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**The Syrian Civil War:
Understanding Qusayr
and Defending Aleppo**

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Introduction¹:

In May 2013, EDAM has initiated publishing military strategic analyses series concerning the Syrian Civil War. Our first monograph, *The Syrian Civil War: A Military Strategic Assessment*, was penned as an introduction to the Syrian battleground by shedding light on the essential factors and trends that either shaped or potentially capable of shaping the ongoing civil war's trajectory. Subsequently, on June 6th 2013, the EDAM research team published a follow-up paper, *The Syrian Civil War: Chemical Weapons Assessment*, about the WMD aspect of the conflict. Finally, following the developments in Qusayr and the current pressing threat in Aleppo, EDAM now releases the third battlefield update as the most recent paper of the *Syrian Civil War* series.

In this work, *The Syrian Civil War: Understanding Qusayr and Defending Aleppo*, we are focusing on the developments that brought about the regime's military momentum along with critical game-changers with regard to the Battle for Aleppo that would be crucial for the fate of the civil war.

1. The Battle of Qusayr: Understanding The Baathist Dictatorship's Military Momentum

In order to get a good grip on the current situation of the Syrian Civil War, one should get a better understanding about the importance of the joint Qusayr offensive of Assad's forces and Hezbollah. From a military standpoint, the Qusayr Offensive was a geostrategic turning point. However it was not a final decisive battle that concluded the civil war. In other words, the Battle of Qusayr has speeded up the momentum in favor of the Baathist dictatorship, but the Battle for Aleppo is being fought within different military parameters.

From the geostrategic perspective, the town of Qusayr is important for mainly three reasons. First, Qusayr is located at the junction of the Mediterranean shores of Syria, with an important Allawite population, and the capital Damascus. An opposition victory in Qusayr, and Homs in a broader sense, would have been tantamount to the isolation of Assad's capital. Such a development would have forced the regime to a landlocked position; and then the rest of the military efforts would have been isolating Damascus from its suburbs and from the Jordanian border area for the final opposition victory. Second, Qusayr had been an effective supply route for the opposition from Lebanon. Thus, the Qusayr Offensive interrupted the opposition supply lines through Bekaa Valley which has always been a key geopolitical factor for many Middle Eastern conflicts. And third, in case the opposition controls Syria – Lebanon connection, it would be tantamount for Tehran to lose the gate opening to its robust proxy, the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is a critical component of Iran's regional "power projection" and deterrence capacity.

¹ For previous "The Syrian Civil War" monographs, visit EDAM web-site
http://edam.org.tr/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=181&Itemid=239

In military terms, assessing the conflict in Qusayr would be an important lessons-learned opportunity for analyzing future battles of the Syrian Civil War.

The first and foremost characteristic of Assad's forces' Qusayr offensive is the reliance on air power and artillery shelling in order to soften the opposition deployments. Starting from May 19th, heavy pounding from air and ground took place onto the units defending the town.² The opposition units, which have lacked effective air defenses so far, had to operate under this heavy pressure which played an important role in their defeat. Secondly, Assad's forces managed to confine and isolate the opposition units by carefully capturing critical surroundings such as the Dabaa Base.³ In fact, it is argued, this strategy emanated from the Baathist regime's previous failed military effort to re-capture Qusayr which took place in March 2013 when Assad's forces were repelled thanks to the opposition reinforcements. Thirdly, the regime was well able to integrate irregular fighting elements of Hezbollah and other paramilitaries with Assad's forces' conventional superiorities over the opposition.⁴ Notably, in the initial monograph of *the Syrian Civil War* series, EDAM has drawn attention to this very fact of *Hybrid Warfare* concept which can briefly be defined as the concept of multi-modal fighting through operationally integrating regular and irregular tactics and strategies.

In addition, the Battle of Qusayr showed that the Baathist dictatorship is still following its "selective deployment" strategy. During the operations elite forces from the Republican Guard were supported by other conventional units as well as by Hezbollah and the regime's irregulars.⁵ Since the outset of the civil war, this strategy has been causing a higher level of discipline among engaging elements on one hand, while it has also been overstretching the elite troops from the praetorian units on the other hand.

