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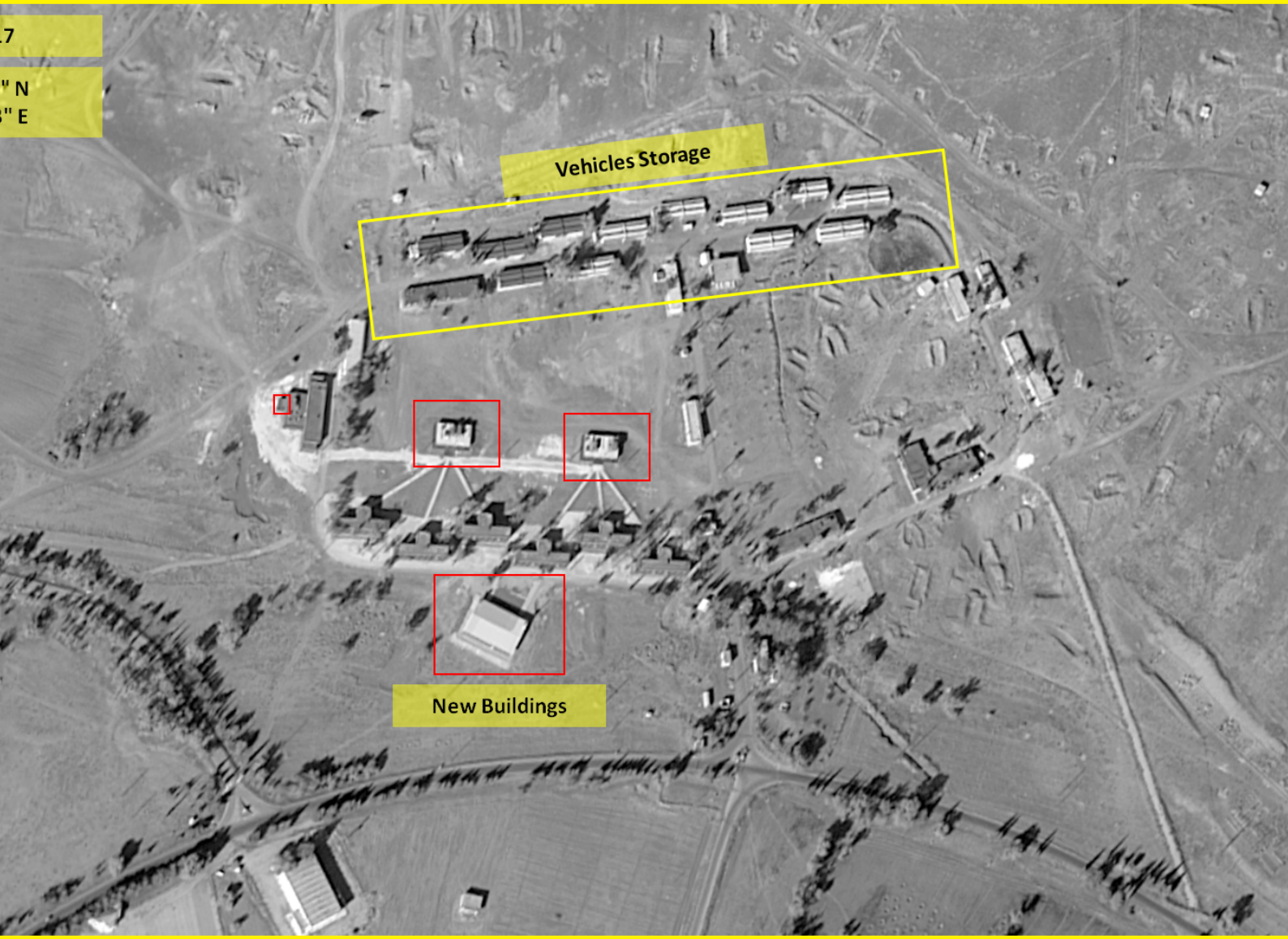
BICOM Briefing

Iranian forces and Shia militias in Syria

March 2018

Suspected as Iranian Base, South of Damascus



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Introduction

On Wednesday, 28 February a US media outlet reported that Iran was building a new military base 16 km northwest of the Syrian capital, Damascus. The report included satellite images of warehouses which could store short and medium-range missiles that intelligence officials said were capable of reaching any part of Israel. The base, which is operated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's (IRGC) special operations Quds Force, is similar to one established by the Iranians near the town of al-Kiswah, 15km southwest of Damascus, which was reportedly targeted by Israeli fighter jets last December.

