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Information Unit



**Iranian influence within  
the Regime Army.. 2017/18  
Strikes that targeted Iran in Syria**

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Special Report

## **Omran for Strategic Studies**

An independent think tank and policy center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region.

Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria.

Omran's work support decision making mechanisms, provide practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision makers, identify challenges within the Syrian context, and foresee scenarios and alternative solutions.

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Publish Date: April 16, 2019

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## Introduction

Iran was present in Syria from the very beginning of the revolution and was a strong supporter of the Syrian regime, In addition to providing the regime with weapons, soldiers, advisors, money, and political support, Iran also brought in sectarian fighters from countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanese to form militias and fight alongside the regime .

Today in 2019, Iran's role in Syria appears to be expanding even further. Iran's strategy has entered a new phase in which it recruits Syrians loyal to the regime to fight under direct administration and command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), relying on local defense forces and newly formed military brigades.

## Iran's Most Significant Influences in the Syrian Army

### Local Defense Forces (LDF) and National Defense Forces (NDF): A Comparison

The National Defense Forces (NDF) was established in 2012 under the direct supervision of Iran to serve as an auxiliary militia force for the Syrian army. By the end of 2017, a similar group known as the Local Defense Forces (LDF) was established in Aleppo governorate, specifically in its eastern countryside. The LDF consisted of several small local militias operated directly under the supervision of Iran, but without any legal status in Syria. Iran established and supported the LDF and linked its structure to the structure of the Syrian army, avoiding the error that occurred when the NDF were established. Recently, LDF members have been able to resolve their legal status and join the Syrian army, but their time in the LDF is not counted as time in the army's service.



On 6 April 2017, a memorandum from the "Organization and Administration Division / Branch of Organization and Armament" was issued to the General Commander of the Army and the Armed Forces, Bashar al-Assad, in order to suggest ways to formalize the status of Syrians, both civilians and military, who have worked with the Iranian side throughout the crisis. President Bashar al-Assad signed that document, in agreement, in April 2017. <sup>(1)</sup>

The document was signed by the head of the "Organization Division" Maj. Gen. Adnan Mehrez Abdo, the Chairman of the General Staff of the Army and the Armed Forces, General Ali Ayoub, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and the Minister of Defense, General Fahd Jassim al-Fereij.

According to the document, the committee examined the organization of these forces from the aspects of "organization, leadership, combat, and material guarantee, rights of the martyrs, wounded and disappeared, sorting out the affairs of those commissioned who have avoided

<sup>(1)</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi. Administrative Decisions on Local Defence Forces Personnel: Translation & Analysis. 3-5-2017. Link: <https://goo.gl/ngXYKc>

obligatory and reserve service and deserters, and the civilians working with the Iranian side." It recommended the following proposals:

- First: To organize the military and civilian elements who are fighting with the Iranian side as part of the local defense brigades in the governorates. The document includes a table showing the numbers of personnel who dodged compulsory and reserve service, deserters, civilians, and their status by governorate. The total number of troops is 88,733.
- Second: To resolve the situations of military deserters and those wanted for the compulsory and reserve service, and to transfer and appoint them to the local defense brigades in the governorates. This should include those whose situations have already been settled and are already working with the Iranian side as part of the local defense regiments. The document lists the numbers of those individuals as 51,729.
- Third: To organize volunteer contracts for civilians working with the Iranian side in the armed forces for a period of two years, regardless of the conditions of volunteerism in force in the armed forces. The document lists the number of civilians working with the Iranian side as 37,400.
- Fourth: To resolve the situation of the 1,650 officers in the 69 Officers Course who are currently working with the Iranian side in the governorate of Aleppo.
- Fifth: The leadership of local defense regiments working with the Iranian side in the governorates should remain with the Iranians in coordination with the General Command of the Army and Armed Forces until the end of the crisis in Syria, or until a new resolution is issued.
- Sixth: To provide all types of military and civilian insurance for Syrians working with the Iranian side, after they are organized into the local defense regiments in the governorates, in coordination with the competent authorities.
- Seventh: The responsibility for guaranteeing the material rights of the martyrs, wounded, and missing persons who have been working with the Iranians since the beginning of the conflict should fall on the Iranian side.
- Eighth: To issue instructions to regulate the executive instructions for military and civilian personnel working with the Iranian side, after organizing them into the local defense regiments in the governorates.

