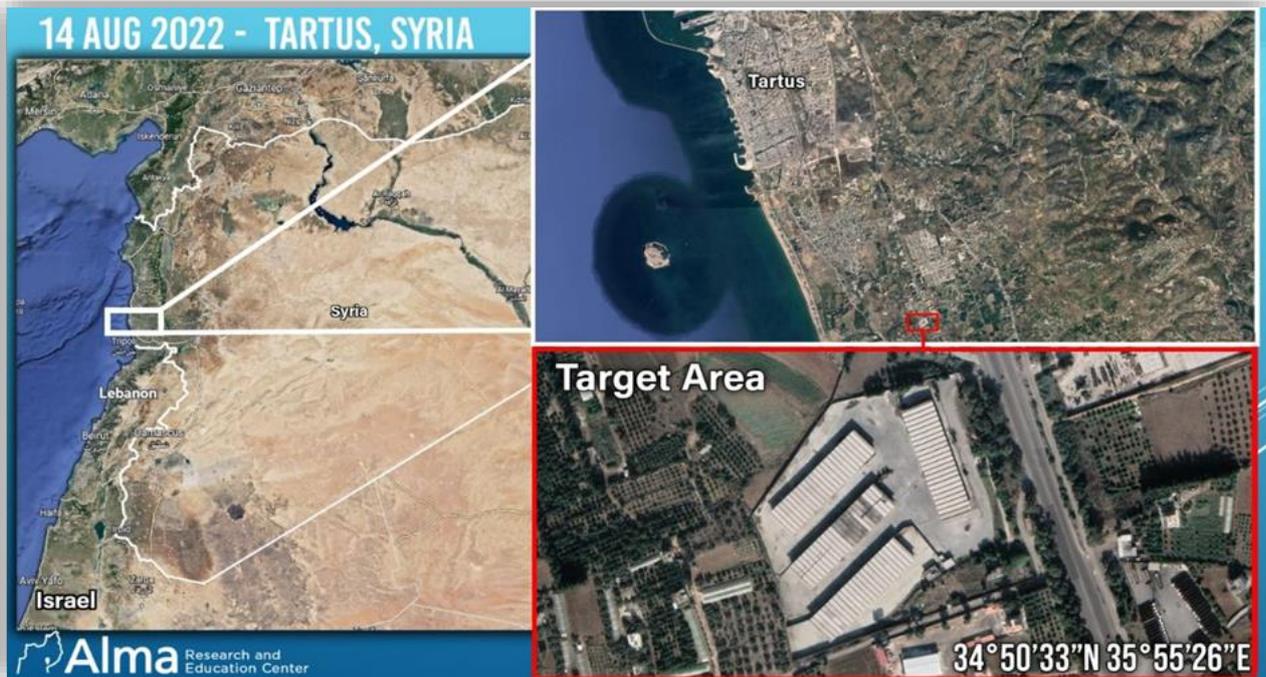


In the photo: the crater caused by a missile hit on the runway - Aleppo airport (September 6, 2022).

In our assessment, the objective of the airstrikes was apparently the destruction of advanced Iranian conventional weapons components that arrived through the land corridor from Iran, were then transferred to Syria through the area of Al-Bukamal, and from there, they were transported along the Palmyra-Homs route south of Tartus. The coast area is near Lebanon's northern border with Syria. The weapons components were apparently stored in civilian agricultural and industrial areas in preparation for their transfer to Hezbollah in Lebanon.



Above: The attack in Al- Hamidiyah, Syria (July 02). The weapons were transported on the land route marked in blue.



Above: The attack on Abu Afsa on August 14.

We have recently received indications that the Iranians are exploiting the Shi'ite pilgrim civilian bus traffic entering Syria (to visit the holy Shi'ite religious sites) as part of the land corridor through Al-Bukamal to transport weapons. The Iranians likely use the civilian buses to transport weapons components intended for the precision missile project and to transport components used for the maintenance and assembly of UAVs at the T4 airport between Palmyra and Homs.

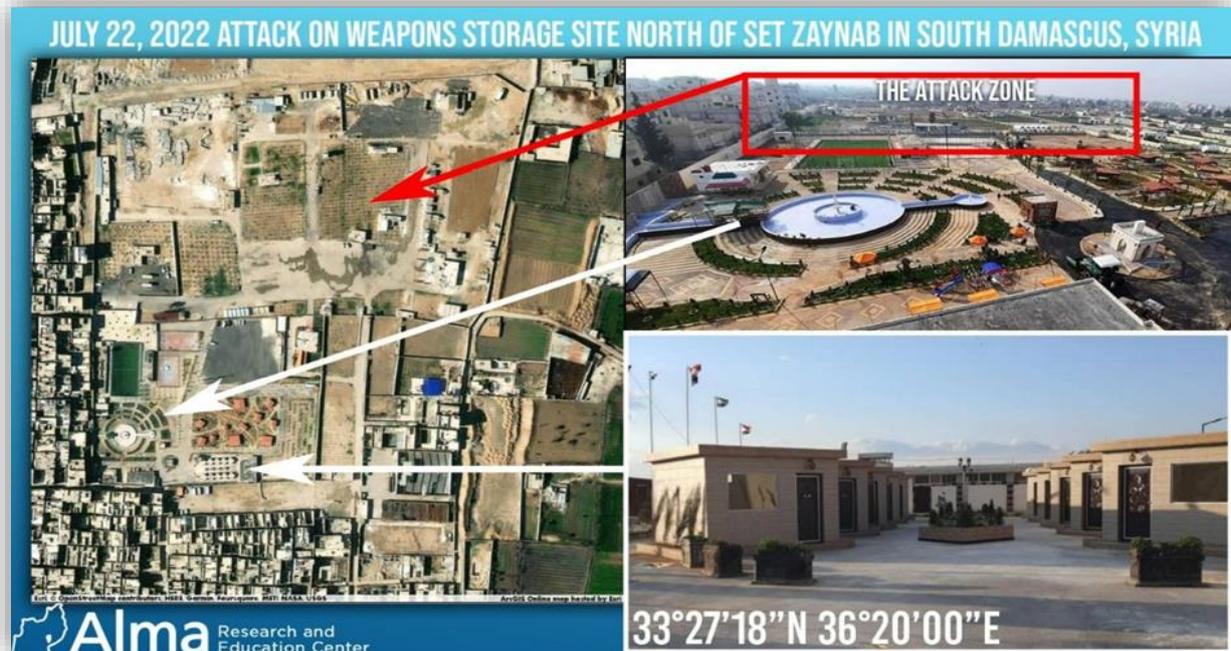
In our assessment, the American presence in al-Tanf severely restricts the Iranian activities within the land corridor and, as an operational constraint, directs them to one central geographical region in the Al-Bukamal and Deir ez-Zor area. As of this writing, the American "blocking" in al-Tanf effectively obstructs the transfer of advanced Iranian conventional weapons to Syria and Lebanon (but unfortunately, it is ineffective in terms of other types of smuggling, with an emphasis on drugs).

Is this also the case with northern Iraq and the transition to northeastern Syria? We are not sure of this. Despite the Kurds' (hostile to the Shiite axis) control of this area and despite the limited American presence in this region, the Iranians might try to make use of this potential route since the Iranians are in a state of operational incapacity in the "comfortable" areas of the land corridor. As far as the Iranians are concerned, this would be an operational risk. This is a surprising and unexpected route that will require precaution. Camouflage and subterfuge can only succeed if the Iranians do not turn this route into a day-to-day routine.

It is no coincidence that starting from February 2018, the forces of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran have invested considerable military efforts in recapturing the city of Aleppo and its surroundings. After the reconquest of Aleppo at the beginning of 2020, considerable resources were invested in the civilian and military entrenchment. In Iran's strategic planning, the city of Aleppo was supposed to be a major anchor in Syria for the "absorption" of weapons arriving via the land corridor from the geographical area of northern Iraq. From Aleppo, the route was planned to continue south towards Homs and Lebanon. However, as noted above, the route through the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, which connects to Aleppo, is currently problematic for the Iranians. Assuming that the Iranians have stopped flights to the Damascus airport, it is possible that the Aleppo airport will be an alternative for the air corridor (medium-sized planes). From the Aleppo airport, the Iranians will utilize the last part of the land route south towards Homs and Lebanon.

As of this writing, the cities of Al-Bukamal, Homs, and Damascus (with an emphasis on the international airport and the area of Saida Zaynab in southern Damascus) are the main anchors for the "absorption" of weapons arriving via the land corridor inside Syria. The entrenchment of the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran in these cities, both civilian-wise and militarily, is taking place with greater intensity and serves Iranian strategic planning to establish, design, and stabilize the land corridor.

At this stage, we cannot assess the magnitude of the airstrike's effect on July 22, 2022, against an advanced Iranian weapons depot in the area of Saida Zaynab.



At the end of July 2022, following the airstrike, we received unverified indications of some Iranian organizations operating in Saida Zaynab, including Iran's Jihad al-Bina, which ceased their activities in the region permanently or temporarily for unclear reasons. In addition, the Iranian Shi'ite militias transferred all their weapons and ammunition from the international airport in Damascus and from the temporary warehouses in its vicinity to warehouses between the Damascus airport and the Ble military airport. According to indications, these warehouses were also attacked on July 22. The instructions received by the Iranian militias in the area of the Damascus airport were to completely clear the airport of all the temporary warehouses and shipments that were stored there before June 2022, when it was attacked and went out of operation, coinciding with the beginning of the renovation of the field.

It seems that the Iranian operational flexibility within the land corridor can be manifested mainly on Syrian soil by potentially using four routes. However, these four Syrian routes also originate from one geographical anchor, the Al-Bukamal province, which currently constitutes the route from Iraqi territory to Syrian territory. The other geographical routes from Iraq to Syrian territory (the al-Tanf region and northeastern Syria) are currently irrelevant or very problematic to the functioning of the Iranian corridor.

Over time, the Iranians drew conclusions regarding the necessity to revise the nature of the land corridor. The tendency to use the civilian environment and the "human shield" tactic is increasing, emphasizing interim storage in Syria in preparation for the transfer of weapons into Lebanon to the hands of Hezbollah. A typical example of the "human shield" and "intermediate storage" is the site that was attacked in Saida Zainab on July 22.

