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The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border:

From a National to a Regional Frontier

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Summary

Over the past nearly two decades, the presence of a variety of state and nonstate military and security forces has transformed the Syrian border district of Bukamal and the neighboring Iraqi district of Qa'im. Following the end of the self-proclaimed Islamic State's caliphate, Iranian-backed militias began to play a major role in the area, turning it into a flashpoint between Iran and its allies on the one side and the United States and Israel on the other. The strain of tensions and the threat of instability are liable to ensure that this heavily securitized part of the border will remain a magnet for conflict for years to come.

Key Turning Points

- From the late 1960s until 2003, the rivalry between the Iraqi and Syrian branches of the Baath Party resulted in a strong military and bureaucratic presence along the border, reducing cross-border connections.
- After 2003, the Iraqi-Syrian border became a conduit for jihadi fighters entering Iraq to battle U.S. forces. When Syria's uprising began in 2011, the flow was reversed as jihadists entered Syria to fight its government, culminating in the Islamic State's takeover of the area in 2014.
- After the Islamic State was defeated, Syria and Iraq officially reopened the Qa'im-Bukamal border crossing in early October 2019. However, the foothold that Iranian-backed groups have carved out in the area has made the border a nexus for the projection of Iranian regional influence and a point of confrontation between Tehran and its adversaries.
- The militarization of the border and the presence of state and nonstate actors have blurred the lines between formal and informal institutions and obscured who ultimately holds authority and governs the area—state institutions or nonstate militias.

Key Findings

- The mainly Sunni inhabitants of Bukamal and Qa'im have been largely stripped of agency to manage their own affairs—either because they have been displaced or because their areas have become a theater for geopolitical rivalries and the operation of Iranian-backed militias removed from local needs.
- Given the respective interests and alliances of this multitude of actors and their different ways of engaging with local dynamics and regional rivalries, the Qa'im-Bukamal border area will continue to be volatile and unstable.

- The tensions between some official Iraqi and Syrian military, security, and civilian institutions and Iranian-backed militias hinder Baghdad and Damascus from restoring the sovereignty and governance capacity they previously had over the area. For better or worse, the lingering presence of Iranian-backed proxies leaves Iraq and Syria with no choice but to accommodate Iran's interests to some degree.
- The Qa'im-Bukamal border faces a dilemma. Any weakening of the Iranian-allied militias may provide an opportunity for the Islamic State to revive itself. However, if these militias stay in control of the area, the border will remain a flashpoint for conflict between Iran and its adversaries, particularly the United States and Israel.

Introduction

Over the last nearly two decades, the border area between the Syrian district of Bukamal and the Iraqi district of Qa'im has become a highly militarized and volatile area at the heart of the Middle East. It has developed into the focal point of a regional geopolitical rivalry populated by Iranian-backed militias and frequent U.S. and Israeli airstrikes and drone attacks targeting them.

This area has long been a vital border crossing for jihadi militants. After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the border region served as a crossing point for jihadists entering Iraq from Syria. When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, the flow of fighters reversed, and jihadists began entering Syria from Iraq. By the summer of 2014, both districts had fallen to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and the area became one of the group's strongholds. To form a supranational state across the Iraqi-Syrian border, the Islamic State established its so-called Euphrates Region (Wilayat al-Furat), integrating the districts of Bukamal and Qa'im into a single administrative unit and removing barriers that had separated them for almost a century.

A variety of factors make this border zone highly significant. First, Qa'im and Bukamal are a major strategic thoroughfare between Damascus and Baghdad, and the short distance separating the suburbs of the two districts (about 7 kilometers) makes them the closest populated areas on either side of the border. The resemblance and connectivity between the communities there, who are predominantly Sunni Arabs and have tribal and familial ties across the border, have made this area susceptible to the emergence of transborder, pan-Sunni and pan-Arab feelings of solidarity.

Second, located near the Euphrates River, the large tracts of farmland surrounding Qa'im and Bukamal contain the most fertile lands near the border, providing a self-sufficient food supply and covert routes for border-crossing networks of nonstate actors including insurgents and smugglers. Third, this area recently has become the main place where Iranian-backed groups have been deployed on both sides of the border, in overlapping areas with various Syrian and Iraqi state and nonstate actors. These deployments are turning the border zone into a pivotal space where Iran is seeking to secure a land route extending from its own border with Iraq to the Mediterranean region, even as local Syrian and Iraqi authorities are striving to account for, and when necessary, accommodate, Tehran's influence as the conditions for managing the border and providing security continue to shift.

On October 1, 2019, following the expulsion of the Islamic State, Syria and Iraq reopened the Qa'im-Bukamal border crossing to restore a measure of normalcy while regulating and expanding cross-border trade. This made the area even more important given that the two other official border crossings on the Iraqi-Syrian border—the Tanf-Walid and the Rabia-Yarubiyya crossings—remain closed. U.S. forces have blocked the Syrian government's access to the former, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a coalition of militias led by the People's Protection Units, a Kurdish militia with ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party—impedes its access to the latter.

However, the new situation on the ground has become far more complicated. New configurations of authority and border management emerged, characterized by fluid and hybrid security arrangements involving various state, nonstate, and parastate actors along the border and in Qa'im and Bukamal. The border today has a broader regional role to play. It allows Iran to project influence in Syria and Lebanon and provides a conduit for pro-Iranian militias moving between Iraq and the Levant. Rising antagonism between Iran on the one side and the United States and Israel on the other has affected power structures along the border, while the weakness of central authorities and competition among local and tribal groups have made the situation even more complex.

Consequently, the border area has become highly militarized and is now a coveted tract of land for an Iranian-led coalition of militias for political, military, and economic reasons. Rather than merely denoting the line between two sovereign countries, it acts more as a hub for the overlapping authorities of Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus. Even after the defeat of the Islamic State, the presence of transnational actors connected to Tehran continues to cast a long shadow over the restored border.

From Separation to Entanglement

To understand how this situation arose, it is helpful to turn back the clock. For decades, the Syrian-Iraqi border region around Qa'im and Bukamal had been stagnant owing to the suspension of diplomatic relations and cross-border trade. Iraq and Syria, ruled by rival branches of the Baath Party at the time, seldom saw eye to eye. This state of affairs began to change in the late 1990s when the two countries resumed commercial relations and the cross-border movement of people. Then the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 ushered in a new phase for the area, leading to a revival of illicit activities, as jihadists began to transit across the border there. The years of conflict in Iraq that followed, and then the lengthy, ongoing civil war in Syria since 2011, entangled the two sides of the border in an increasingly complex fashion that is still apparent today (see map 1).