Key points and lesson-learned from the Battle of Qusayr and the main reasons behind Assad regime's military momentum can be specified as follows:

- ✓ **Military Stamina:** The Syrian Arab Armed Forces' capacity was significantly eroded due to the ongoing civil war. In this regard, many analysts believed that this degradation would lead to a total collapse sooner or later. However, the Baathist regime has been well supported by its allies, the Russians and the Iranians mainly, since the first days of the conflict. Furthermore, the opposition couldn't get enough support to match the regime in several military aspects. So much so that only recently the European Union lifted the arms embargo and Washington

² "Syrian Army Storms Rebel Town of Qusayr", *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22586378>, 19 May 2013, Accessed on: 24 June 2013.

³ "Syrian Army Seizes Strategic Air Base Near Qusayr", *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/29/us-syria-crisis-dabaa-idUSBRE94S19T20130529>, 29 May 2013, Accessed on: 23 June 2013.

⁴ Elizabeth, O'Bagy. *Syria Update: The Fall of Al Qusayr*, ISW, Washington D.C., 6 June 2013.

⁵ Jeffrey, White. "The Qusayr Rules: The Syrian Regime's Changing Way of War", *Policy Watch 2082*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31 May 2013.

decided to arm the moderate opposition elements. As a result, the attrition factor has become more relevant to the opposition units than to Assad's forces.

- ✓ **Air-Superiority:** Syrian Air Force was the one of the biggest factors that kept the Syrian regime defiant. Assad's forces have utilized their air superiority for both air-ground bombardment (even by employing incendiary and cluster ammunition) and punishment operations against civilians, as well as supporting isolated and besieged fortifications and bastions. In the absence of a no-fly zone, and due to the very fact that the opposition units do not have adequate air-defenses, the Baathist dictatorship has been taking advantage of its air power monopoly. Besides, it should be noted that the unmatched advantage with respect to ballistic missiles also helped the regime to threaten opposition deployments and civil population from deep territory.
- ✓ **Armor – Artillery Superiority:** Along with the air superiority, artillery and artillery rockets (as well as ballistic missiles as mentioned above) provided an unmatched superiority to the regime. Through indiscriminate shelling the regime forces have been conducting both punishment and softening operations that caused mass displacements up until now. The mass displacements served as an isolating factor between the armed opposition and their “potential human resources”. Moreover, many of the regime's praetorian units enjoy advanced armored and mechanized capabilities. Without proper countermeasures and under appropriate topographical conditions the regime's armored units proved their battlefield reliability vis-à-vis the opposition.
- ✓ **Military Geostrategic Conduct:** Assad's forces have altered their Soviet-type, centralized doctrine and operational art for a much more flexible one. Firstly, the regime preferred to hold central locations with critical geopolitical value instead of large swaths that necessitate high number of troops that are already overstretched. Secondly, as recently surfaced in the Qusayr case, the regime now acts cautiously and carefully by isolating the opposition's resisting core from its surroundings and reinforcements routes. This operational approach brought about lack of enough support and erosion of LOCs in the opposition's efforts.

To sum up, Qusayr was a turning point in the Syrian Civil War, but definitely not the decisive final battle. The war is not over by all means. In that sense, the opposition's performance in defending Aleppo and even enhancing their gains would be crucial.

2. Defending Aleppo:

Despite the relevance of the lessons-learned from the Battle of Qusayr, Aleppo remains as a different case from a military standpoint. For assessing the Aleppo scenarios this paper utilizes an analytical approach that combines both “meaningful templates”, which were elaborated from the Battle of

Qusayr and previous clashes, and the *sui generis* conditions of the Battle for Aleppo in different angles.

The Assad regime's doctrinal approach to the civil war and its combat record can give a clearer idea about the Assad's forces' mass efforts to re-assert full control over Aleppo. Firstly, a large-scale operation to restore full control over Aleppo would most probably utilize the regime's "selective deployment" strategy which would involve politico-militarily reliable praetorian *units* (i.e. the 4th Armored Division, the Republican Guard) along with other detachments from the rest of the armed forces. Besides, as seen in the Battle of Qusayr, the Hezbollah militia are now an integral part of the Baathist dictatorship's violent crackdown. Thus, we should expect further support from Hassan Nasrallah's forces during the operations in the north. Secondly, the regime's reliance on air power for strategic supplies, close air support, and air-ground bombardment would be critically important during the military endeavor for Aleppo and its surrounding suburbs.