The following tables lay out the most prominent combat groups that were part of the LDF at the time of its establishment. The groups named below, in addition to several additional formations that participated in the battle of the southern Aleppo countryside in early 2018, include an estimated 45,000 fighters in total:

**Imam Baqir Brigade**

Deployment	Ideology	Nationality
Aleppo-Deir Ezzor	Tribal	<b>Syrian</b>

**Jaysh al-Mahdi Forces**

Deployment	Ideology	Nationality
Aleppo	Shia Sadri	Syrian

**Imam al-Husain Brigade**

Deployment	Ideology	Nationality
Damascus and its countryside	Shia Sadri	Syrian

**Asad Allah al-Ghalib Brigade**

Deployment	Ideology	Nationality
Lattakia countryside	Shia Sadri	Syrian

**Nubul and Zahraa Militias in north Aleppo**

Deployment	Ideology	Nationality
Nubul & Zahraa-Aleppo city	Shia Khomaini	Syrian
Nubul & Zahraa-Aleppo city	Shia Khomaini	Syrian
Nubul & Zahraa	Shia Khomaini	Syrian
Nubul & Zahraa	Shia Khomaini	Syrian

The LDF also spearheaded the battles against ISIS in Deir Ezzor and the southern Raqqa countryside. These are now the military, security, and administrative forces controlling the area stretching from the southern countryside of Deir Ezzor, passing through southern Raqqah, all the way to the eastern countryside of Aleppo and the Aleppo city. The following are the most important formations that joined the LDF in early 2018:

Nationality	Deployment	Name
Syrian	Aleppo	Doshka Brigade
Syrian	Aleppo	Al-Safira Brigade
Syrian	Hama	Al-Berri Brigade
Syrian	Hama	Al-Hikma Brigade
Syrian	Aleppo	Al-Nayrab Regiment
Syrian-Iraqi-Lebanese	Aleppo - Raqqah	Islamic Resistance in Syria
Syrian	Homs	Al-Rida Forces
Syrian	Homs	Al-Radwan Forces

Syrian	Idlib	Suqur al-Dhaheer Forces
Syrian	Aleppo	Khan al-Asal Eagles
Syrian-Iraqi	Deir Ezzor	Force 313
Syrian	Hama	Al-Ghadab Christian Forces
Syrian	Tadmur(Palmyra)	Imam Zayb al-Abdeen Brigade
Syrian	Lattakia Countryside	Al-Qirsh Group

## Brigade 313: The IRGC's New Military Formation

Iran has continued its efforts to expand into southern Syria despite international agreements aimed at limiting its role in the region. In doing so, Iran is violating the Hamburg agreement between Russia and the United States, which required Iranian troops and affiliated militias to stay at least 35 kilometers away from the Syrian-Jordanian border. <sup>(2)</sup>