One of the main objectives of the Iranian civilian entrenchment that we have identified for several years in southern Syria, southern Damascus, Al-Bukamal-Deir ez-Zor, Homs, and Aleppo is to serve the tactics of the "human shield" in general and the Iranian corridor to Lebanon in particular. The civilian entrenchment provides the Iranians and their proxies freedom of military action in Syria.

Chapter A – The Land Corridor – the transit routes from Iran to Iraq and the routes in Iraq

The "northern" route (not referring to the geographical area of northern Iraq)-

The Khosravi border crossing (coordinates: 34.382424, 45.469988) and the Zarneh border crossing (coordinates: 33.800474, 45.606723) from Iran to Iraq:

Likely, the land corridor route for the transfer of weapons usually begins from the area of Tehran, where a large concentration of Iranian arms industry factories are located. We estimate that the "northern option" is the route from the Tehran region through two major passes, the Khosravi and Zarneh border crossings. The Khosravi crossing lies between the town of Seyed Saeed in Iran and Khanaqin in Iraq. The Zarneh border crossing, located south of Khosravi, lies between the town of Sumar in Iran and Mandali in Iraq. The distance from Tehran to these crossings is approximately 750 kilometers and about a 9-hour drive.



Above: The Khosravi border crossing (Ground photo)



Above: The Zarneh border crossing from the Iranian side (Ground photo).

From Tehran, in this part of Iran, the driving is on high-quality highways (Route 5 and Route 6). Advancing on to Intercity Road 48, where traffic is slower, specifically on the mountainous section in the Rfie area in the Kermanshah district. In this area, there are no threats on the route. To get to the more southern Zarneh crossing, from Route 48, join Intercity Road 17, and from there, connect to a narrow local un-numbered road leading to the crossing.

IRGC LAND CORRIDOR STARTING FROM TEHRAN TO IRAQ BORDER - "NORTH ROUTE"



Alma Research and Education Center

KHOSRAVI BORDER TERMINAL - IRAN/IRAQ BORDER



Alma Research and Education Center



Above: The Zarneh crossing (between the town of Sumar in Iran and Mandali in Iraq)

Another crossing, which is not an official crossing, is located north of the Zarneh crossing in the Naft Shahr area.



The "northern" land route on Iraqi soil

These crossings lead from Iran to Diyala (Iraqi) province, where an Iranian military base is tasked to store the weapons transferred from Iran in interim storage until they continue westward towards Syria. The province of Diyala has been known for many years as the region from which many goods of various kinds are smuggled into Iraq. These goods paralyze domestic production in the province due to the low prices at which the smuggled goods are sold. Reports we have pinpointed from 2019 and 2021 show an Iraqi government directive to the security forces not to take action against the smuggling in this region.

From the Khosravi / Zarneh crossings, the "northern option" route continues to the area of Iraq's capital city, Baghdad. From the Khosravi crossing, the distance to the Baghdad area is about 185 kilometers, estimated at about a 3-hour drive. From the Zarneh crossing to the Baghdad area, its approximately 130 kilometers, about a two-hour drive. From the Khosravi crossing, there is a high-quality level road, no. 5, directly to Sa'diah. From the Zarneh crossing, it's a drive on Route 82 westward. The two crossings connect to Route 4. At Al Ghalibiyah, west of Baqubah, connect to Highway 2 to Baghdad. Baghdad is bypassed from the north on Route 97. In this part, too, there are no real threats on the route since the main routes are under the full control of the Iraqi government. However, although the intensity of its activity varies, ISIS is still active in various provinces in Iraq, including the Province of Diyala.



From the Baghdad area, the land corridor route in the "northern option" advances towards the Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal (Syria) crossing - 386 kilometers, about a 5.5-hour drive. The route proceeds on Hwy 1 towards Ramadi. From Ramadi, it connects to Route 12 towards Haditha. From Haditha, it continues to the Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal border crossing between Iraq and Syria; the road, a paved two-lane medium-quality road, about 150 kilometers long, runs along the Euphrates River. Today this part of the route is located in the area of the Al-Anbar province, under the control of the Iraqi government. There is no ISIS presence or activity in the province as it was in the days of the ISIS caliphate. However, ISIS is still active in this province at varying intensities. It should be borne in mind that this is a desert route in the practically uninhabited territory; the control and security are complex.

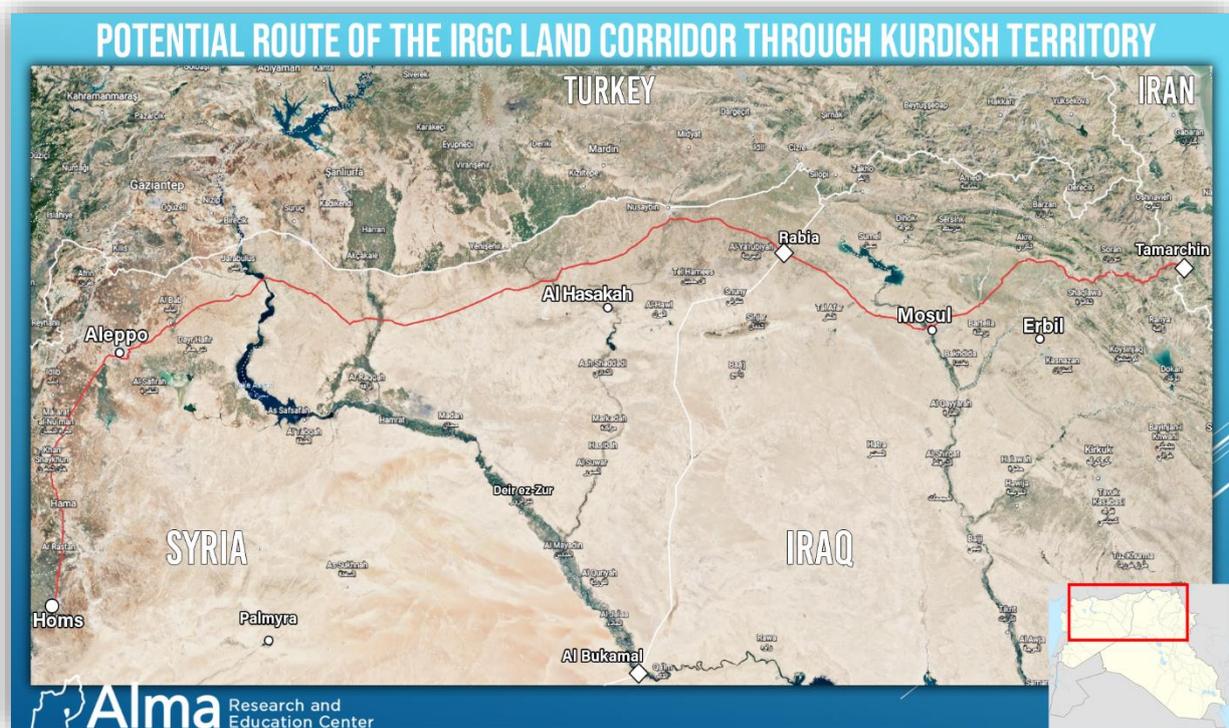
The alternative to Route 12 is the desolate desert route, founded on the oil pipeline path, which runs from the Syrian city of Kirkuk. This road passes by the T1 pumping station.



Are the geographical areas of northern Iraq and northeastern Syria relevant for the use of the land corridor?

The potential route starts from Tehran and proceeds towards the cities of Erbil and Mosul in Iraq, crossing into Syrian territory via the M4 highway westward towards the Al-Hasakah area, the city of Aleppo, and from there on the M5 south towards the city of Homs. As of this writing, this route is problematic for the Iranians. Northern Iraq (Erbil and Mosul) and northeastern Syria (Al-Hasakah region) are under the civilian and military control of the Kurds. There is also a US military presence in northeastern Syria. The Iranians will find moving freely in these areas challenging and may encounter many difficulties.

In our assessment, despite the abovementioned, the Iranians might try to use this potential route when they are in a state of operational incapacity in their so-called "comfortable" areas of the land corridor. As far as the Iranians are concerned, this would be an operational risk. However, this route is a surprising and unexpected route requiring precautions. Camouflage and subterfuge can only succeed if the Iranians do not turn this route into a day-to-day routine.



The "southern" route

The Iran/ Iraq Shalamche border crossing (coordinates 30.504860, 48.026666):

In writing the report, we assume that the route of most of the arms shipments within the land corridor begins in the Tehran region, where there is a large concentration of the Iranian arms industry. Based on this assumption, our assessment is that the route inside Iran towards the Shalamche border crossing will start in the Tehran region, bearing southwest on highway number 5, in the direction of the city of Arak. From there the route proceeds west and south towards the cities of Khormabad and Dezful. From the city of Dezful, the route will presumably continue south on Intercity Route 37 towards Ahvaz. From there, we assume the route will go on south towards Khorramshahr. The journey inside Iran is about 1000 kilometers long and approximately a 12 hours' drive.



The Iraqi side of the Shalamche border crossing (Ground photo).

The crossing between Iran and Iraq, within the framework of the land corridor in the "southern option," will most likely occur at the Shalamche border crossing. The crossing is located in western Iran between the Iranian city of Khorramshahr and the large Iraqi city of Basra, located in southern Iraq. The vast majority of the residents of Basra are Shi'ites.



The "southern" land route on Iraqi soil

The region of southern Iraq is characterized by an absolute majority Shiite population. This region is a convenient operational area for Iranian elements and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian patronage.

The "Shiite strip" stretches from the Iraqi-Shiite city of Basra, located near the border with Iran, to the northwest towards the Iraqi-Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala. The "Strip," by way of the Iraqi highway No. 1, or the interurban Route 28, is a natural and classic land corridor for Iranian activity to transfer weapons to the Shiite axis in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In the "Shiite strip" from Basra through Najaf to Karbala, there are many bases and sites used by the radical Shiite axis led by Iran, which function as storage, supply, and detachment stations facilitating the land corridor used by the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran.

The distance from the Shalamche border crossing to Karbala is about 600 kilometers and about a 6-hour drive. From the city of Karbala, there are two main options to reach the Al-Bukamal border crossing with Syria:

The first (shorter) option: From Karbala, heading north to Ar Razzah. From there, connecting to Route 12 northwest towards the Ramadi area. From there, northwest to Haditha, turning east to the border crossing area with Syria in Al-Bukamal. About 500 km and approximately 5 hours' drive.