Thirdly, military geostrategic trends of the conflict, which were assessed in detail by the initial EDAM monograph (*The Syrian Civil War*), suggest important imperatives that would shape the Baathist regime's and the opposition's contests for Aleppo:

a. From the Baathist Dictatorship's Perspective:

- ✓ Nearly all military campaigns, except some forms of special operations, need to be initiated upon reaching an effective level of troop concentration. Following adequate troop concentrations, one would need jump-off points to initiate an assault. And between the concentration zones and jump-off points, the aggressor has to manage *en masse* troop movement in order to stage a decisive strike. This very fact of war studies determines the merits of Assad's forces' deployment references. Clearly, with regard to the "selective deployment" strategy, the Baathist regime has to concentrate enough number of elements from its elite units (*Special Forces, the Republican Guard, and the 4th Armored Div.*), other conventional forces as detachments, along with foreign and indigenous paramilitaries (*the so-called 'National Defense Force', Hezbollah militiamen, and reported Quds Forces elements*). These forces would probably start *en masse* movement from Hama area to the jump-off points, and more importantly to the opposition-held areas of Aleppo.
- ✓ To do so, Assad's forces need to dominate M5 highway in order to secure mass supply lines and reinforcements' routes to augment engaging units in the north. As indicated in a previous EDAM study, the geostrategic trends of the Syrian Civil War resembles the initial phase of the first Arab – Israeli War, *the Battle for the Roads*. Therefore, the regime friendly elements need to open their way through important choke points, and also hardened opposition defense lines, such as Saraqeb and Maarat al Nu'man. The more the opposition succeeds to hold onto critical choke points between Aleppo – Damascus and

Idlib – Aleppo axes, the more probable it is that the regime would have to rely on air-supplies and would be prevented to move in mass mechanized columns.

- ✓ As seen in the Qusayr clashes, the Baathist regime would possibly employ heavy air-ground bombardment and artillery shelling for softening the opposition defensive lines. Besides, Assad’s forces would probably focus their efforts on cutting the ways of possible reinforcements to engaging opposition elements, and try to outflank their adversaries. This was the silver bullet during the operations in Qusayr, as the Baathist dictatorship’s elements enjoyed their Hezbollah allies surrounding the FSA elements from the Lebanon side. However, the military picture in Aleppo is different. There is no Lebanon behind the borders, and in order to outflank the opposition from the north, the regime’s forces need to (1) break the siege in the Minnakh Air Base, (2) re-take the control of A’zaz area to a certain extent.

b. From the Opposition’s Perspective:

- ✓ The opposition elements’ military strategic imperative is to deny Assad’s forces a “safe journey” along the M5 highway, and to disrupt troop concentrations to reach their jump-off points *en masse* without bleeding. In this regard, the FSA and other opposition elements have to wage a war of attrition along the *Lines of Communication (LOC)* and supply routes of their adversaries. In doing so, the armed opposition has to fortify their check points along the main supply routes, most importantly, along the M5 highway, and also to employ mobile elements in hit-run tactical incursions.
- ✓ Another must for the opposition is to avoid being outflanked from the north. In that sense, fully capturing the Minnakh Air Base would be essential for the FSA and its allies. In April 2013, the regime’s forces managed to break the 6-months long siege of Wadi al Deif, and started to enjoy ground support instead of solely relying on air-supplies. A repetition of Wadi al Deif outcome in the Minnakh Air Base would be catastrophic. As a matter of fact, at the time of writing, *Al Jazeera* has reported intensive clashes for taking control of the Minnakh Air Base between the regime’s besieged units and the rebel elements.⁶
- ✓ In order to defend Aleppo and the north successfully, the opposition has to keep the Baathist dictatorship’s forces overstretched in other areas of the country. This would be more or less a panacea for rendering Assad’s *selective deployment* doctrine abortive. In other terms, the regime has been relying on *praetorian* units to spearhead the operations, and Assad needs concentration of his forces to launch a massive re-capturing effort. Therefore, the opposition has to be active in the suburbs of Damascus and along the

⁶ Al Jazeera, “Rebels and Military Battle in Aleppo,” <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2013/06/2013618181150366554.html>, 18 June 2013. Accessed on: 23 June 2013.