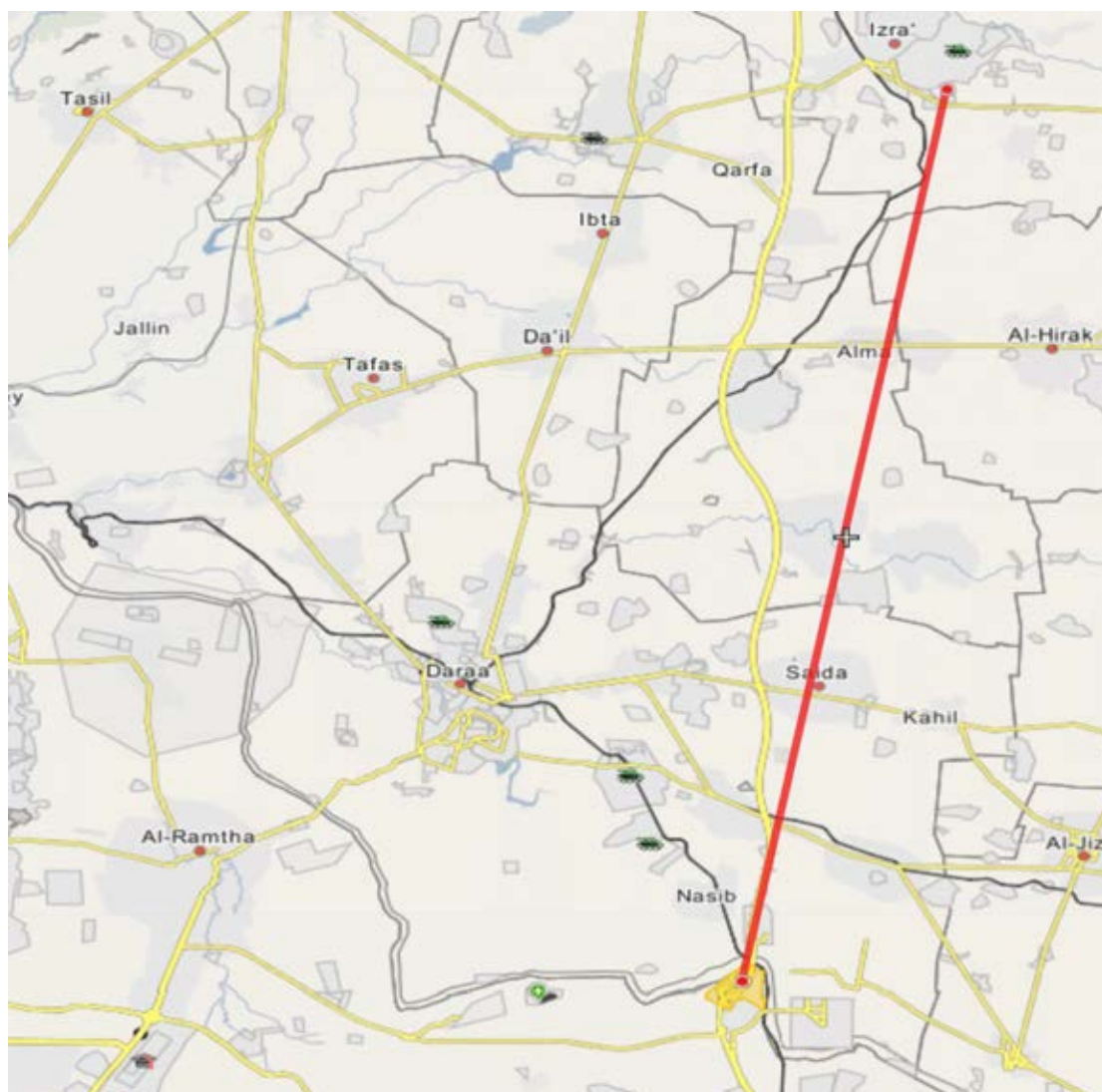


In November 2017, the IRGC established a special military body on the southern fronts of the Syrian army, called "Brigade 313." That same year, the brigade opened a recruitment center in the city of Izra'a in Daraa governorate. Through this center, Brigade 313 attracted more than 200 young Syrians from Daraa, most of whom were young people who reconciled their status with the regime in 2017. New members of Brigade 313 receive an identity card bearing the emblem of the IRGC, which ensures their ability to pass through the regime force checkpoints. Within two weeks of joining Brigade 313, recruits are enrolled in training camps in Izra'a and Sheikh Meskin.

Brigade 313's headquarters is located about 30 kilometers from the border with Jordan and about 45 kilometers from Israel. For this reason, the brigade's location poses a direct threat to the agreement between Washington and Moscow.