MAP 1
The Iraqi-Syrian Border



The History and Geography of Qa'im and Bukamal

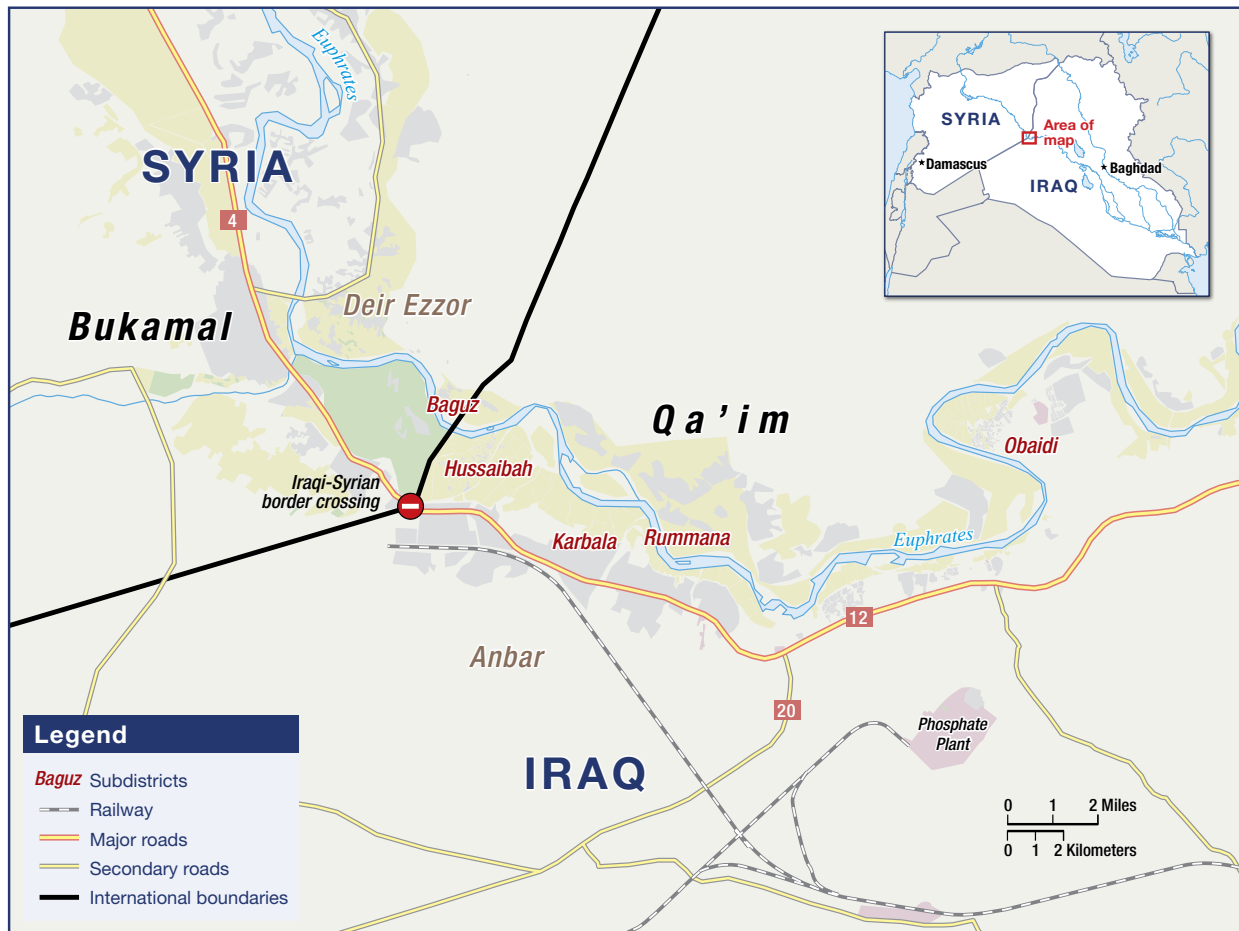
The border between Qa'im and Bukamal was demarcated in 1920, following clashes between Arab forces led by Ramadan Shalash, a local notable in Deir Ezzor who briefly controlled Qa'im, and the British forces that had occupied the area after the withdrawal of Turkish troops.¹ There was an element of randomness behind the creation of the actual border line, although the British government justified it in part by considering Qa'im to be the easternmost point in the domain of the Dulaim, the largest tribal confederation in western Iraq.² In collaboration with British forces, Ali al-Suleiman, the head of the Dulaim in the 1920s, soon imposed his authority over rebellious border tribes like the Bou Mahal, who are part of the Dulaim confederation.³

This was the beginning of a period when Qa'im and Bukamal were disconnected from each other and were integrated into the respective structures of the Iraqi and Syrian states. Even though Iraq and Syria disputed other parts of the border later on, the Qa'im-Bukamal region had no major changes. The League of Nations officially confirmed the Iraqi-Syrian border in 1932.⁴

The distance between the respective suburbs of Qa'im and Bukamal is about 7 kilometers. On the Syrian side of the border, Bukamal is in the far eastern reaches of the country and about 500 kilometers from the capital Damascus. Qa'im, in turn, is on the far western edge of Iraq's Anbar Governorate and about 400 kilometers from Baghdad, at the point where the Euphrates River enters into Iraqi territory from Syria. Qa'im stretches roughly 26 kilometers along the southern banks of the river. In Syria, the Euphrates divides the area into two subregions. The western side is called the Shamiyya and is held by the Syrian regime alongside Iranian-backed militias. Meanwhile, the eastern side is known as the Jazira, which is controlled by the SDF.

The population of Qa'im is estimated to be around 190,000.⁵ As in Bukamal, most of the inhabitants are Sunni Arabs. At the center of the district is the town of Hussaibah (also often referred to as Qa'im), which is located closest to the border (see map 2). To the east are the subdistricts of Karabla and Obaidi. On the northern side of the Euphrates is a town called Rummana that is also adjacent to the Syrian border; the town separates Qa'im from Iraq's Nineveh Governorate. The area includes Baguz, a rural expanse made famous in 2019 when its Syrian side became the Islamic State's final stronghold.⁶ Qa'im contains more than fifty villages on both sides of the Euphrates.⁷ The main tribal groups are the Bou Mahal, who live near the border and in the district's center; the Karbuli, who inhabit Karabla and adjacent areas; and smaller tribes and clans such as the Salman, the Obaid, and the Rawiyeen.

The Qa'im-Bukamal Borderlands



The tribes, clans, and families that have settled in Qa'im, Bukamal, and the adjacent areas all have strong ties of kinship. These tribal units include the Jaghaifa, Ogeidat, Marawsha, Bou Mahal, Rawiyeen, Abeed, Mashahada, Bou Badran, Shaitat, Hassoun, and Aniyeen.⁸ Most of the population works in agriculture and commerce. Before the establishment of the modern Syrian and Iraqi states, both were connected commercially to Deir Ezzor and located on the nineteenth-century Ottoman caravan route between the Syrian city of Aleppo and Baghdad.⁹

Although communal and economic cross-border relations did not completely cease after the modern Iraqi and Syrian states were formed, these exchanges were significantly reduced. From the late 1960s to 2003, rival Baath governments were in power in Syria and Iraq. Both imposed centralized rule on their respective countries, which further integrated peripheral areas into the central structures of the

state. Centralization led to a strong military and administrative presence around Bukamal and Qa'im by the Syrian and Iraqi governments and their security forces, significantly diminishing unauthorized border crossings and unregulated commerce. Some locals and tribal groups continued to move across the border, often smuggling sheep and other goods in precarious trading arrangements that depended largely on price and currency differences between Iraq and Syria. Although the central governments were not always interested in fighting such activities, they sought to curb and monitor them, as separate national jurisdictions took root.¹⁰

As Qa'im and Bukamal became more integrated into centralized governing structures and economic processes, the value of illicit cross-border trade plummeted, and new economic activities took its place. In Iraq, the government set up a large industrial complex in the eastern part of Qa'im, 16 kilometers from Husseibah and 25 kilometers from the Qa'im-Bukamal border crossing. The complex included a large cement factory and a phosphate-processing company that produced fertilizers. At the same time, the Iraqi state developed a railway system and a highway network connecting the border crossings in western Anbar to central areas of the country.¹¹

Bukamal, by contrast, is primarily an agricultural area, where residents work in farming and ranching. The Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform and the state-run Agricultural Cooperative Bank significantly reinforced the district's dependency on Damascus by establishing branches in the district to support local farmers. Consequently, when the Syrian uprising began in 2011 and armed groups in the area pushed regime forces and state institutions out, the local economy collapsed.

Between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, diplomatic and commercial relations between Iraq and Syria were broken due to the hostility between the two Baath regimes of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and Syrian president Hafez al-Assad. The resulting divide left the borderlands stagnant, leading the local population to turn to their capitals in search of economic opportunities and causing Qa'im and Bukamal to become further connected to Baghdad and Damascus, respectively.

However, things started to change in the 1990s, mainly due to the harsh economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait—sanctions that caused a massive deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in Iraq. As a result, smuggling activities across the border were revitalized, a development that mainly benefited tribal and clan-based networks in western Iraq and eastern Syria. Some of these networks had good connections with Iraq's governing apparatuses, which became increasingly staffed by members of loyalist Sunni tribes and clans.