Amman – Damascus highway during the Battle for Aleppo in order to disrupt the elite units' concentrations vis-à-vis the FSA elements in the north.

- ✓ The last geostrategic imperative of the opposition is to deny any potential jump-off points to the regime's forces. As recently as June 2013, the Baathist dictatorship and its allies started to reinforce predominantly Shi'a populated Nubl and Al Zahra villages that are located between the Minnakh Air Base and central Aleppo.⁷ Should the Baathist dictatorship manage to secure the Minnakh Air Base and reinforce these two villages with enough number of troops, then Assad's forces would have the ability to cut the opposition LOCs from the Turkish border to the north, and also to form good outflanking / jump-off positions towards the rebel-held areas of Aleppo.
- ✓ In case of a successful defensive strategy, the opposition units might act on their momentum and shift to the offense. Especially, the central / west – central parts of the city of Aleppo offers important targets such as the *Military Research Center*, *Military Intelligence HQ*. In this regard, *Rashidin* district can well serve as a good jump-off point to the opposition. Likewise, a possible capture of the Aleppo International Airport would also be a significant blow to the regime.



Defending Aleppo: Some Critical Locations

⁷ Liam, Durfee, et al. *The Battle For Aleppo*, ISW, Washington D.C., 13 June 2013.

3. Military Assistance to the Opposition: Comprehending the Military Context and Understanding Their Supply Needs

The end of the EU led arms embargo coupled with the White House's changing stance are to be taken as the harbinger of an important trend of arming the moderate Syrian opposition. At the time of writing, the Friends of Syria meeting in Doha agreed "to provide urgently all the necessary material and equipment to the opposition on the ground".⁸ In this complicated overall picture, we must clearly define and understand relevant military contexts of the ongoing efforts for Aleppo when assessing the merits of military assistance to the opposition.

a. Light Infantry Anti-Tank Warfare

Since the very outset of the conflict, regime forces used armored units against the opposition effectively. This strategy has been causing a crucial asymmetry between the belligerents. Thus, one of the priorities of the opposition should be to deny the Baathist regime's armor superiority. In military terms, this is tantamount to waging a tactical anti-tank warfare by using light infantry's limited but important advantages against armor units. According to open-source information, Assad's forces have a relatively advanced inventory of the T-72s, namely between 1,500 – 1,700 main battle tanks of several variants⁹. With all degradation factors (imperfect combat-readiness levels, casualties, defections, and lack of spare parts) Assad's forces are estimated to enjoy still "hundreds of T-72s", maybe even still over some 1,000 (along with other mid and low quality T-62, T-55, T-54 models with a total of 4,000 – 4,500 mbt under pre-civil war conditions including the ones in storage) that would be a menacing threat for the opposition in Aleppo.

As a further modernization for its T-72s, Damascus had run an improvement project with the Italian firm *Galileo Avionica* in 2003. This new upgraded model, T-72A, has advanced fire-control systems and night vision capabilities along with and improved reactive armor.¹⁰ Both *the Jane's Defense* and the Israeli think-tank INSS precisely estimated the number of the modernized T-72s as 122¹¹. These tanks can be employed either within an armored brigade (some 105 tanks estimated for 3 armored battalions and one mechanized battalion), or within three mechanized brigades (some 41 tanks estimated for three mechanized and one armored battalion).¹² Due to the "special politico-sectarian" conditions of the Syrian Armed Forces, EDAM estimates that the most advanced T-72s

⁸ "Fighting Rages after Doha Meeting on Syria", *Al Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/2013622144844127498.html>, 23 June 2013. Accessed on: 25 June 2013.

⁹ INSS, *Military Balance Files – Syria*, Updated on 02 Jan. 2013, p. 6

¹⁰ IHS Jane's, *World's Armies: Syrian Army*, August 2012, p.15.

