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Trump's Air Strike on al-Tanf: No to the Shiite Crescent

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The two recent US air strikes on a Syrian convoy heading to the al-Tanf military base in the southern Syrian Desert a few miles from the Jordanian-Syrian border have major strategic importance. The attack signaled for the first time since the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 that the US would not countenance the reemergence of the Iranian-controlled Shiite crescent that Iran had created through Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut after the US exited Iraq in 2010.

The US air strikes on a Syrian convoy heading to al-Tanf military base in the southern Syrian Desert a few miles from the Jordanian-Syrian border scarcely made any front pages in the world media. This was a major oversight. The strikes should have been a major headline, especially as they occurred prior to Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia.

The attack signaled for the first time since the Syrian civil war broke out in the spring of 2011 that the US, under Trump, will not countenance the reemergence of the Iranian-controlled Shiite crescent that Iran had created to connect Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Iran had taken advantage of the US's exit from Iraq in 2010 and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war a year later to establish that Shiite crescent.

Technically, the two air strikes were a minor affair. Two fighting F-15 jets struck a convoy of Syrian troops and unidentified pro-Syrian militia members, killing five to fifty of them as well as destroying several vehicles. The US justified the strike on military grounds. The convoy was likely to threaten elite US army troops advising Free Syrian Army-linked forces, who, together with YPG Kurdish forces, have pushed ISIS back to Raqqa, its last major stronghold in Syria.

According to the US army spokesperson, the strike hardly came as a surprise. The Syrians had long known of the 35-mile radius “deconfliction” zone around a former Syrian army base that US special troops use to train their local allies. Syrian forces were aware that they were forbidden to enter that zone.

The real goal behind the attack lies in the reason the Syrian convoy risked penetrating the area. The Syrians and their allies were obviously trying to link up with pro-Iranian militias operating against ISIS around Mosul, the last and crumbling stronghold of ISIS in Iraq. Syria and its Iranian patron reasoned that as ISIS was responsible for rupturing the Iranian-controlled Shiite crescent in 2014 when it captured Raqqa and Mosul and the vast space in between, the defeat of ISIS had to be a prelude to resurrecting the crescent.

President Trump obviously thought otherwise. Unlike his predecessor, who viewed Iran as part of the solution to lowering the flames in the Middle East, Trump sees Iran as very much part of the problem. That position that is in tandem with that of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Jordan (from where the F-15s might have taken off). All those states view Iran as the major threat by far to their national security.

There could be no better way to express the new American administration’s unity of purpose with its traditional Gulf allies than a military strike to show its commitment to containing the Iranian crescent threat. The timing of the strike was perfect – two days before the president and his entourage landed in Riyadh to sign multibillion-dollar armament deals between the US and Riyadh.

Iran clearly understood the strategic meaning of this otherwise minor military move. Fars, a leading Iranian news agency linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, announced that 3,000 fighters from Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Lebanese Shia militia, were being sent to the area “to prepare the Syrian army and its allies for thwarting the US plots in the region and establish security at the Palmyra-Baghdad road.”

The larger impact of the strike was also clear to Russia, the ally of Iran and Syria. Russia’s deputy foreign minister condemned the strike, calling on the US to stick to the original mandate of the multi-state coalition to defeat Sunni Islamic terrorism.

Above all, the strike and its vast regional implications demonstrate that the containment and, possibly, the ultimate defeat of ISIS are hardly likely to enhance the prospects of achieving peace in the area. To the contrary, the rollback of ISIS is only going to intensify the conflict between the various militias on the ground, as well as their national and international sponsors.

Only the promotion – or thwarting – of an Iran-dominated Shiite and heterodox arc, with all its implications for the regional and international balance of power, can catapult a small patch of desert devoid of any natural resources, known hitherto only to local geographers, into an international flashpoint. Commit to memory the name and location of al-Tanf. It is liable to haunt the wider Middle East for years to come.

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