The second (longer) option: From Karbala, heading east on Route 22 to Al Nukhib. From there, carrying on north on Route 21 until it connects with Route 1 or 10. From there continue east to the Rutba area, connecting to Route 20 northeast to the border crossing with Syria in the Al-Bukamal area. About 800 km and approximately 8 hours' drive.

It is possible to combine the above two options and, from the Ramadi area, turning east towards Rutba on Hwy 1 for about 430 km, a 4.5 hours' drive.



Is the border area in al-Tanf relevant for use for the land corridor?

From the town of Rutba in Iraq, it is possible to continue on Route 1 towards al-Tanf Syria, crossing the border at the Iraqi Al Waleed border crossing. The passage through the Al-Tanf area is the shortest and fastest route from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. As of this writing, the potential land route via al-Tanf does not allow the Iranians to make significant arms transfers to Syria and Lebanon because of the American presence in this area. As long as the border crossing is controlled by the rebel forces under American aegis, the ability to cross via this route is unfeasible, and therefore it is necessary to detour through the area of Al-Bukamal - Deir ez-Zor.

Understanding the continuity of this route and the potential for a fast and safe route between Iran and Iraq and Syria and Lebanon, the US military forces deployed in the a-Tanf area. In 2016, the US military established a base in Syrian territory, just 13 kilometers from the Jordanian border, providing a response for controlling this part of the land corridor.

The geographical area of al-Tanf constitutes a kind of autonomy for the rebels and the opposing forces to the Assad regime, which are located under the auspices of an American military umbrella. This situation is to the dissatisfaction of the Syrians, Iranians, and Russians, who emphasize that this presence without invitation and coordination with the Assad regime is contrary to international law.

This geographical area has become a friction point between Iranian IRGC forces and Iraqi Shiite militias against US forces in the area, including in the airspace, as exhibited in the UAV attack on the American base in al-Tanf and in occasional rocket attacks against it.

Al-Tanf area is not hermetically sealed against smuggling. Occasionally there are smuggling attempts, mainly of drugs. Iran and the radical Shiite axis elements are trying to challenge the US and the opposition force "Ma'air Althura" located there with these smuggling attempts. However, in our estimation, significant weapons transfers will not be run through this route.

How secure is the Iraqi-Syrian border?

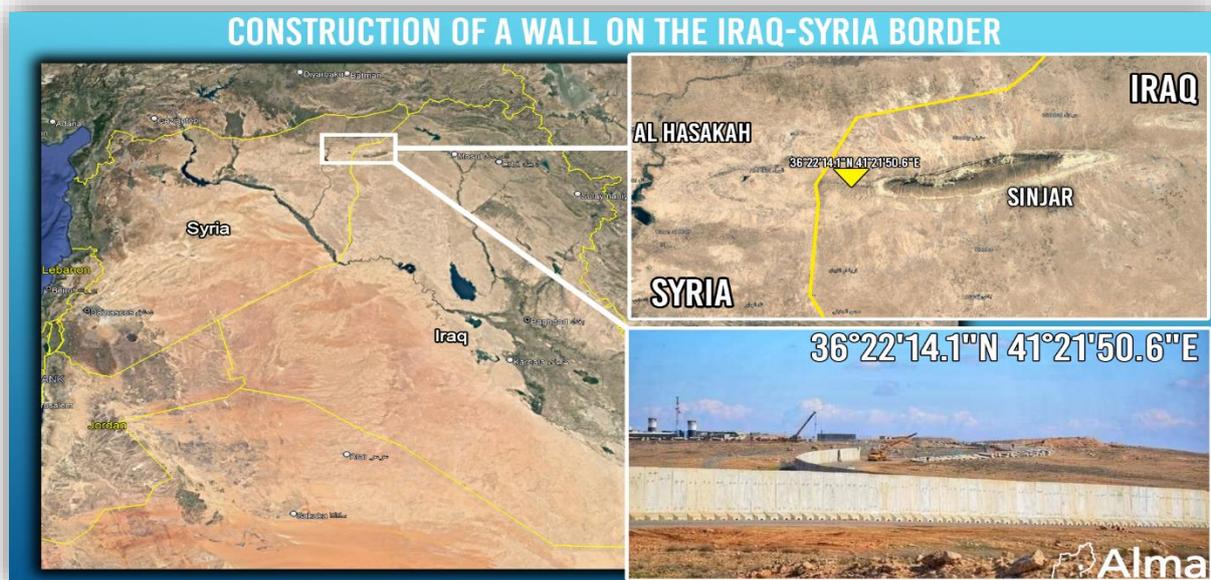
Despite Iraqi declarations pledging to strengthen security measures on the border with Syria, several Iraqi military personnel have stated that the number of smuggling operations is high and that there may be tunnels between Iraq and Syria that have not been exposed. The tunnels smuggle weapons, drugs, food, cigarettes, etc. The local government in the border area does not receive sufficient support from the central government in Baghdad to deal with this issue.

A former Iraqi senior policeman, Tareq al-Asal, claimed that the Iraqis secured the border between Iraq and Syria in the Iraqi Al-Anbar province by only about 50%. The Al-Anbar province is the geographical area coinciding Al-Bukamal. In contrast, the Iraqi Army spokesman announced in December 2021 that 80% of the border with Syria was fortified.

Despite the comments of the Iraqi security officials above, the border between Iraq and Syria, which is about 1000 kilometers long, is a border that can be defined as a breached border, especially in the area of Al-Bukamal, which is now the main area where the land corridor route passes.

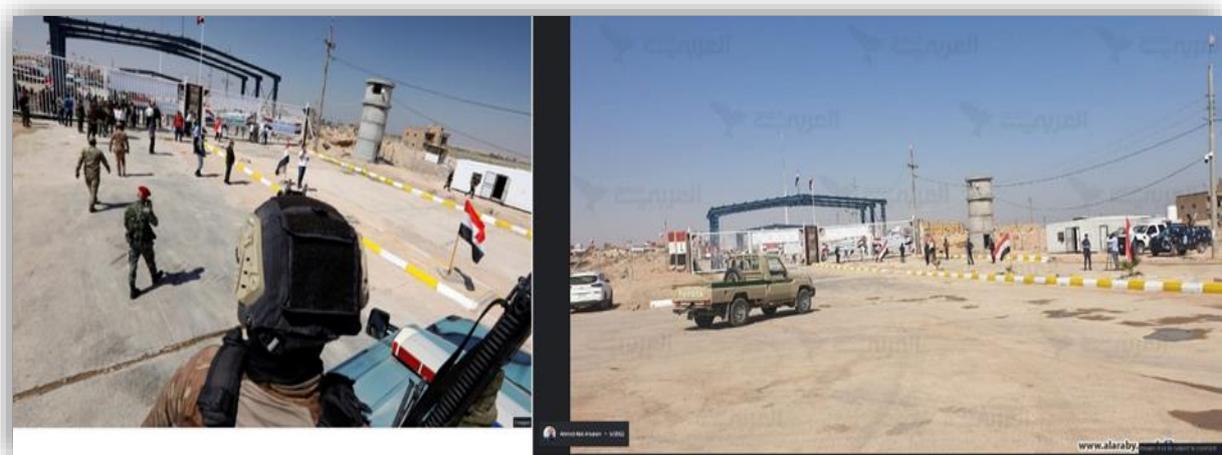
[Exclusive photos of the Iraqi border police outpost](#) and its personnel inside and out and photos from the Euphrates River gorge in the area of Al-Bukamal, show how breached the border is and how easily it is possible to cross between Iraq and Syria.

In the Iraqi province of Sinjar (northern Iraq), on the border with Syria (east of Al-Hasakah), Iraq began the construction of an obstacle, including a concrete wall. According to a statement by the Iraqi government dated January 26, 2022, it is a wall aimed at combating ISIS terrorism. At this stage, the extent of the construction and the length of the wall is unclear. According to the location of the construction, it is possible that the US, which has military and economic interests in the Al-Hasakah area (Deployment of forces and oil fields secured together with the Kurds), is involved and has an influence on the construction of the barrier.

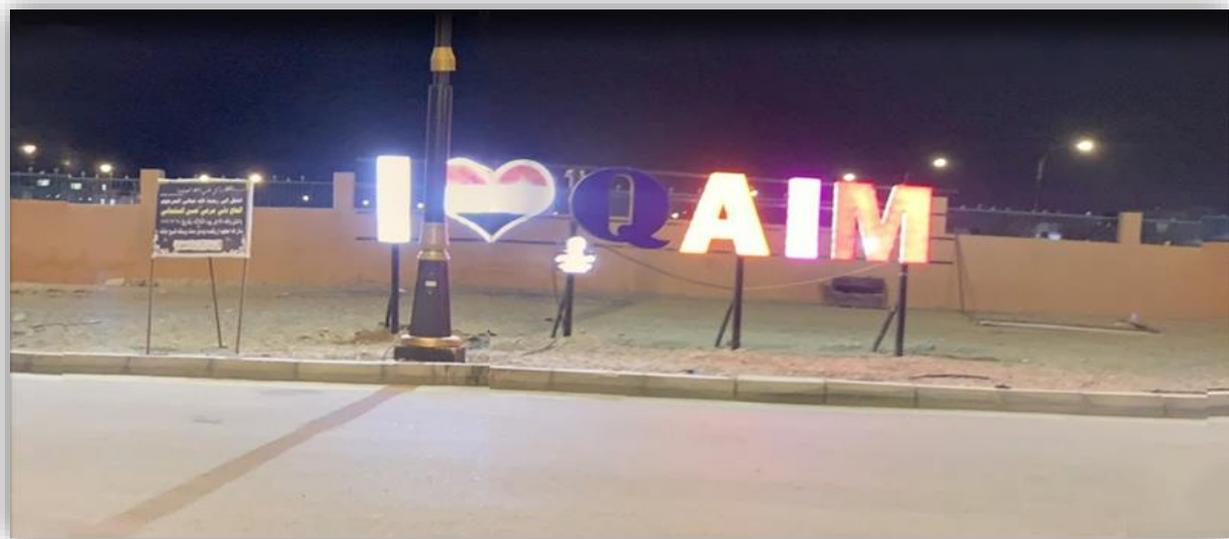


Chapter B – The Land Corridor: The main route between Iraq and Syria

Al-Qaim–Al-Bukamal Border Crossing



Above: The Iraqi side of the Al-Qaim border



The Al-Qaim (Iraqi side)- Al-Bukamal (Syrian side) border crossing was reopened in September 2019 after the area was finally purged of ISIS forces after it was recaptured in November 2017 by elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran and the Syrian armed forces.