Smuggling involved livestock, tobacco, alcohol, electronics, and oil and fuels; this illicit trading was mainly motivated by the plummeting value of the Iraqi dinar.¹² While the government tried to stop some of these activities, there were other trafficking networks that were linked to or sponsored by

members in the Iraqi regime—networks tacitly allowed by the government to circumvent the international sanctions. These networks would later provide an effective apparatus for the illicit activities of insurgent groups after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.¹³

By the late 1990s, the Syrian government was looking for opportunities to improve its economy and secure new markets for its exports, while Iraq was looking for ways to mitigate its economic and humanitarian crisis and decrease its international isolation. These motivations led the two countries to reopen border crossings in 1997, resume commercial relations, and allow the controlled movement of people. As a result, the border areas regained a degree of vitality, and some of the cross-border connections were reestablished, only to contribute to the emergence of jihadi networks after 2003.¹⁴

The Rise of Jihadism After 2003

When the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraqi state institutions and security organs in Qa'im and other border areas suddenly disappeared.¹⁵ The resulting vacuum allowed for the emergence of Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafdayn, commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In time, al-Qaeda in Iraq, which eventually transformed into the Islamic State, succeeded in weaving itself into the region's social fabric by recruiting local fighters and exploiting a growing sense of alienation among Iraq's Sunni Arab population after the fall of a regime that had been dominated by Sunni Arab officials.¹⁶

Qa'im, and the Iraqi-Syrian border in general, became a jihadi stronghold for two reasons. First, the fertile area allowed fighters to cultivate a self-sufficient food supply. Second, the vast stretches of desert on all sides of the area let jihadi networks disperse and maneuver in unpopulated areas while still remaining close to urban centers.

After 2003, foreign fighters joining al-Qaeda in Iraq used trafficking routes to cross the border from Syria. According to a former member of the Anbar Provincial Council, Bukamal became one of the major points where these jihadists would congregate before moving into Iraq.¹⁷ Many foreign fighters reportedly received training in Bukamal, facilitated by nearly one hundred Syrian locals.¹⁸ Documents seized from al-Qaeda in Iraq, as well as other evidence, indicate that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad facilitated the movement of jihadists through its territory, out of concern that the United States would use Iraq to destabilize Syria.¹⁹ In response, later in 2008, U.S. troops would attack jihadi fighters in Bukamal by air—the United States' first military operation in Syria since the invasion of Iraq.²⁰

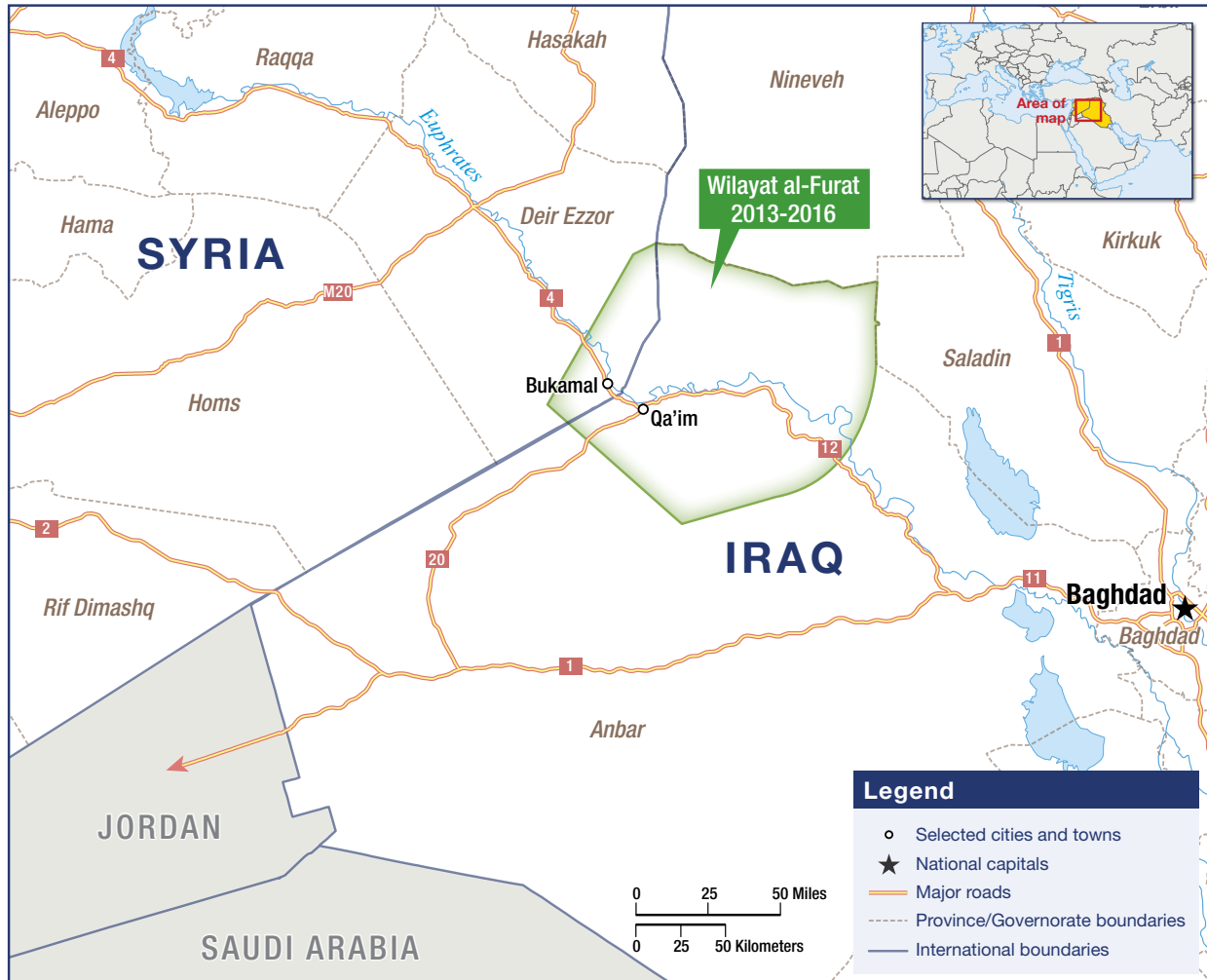
In 2005, the U.S. military formed an alliance with local tribal fighters, especially those from the Bou Mahal tribe, to fight in Qa'im against al-Qaeda in Iraq.²¹ This was the beginning of what would come to be known as the Anbar Awakening, a campaign that managed to incapacitate the jihadi group and restore a considerable degree of stability to the area. Iraqi border guards began operating again at Anbar's border crossings in 2006, though their presence was largely nominal as the U.S. military and local tribal militias effectively controlled the area.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 and the beginning of the Syrian uprising created new opportunities for jihadists to reinvigorate their movement. Many fighters, exploiting the emerging void on both sides of the border, eventually coalesced into the Islamic State. Some of the preexisting smuggling networks that were established in the late 1990s were revitalized after the Syrian uprising to facilitate the movement of fighters across the border. One of these networks was led by Saddam al-Jamal, a resident of Bukamal, who later became an important operative of the Islamic State in the area. In fact, al-Jamal began his smuggling activities across the Iraqi-Syrian border in 1998 and continued to do so until 2010. After the Syrian uprising began, he tried to employ this experience to facilitate the movement of jihadists, rebels, and weapons before forming his own insurgent group in Bukamal. Later, he joined the Islamic State to face Jabhat al-Nusra, a rival jihadi group that was seeking to control Bukamal.²²

By early 2013, the Syrian regime had lost control of much of Deir Ezzor Governorate, allowing for the formation of local armed groups. Some defended their respective localities, while others participated in the broader campaign against the Assad regime. These groups variously linked up with the Free Syrian Army or more radical jihadi organizations, such as Jabhat al-Nusra. In July 2014, the Islamic State captured Bukamal.²³ It then extended its control toward the Syrian-Iraqi border, occupying the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014, before moving to seize other areas inhabited by Sunni Arab majorities in Iraq, including Qa'im.