This news followed a feature in the *New York Times* which argued that Iran was "redrawing the strategic map of the region" and that dozens of bases in Syria were being operated by Iran and its Shia militia network.

BICOM's paper, *The Middle East in 2018*, detailed Iran's strategy of creating a land corridor stretching through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon; its plans to establish a long-term military deployment in Syria for itself and its militias; and its building of facilities in Lebanon and Syria to manufacture accurate missiles for Lebanese Hezbollah. All of this would constitute the creation of an Iranian sphere of direct influence in the Middle East in dangerous proximity to Israel and with negative consequences for Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Yemen.

These moves have led Israeli security analysts to plan for a unified front between the Syrian and Lebanese theatres in a future war.

Jordan also continues to be concerned by the situation in southern Syria. Since 2004, when King Abdullah II spoke of a growing expansion of Shia influence – what he termed a Shia crescent – stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the Mediterranean, Amman has rejected the presence and establishment of the IRGC and Shia militias along its borders. While the Kingdom hoped that the de-escalation agreement signed with the US and Russia for southern Syria in July 2017 would distance both Sunni and Shi'ite radical fighters from Jordan, this has not proven to be the case so far.

In Iraq, another country where Iran has implemented its proxy policy, the Iranian sponsored militias were not disbanded following the defeat of ISIS but are standing as a united list in the coming elections and will likely lead key institutions in the country. They are also protected in law as a permanently mobilised force, despite the fact that their leaders take orders from Iran rather than the Government in Baghdad. With the civil war in Syria far from over, Iran will likely seek to implement this "Iraq model" in Syria in the future.

The sheer number of moving pieces in Syria – the regime heading south, Iran seeking to establish military bases, Israel becoming more active in preventing the establishment of Shi'ite militias and Russia looking to maintain its dominance – are creating a combustible situation with high potential for miscalculation, error and rapid escalation between Israel, Iran and its allies. On 10 February, an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) entered Israeli airspace. Israel attacked Iranian assets in Syria in response and regime forces shot down an Israeli F16 involved in the operation.

This briefing paper identifies the main Iranian-backed Shia militias in Syria (out of the approximately 35 which are operating in the country), describes their composition and size and maps out the estimated locations of Iranian bases within Syria.

Suspected Iranian Base at Jabal ash Sharqi, approximately 13km from Damascus, Syria. Image used with permission of ImageSat International, copyright 2018.

Shia militias in Syria sponsored by Iran

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Iran has sent thousands of troops and Shi'ite volunteers to support President Bashar al-Assad. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps as well as Syrian National Defence Forces, Hezbollah and several other Shi'ite militias have played a major role in the regime consolidating control and regaining territory, especially in the Battle for Aleppo in 2016.

Shia militias in Syria			
Name	Description	Location / military operations	Approximate numbers
Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)	The IRGC is the security and military organisation responsible for the protection and survival of the Iranian regime. It controls Iran's ballistic missile program and facilitates relations with Hezbollah, as well as Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. The IRGC is working to establish weapons and missile facitilies in Syria. Its senior commanders are Mohammed Al Jafari and Qasem Soleimani. The IRGC's elite Quds Force is heavily involved in the fighting in Syria. It provides support and training to many Shia militias in order to transform them into professional transnational militia proxy forces modelled on Lebanese Hezbollah.	10-13 military bases, including in and around Damascus, on the outskirts of Aleppo, in the town of Izra near Deraa, to the west of Palmyra near Homs, south of Latakia near Tartus and in Quneitra.	8,000 to 10,000
Syrian National Defence Forces (NDF)	Represents Iran's attempt to more formally unify the Syrian regime's local militias. Under the guidance of the IRGC, the NDF is often compared to Iran's Basij (Mobilisation) militia. Established in 2012.	Bases in Aleppo, Tartous, Hama, Homs, Damascus, Sweida, Latakia.	90,000 -100,000
Hezbollah (Lebanese)	At the centre of Iran's Shi`a foreign fighter network in Syria and the region. Estimated to have had 2,000 fighters killed and 5,000 injured over the course of the conflict. Possesses more than 100,000 missiles in Lebanon, dozens of which are highly sophisticated.	Fought in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Damascus, Deraa province and Quneitra. Played A major role in battle for Aleppo in the Qalamun region, and in the towns of Zabadani and Qusayr near the Lebanese border.	5,000 - 8,000
Liwa Fatemiyoun (Afghani)	Primarily comprised of Afghanis residing in Syria before the war and Afghani refugees in Iran.	Fought in Aleppo, Daraa, Damascus, Latakia, Qalamoun region and against ISIS in Palmyra.	10,000-12,000