Iran's efforts to recruit local elements and integrate other militias with these bodies ramped up in anticipation of international efforts to deport Iranian-backed militias containing foreign elements, mostly from Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

<sup>(2)</sup> 2 The Russian-American "Hamburg Agreement" on Syria: Its Objectives and Implications, Arabs 48, 11-7-2017, <https://goo.gl/hW4GAr>



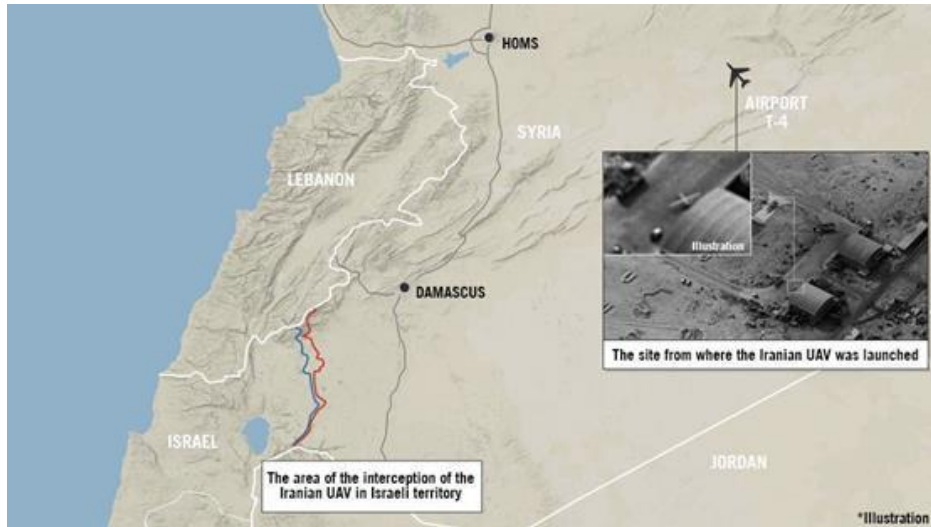
## Major Israel and U.S. attacks on Iranian forces and affiliated militias in Syria

### 10 February 2018 – Israeli attacks

- An Israeli Apache helicopter intercepted unmanned Iranian reconnaissance aircraft that entered the Golan Heights and sirens were heard in the area of Besan, Israel.
- Following the drone infiltration, Israeli warplanes attacked Iranian targets at T4 (Tiyas) airbase in Syria.
- One of the Israeli warplanes crashed near the Galilee in northern Israel after it was hit by a missile launched from Regiment 16 in Syria, which is controlled by Iran.

Following the crash of the Israeli warplane, the Israeli Air Force responded by targeting several, locations near the administrative border between Damascus governorate and the southern governorates of Daraa and Quneitra. Specifically, Israel targeted areas where the Iranian-backed Brigade 313 forces and Lebanese Hezbollah forces are stationed in the town of Al-Dimas on the Damascus-Beirut road near the Syrian-Lebanese border.

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) media announced that seven locations were successfully destroyed (three Syrian air defense batteries and four targets belonging to Iran), and confirmed that Syrian regime anti-aircraft missiles capacity dropped to 50% after most of its locations were destroyed.



T4 Location – Satellite image for the Iranian-made drone (Shahid) dated on (Jan 2018)

### 9 April 2018 – Israeli attacks

Israeli warplanes fired a number of missiles at the T4 (Tiyas) airbase from Lebanon’s airspace. Seven IRGC forces were announced dead following the attack.