On June 29, 2014, the Islamic State announced that it had formed a caliphate in the large swath of territory it controlled in eastern Syria and western Iraq. It claimed to have removed what it identified as the "Sykes-Picot border between Iraq and Syria"²⁴—even though the 1916 Anglo-French agreement, long a sore point in Middle Eastern politics, had never defined the Iraqi-Syrian border. The important thing is that the Islamic State sought to turn its declaration into reality by forming the Euphrates Region, which included the territory between Ana in western Anbar Governorate and Mayadeen in eastern Syria (see map 3). This area, which included Qa'im and Bukamal, became the region's center. In doing so, the Islamic State attempted to create an alternative order and connect the border zone to a new center of gravity under its proclaimed caliphate.

The Islamic State's Euphrates Region (Wilayat al-Furat)



Foreign fighters and their families began moving to the Islamic State's Euphrates Region, and the group helped them settle in the homes of families that had fled Qa'im and Bukamal. In Qa'im, the group appointed foreign imams to the town's mosques.²⁵ Initially, an Islamic State leader from Samara in Iraq, known as Abu Anas al-Samarrai, was appointed *wali* (governor) of the new region.²⁶

The connections between the two districts had already begun to deepen after the Syrian uprising began, when families from Bukamal had settled in Qa'im, often helped by relatives on the other side of the border. At the same time, it became normal to see Iraqis in Bukamal and Mayadeen, with

some holding senior positions in the Islamic State's administration.²⁷ Later, the Syrian side of the border area became more important following the group's expulsion from Raqqa in Syria and Nineveh and Qa'im in Iraq. This concentration of power would make parts of the borderland the Islamic State's final sanctuary.

For the more than three years they spent under the Islamic State's authority, residents of Qa'im and Bukamal could cross the border without passports or other special permits to engage in small-scale trade or visit doctors.²⁸ Several residents told the authors that they regularly traveled from Qa'im to Bukamal or Deir Ezzor to obtain medical treatment, conduct personal business, or simply buy local produce from Syrians who had traveled to Bukamal or Deir Ezzor to sell their wares. During this period, the Islamic State controlled the cross-border fuel trade. In Qa'im, which contains the large and unexploited Akkas gas field, the Islamic State used primitive technology to extract, refine, and sell oil in both Iraq and Syria.²⁹

But this experience did not fully alter the inhabitants' perceptions of their national identities or completely remove the psychological barriers between them and their counterparts across the border.³⁰ The nearly century-long existence of separate Iraqi and Syrian states and decades of policies aimed at integrating border areas into the two countries' respective central state structures had shaped the identities of these border populations.

For instance, one family from Bukamal owned land on both sides of the border between Bukamal and Qa'im. In the 1970s, when the border was closed, the family lost control of its land on the Iraqi side. It asked Iraqi relatives to take care of the property and send them a percentage of the income it generated. In the mid-1990s, the Iraqi family stopped sending the money. The Syrian family began seeing their Iraqi relatives more as Iraqis than as kin. When the Islamic State took control of the area, the family went to the group to file a complaint and regain control of its land. The sharia judge, a Saudi with little knowledge of the local situation, failed to resolve the issue. Now that the national border has been reestablished in the wake of the Islamic State's collapse, the Syrian family believe that the Iraqis have stolen its land.³¹

A resident of Qa'im said the local population found it difficult to deal with Syrians because of their different habits and what he termed their tendency to "focus on economic benefits without consideration for social customs and norms."³² Furthermore, the Islamic State's caliphate was relatively short-lived, and large segments of the population—about 40 percent of the inhabitants of the district of Qa'im, according to its mayor—fled the border area during different stages of the conflict.³³ The incessant infighting and lack of an established order in turn prevented the Islamic State from fully implementing the administrative changes it attempted to impose.

The Islamic State on the Rocks, Iranian-Backed Militias on the Rise

The expulsion of the Islamic State from Qa'im in 2017, and its ultimate defeat in Baguz in 2019, led to the deployment of many military and paramilitary forces in the Qa'im-Bukamal border area. Many militias had close ties with Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These connections helped transform the border area into a passage for Iran to project its regional influence. In response, the United States and Israel came to regard the Iraqi-Syrian border area as a crucial front in the struggle to contain such influence. Border dynamics have been driven mostly from the Iraqi side, the source of both Iranian influence and the militias deployed inside Syria. Much of what has happened in Bukamal thus has been an extension of developments in Qa'im.

The Militarization of the Qa'im-Bukamal Border Area

On the Iraqi side of the border, an array of state, nonstate, and parastate military units share territorial control. These include the Iraqi Army's 7th and 8th Divisions, border guard units, a counterterrorism force, federal police, various militias operating under the auspices of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and a local tribal force. Although these units came together to fight the Islamic State, they all pursue their own political, military, and economic interests. In particular, the competition for influence between the United States and its allies and Iran and its allies has become a primary factor shaping post-Islamic State realities in the area.

This competition is apparent predominantly in the deployment of Iranian-backed militias in Qa'im and Bukamal, reflecting the ongoing fragmentation of authority and militarization in the area. The main militias operating in Qa'im are Kataib Hezbollah (PMF Brigade 45), which controls the road between Qa'im and Akashat to its southwest; Kataib al-Imam Ali (PMF Brigade 40); Saraya al-Khorasani (PMF Brigade 18); Liwa al-Muntazir (PMF Brigade 7); and Kataib Ansar al-Hujja (PMF Brigade 29). One group that is not aligned with the IRGC is Liwa al-Tafuf (PMF Brigade 13), led by Qasim Muslih. Although Muslih and Iranian-backed groups share an anti-American stance, his brigade was formed by the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, and it is loyal to the Najaf-based religious authorities led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.³⁴ Deployed around the border crossing and in Husseibah, Liwa al-Tafuf has built better relations with the local Sunni population than other groups that locals perceive to be pro-Iranian.³⁵

Two additional local tribal forces are considered part of a tribal *hashd*, a reference to Sunni militiamen who are registered as PMF members. The first of these is the Hamza Brigade, led by Rabah al-Mahallawi and made up of members of the Bou Mahal tribe, who have been deployed near Husseibah. This group emerged after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, initially to resist the occupation. However, in 2005, it became a strong local ally of the U.S. military in its conflict against al-Qaeda in

Iraq, after the latter killed Bou Mahal tribesmen, including the chief of the Qa'im police.³⁶ The second is the Upper Euphrates Brigade, whose members are from the Karbuli tribe. This brigade, led by Musa al-Karbuli and Assif Ibrahim al-Karbuli, is deployed in Karabla and near the Akkas gas field.³⁷

Bukamal, by contrast, is divided between the SDF and the Assad regime, but IRGC-backed militias also maintain a heavy presence in the city. On the regime-controlled Shamiyya side, the 17th Division, the Republican Guard, and some Russian forces control the boundary between the Assad regime and the SDF along the Euphrates. The Russians also run a center focused on fostering reconciliation (Markaz al-Musalaha) in Bukamal.

Some neighborhoods in the town have become centers for Iranian-backed militias. These include the previously mentioned Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat al-Abdal, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, the Zeinabiyoun, the Fatimiyoun, Kataib al-Imam Ali, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq.³⁸ In May 2019, the Fatimiyoun militia, composed mainly of Afghan Shia fighters, took over a building in the Dowar section of Bukamal because it gave them a good view of the surrounding roads. They installed cameras and converted the building into an operations center. On the Jazira side, by contrast, the SDF has maintained control in cooperation with the Shaitat clan—a less complex mix than the multinational forces on the Syrian regime-controlled side. This combination of armed units throughout the border region likely will keep tensions high for many years to come.

The area's division into zones under Syrian regime and SDF control also has created parallel social and political systems. Even though both areas have been retaken from the Islamic State, those who have taken control of each side have sought to impose their own respective agendas. For Damascus, the aim has been to open the border with Iraq to facilitate the movement of Iranian-backed militias. Meanwhile, the SDF's overriding priority was to defeat the Islamic State; its partnership with the Shaitat clan was crucial to driving the Islamic State out and helping the SDF gain a measure of political legitimacy for this achievement.³⁹ These different political aims will entrench the divisions in Bukamal and reinforce the de facto, porous border.