Al-Bukamal is an area known for the smuggling, in both directions (Iraq/Syria), of everything that can be smuggled: food, fuel, drugs, etc. The Al-Bukamal area is a significant source of income for all those involved in smuggling, especially those of the radical Shiite axis.

Since its opening, the Al-Bukamal crossing has been controlled and operated almost exclusively by associates of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran. On the Iraqi side of the border, in the Al-Anbar province, those leading the smuggling are the Iraqi Hezbollah militias, liwa' (brigade) 45 and liwa' (brigade) 13, led by a man nicknamed Qassem Maslach.

The geographical area of Al-Qaim and Al-Bukamal is characterized by a large presence of military bases operating under Iranian auspices. The main role of the Iranian Shi'ite militias today is to secure the land corridor routes in Iraq and Syria in general and the border crossing area in Al-Qaim and Al-Bukamal in particular.

The military bases are used, among other things, to store weapons. Such bases can be found in um al-Malak, in the area of Al-Ramana (located near the border about 20 km after the town of Al-Baghuz), and in the area of Dughimah between Al-Obeidi and Al-Ramana. The presence of Shiite militias also exists in Akasha, Ras al-Haram, Mashariya, and Makr al-Dibf. In some of these places, residents of the area have been forced to emigrate in favor of establishing these logistics bases.

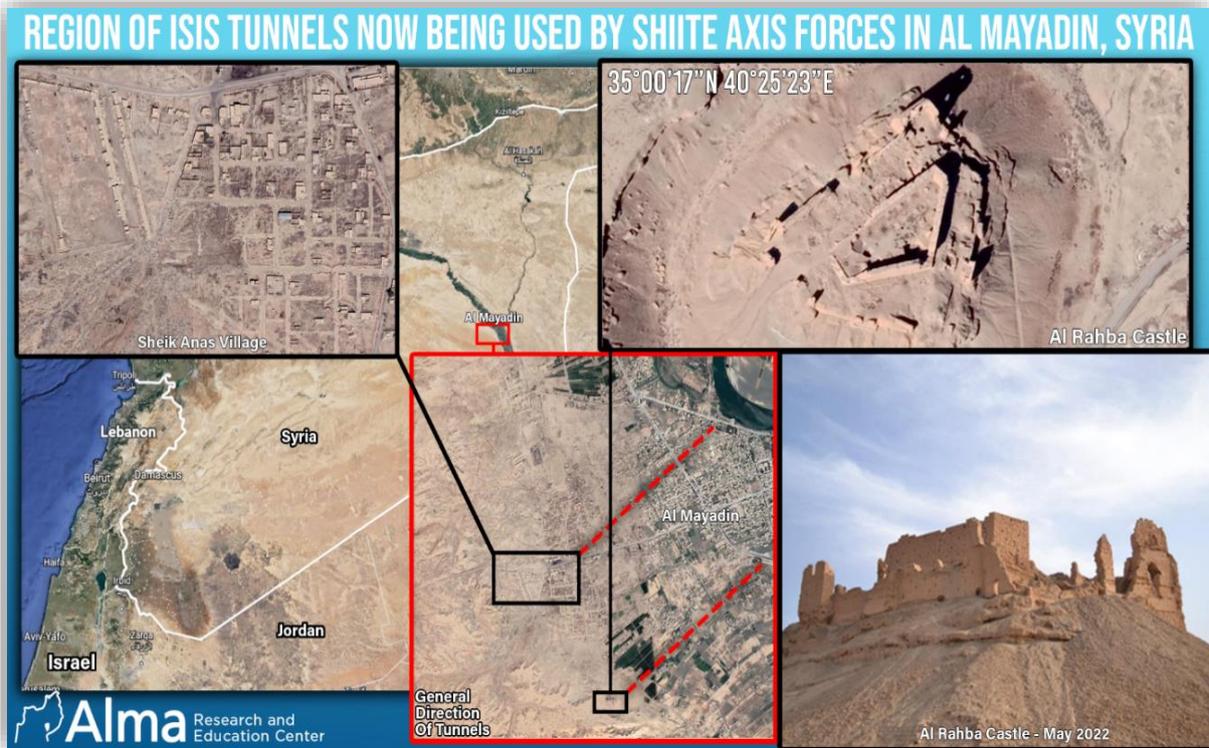
In addition to the formal crossing, there are also informal crossings and roads where it is possible to cross the border between Iraq and Syria. Such crossings exist in the area of the villages of Al-Abbas and Al-Hari (قرية الهري), southeast of Al-Bukamal, near the Al-Qaim/Al-Bukamal formal border crossing (coordinates 34.398175, 40.974831).



The border crossing in the area of Kafr al-Hari, southeast of Al-Bukamal. (In the poster: Qasem Soleimani & Abu Mahdi al-Muhandi)



In addition, the network of tunnels previously dug by ISIS in the area of the city of Al-Mayadin, north of Al-Bukamal, is sometimes used. One of the axis of these tunnels is the village of Al-Sheikh Ans, Qal'a al-Rabah, the area of Al-Mazra'a, and from there directly to the city of Al-Mayadeen in Syria.



How are the smuggled weapons disguised when they are transported from Iraq to Syria through the land corridor?

Elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran have several options for disguising the weapons they transport in the land corridor: as a "humanitarian" cargo, a "food" cargo (fruits/vegetables/wheat, etc.), or as can be seen in the bellow photo, hidden inside a civilian cargo, such as a prefabricated structure.



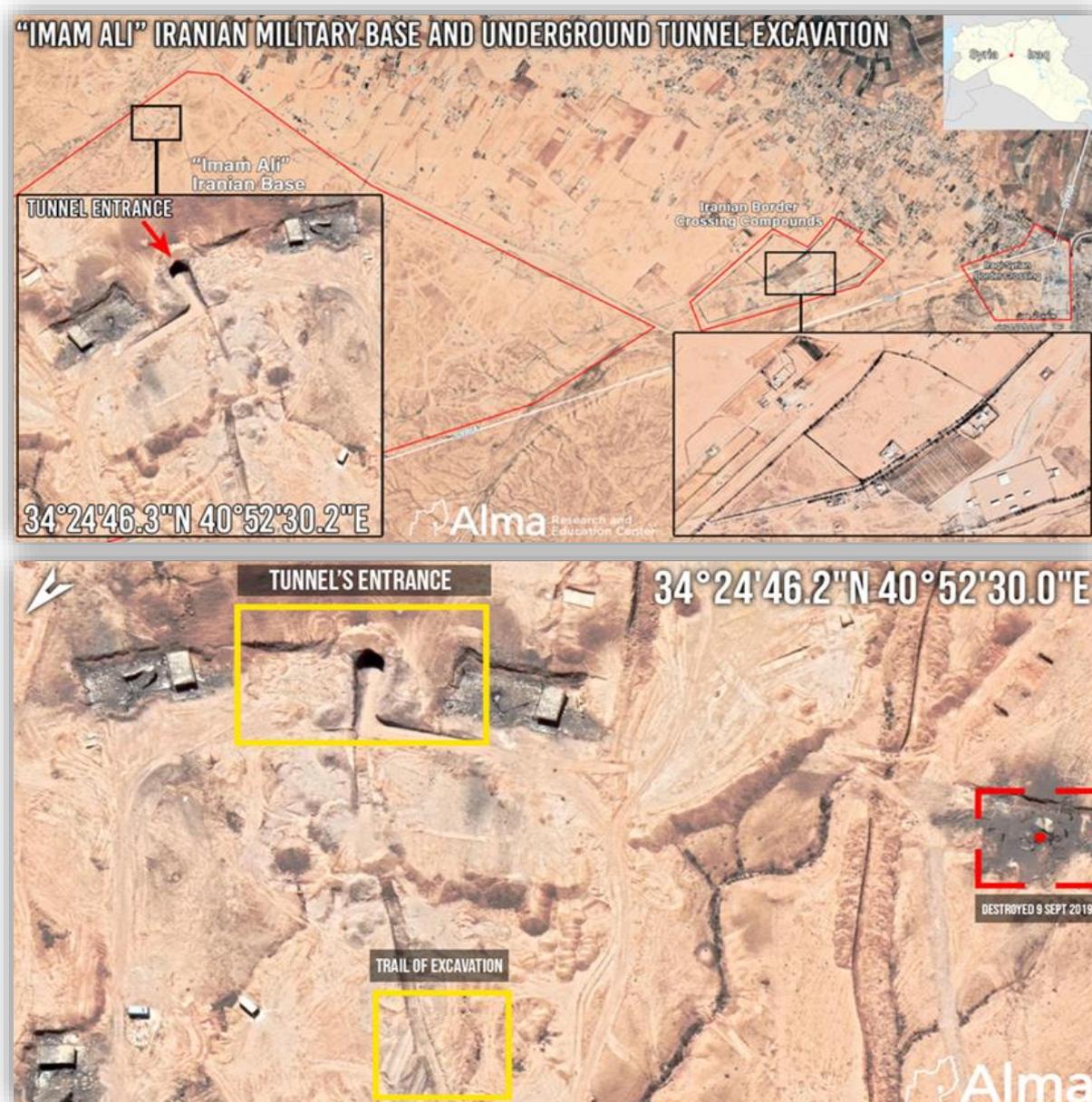
The Iranians also take advantage of the civilian buses carrying Shi'ite pilgrims on their way to visit the holy Shi'ite religious sites in Syria to transfer weapons and, most likely, weapons components intended for the precision missile project, which is carried out, among other locations, at the CERS Institute in Jarmaia and Masyaf. The buses also transport components used for the maintenance and assembly of UAVs at the T4 airport between Palmyra and Homs. These buses enter Syria from Iraq through the area of Al-Abbas and Kafr al-Hari (قرية الهري), southeast of Al-Bukamal.