¹¹ *Ibid.* P. 16; INSS *Military Balance Files – Syria*, p. 6

¹² For a comprehensive insight see: Joseph, Holliday. *The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle*, ISW, Washington D.C., February 2013.

must have been delivered to the 4th Armored Division with nearly all officer ranks are manned by the Allawites along with a very high proportion of the same sect in lower ranks too. This elite unit, in which Maher al Assad officially commands a brigade (most probably the 42nd Armored) and acts as the de-facto commander of all division, enjoys privileged combat-readiness levels with 3 armored brigades, a mechanized brigade, a special forces regiment, and an artillery regiment for fire-support.¹³ Likewise, the Republican Guard, which enjoys 3 mechanized brigades (the 104th, the 105th, and the 106th along with two infantry and one artillery regiments), can also be equipped by some of the modern T-72s.

The T-72s reactive armor technology is capable of resisting against less advanced weapons used by the opposition fighters, such as “the Middle East small wars classic” *RPG-7*. In order to penetrate the T-72 armor, the opposition would need more advanced tandem-charge anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM). For instance, the AT-14 Spriggan (or the Kornet) ATGMS, which exist in the Syrian inventory, proved some success against the Israeli Merkavas (with more advanced armor tech when compared to that of the T-72s) in 2006 2nd Lebanon War.

Notably, following the decision of Washington to militarily support the rebels, the Daily Telegraph claimed that the opposition received the first delivery of weapons from Saudi Arabia. According to the news, the Kingdom sent AT-5 Sprandel (Konkurs) type ATGMs to the opposition fighters.¹⁴ Although it is an earlier model when compared to the AT-14s, the AT-5’s warhead penetration capabilities should work satisfactorily against the T-72s under appropriate conditions.

To sum up, the opposition would need more ATGM weapon systems, both numerically and technologically advanced ones, in order to deny the Baathist dictatorship’s armor advantages. The 2nd Lebanon War in 2006 has been a well-studied lessons-learned case for assessing light infantry’s capabilities against the armor. Aleppo’s topographical and urban / suburban landscape also enables the opposition to employ effective ATGM operations when resisting the regime’s offensive moves.

b. Low-Altitude Mobile Air Defense

Another critical task for the opposition is to resist against the regime’s air superiority via mobile anti-aircraft systems, and especially through Man-Portable Air Defense Systems

¹³ Ibid., p 12.

¹⁴ “Syrian Rebels Get First Heavy Weapons on the Front Line of Aleppo”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10131063/Syrian-rebels-get-first-heavy-weapons-on-the-front-line-of-Aleppo.html> Accessed on: 23 June 2013.

(MANPADS). Without a doubt, even the most effective MANPADS capability would not compensate for the benefits of a no-fly zone. However, particularly against rotary-winged assets and low-flying and approaching / taking off elements (i.e. air supply missions to besieged bases and to the operating units on the ground) MANPADS would be very effective.

Within the Syrian Arab Armed Forces' arsenal, we observe Strela series (i.e. SA – 7 variants) and more advanced Igla series (i.e. SA-16, SA -18, and SA-24) MANPADS which are both Soviet & Russia manufactured. The latter series, namely the Igla models and variants, are more capable against decoys and countermeasures (i.e. thanks to their anti-flare filters), enjoys better ranges, have better guidance systems, and utilize more advanced engagement aspects (most of the earlier MANPADS can only engage from behind while modern systems such as SA-18 have “all around engaging” capacity).¹⁵

Up until now, the YouTube coverage of the Syrian Civil War showed many cases of shot down air assets by the opposition elements. Enhancing the opposition's MANPADS capability would be crucially important in some aspects:

- ✓ Advanced MANPADS capabilities would threaten any re-supply mission to besieged units, the Minnakh Air Base most importantly, for defending Aleppo and restricting the regime's air-ground missions at low-altitudes.
- ✓ The regime forces have been utilizing Mi series Mi-8 'Hip' and Mi-17 'Hip-H' rotary-winged assets during the civil war effectively (IISS' Military Balance 2013 estimates 6 squadrons). These assets are both multi-role helicopters which can be used for transporting troops (20-30 troops) as well as air-ground attack missions including deliveries of incendiary bombs and cluster sub-munitions. Advanced MANPADS, such as the SA-18 and the SA-24 can threaten the Mi series helicopters flight missions as well as the Hind series attack helicopters to a certain extent (the remaining rotary winged asset in the Syrian inventory, the SA 342L Gazelle, is more suitable for anti-tank missions and was not commissioned against the opposition forces as intensively as Hip and Hind assets).
- ✓ Theater level evidence suggest that the Baathist regime's air superiority played a crucial role up until now which eroded the opposition's combat capacity. In case of a major offensive against Aleppo, we will probably observe higher flight hours which would mean more hit chances for the opposition. Therefore, the opposition elements' MANPADS capabilities vis-à-vis Assad's forces should be augmented

¹⁵ For a comprehensive assessment of MANPADS in contemporary warfare see: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Man-Portable Air Defence System (MANPADS): Countering the Terrorist Threat*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2008.

by their allies as soon as possible due to the pressing threat in the north for inflicting more severe casualties to the regime.

One of the most important handicaps of MANPADS is their limited range and altitude. Contemporary MANPADS models and variants, even the most advanced ones, are effective within ranges less than 7 kms, and employed against air assets within view of the operator.¹⁶ Thus, as indicated, it would not compensate for what a no-fly zone can offer to the opposition.

Furthermore, MANPADS at the hands of hostile groups would significantly pose threat to airline security, especially during the climbing and the approaching phases of the civilian aircrafts. For that reason, the Wall Street Journal noted that while Washington would likely include ATGMs to its military assistance program, MANPADS transfer might be ruled out.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Chinese manufactured FN-6 type MANPADS systems, which shouldn't be included by the Syrian Arab Armed Forces inventory, were seen at the hands of the opposition units in action.¹⁸ This evidence suggests that black market connections have already been established in Syria that could be a problem in the post-civil war period.

c. Small Arms and Ammunitions

Although small arms, lower caliber mortars, and ammunitions are not tactical game-changers as ATMGs and MANPADS are, they constitute an important proportion of light infantry units' military assets. The critical point for the opposition is to keep their supply flowing by holding onto supply routes. Following Qusayr, for instance, the opposition has lost the strategic "Lebanon route" for supplies. Thus, Amman – Damascus highway and the border with Jordan now gained more importance, and should be defended well by the opposition elements.

4. Strategic Guidance: Critical Factors that can Cause Drastic Shifts

In addition to the factors that were mentioned hitherto, there might be some critical developments that are well capable of radically shifting the ongoing civil war's trends as follows:

- ✓ **No-Fly Zone:** Implementation of a no-fly zone is a complex issue that necessitates a detailed military analysis. For instance, the scope of the planned no-fly zone, whether it would contain overall Syrian airspace or a partial one that could be limited with northern regions to be precise, would determine the operational geography and

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 1

¹⁷ "US to Arm Syrian Rebels", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 June 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324188604578543820387158806.html>. Accessed on: 23 June 2013.

¹⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3I1c1I6f74>. Accessed on 24 June 2013.

required weapon systems. Likewise, the locations of Assad's air defenses and combat-readiness of the regime's fighter jets would be critical. But above all, a no-fly zone decision would definitely cause a drastic shift in the Syrian battleground by denying the air-superiority of the Baathist dictatorship.

- ✓ **The S-300s Transfer to the Assad Regime:** The S-300 SAM (NATO reporting name SA-10 Grumble) is a Russian manufactured, modern air & missile defense system. The system's more advanced version is the S-300 PMU-2 Favorit (NATO reporting name SA-20 Gargoyle). An S-300 transfer to the Baathist regime would be a game changer as this system is capable of making any air-operations, including prospects of a no-fly zone, harder than ever. For one, air superiority is a prerequisite nearly for all incursions, be it no-fly zone or even a ground incursion; thus, suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) remains as one of the most important missions of air superiority endeavors.