Photo showing aftermath of Israeli airstrikes on T4 Airbase. <https://goo.gl/8JJqbh>

## Iranian locations that were targeted before, after, and during the April 2018 strikes by the U.S. and its allies

2018 Major hits before the US strike on Syria							
Date	Province	Area	Location	Local Forces	International Forces	Attacker	Note
10/2/2018	Homs	Eastern Rural	Tayyas Airbase (T4)	Regime and Pro-Iran forces	IRGC and Hezbollah	Israel	Strike Destroyed: Iranian Drone - main control tower - military accommodation
9/4/2018	Homs	Eastern Rural	Tayyas Airbase (T4)	Regime and Pro-Iran forces	IRGC and Hezbollah	Israel	Strike Destroyed: Three warehouses - the death of 7 IRGC fighters

2018 Major hits During the US strike on Syria							
Date	Province	Area	Location	Local Forces	International Forces	Attacker	Note
14/4/2018	Damascus	The City	41 Special forces HQ	No Forces	Hezbollah	Unknown	The strike is not mentioned in foreign or local media
14/4/2018	Homs	Qatyna Lake	Military Warehouse	No Forces	Hezbollah	Unknown	Hezbollah didn't publish anything about this location

Between 15 and 18 April 2018, after the U.S.-led attacks on Syria, two Iranian locations in Syria were reportedly targeted by unknown attacker: one in the Azzan Mountains in southern Aleppo and the other near al-Shiraat Airbase. There was no confirmation from the regime's media regarding these attacks, only local sources confirmed seeing or hearing the explosions.

Full list of All the Location targeted during the US hit (Confirmed or Not)				
Province	Location	Presence of IRGC	Presence of Pro-Iran	Strike Confirmation
Hama	Scientific Research in Misyaf	Yes	Yes	Not Confirmed
Homs	Hezbollah HQ North of al-Qusayr	No	Yes	Not Confirmed
Homs	Military Warehouse Near Qatyna lake	No	Yes	Confirmed
Damascus	Scientific Research in Barzeh	No	Yes	Confirmed
Damascus	Scientific Research in Jamraya	No	Yes	Confirmed
Damascus	Al-Dumyer Airbase	No	Yes	Not Confirmed
Damascus	Al-Kiswa Military Locations	Yes	Yes	Not Confirmed
Damascus	Brigade 105	No	No	Confirmed
Damascus	Mazzeh Airbase	No	No	Confirmed
Damascus	41 Special Forces HQ	No	Yes	Confirmed
Damascus	Rhayba Military Locations	No	Yes	Not Confirmed

## 8 May 2018 -Israeli attacks

Israeli missiles struck the first Armored Division (Jabal Al-Mani) in al-Kiswa near the Syrian capital Damascus. The attack took place after an hour after U.S. President Donald Trump

announced he was withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal. At least 13 fighters were killed in the attack; seven of them were members of the IRGC and other Iran-backed militias.

Hitham Abdul Rasol, IRGC commander and developer of "Fajr-3" Iranian missile defense system, visited two Iranian locations on the same day of the attack: one in al-Zabadani and the other at the Damascus International Airport. Both of these locations are likely to host "Fajr-3" systems.

### 10 May 2018 – Israeli attacks

After Iranian forces fired 20 rockets at Israeli military positions in the Golan Heights at night on 9 May 2018, Israeli Air Force planes entered Syrian airspace to attack dozens of Iranian targets inside of Syria. The following table lists the major locations that were targeted:

Province	Location	Coordinates	IRGC	Pro Iran Militias
Damascus	Western Ghouta (Tell Harboon)	33°21'7"N 35°52'15"E	No	Yes
Quneitra	Khan Arnaba	33°10'56"N 35°52'51"E	No	Yes
Quneitra	Khan Arnaba (Tell al-Qubu)	33°12'12"N 35°53'3"E	No	Yes
Damascus	Kanakir (Brigade 121)	33°16'46"N 36°4'51"E	Yes	No
Damascus	Al-Kiswa	33°22'58"N 36°14'5"E	Yes	Yes
Damascus	Al-Kiswa (1st Armoured Division)	33°21'6"N 36°17'39"E	Yes	Yes
Quneitra	Khan Arnaba (Tell al-Shaar)	33°10'29"N 35°56'34"E	No	Yes
Daraa	Mahji (Air Defense Base)	32°56'8"N 36°12'34"E	No	Yes
Daraa	Izraa (12th Armoured Brigade)	32°51'29"N 36°16'23"E	No	Yes

### 25 December 2018 – Israeli attacks

On 25 December 2018, Israel launched a series of airstrikes against military targets in Damascus and its countryside, targeting military sites and weapons stores where pro-Iranian forces were deployed. These strikes were launched in two stages and are unique in terms of timing, targets, intensity, and messaging.