The Iranians have come to the understanding that one of the main weak points of the land corridor is its reliance on identified military "environment" infrastructures. Therefore, there is a clear trend, at least in the Syrian geographical area, of camouflaging and assimilating the corridor as much as possible in a civilian environment. This is especially evident when the weapons are stored in an interim storage location before being handed over to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The Imam Ali military base

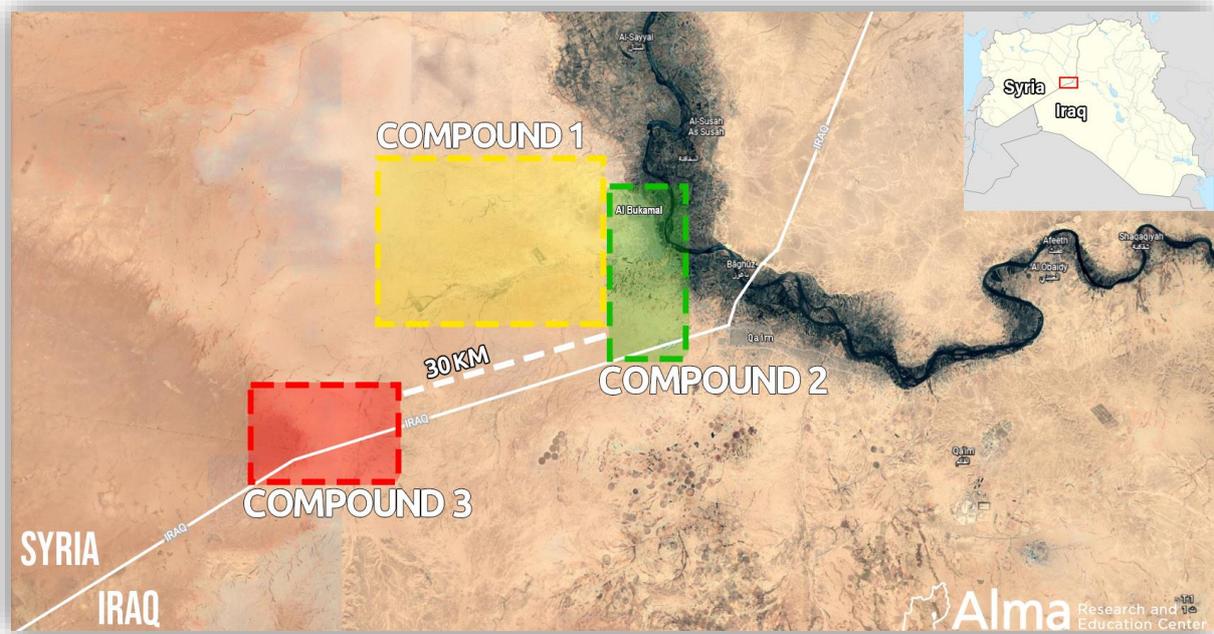
The Imam Ali military base was established by the Iranians in 2019. The base is located east of the city of Al-Bukamal, close to the border with Iraq. It is the largest and most central base belonging to the radical Shiite axis led by Iran in the area of the land corridor crossing in Al-Bukamal. At the Imam Ali base, the weapons from Iran via Iraq are stored and prepared for further transport westward to Lebanon. It appears that Shiite militias train in and near the base.

In 2019, in light of several attacks against the base, Iran began digging tunnels suitable for the entry and passage of large transport vehicles such as trucks. These tunnels are apparently used to store heavy weapons. Towards the end of 2019, large-scale construction was carried out, and the base was expanded. Nowadays, the Imam Ali base is built of three main complexes.



The area where the tunnels for storing heavy weapons were dug in the Imam Ali military base.

The first base compound is very significant in bringing weapons into Syria. There are at least 60 bunkers and large warehouses in this complex for, among other things, storing ballistic missiles. The second base complex, closest to the border, contains air defense systems and platforms for launching ballistic missiles and rockets of various types. There may be cross-border tunnels into Iraq. The base's third complex, the western one, also contains air defense systems and many weapons depots. Its main purpose is apparently to protect the other two compounds, and it is located on a mound overlooking the entire area.



Above: The Imam Ali military base compounds (Compound 1 in yellow, Compound 2 in green, Compound 3 in red).

Al-Bukamal – a Syrian city under Iranian security control

The city's unique geographical location along the land corridor route between Iran and Lebanon has made it one of the strategic key points in the land corridor of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran. As a result, Iran's military and civilian hold on the region is absolute.

Members of the Shiite militias belonging to the radical Shiite axis control the security in the city of Al-Bukamal. One of the main functions of these militias is to secure the land corridor in the Syrian geographical area. The operational arm in the city of Al-Bukamal is Fog' 47 (regiment 47). Fog' 47 belongs to the Shiite militia "Hezbollah-Iraq." The general military commander in the region is Hajj Askar, an Iranian Revolutionary Guards officer who lives in the secure military compound belonging to the Shiite axis in the city of Al-Bukamal called Al-Mari Square. Hajj Askar is in military charge of the Shiite militias in the area of the Al-Bukamal province and north towards Deir ez-Zor. Another prominent commander is Abu 'Issa al-Mashhadani.



Above: The Fog' 47 Ministry of Defense building (Hezbollah-Iraq militia).





Hajj 'Askar (third from right in uniform).



Abu 'Issa al-Mashhadani.

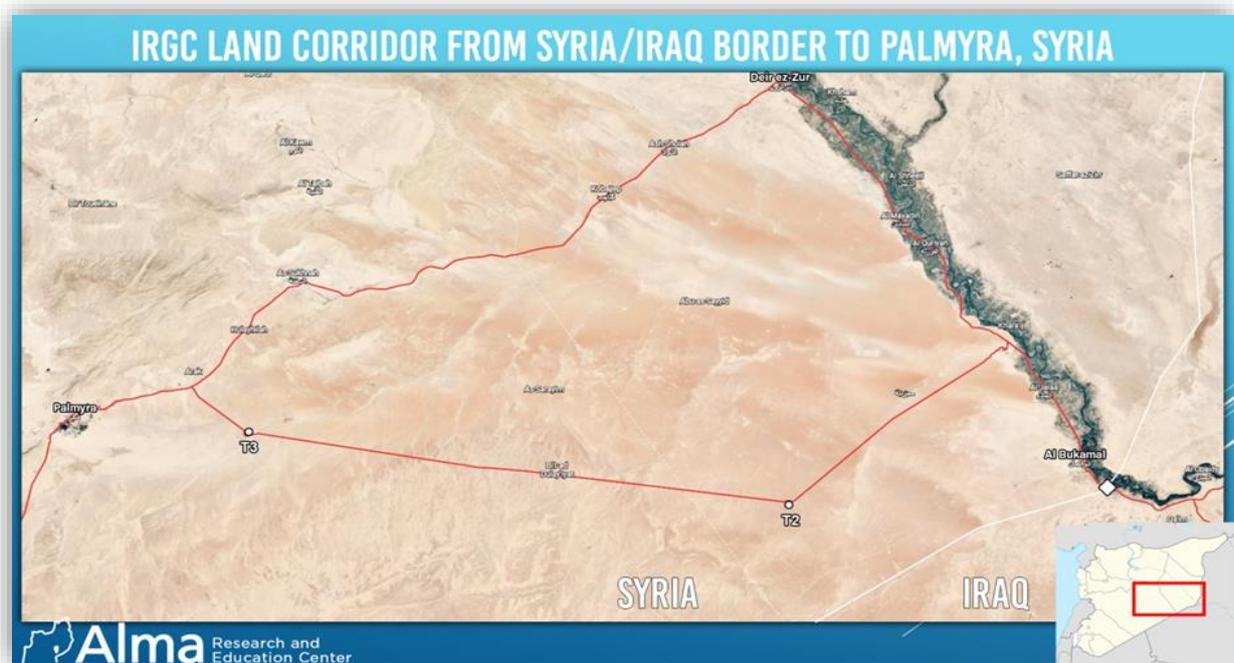
Chapter C - The land corridor routes in Syria up to the border with Lebanon

Al-Bukamal - Arak / Palmyra - Damascus - Jdeidat Yabous (Al-Mitzna) / Zabadani / Asal al-Ward:

The distance between Al-Bukamal and Damascus is 530 kilometers, about 7.5 hours' drive. This route has two driving options to Arak / Palmyra:

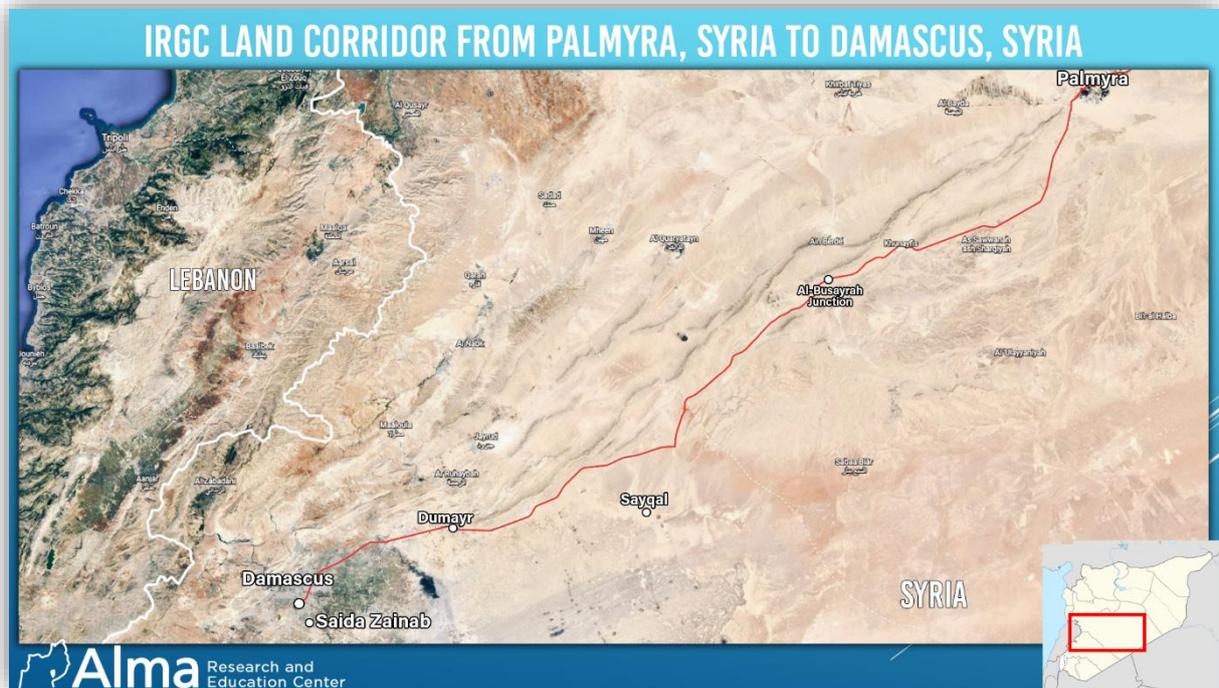
From a security perspective, the shortest but most problematic road is via the oil terminals: Exiting Al-Bukamal, advancing north on Route 4 till reaching the desert oil terminals road. On the oil terminal road, bearing west for about 70 km to the T-2 oil terminal and from there northwest down the desert road about 150 km, passing the T-3 oil station to the M20 route junction near Arak. It is a deserted desert route with no military presence and almost no activity. ISIS squads operate in this desert part of Syria. Convoys on this route are prone to harm from sabotaging the road infrastructures (with an emphasis on local bridges running over ravines), planting IEDs against vehicles, and even anti-tank attacks and ambushes. The route allows faster movement towards Damascus but is submitted to security problems.