Furthermore, the S-300 transfer would seriously limit important regional actors', such as Turkey's and Israel's for instance, air superiority in case of a clash with the Syrian regime forces. The IISS' and Jane's Defense's surveys suggest that the Turkish Air Force possess one *SEAD* squadron (the 151st Squadron) with F-16Cs while the Israelis have two squadrons of F-16Ds that are both using AGM-88 anti-radiation missiles for *SEAD* missions¹⁹. Despite the satisfactory performance of the AGM-88 missile, its operational range can be overtaken by that of the S-300s. Furthermore, should Moscow delivers the system, the S-300s would be employed in combination with the Pantsir-S1s in lower altitude and shorter range (up to 20km) systems along with mid-tier assets such as the Buk-2M. In other words, the "density" and "diversity" of the Baathist regime's air defenses might be augmented to a considerable extent which would be a drastic game-changer. In addition, the advanced radar systems of the S-300s would enable Damascus to detect an area of 200kms approximately. As a final note, it should be reminded that such a complex system would require an acceptable "absorption period" for the Syrian operators to learn the critical know-how. Therefore, a more active Russian involvement may be brought about along with the possible S-300 deployment.

- ✓ **The Al Safir Military Compound:** Despite the lack of transparent and open source information, it is widely assumed that Assad regime's strategic weapons (WMDs and ballistic missiles) are deployed around Damascus and in the mid-west parts of the country, probably in high-profile military bases such as the *Mazze*. Actually some

¹⁹ For detailed info see: IHS Jane's, *World's Air Forces – Turkey Air Force*, 02 July 2012; IISS, *Military Balance 2013*, Routledge, London, 2013.

regards this deployment situation as an obstacle for the coastal micro-Allawite state. The only “known exception” to this picture is the al Safir Military Compound located at the south of Aleppo. The compound is suspected to be a high-risk chemical weapons and ballistic missiles base with critical infrastructure. Any drastic changes with regard to the al Safir would be capable of altering the trajectory of the civil war, and particularly the Battle for Aleppo.

Conclusion

In sum, there are some key points that should be taken in consideration to better evaluate the circumstances leading to the fall of Qusayr, as well as what can and cannot happen in Aleppo:

- ✓ The geostrategic contexts of the Battle of Qusayr and the Battle for Aleppo differ to a certain extent. In Qusayr, the regime forces confronted Syrian armed opposition’s units being outflanked by the Hezbollah fighters engaging from the Lebanon side. A repetition of Qusayr in Aleppo will depend on outflanking the opposition positions from the north, from the Minnakh Base to be precise, which seems harder than the conflict in other parts of the country. For one, the opposition concentration is higher with the intense participation of relatively more robust units like the *Tawhid* and *Farouk* brigades; and secondly, the opposition knows that while Qusayr was not the decisive battle for the civil war, Aleppo can be exactly that.
- ✓ In the previous paper, *The Syrian Civil War: A Military Strategic Analysis*, EDAM analysts had concluded that the ongoing civil war has been the most recent example of the Hybrid War concept. In fact, Qusayr case justified EDAM’s this military analysis when depicting the Syrian Civil War. Clearly, the Baathist regime incorporated irregulars (Shabiha, so-called National Defense Force, and Hezbollah fighters) with heavy shelling, air-superiority, and armor within operational integrity. If there will be a common ground between the Battle of Qusayr and Battle for Aleppo, it would definitely be the warfare characteristics of Hybrid War. In that sense, the opposition should render abortive the regime’s air superiority, at least at low altitudes, and armor advantages through ATGMs.
- ✓ “Isolation” remains as another existential threat to the opposition’s deployments in and around Aleppo. In Qusayr, the Baathist dictatorship and its Lebanese allies isolated the opposition’s positions first, staged shelling and air-bombardment for attrition, and only then preferred to strike tactical and operational center of gravities on the battleground. Therefore, keeping the LOCs strong and supply lines open, as well as interrupting that of the adversaries’ would be essential for the opposition’s resistance in Aleppo.

- ✓ The factors of “momentum” and “upper hand” have always been pretty exchangeable throughout the military history, and the Syrian Civil War is no exception. However, the Battle for Aleppo is a very significant milestone of the current civil war, and probably would determine the future trajectory more than Qusayr has done.