These Israeli attacks were the ninth of their kind in 2018. They were the second such strikes to take place after Russia's deployment of the S-300 air defense missile system and the first since Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from eastern Syria. Israel's 25 December strikes were notable because they indicated the return of coordination between Moscow and Tel Aviv in Syrian airspace in support of their common interests in the reduction of Iranian influence and potential expansion in Syria. They were also notable because they conveyed the clear message that Israel would continue its policy of striking Iranian forces and infrastructure in Syria despite the U.S. withdrawal. The intensity and length of the attacks may

also indicate Israel's readiness for a future escalation against Iran in Syria and serve to push Russia and the U.S. to deal more seriously with the dilemma of expanding Iranian influence.

Israel sees the American withdrawal from Syria as an opportunity to intensify its pressure on Iran and test Iran's reaction. If Iran responds aggressively to Israel's intensification, it will lead to regional escalation and pressure the U.S. to adopt more punitive policies and measures against Iran, possibly delaying the U.S. withdrawal from Syria. It may also delay Iran's plans to expand in the eastern region of Syria to counter the growing Russian presence there. However, Iran may also choose to absorb these Israeli strikes and respond either on a small scale or not at all, in order to focus on filling the vacuum in the eastern region following the U.S. withdrawal. It will encourage Israel to launch more attacks against inside Syria during the transitional U.S. withdrawal period if it is actually completed, which is a likely scenario.

### 17 January 2019 – Israeli attacks

The Israeli Air Force struck some ten targets in Syria overnight from Sunday 20 January – Monday 21 January. The attack targets included arms warehouses at Damascus International Airport and other locations, and sites belonging to IRGC including an Iranian intelligence site and an Iranian training camp. The attacks were in response to a ground-to-ground missile that was fired at Israel from Syria a day earlier and intercepted.



Video 1: Israeli media published a video of one of the strikes - <https://goo.gl/NmXmkm>

## 27 March 2019 – Israeli attacks

The Israeli air force launched airstrikes on the industrial zone in the northern city of Aleppo, causing damage only to materials as per the official pro-Regime news agency "SANA," while opposition sources said the strikes hit Iranian ammunitions stores and a military airport used by Iranian-backed militia's forces. <sup>(3)</sup>

Inside sources confirmed that the Israeli airstrikes targeted two warehouses in the industrial area of Sheikh Najjar. The warehouses contained light and medium ammunition, based on the type of ammunition that was heard in the blast after the airstrikes.

These warehouses are under the control of Iranian-backed militias, until now the identity of the militia, which was hit, is under investigation. However, according to previous information Badr Organization, Fatemiyoun, Hezbollah, and al-Nujbaa are based in this area.

The site of the airstrikes was locked down for seven hours then it was opened only for LDF forces and SANA, which published pictures of the site showing that the raid targeted an empty warehouse and only caused martial damage.

ISI published recent pictures of the location that was targeted, the pictures showed several damaged warehouse in the area of the airstrikes, and it's also visible that these airstrikes targeted specific locations and not a random hit in order to destroy empty buildings as per the official regime news agency statement.



<sup>(3)</sup> Location of the raid: <http://wikimapia.org/m/#lat=36.2631&lon=37.255325&z=11&l=36&m=b>

### Syria, Aleppo, Sheikh Najjar Industrial Area: Strike (27 March 2019) Aftermath

30 March 2019  
36°16'55.251" N 37°14'41.971" E



According to media reports and ISI visual analysis, the mentioned **Industrial building** (70x35 meters), located 450 meters west to the **bombed hangar**, was probably attacked on 27 March 2019.