Today, as far as the hybrid security order of the Qa'im-Bukamal border zone is concerned, the line between formal and informal security actors is increasingly blurred. It is unclear who actually holds authority, as paramilitaries have become more enmeshed in local governance, security, and economic affairs. This ambiguity reflects the myriad local, national, and broader geopolitical interests in the area. Despite the multiplicity of military forces, a prevailing sense of insecurity has impacted local governance and the economy. According to local officials and residents, the tensions caused by the presence of militias and the weakness of official security forces have made it difficult to fully secure border towns and direct resources toward reconstruction and long-term stabilization.

The Syrian-Iraqi border is no longer truly Syrian or Iraqi in any meaningful sense of the term. Rather, it has become a strategic area where various actors have marginalized local residents. None of these actors has a strong interest in facilitating the return of refugees or reconstruction. Thus, the conflict has reshaped the border region according to the logic of military and security control, regardless of the needs or wants of those who live there.

For example, Kataib Hezbollah has turned a large swath of agricultural land in the Masharii area, on the southern side of Qa'im, into a military zone, refusing to allow local farmers to use it. The area contains about 1,600 farms, and members of Qa'im's local council have claimed that the decision harmed the local economy, given that about 40 percent of the population depends on agriculture for its livelihood.⁴⁰ The area's industrial sector likewise has suffered major damage from decades of war and international sanctions. The phosphate-processing company in Qa'im, which once exported its products, ceased functioning after it was taken over by the Islamic State. Most of its machinery was destroyed or disassembled to create armored plating for the group's vehicles or to be used in other profitable ways.⁴¹

Militias also have harmed the local economy by monopolizing black market activities, particularly the smuggling of fuel imported from Syria.⁴² According to a notable from Anbar who has connections in Qa'im, while the border crossing was still closed before October 2019, hundreds of trucks continued to cross the border under the militias' supervision.⁴³ A member of an official Iraqi security body confirmed that state institutions could not effectively monitor areas controlled by IRGC-backed militias near the Qa'im border zone.⁴⁴ The militias imposed taxes on trucks entering the district or carrying goods in or out of it. For example, trucks transporting limestone needed for construction in Qa'im from the Akashat quarries south of Qa'im were taxed by militias controlling the road.⁴⁵

Therefore, if the geopolitical rivalry offers a rationale for the deployment of these militias in the border area, the region's lucrative economic opportunities encourage them to develop funding mechanisms to sustain their presence. As in other parts of the country, the deployment of violence has become an essential tool for achieving profits. With the high rates of unemployment and the increasing militarization of governance and the economy, forming, joining, and sustaining militias has become one of the few profitable rent-seeking methods. Amid this atmosphere of general insecurity, most paramilitary forces, and sometimes official security forces, have engaged in extortion. Local residents have reported that some tribal fighters, now deprived of the patronage they previously enjoyed from the U.S. military or the Iraqi government, have sought to make up for this shortfall by regularly blackmailing business owners or shopkeepers.⁴⁶

Given the weakness, inefficiency, and corruption of official institutions, locals sometimes complain about the actions of tribal militias to leaders of PMF militias, particularly Liwa al-Tafuf.⁴⁷ However, there is no authority that can rein in the more powerful militias, such as Kataib Hezbollah. A local resident observed, “We don’t know how to deal with the militias. They belong to various factions and receive different orders from different authorities.”⁴⁸ To compensate for the region’s instability, local business owners invest their money in other parts of Iraq, such as Kurdistan, or even abroad, particularly in Turkey or the Gulf countries.⁴⁹

The presence of IRGC-backed Shia militias also has created concerns over heightened sectarian tensions in a predominantly Sunni area, a situation that could lay the groundwork for a resurgence of the Islamic State. One indication of the depth of the Shia militias’ foothold is the presence of the Kataib al-Imam Ali militia, which has an office in Bukamal and reportedly has deployed deep into Syrian territory.⁵⁰ According to one militiaman, “We are there because the Syrian army is weak and corrupt.”⁵¹ Starting in 2019, the militias imposed tight security measures in Bukamal. They placed cameras on the border, set up prefabricated buildings, and evacuated people from areas near the border crossing into Iraq. They also cut down trees to ensure a clear view of the border.⁵²

The presence of these militias does not completely rule out the involvement of official security forces on the Iraqi side of the border. Although some Iraqi army, antiterrorist special forces, and intelligence units have maintained a distance from the IRGC-backed militias, members of Iraq’s border guard forces operating in the area have suggested that the militias have taken these actions to prevent Islamic State fighters from reentering Iraqi territory.⁵³ They have admitted that because the system of control and surveillance is still not sufficiently developed to achieve this objective, the militias’ presence in the area (alongside official security personnel) is justified.⁵⁴

This stance may be explained, in part, by the fact that the head of the border guard forces, which are affiliated with Iraq’s Interior Ministry, is an associate of the Badr Organization, a paramilitary group with strong historical ties to the IRGC that currently dominates the ministry. This suggests that there is collaboration and perhaps even a division of labor between the border guard forces and IRGC-backed militias.

Yet the fear of an Islamic State revival is hardly unjustified. The group’s cells continue to seek opportunities to infiltrate the border area and secure alternative sources of funding. According to Iraqi security officials, the Islamic State is still capable of smuggling individuals, weapons, and goods across the border.⁵⁵ About 1,200 of its members crossed the Syrian-Iraqi border during the first nine months of 2019, moving in small groups and either using local smuggling networks or securing the help of corrupt individuals in the security forces.⁵⁶ Economic frustrations and sectarian enmities could make some locals more amenable to the Islamic State’s attempts to trigger a new insurgency.

The Regional Implications of the Qa'im-Bukamal Border

The existence of a hybrid security order in the border area, with official security forces deployed near militias, has created an inherently unstable situation. The overriding regional geopolitical rivalries, pitting the United States and Israel against Iran, are greatly affecting border dynamics. The Qa'im-Bukamal border zone has thus become the stage for a geostrategic reconfiguration in which Iran and its allies are vying for greater influence.

Iran's recent support of the Syrian and Iraqi governments' respective fights against their armed foes has strengthened Tehran's ties with both countries. Yet the IRGC has built and expanded a network of transnational paramilitary groups that also constrains the freedom of the two governments to act independently of Iranian interests. The IRGC-led network of paramilitary groups includes combatants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria who fought alongside Iraqi and Syrian government forces against the Islamic State or Syrian rebels, making the governments of Iraq and Syria increasingly dependent on such support. In addition, these groups have gained influence by controlling territory and securing resources, legitimacy, and immunity by integrating themselves into the state, as they have with the Iraqi PMF. Although, in reality, these militias have maintained a broad degree of administrative and operational autonomy from the formal chain of command, they have used the PMF umbrella as a legitimate cover for their deployment.

Iran has several goals in its deployment of militias around Qa'im and Bukamal. First, it is interested in denying the Islamic State the opportunity to reconstitute itself in the peripheral reaches of Iraq and Syria by taking advantage of the topography of these areas and their remoteness from Baghdad or Damascus. Second, it wants to secure a land corridor to connect areas of Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, a task that requires controlling or closely monitoring the movement of people, arms, and goods across the border.