The second, safer route is from the direction of the Al-Bukamal border crossing to Deir ez-Zor and from there west to Arak and Palmyra. Along this road, there are many Shiite militia security posts. This is a better-quality route and has a better security situation despite the lengthening of the travel time. As part of the work to rehabilitate and improve the Syrian road network, the Deir ez-Zor-Al-Bukamal road (90 km) was completed.



The distance from Arak/Palmyra to Damascus is 386 km, about a 5.5 hours' drive. The M20 road towards Palmyra is a good-quality highway. West of the city of Palmyra, ascending Route 90 towards Al-Busayrah junction, turning to Route 53, continuing towards Route 2 junction, and west to Al Dumayr on a similar quality road. Traveling until Highway 5 (Homs – Damascus) onto Damascus.

The geographical area of the route from Arak/Palmyra to Damascus is currently under the full control of the Assad regime with a full security forces presence, as well as three military airfields that allow for close air and ground protection (Sayqal, Dumayr, and Palmyra). However, this route is a desert road and in certain sections, is subject to sabotage and disruption through the planting of IEDs or the destruction of bridges.



Damascus is a transit station. In Damascus, it is customary to store the weapons for a short period to prepare them for transfer to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The weapons are stored, among other locations, in Saida Zainab and the surrounding areas. In these geographical areas, we are aware of the widespread entrenchment of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran. It should be noted that the Damascus area is an area where weapons are also stored for future use by the Shia axis inside Syria or against Israel (See [Special Report: The Iranian Establishment in Sayyidah Zaynab](#)).

SUSPECTED WEAPONS STORAGE SITES OF SHIITE AXIS NEAR DAMASCUS AIRPORT

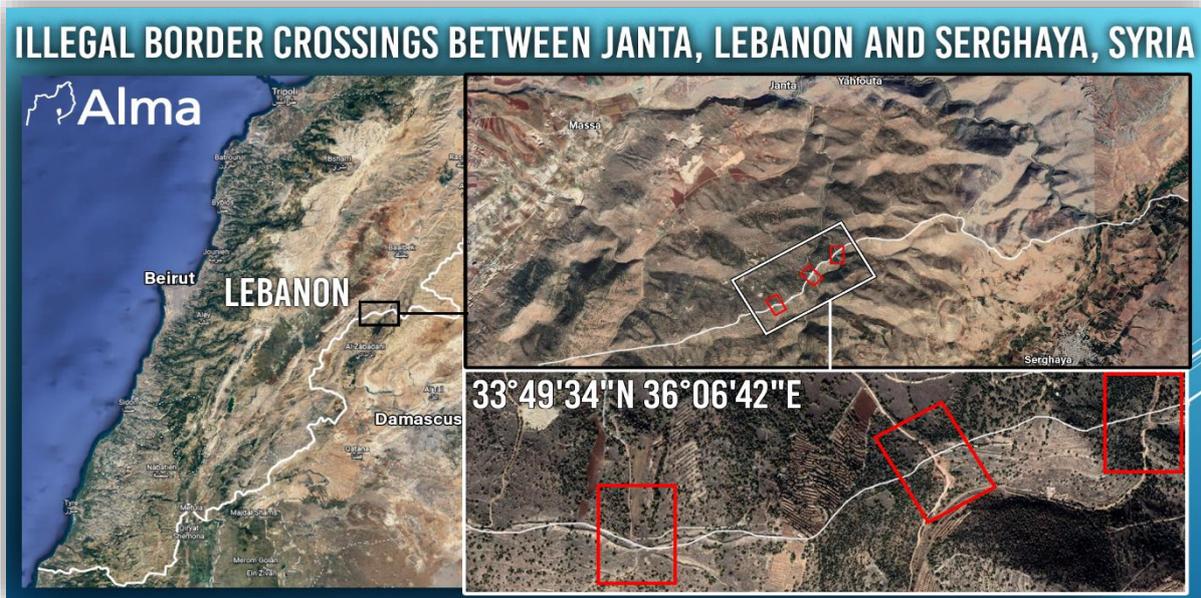


From Damascus, the weapons can be transferred to the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon (Hezbollah's logistics hinterland) via Route 1 (the Beirut-Damascus highway) northwest towards the main border crossing between Syria and Lebanon, Jdeidat Yabous /Al Masnaa.

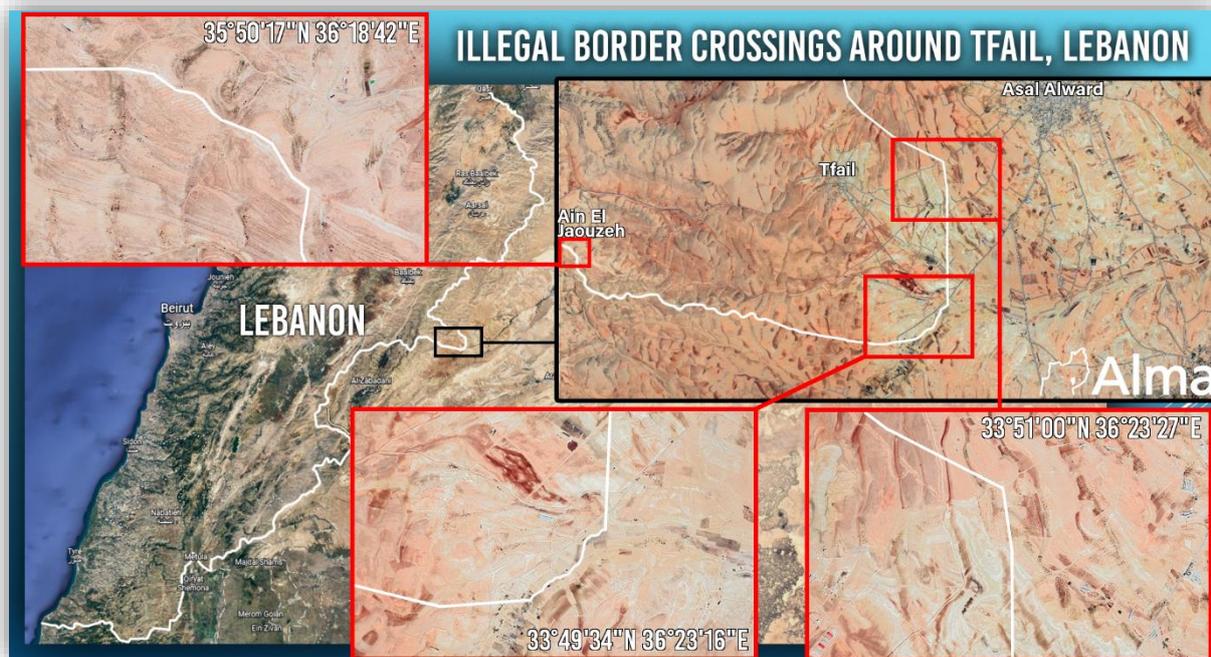
IRGC LAND CORRIDOR FROM DAMASCUS TO THE JDADIT YABWS AND MASNAA BORDER CROSSINGS



Alternatively, from Route 1, turning north onto Route 113 towards Zabadani in Qalamoun and from there towards the Lebanese border. In the Zabadani region, we wish to point out the Massa crossing (near coordinates 33.85111 36.06667) and the Jenta crossing (coordinates 33.85871056003535, 36.10801221700351), whose access road has been re-paved in recent years.



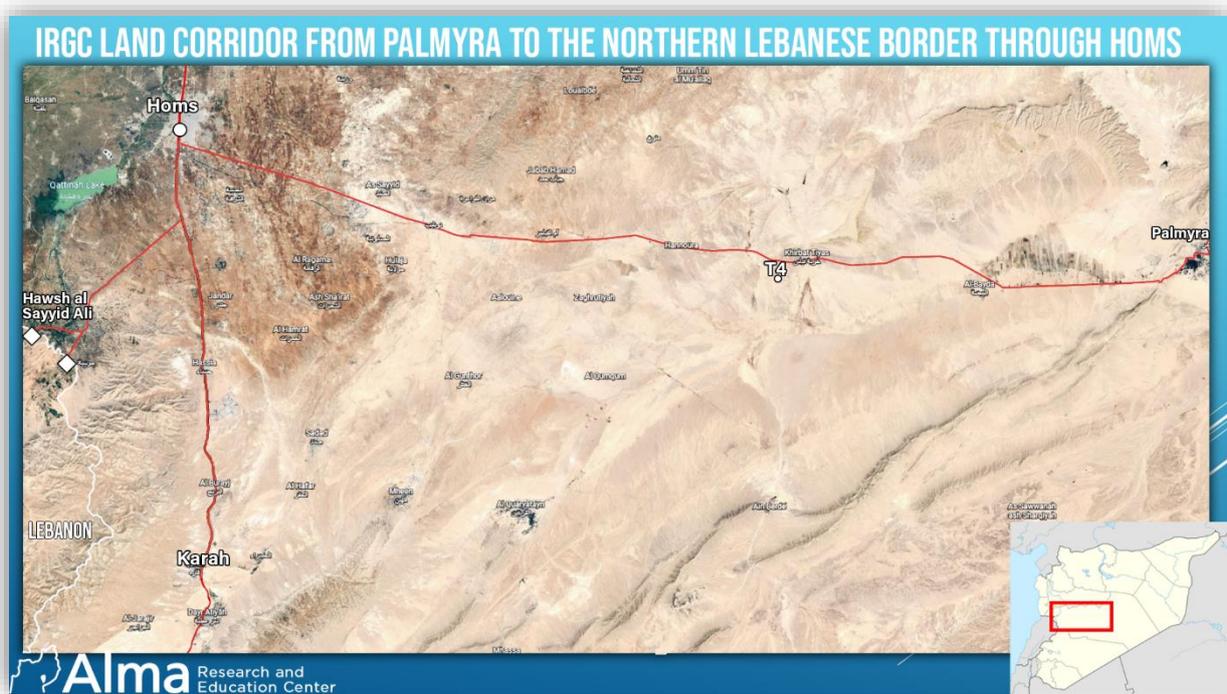
Another example of an area with potential border crossings in the area of Qalamoun is the town of Assal al-Ward (coordinates 33.86489, 36.41262) and Tfail in Lebanon. In this geographical area, there are three potential border crossings: Wadi Arabiya (coordinates 33.84797, 36.39437), Assal al-Ward (coordinates 33.89088, 36.40646), and Jarred Shabat el Jaouzeh (coordinates 33.83556, 36.315).