While there aren't significant signs of massive explosions, it seems that the **bombes hit several spots of the building and caused a partial roof collapse**. In addition, nearby structures suffered collateral damage.

Private vehicles and trucks parking and passing nearby are possibly related to the hangar.

ISI

### Syria, Aleppo, Sheikh Najjar Industrial Area: Strike (27 March 2019) Aftermath

30 March 2019  
36°16'55.251" N 37°14'41.971" E



This picture is a snapshot from a U-News Agency video published on 29 March 2019 in YouTube. According to U-News Agency, the video shows the building which was bombed on 27 March 2019 in Sheikh Najjar Industrial area, Aleppo.

Source: U-News Agency - <https://youtu.be/2i5LH0X31hw>

ISI

### Syria, Aleppo, Sheikh Najjar Industrial Area: Strike (27 March 2019) Aftermath

30 March 2019  
36°16'54.609" N 37°15'00.581" E



According to media reports and ISI visual analysis, the **Industrial hangar** (70x35 meters) located in the north-western part of Sheikh Najjar Industrial zone, Aleppo, was probably bombed on 27 March 2019.

While there aren't significant signs of massive explosions, it seems that the **bombes hit several spots of the hangar and caused a partial roof collapse**.

It is possible that the private vehicles parking near the hangar related to the hangar.

ISI

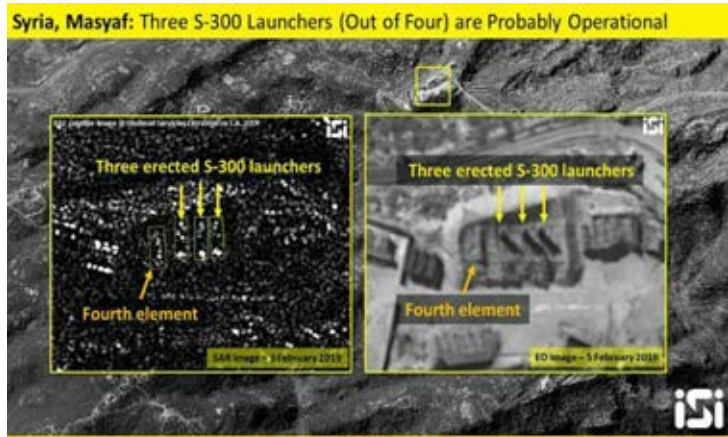
Pro-Iranian accounts promote that the strike was in line with Turkey's desire to empty the towns of Nubl and Zahraa to form a Sunni belt, that's why the regime with the support of the Iranian took the decision to intensify the military presence to prevent any future Turkish military plan.

### 13 April 2019 – Israeli attacks

The Israeli Air Force launched airstrikes from Lebanese airspace on targets in the Syrian province of Hama. According to inside sources and Pro-Regime media, the target was a military location of IRGC and other Iranian-backed militias and the area is located between the research center and al-Talaa Camp.

In February 2019, ISI center published pictures showing the Russian S-300 surface-to-surface missile system based in Syria near the targeted area. This was the third strike in 2019 that explicitly targeted Iranian-backed militias.