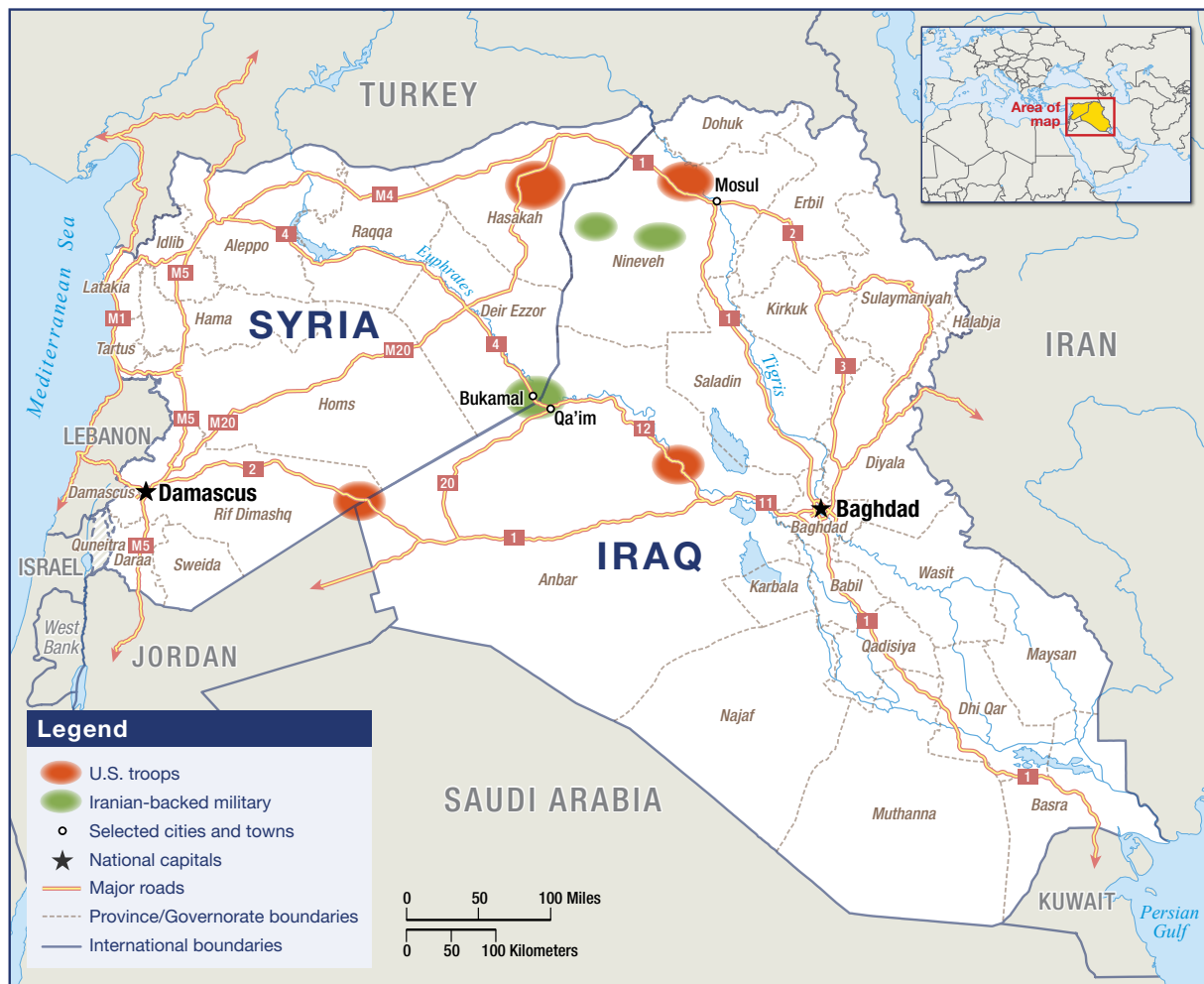
Third, Tehran would like to obstruct attempts by the United States and its allies to use the border area—where Sunni Arab communities who often harbor anti-Iranian sentiments reside—as a base for countering Iranian influence in the region. Finally, Iran needs to retain the ability to militarily reinforce Hezbollah in Lebanon and possibly deploy other IRGC-backed militias to the Levant in the event of a conflict with Israel conducted from Lebanon or Syria.

The presence of U.S. forces is of particular concern to Iran and its allies. The United States continues to hold two military bases near the border. One is at Tanf, close to the (still-closed) Tanf-Walid border crossing between Syria and Iraq, roughly 200 kilometers to the south of the Qa'im-Bukamal crossing. The other, Ayn al-Asad, is in Anbar Governorate near the district of Baghdadi. U.S. President Donald Trump visited the base in December 2018 and declared that it would be used to

keep an eye on Iranian activities.⁵⁷ Additionally, U.S. troops had earlier been deployed near the old railway station in Qa'im during the campaign against the Islamic State.⁵⁸ On March 16, 2020, the U.S. military announced the redeployment of these troops to a different base in Kirkuk in northern Iraq. Notably, although U.S. military officials mentioned that the redeployment has been planned since the fall of 2019, the announcement came at a time when paramilitary groups were escalating their attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq.⁵⁹

The IRGC-backed militias have used the U.S. deployment in western Iraq to justify their own presence near the border. Iraqi officials from Anbar have claimed that the United States is trying to build new bases in the town of Rummana, north of Qa'im.⁶⁰ Members of Iranian-allied militias have stated that the U.S. military presence in the area is aimed at assisting the Islamic State, a recurrent theme in the groups' propaganda efforts.⁶¹ In August 2019, drone attacks killed or injured several

MAP 4
U.S. Troops and Iranian-Backed Militias Near the Iraqi-Syrian Border



members of Kataib Hezbollah near the border; the PMF accused Israel of being the perpetrator.⁶² In other statements, the PMF has accused the United States of facilitating Israeli attacks on its bases, leading pro-PMF political groups to intensify their demand that U.S. forces fully leave Iraq.⁶³

On December 29, 2019, the U.S. military launched airstrikes against five locations held by IRGC-backed militias near the border—three in Iraq and two in Syria. The strikes killed more than twenty-five members of Kataib Hezbollah, provoking strong condemnation from the Iraqi government and the PMF.⁶⁴ Washington claimed the airstrikes were in response to an attack by Kataib Hezbollah against a military base in northern Iraq where U.S. troops were deployed, an attack that resulted in the death of a U.S. military contractor.⁶⁵

The attack further escalated tensions between the United States and Iranian-backed groups and the Iraqi government, prompting demonstrators affiliated with the PMF to swarm the compound housing the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in late December 2019. The Trump administration responded by ordering the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the IRGC's Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the PMF's deputy head and operational leader. Iran retaliated by firing missiles at two military bases located in Iraq that house U.S. troops.⁶⁶ The casualties were relatively limited (with no deaths, though several U.S. soldiers were injured). Subsequently, both sides sought to deescalate the crisis. Nevertheless, this chain of dangerous events showed that the hostilities in an Iraqi-Syrian border area that holds increasing strategic importance could lead the countries to the brink of war (see map 4).

Another aspect of the competition between the United States and Iran is related to reconstruction in the border area and of the roads leading into it. An example of this, confirmed by several sources,⁶⁷ was a project involving the highway network connecting Baghdad to the crossings of Trebil on the Iraqi-Jordanian border and Tanf on the Iraqi-Syrian border. The highway network is also linked via a secondary road originating in Rutba to the Qa'im-Bukamal border crossing and then to the extension inside Syria of the Qa'im-Bukamal road (Road 12).⁶⁸

The 570-kilometer-long Baghdad-Trebil highway was constructed in the late 1980s and became the main conduit between Iraq and the outside world when the country was under sanctions in the 1990s. According to some assessments, about 40 percent of Iraq's land trade traveled along the highway at this time.⁶⁹ After 2003, passage became dangerous because of attacks by insurgent groups, especially al-Qaeda in Iraq, which robbed travelers or seized their goods or vehicles to resell them.⁷⁰

In March 2017, the Iraqi government of then prime minister Haider al-Abadi approved a proposal by Anbar Governorate to grant a U.S. company, Olive Group, a contract to invest in repairing the highway and protecting construction workers and travelers.⁷¹ The contract, which was negotiated by

the governorate's provincial government, also included a plan to develop the international highway that connects Baghdad to Arar on the Iraqi-Saudi border, as well as to construct a new highway connecting Anbar directly to the Saudi border.⁷²

But the project faced strong opposition from several members of the Iraqi parliament, including Shia groups allied with Iran as well as a few Sunni groups opposed to the Iraqi Islamic Party, which at the time was in charge of the governorate. The controversy forced the government to abandon the contract and reassign the responsibility for highway protection to the Iraqi security forces. One reason for the opposition was suspicion that the Olive Group was linked to the infamous Blackwater security firm, four of whose employees were convicted of a 2007 mass shooting in Baghdad that claimed the lives of at least seventeen civilians.⁷³