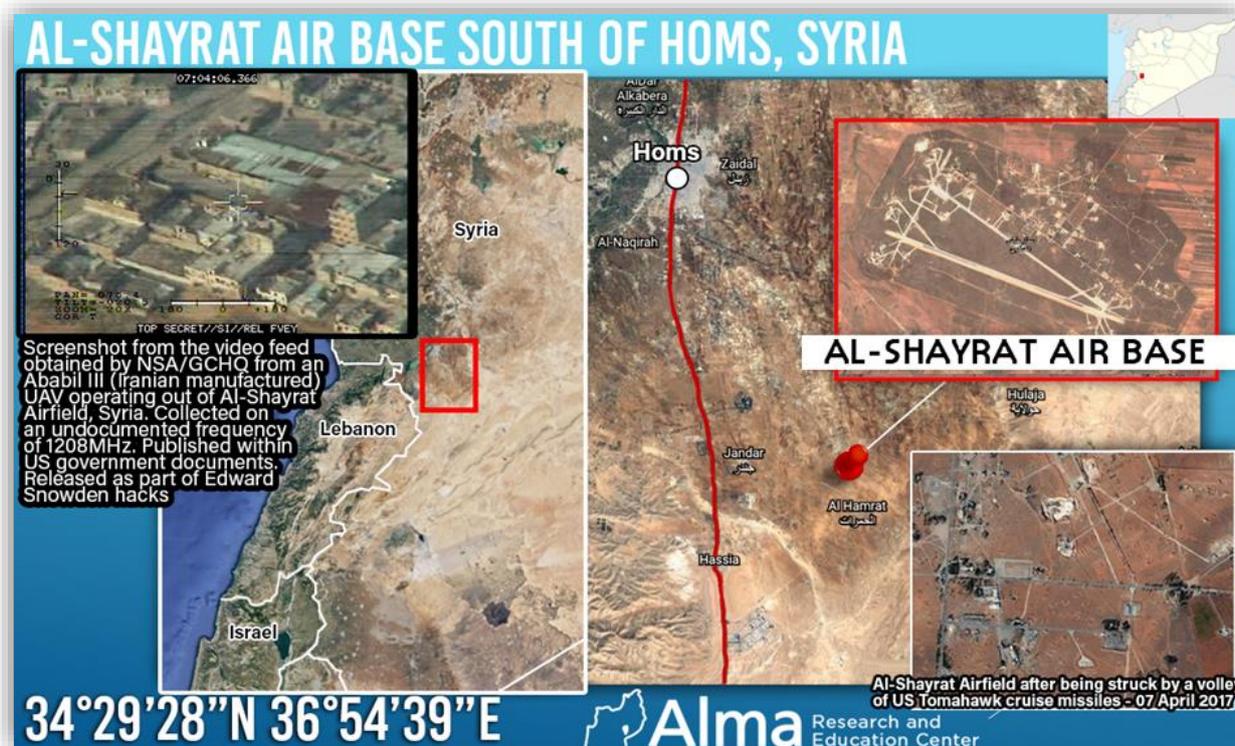
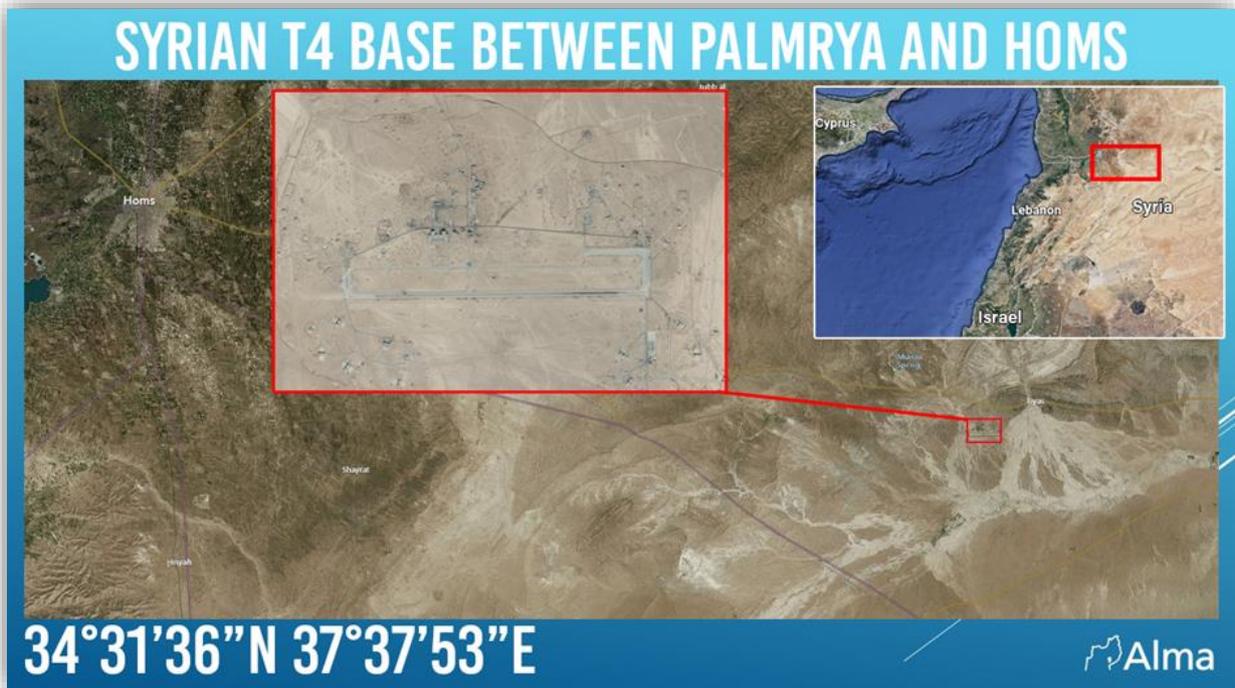
Albukamal-Arak/Palmyra-Homs – Al-Qusayr / Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali / Kara

The Syrian town of Al-Qusayr and its western geographical area towards Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali and the Lebanese town of Qasr, and the geographical area south of Al-Qasir in the direction of the Syrian town Qara (bordering with the Lebanese Arsal area), are a geographical area where land smuggling routes head into and from Lebanon. Although the Syrian 4th Division is stationed in this geographical area, it is de facto in Hezbollah's control. In addition to the arms transfers, the area is a well-known major smuggling hub of civilian goods, such as drugs, fuel, and the like.

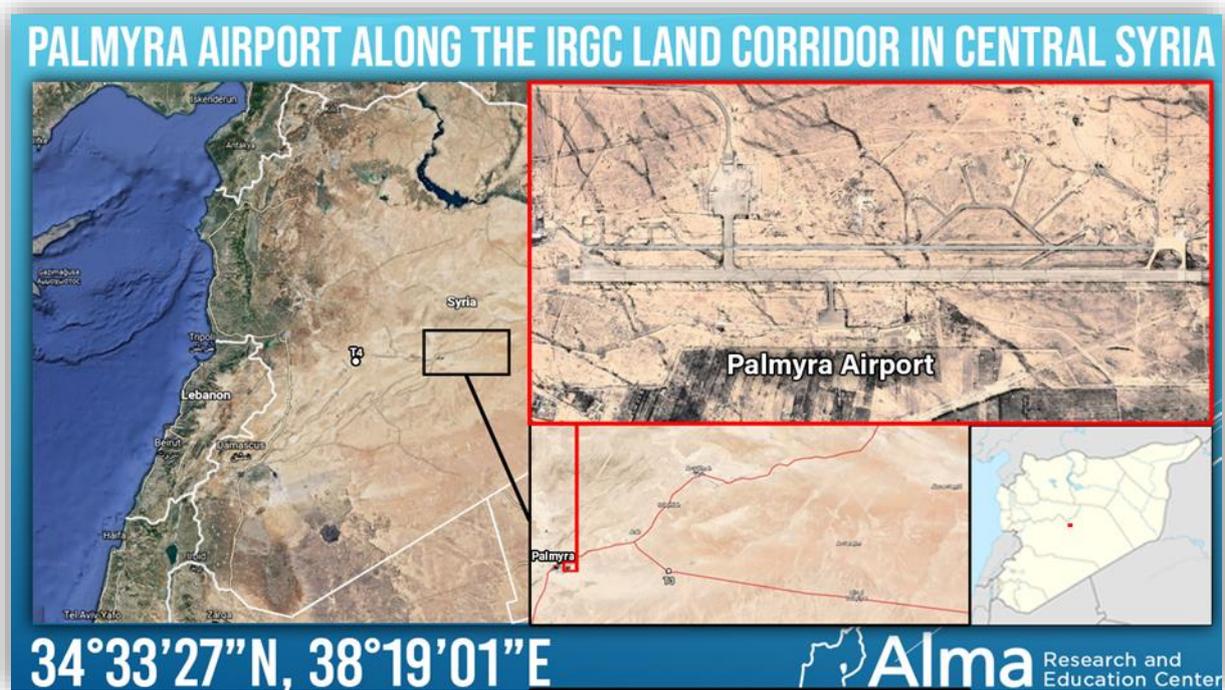
To reach the above areas, proceed west from Palmyra on Route 32 and later onto Route 3 to the city of Homs. From Homs, advance southwest on Route 4 towards Al-Qasir/Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali. Alternatively, it's possible to proceed south from Homs on highway M5 along the border with Lebanon (the Lebanese Beqaa area) towards the town of Kara.