Name	Description	Location / military operations	Approximate numbers
Al Nujba Movement (Iraqi)	Subordinate to the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) in Iraq and also supported by Hezbollah. In 2017 its leader announced the establishment of the Golan Liberation Brigade. Have been pictured with American MRAPs, HUMVEEs and M113 armoured personnel carriers in Iraq.	Fought in Aleppo, rural north Hama, Damascus and the Syrian Desert.	Up to 9,000
Liwa Mukhtar Al Thaqfi (Iranian)	Established in 2016 under the guidance of the IRGC. Primarily located in the Latakia area and claims to have only Syrian fighters.	Fought in rural north Hama, Syrian Desert, and rural Latakia.	Up to 5,000
Abu Fadl Al Abbas Brigade (Iraqi)	Many figures in the original Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas network moved on to create and lead their own brands and formations. A reoccurring theme in many photos is fighter's carrying Russian sniper rifles.	Mainly in Aleppo and Damascus.	Up to 4,500
Imam al Baqer Brigade (Syrian)	Operates within the Local Defence Forces network of pro-Assad militias as well as being affiliated with Hezbollah. Photos of the group in Aleppo in April 2016 showed them with four tanks. Formed in 2012.	Fought in rural East Aleppo, Idlib, Palmyra, north Hama and the Syrian Desert.	1,500 - 2,000
Kata'ib Hezbollah (Iraqi)	Iranian proxy operating in Syria, and forms part of the Iraqi PMUs. Some personnel fought against the US during the 2002 Iraq war. Also fought against ISIS at Ramadi and Mosul in Iraq. Have been pictured in Iraq with American Mine Resistant and Ambush Protected vehicles, HUMVEEs and M113 armoured personnel carriers as well as Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement (MTVR) heavy duty all-terrain vehicles and howitzers. Also in possession of Chinese QW-1 Vanguard and Iranian variant Misagh-1 type MANPADS and QW-1M Vanguard portable air-defence system.	Rural Aleppo, Idlib, Syrian Desert, Damascus and Daraa.	Up to 1,500
Liwa Zainabiyoun (Pakistani)	Primarily recruited, financed, and handled by the IRGC. Distinct unit since 2013.	Fought alongside regime forces in Deraa and Aleppo. Also based in Damascus and Syrian desert.	Up to 1,000

Iranian bases in Syria

In addition to sponsoring Shia militias, Iran has also reportedly established between 10-13 military bases across Syria. Iran uses these bases for a number of purposes such as: barracks, logistics, training and intelligence and facilitating the transfer of arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Central Command

The main IRGC command centre is Syria, known as the "Glass Building," is within the premises of Damascus International Airport. IRGC forces are airlifted to Syria and dispatched to other military fronts within Syria. Between 500 and 1,000 personnel are believed to be stationed there.

Another central command centre is believed to be located in the Shibani Garrison, previously the home of Assad's Republican Guards. As of 2016, 3,000 IRGC forces as well as the Afghani Fatemiyoun forces and Hezbollah were stationed there.