However, according to a former official from Anbar who was directly involved in formulating the project, the Iranian-allied groups rallied against it because they saw it as an attempt by the United States to expand its influence in Anbar and western Iraq.⁷⁴ Combined with the fact that U.S. forces control the region's airspace and operate surveillance balloons from their military base in Anbar, certain pro-Iranian factions regarded the project as part of a long-term plan to solidify the U.S. foothold in the governorate and turn it into a base for anti-Iranian activities.⁷⁵

A Kataib Hezbollah official voiced such thoughts when he denounced the "attempt by U.S. forces to secure full control over the Iraqi-Syrian border, under the pretext of preventing the Islamic Republic [of Iran] from using the border to support Syria and Hezbollah, not to mention to impose hegemony over Iraq's capabilities and assist local groups seeking to divide Iraq."⁷⁶ Pro-Iranian groups also have sought to develop alternative plans to use Iraq's highway system to expand and entrench their own influence along the border. Local residents say there have been attempts to develop a route from Karbala to the Qa'im-Bukamal area to facilitate the movement of the PMF-affiliated groups and ordinary people (especially those going to Damascus on pilgrimage) between the Shia-populated south and the border.⁷⁷

The importance of the Qa'im-Bukamal border crossing to Iran becomes clearer when one realizes that its official reopening in October 2019 was dictated largely by the interests of Iran and its allies. According to a Sunni lawmaker from Qa'im, the border was reopened principally to help Syria's economy, alleviating oil and fuel shortages and providing an opportunity for the Syrian government to revive industrial production in Aleppo.⁷⁸ Then Syrian interior minister Mohammed al-Shaar visited Baghdad in February 2018 and asked the Iraqi government and parliament to reopen the border.⁷⁹ Moreover, Iraqis allied with Iran, such as Mohammed al-Hashimi, who was chief of staff in the prime minister's office and a member of an Iranian-backed coalition, took particular interest in the issue and urged parliamentarians from Anbar to approve the opening of the crossing.⁸⁰

The Qa'im-Bukamal crossing has gained additional importance because the two other official border crossings on the Iraqi-Syrian border—the Tanf-Walid and Rabia-Yarubiyya crossings—remain closed. Damascus's access to these crossroads is blocked by U.S. forces and the SDF, respectively.

Some local officials in Qa'im believe that the reopening of the border crossing will primarily benefit Iran and its allies. They say that only companies linked to Iran or its allied groups will be allowed to engage in cross-border activities, and these are mostly Lebanese, Iraqi, and Syrian companies.⁸¹ Lebanon's government and Lebanese Hezbollah have shown great interest in developments at the crossing, saying it would make the large Iraqi market more accessible to Lebanese goods and help Lebanon's troubled economy.⁸² Nevertheless, officials from Qa'im also admit that, regardless of politics, the reopened crossing will also help the local economy and provide job opportunities for the growing number of unemployed youths.⁸³

Even as Tehran and its allies seek to connect the Qa'im-Bukamal border zone to a broader network of pro-Iranian groups united against the United States and its allies, both Baghdad and Damascus are focused on reasserting their respective legal jurisdictions over the border. According to Kazim al-Aqabi, the former Iraqi director in charge of border crossings, the government has been trying to restore border-control facilities and set up an effective mechanism to monitor the movement of people and goods across the border.⁸⁴ Therefore, the priorities of official security and civil institutions in both countries and those of IRGC-backed groups are not aligned—even though some of the latter groups in Iraq belong to the PMF, which (in theory, at least) is part of the state.

This disconnect has occasionally become apparent in public. For example, the Iraqi government has insisted on its exclusive right to oversee border crossings through the Border Crossings Administration, which previously ordered the closure of an informal crossing in Mandali on the Iraqi-Iranian border over concerns that militias and criminal organizations would exploit it. Yet, as Aqabi himself has admitted, it is not always easy for border guards and customs officers to impose their authority over more powerful groups.⁸⁵

In another, more telling example of the mistrust between IRGC-backed groups and official Iraqi security institutions, Kataib Hezbollah released in July 2019 what it claimed to be a recording of a telephone conversation between General Mahmoud al-Falahi, who was the commander of Iraqi security operations in Anbar, and a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency operative. In it, Falahi promised to provide the agent with information about the locations of PMF factions in Qa'im and the border area.⁸⁶

In response to these allegations, then prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi ordered the Defense Ministry to conduct an investigation, which concluded that the accusations were false. Nevertheless, Falahi, a Sunni general, was transferred to a less sensitive post. Some pro-PMF lawmakers said he was declared innocent only because of U.S. pressure on the Iraqi government.⁸⁷ According to a newspaper report, Kataib Hezbollah opposed Falahi's appointment to the most senior military position in Anbar because he had refused to accept the group's deployment in Nukheib, a district disputed by Anbar and Karbala. Nukheib is located strategically as a boundary between Anbar and the Shia-dominated south and between Baghdad and the Iraqi-Saudi border.⁸⁸

Local residents and officials in Qa'im think that another factor that underscores the geopolitical importance of the border area is that it has abundant natural resources, including natural gas, oil, phosphorous, and sulfur. For example, the Akkas gas field in the southern part of the district of Qa'im and parts of Syria is one of the largest in Iraq and has the potential to provide cheap energy and electricity to both Iraq and Syria.⁸⁹ Local officials and notables in Qa'im believe that both the Iraqi central government and the government of Anbar Governorate have unfairly neglected their district despite its enormous economic potential.

Therefore, some joined their counterparts in other towns of western Anbar—such as Ana, Haditha, Hit, and Rawa—in demanding the formation of a separate governorate for western Anbar. Their aim, as one former senior official from western Anbar put it, was to “govern the area and exploit its resources more effectively.”⁹⁰ But other officials from Anbar saw this demand as an attempt to weaken the governorate and divide the Sunni community, so they rejected it. According to Bou Mahal tribal leader Sabah al-Mahallawi, most Sunni parliamentarians opposed the proposal.⁹¹ Even the Shia parliamentarians who supported the measure made its passage conditional on demarcating the border between Anbar and Karbala anew by having Karbala annex the disputed area of Nukheib. Mahallawi said that this demand complicated the issue and added a sectarian dimension to it, which is why he and his colleagues have, for now, dropped the proposal.

This episode exposes a broader truth about the border area. It shows that local dynamics in the area are becoming increasingly entangled with larger political and strategic considerations in Iraq related to the border. The future of the Qa'im-Bukamal border zone will continue to be shaped by the interplay of these factors and by the competition and relationships among the multitude of formal, informal, and hybrid actors active there.

Conclusion

Amid the recurring conflicts that have plagued the area over the past nearly two decades, the Qa'im-Bukamal border zone has become fragmented and militarized. Yet the area is also now a major artery connecting Baghdad and Damascus and is populated by multiple groups that are allied with Iran. Consequently, Tehran's regional strategy is intimately tied to developments along this stretch of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

At the same time, because of war, the towns and villages on both sides of the border have been largely depopulated. Economic activity has plummeted, and the social fabric of Qa'im and Bukamal has been considerably altered. Especially in Bukamal, many people who fled the conflict or were displaced cannot return due to continuous instability and lingering uncertainty. New sorts of relationships have emerged: competing regional and international interests overlap and make conflict in the area likely to continue.

In such an environment, Iran and its allies have built up their presence and established connections between their geographic strongholds in Iraq and Syria. But this unfinished project will continue to face major difficulties. Reported U.S. and Israeli air attacks on IRGC-backed militia positions in the border area indicate that Iran and its allies have not yet secured a safe land corridor to transport fighters and supplies across the border. At the same time, the local Sunni populations in Qa'im and Bukamal have deep suspicions about (if not outright hostility toward) the pro-Iranian militias among them, a reality that heightens the militias' insecurities about the area's residents. To compensate, the militias have tried to remain outside urban centers while embedding themselves in the local economy and using the border crossing to recruit more local partners.

The tensions between official military, security, and civilian institutions in Iraq and Syria and IRGC-backed militias will hinder Tehran's ability to reshape border management solely to accommodate its own interests. Furthermore, given that most of the militias are part of the PMF, a formal body that the Iraqi government is seeking to control, they need to reconcile their interests with those of the Iraqi state. Despite the considerable Iranian influence in Baghdad and Damascus, there are forces within the two countries' central governments, state administrations, and local authorities who prefer to pursue independent paths or are suspicious of Iranian intentions.