It should be noted that also in Palmyra and at the T4 base halfway to Homs and near the city of Homs, we identify locations that serve as intermediate stations for storing military equipment and weapons on their way to Lebanon.



07:04:06.366
 Screenshot from the video feed obtained by NSA/GCHQ from an Ababil III (Iranian manufactured) UAV operating out of Al-Shayrat Airfield, Syria. Collected on an undocumented frequency of 1208MHz. Published within US government documents. Released as part of Edward Snowden hacks



The Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali area is a relatively large passage area with a breached border that has several illegal border crossings.

See at the coordinates:

34.39996216770528, 36.544068421441

34.434042917357054, 36.51562844813312

34.44945864456509, 36.507124438365175

34.44872107346542, 36.499020851042864

34.45199874091531, 36.49370625022732



In the vicinity of the Syrian town of Kara, there is the Al-Zamrani crossing (34.13914020691027, 36.56804747883234). Since 2015, it has been an official border crossing that is also controlled by Hezbollah.

In the area of Aarsal, the Al-Mahbas crossing is a known crossing (34.20111, 36.59556). This crossing is a border crossing with a well-paved road. Other potential border crossings are located in coordinates:

34.48120578308571, 36.457034885916144

34.48521929354201, 36.447542073678804

34.496169051242866, 36.44917024076123

ILLEGAL BORDER CROSSINGS INTO LEBANON WEST OF QARAH, SYRIA



ILLEGAL BORDER CROSSINGS FROM SYRIA ENTERING LEBANON AROUND QASR, LEBANON

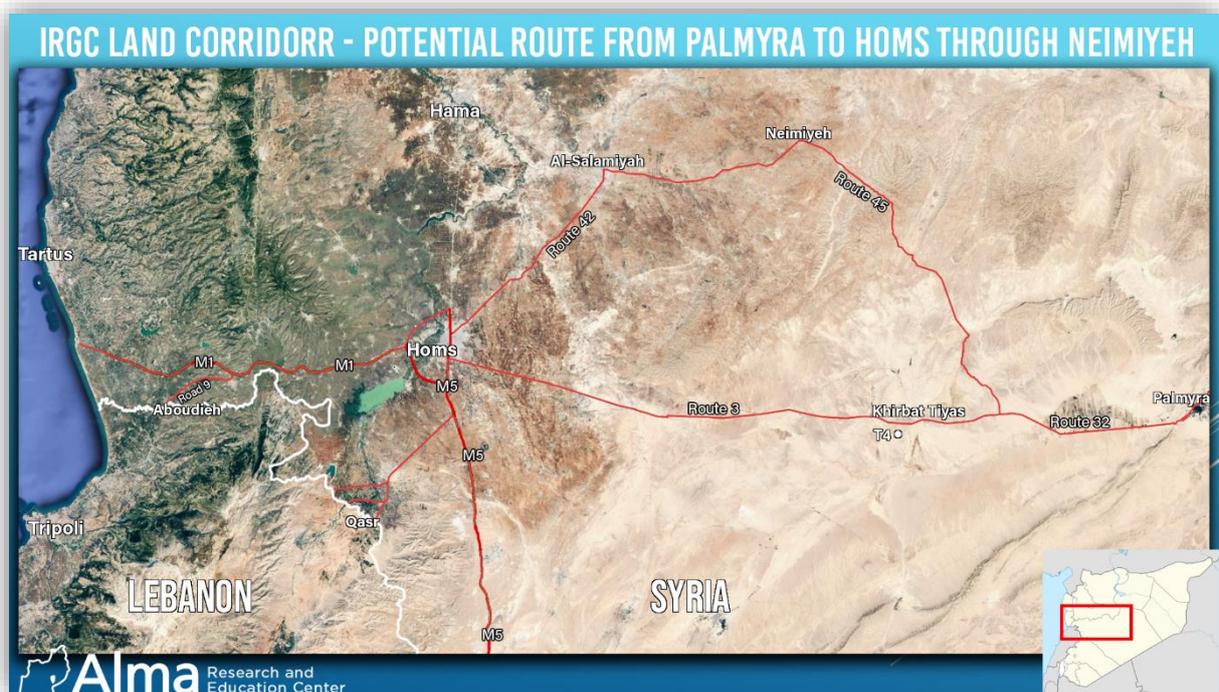


Al-Bukamal - Arak/Palmyra - Homs - The Syrian coast (south of Tartus)

As noted above, the beginning of this route is to exit the Al-Bukamal area towards Arak/Palmyra via the oil terminals (the short but problematic road from a security point of view) or use the second, safer option, via Deir ez-Zor and from there west to Arak and Palmyra.

From Palmyra, proceeding west on Route 32, connecting to Route 3, which reaches the city of Homs. Given operational feasibility, a detour can be made, which lengthens the route by leaving Route 32 and joining Route 45 in a northwesterly direction. From there, connecting back southwest, on Route 42 towards the city of Homs. It should be remembered that this desert region is still threatened by ISIS elements and is not stable in security.

From the city of Homs, it's possible to proceed west on the M1 / 9 road towards the Syrian coast. This route is near and parallel to the Lebanese border, and it is possible to cross into Lebanon through quite a few formal and illegal crossings, for example, Talkalakh (34.66796323679758, 36.30313545437739) and Addabousiyah (34.63897592341871, 36.118999773891815).



Al-Bukamal – Deir ez-Zor – Al Tabqah – Aleppo – Homs

This route is essentially a default route, and in our assessment, its use today is unlikely. In our estimation, the Iranians did not originally intend to reach Aleppo from Al-Bukamal. The passage through Aleppo was originally intended for the planned land corridor route from the geographical area of northern Iraq that runs to northeastern Syria in the direction of the city of Al-Hasakah. From the area of Al-Hasakah, the Iranian plan was to advance westward on the M4 highway to the city of Aleppo and, from the city of Aleppo, to proceed south on the M5 highway towards the city of Hama and Homs.

The route from the city of Aleppo southwards on the M5 highway constituted another challenge for the Iranians. The road passes near the Idlib province, which to this day is under the control of the opposition forces. The Syrian army has invested considerable military efforts with the backing of the Shiite militias of Iran and Russia to regain control of the territories that dominate this road.

It is no coincidence that the forces of the radical Shiite axis, led by Iran, have invested considerable military efforts in recapturing the city of Aleppo and its surroundings. After recapturing the city and its surroundings, the radical Shiite axis, led by Iran, invested considerable resources in the civil and military establishment. In Iran's strategic planning, the city of Aleppo was supposed to be a major anchor in Syria on the overland corridor coming from northern Iraq, just as Al-Bukamal, Homs, and Damascus (with an emphasis on the area of the international airport and Saida Zainab) are a major anchor for the main corridor route today coming from the direction of the Al-Qaim region in Iraq. As noted above, the route via the Kurdish region in northern Iraq is a problematic passage for the Iranians.



Chapter D - The Land Corridor - Future Plans

The railway project connecting the Iranian port of Imam Khomeini with the Syrian port of Latakia:

The project is supposed to commence with constructing a railway that will connect the Iranian cities of Al-Shalamcheh with the nearby Iraqi Basra (32 km). From the city of Basra, there are plans to connect a railway directly to Latakia.

The company commissioned to carry out the project is the Iranian Baniad al- Mostazafan. The initial connection between the Iranian city of Al-Shalamcheh and the city of Basra in Iraq is fully funded by Iran.

The railway between Iran and Syria via Iraq is incomplete, but the gaps to complete such an infrastructure are not large (less than 150 kilometers, and some of them already have the basic infrastructure). It is estimated that they can be completed in about two years. The railway can be used now by bridging the existing gaps using ordinary vehicles. In our assessment, the fragmentation into several transport routes will enable redundancy and may help the efforts to conceal the activity and the contents.

The reconstruction and renovation of the destroyed sections of the railway were slow and even halted, with the Syrian regime accusing the Kurds of sabotaging the railway infrastructure. The project was brought back to life after Iranian former president Rouhani announced in May 2021 that he wanted to re-implement the project. The cost of the entire project is estimated at \$10 billion. At the end of 2021, Iran announced the continuation of the project starting in January 2022 (referring to the first section connecting the Iranian city of Al-Shalamcheh to the city of Basra in Iraq).

Several restrictions prevent the acceleration of the project on Syrian soil. The first limitation is the "race for influence" between Iran and Russia, with an emphasis on the control of the seaports. Russia controls the port of Tartus, and Iran has tried (and will continue to try) to take over the port of Latakia despite Russian opposition and a Russian presence in the port following the airstrikes carried out on it. The second limitation is the change of the originally planned route due to US control over the Al-Tanf area. The original route planned was Iran – the port of um al-Qasr – Basra – Ramadi – Al-Tanf – Al-Busayrah – Homs – the Syrian coast towards Latakia and Tartus. Passing through Al-Bukamal and Homs lengthens the way significantly. The third limitation is the many challenges in maintaining the line's security against ground threats (especially attacks by ISIS cells).

Tehran-Damascus Highway Project

The highway project was frozen in May 2020, seemingly due to the outbreak of the covid-19 crisis and Iraq's government change. The intention was to build a new highway 1700 km long. The highway is planned to pass through Iraqi territory directly to Damascus via Al-Qaim, and Al-Bukamal.

The highway was to be constructed by an Iranian infrastructure company, and the work was planned to last about five years. Its civilian purpose is to enable the transfer of Iranian goods to the Mediterranean Sea via Damascus and from there to Beirut. A project start-up agreement was signed in March 2019, but the Iranians "froze" the project with the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis.

Meanwhile, an inter-Iranian road between the Iranian cities of Kermanshah, Bisotun, and Homeyl, which are very close to the border with Iraq, began to be paved in 2019 as part of the Iranian attempt to ease the traffic load toward Iraq.

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