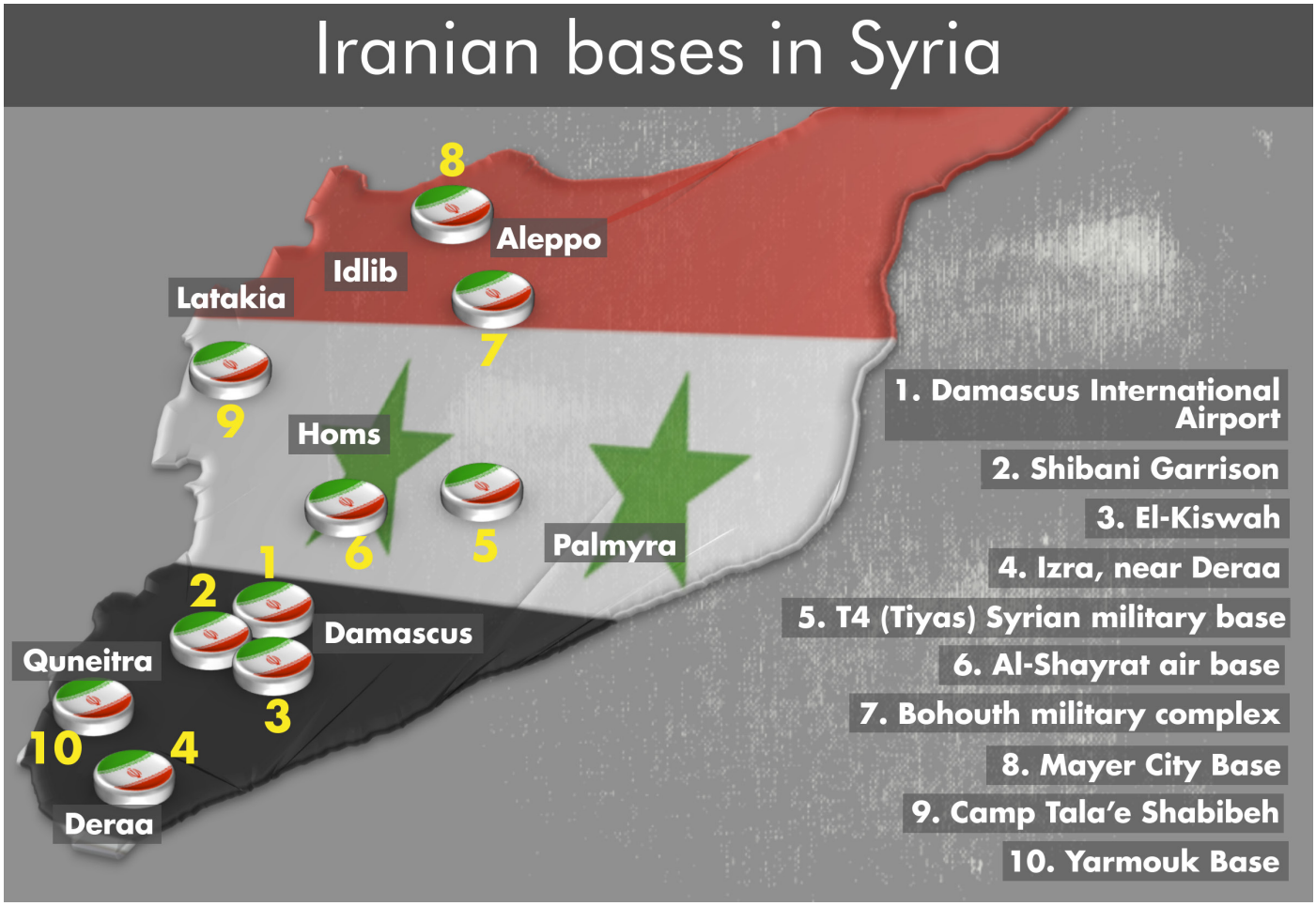
In November 2017, the *BBC News Online* revealed the construction of a permanent military base near El-Kiswah, south of Damascus. The base, located at a Syrian military site, was believed to be for housing soldiers and vehicles. It was subsequently destroyed, allegedly by Israel.

Southern Front

The IRGC's southern command centre is located near the cities of Izra and Deraa, where air defence units equipped with SAM-1 (surface-to-air) missiles and the IRGC's aerospace units are stationed. IRGC units tasked with carrying out operations in southern Syria or near the Jordanian border use this base as the barracks for their troops.

Middle Front

The IRGC's middle command centre is based at the T4 (Tiyas) Syrian military base, located 50km from Palmyra, near Homs. 1,000 IRGC personnel used this base to launch attacks on the ancient city in 2015 and 2016. Approximately 1,000 Russian commandos were also reportedly seen at this airbase in October 2015. Another base near Homs is the Shayrat air base.