Beyond that, the nearby U.S. presence and Russia's unmatched influence in Syria place further limits on Iran's ability to dictate the behavior of national and local authorities in Iraq and Syria. The assassinations of Soleimani and Muhandis created a vacuum in the leadership structures of IRGC-backed militias. If Soleimani's replacement cannot reimpose Iranian control, the coordination between these militias could be weakened. The multitude of actors active around Qa'im and Bukamal and their divergent agendas will prolong the reconfiguration of power dynamics and governing structures, injecting a large degree of uncertainty into the future of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

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Notes

- 1 *Military Report on Iraq: Areas 2 (Upper Euphrates)*, General Staff, British Forces in Iraq, 1924, https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000239.0x000163.
- 2 Ibid. See also Eliezer Tauber, “The Struggle for Dayr al-Zur: The Determination of Borders between Syria and Iraq,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 3 (1991): 361–85.
- 3 *Military Report on Iraq: Areas 2 (Upper Euphrates)*.
- 4 The negotiations between the British government and Damascus in 1920 resulted in a new provisional agreement demarcating the border between Bukamal, which remained within Syrian territory, and Qa'im, which became part of Iraqi territory. See Ammar Youssef Abdullah, “Masalat Tarseem al-Hudud al-Iraqiyya as-Suriyya: 1919–2000” [The demarcation of the Iraqi-Syrian border, 1919–2000], *Journal of the College of Education* 15, no. 1 (2018): 939–58.
- 5 Off-the-record workshop on the Iraqi-Syrian border organized by the Carnegie Middle East Center and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Beirut, June 11–12, 2019.
- 6 Rummana includes several other villages such as Dughemah, Baidha, Samma, Khitela, al-Ish, Huseijah, Bubiya, Irtajah, and Rummiyya.
- 7 Author (Hasan) interview with Ahmed al-Dulaimi, the mayor of Qa'im, Beirut, June 12, 2019.
- 8 Sabah al-Mahallawi, the leader of the Bou Mahal tribe, one of Qa'im's largest tribes, said that one of his brothers was born on and has lived on the other side of the border. Author (Hasan) interview with Sabah al-Mahallawi, Beirut, June 13, 2019.
- 9 *Military Report on Iraq: Areas 2 (Upper Euphrates)*.
- 10 For example, correspondence between the provincial branches of Iraq's Baath Party in Anbar and Nineveh Governorates and the Regional Command in Baghdad contained information about smuggling activities across the Iraqi-Syrian border in the 1990s. Among the items smuggled were sheep and cigarettes. Baath Regional Command Collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.
- 11 The two companies employed about 5,000 people from various regional and ethnoreligious backgrounds. A new urban area was built in Obaidi, where company personnel and their families were settled. The industrial complex and the social mobility it allowed employees accelerated the pace of urbanization and sociocultural change in Qa'im, weakening their tribal ties and further connecting the district to the rest of the country. Author (Hasan) interview with Suhaib al-Rawi, a former governor of Anbar, Beirut, June 12, 2019; and author (Hasan) phone interview with Ayad Hasan Khalaf, a Qa'im local council member, September 10, 2019.
- 12 Tim Eaton, Christine Cheng, Renad Mansour, Peter Salisbuty, Jihad Yazigi, and Lina Khatib, “Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa,” Chatham House, June 2019, 14, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-08-13-ConflictEconomies.pdf>. Authors' interview with al-Salmani and al-Rawi, September 28, 2019.
- 13 Phil Williams, “Criminals, Militias and Insurgents: Organized Crimes in Iraq,” Strategic Studies Institute, June 2009, 25–26. https://www.globalsecurity.org/jhtml/jframe.html#https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2009/ssi_williams.pdf|||Criminals,%20Militias,%20and%20Insurgents:%20Organized%20Crime%20in%20Iraq.
- 14 Authors' interview with Salmani and Rawi, September 28, 2019.
- 15 Parts of this section are based on a September 2019 blog post written by one of the authors. See Kheder Khaddour, “Much More Than a Border,” Diwan (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=79743>.

- 16 One of the first operations against U.S. forces in Iraq took place near Qa'im in May 2003 and was implemented by a member of the Karbuli tribe. Author (Hasan) interview with Hisham al-Hashimi, an expert on jihadi groups in Iraq, Baghdad, February 8, 2019.
- 17 Author (Hasan) interview with Sheikh Hikmat Sulaiman Ayada, a former member of the Anbar Governorate Council and head of the council's Security Committee, Baghdad, September 27, 2019.
- 18 Matthew Levitt, "Foreign Fighters and Their Economic Impact: A Case Study of Syria and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 3 (September 2009): 14–24.
- 19 Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "From Here to Eternity," *Guardian*, June 8, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/08/iraq-al-qaida>.
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- 23 "Syrian Branch of al Qaeda Vows Loyalty to Iraq's ISIS," *France 24*, June 25, 2014, <https://www.france24.com/en/20140625-syrian-branch-qaeda-vows-loyalty-iraq-isis-kamal>.
- 24 As shown by scholars like Sarah Pursley and David Siddhartha Patel, the 1916 "Sykes-Picot Agreement [between France and the United Kingdom] had very little to do with the states and borders of today's Middle East." (The quoted words are Patel's.) Much of what was agreed upon in the agreement was never implemented. See Sarah Pursley, "Lines Drawn on an Empty Map: Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State," *Jadaliyya*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32140>; and David Siddhartha Patel, "Repartitioning the Sykes-Picot Middle East? Debunking Three Myths," Brandeis University Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Middle East Brief no. 103, November 2016, <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb103.pdf>.
- 25 The number of mosques in Qa'im grew during the 1990s, mostly through donations from businessmen and local notables, facilitated by Saddam Hussein regime's adoption of a "faith campaign." The regime used these mosques as platforms to advocate a strict form of Sunni Islam, and they were later instrumental in spreading the jihadi message. Conversations by Harith Hasan with various Qa'im residents, Baghdad, February 10, 2019.
- 26 Author (Hasan) phone interview with Hassan Mutar, Qa'im local council member, September 15, 2019.
- 27 Off-the-record workshop on the Iraqi-Syrian border organized by the Carnegie Middle East Center and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Beirut, June 11–12, 2019.
- 28 Authors' conversations with Qa'im residents, Baghdad, September 28–30, 2019.
- 29 Author (Hasan) interview with Aysar al-Karrbuli, an academic from Qa'im, Baghdad, September 30, 2019; and author (Hasan) interview with Rawi, June 12, 2019.
- 30 According to a Qa'im resident, locals continued to view the Syrians as "others," and the daily exposure to Syrians reinforced their feeling of being different from them, especially in terms of their social habits and economic transactions. Conversations by the authors with Qa'im local residents, Baghdad, September 28–30, 2019.
- 31 Kheder Khaddour, conversations with residents of Bukamal, Beirut, July 2019.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Author (Hasan) interview with Ahmed al-Dulaimi, the mayor of Qa'im, Beirut, June 12, 2019.
- 34 Muslih expressed his opinions on the U.S. intervention in this television interview available on YouTube. "Muslih interview (in Arabic)," YouTube video, 53:10, posted by "Alsumaria," June 20, 2017, accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgL4vdpGuZk>.

- 35 Local council members in Qa'im said that local residents were more likely to accept the presence of Liwa al-Tafuf than other groups. In some cases, residents asked for the brigade to intervene and arrest members of a local tribal militia that was blackmailing or harassing shopkeepers. A local resident also said that some people in Qa'im went so far as to join Liwa al-Tafuf, even though they knew it was a Shia organization. Authors' interview with Hameed al-Salmani and Ayad al-Rawi, Qa'im local council members, Baghdad, September 28, 2019.
- 36 Nicholas J. Schlosser, "The Battle for Al-Qaim and the Campaign to Secure the Western Euphrates River Valley," in *U.S. Marines in Battle: September 2005–March 2006*, <https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/AL-QAIM%20LO.pdf>.
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