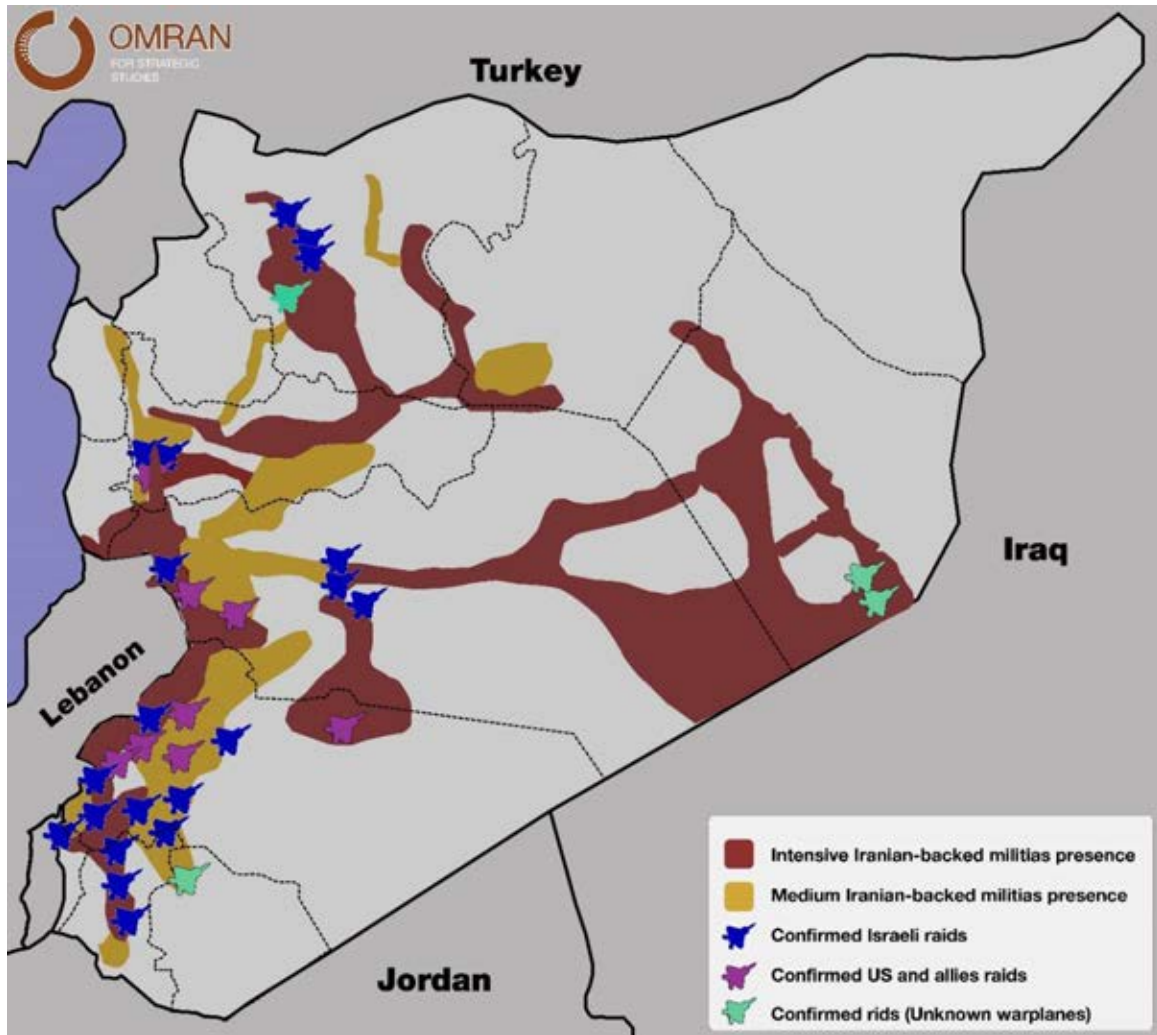
The first one targeted Damascus International Airport, the second was on Aleppo airport and the industrial zone, while the latest, as we mentioned, it targeted Iranian-backed militias' bases near the city of Masyaf in Hama province.



### Conclusion

Since 2017, Iranian military sites in Syria have been continuously targeted by Israel, the U.S. and their allies. These attacks pushed Iran to find a way to protect its presence. Since 2018 Iran has been reintegrating its militias into military formations affiliated with the Syrian regime, which has led to reducing the intensity of the raids against them but did not prevent them.

In general, the raids on Iranian sites did not have a long-term impact on Iran's strategy and goals in the region. The areas under Iranian influence in Syria remain large with various levels of infiltration (military, security, social and economic). This Iranian infiltration and expansion strategy came as a precautionary measure if air strikes were to continue.







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