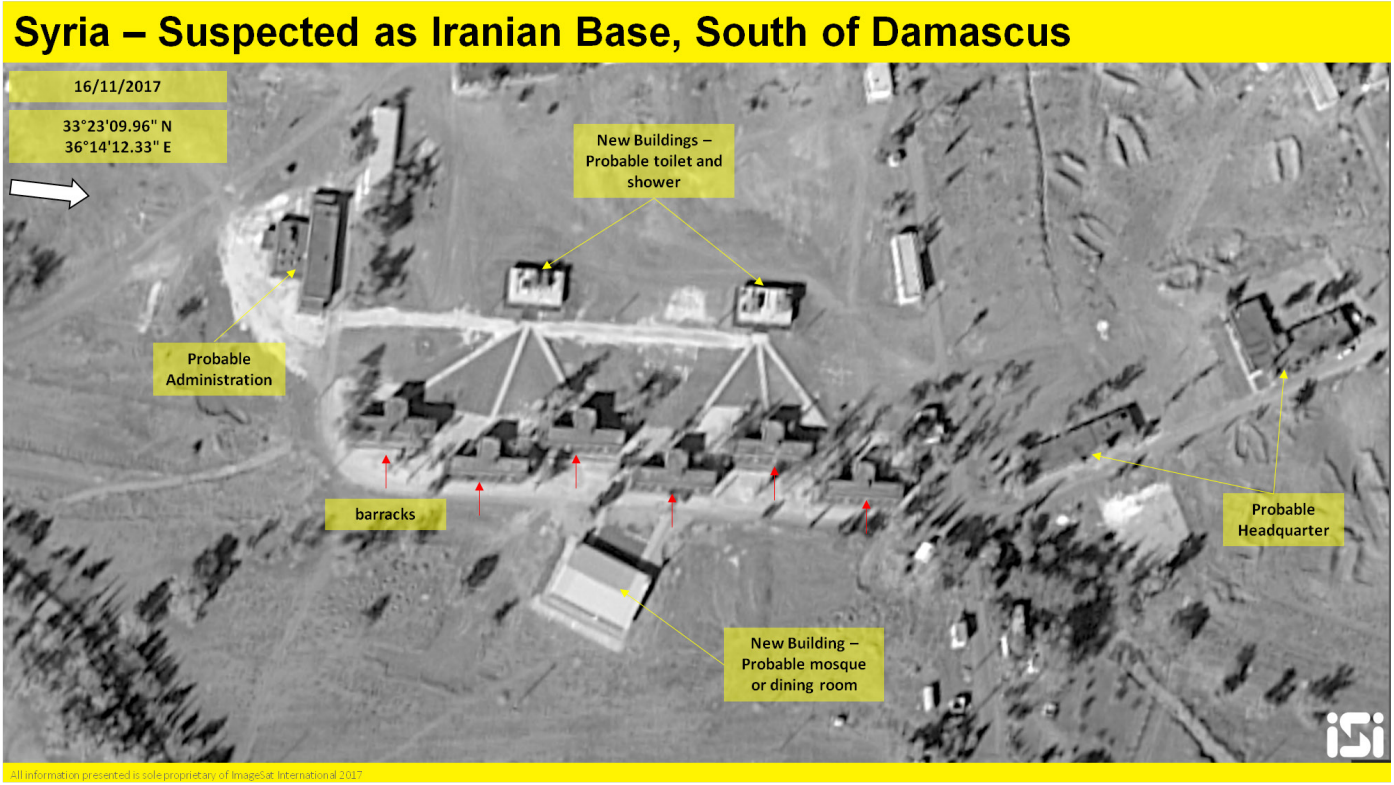
Northern Front

The IRGC's northern command centre is located at the Bohouth military complex, part of the Syrian military, situated behind the main frontline in southern Aleppo. According to eyewitness accounts, in early 2016, 2,000-3,000 forces from IRGC, Afghan, Iraqi and Hezbollah mercenaries were stationed there. Material for chemical weapons and missile fuel are also thought to be produced here. Another base in this region is the Mayer City Base in the predominantly Shia village of Nubl on the outskirts of Aleppo.

Costal Front

The IRGC's costal command centre is located at Camp Tala'e Shabibeh, south of Latakia near Tartus. After Russian forces arrived at Latakia airport as part of the Russian intervention in 2015, a significant portion of IRGC forces were transferred to Camp Tala'e Shabibeh. It is reported to house 6,000 regime forces, of which 2,000 are from the IRGC.

Other suspected Iranian bases include the Yarmouk Base in the Quneitra area and several near Damascus, such as: the Dumayr Air Force Base; the Imam Hussein Garrison; Her Holiness Zainab Base; and the Jabal ash Sharki base.



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For more information please contact:
Charlotte Henry, Senior Press Officer
020 3745 3348
07879 644099
charlotteh@bicom.org.uk

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