



# Deir Ezzor Airport between two possibilities

ISIS breaking in and the control of Assad's regime

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مرصد العدالة من أجل الحياة في دير الزور  
Justice for Life Observatory in Deir EzZor



# DeirEzzor Airport, between two possibilities

ISIS breaking in and the control of Assad's regime



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### **Justice for Life Observatory in DeirEzzor:**

A civil society and a non-governmental, non-profit organization, concerned with strengthening and promoting the culture of human rights in Syria, and it's based in DeirEzzor province.

The Observatory aims to contribute in the implementation and promotion of the human rights culture, and support of activists in this area.

And letting citizens know, either male or female citizens, their civil and political rights. Emphasizing the concept of "the rule of law" and its role in community development. As well as working to build a base for human rights activity in Syria, and build a balance from the cumulative experience and the necessary staff in this area.

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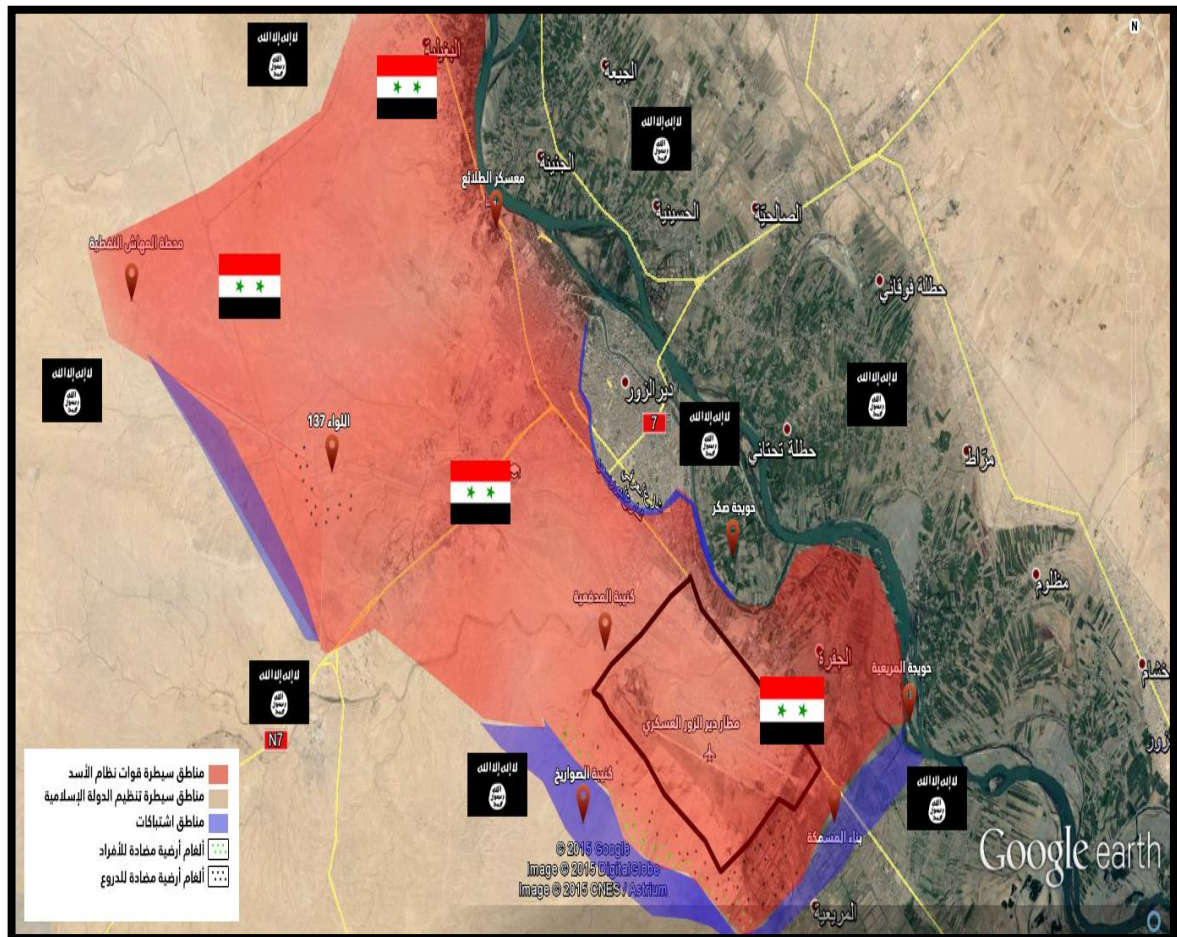
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## **Introduction:**

ISIS has sieged the areas under the regime's control in DeirEzzor city<sup>(1)</sup> for nine months now, and it has isolated it entirely from the areas under their control, preventing food supplies from being brought in, and stopping the trade movement in them, due to which their only port is by air. In addition, the fighting rages between the battlefronts in the province, and DeirEzzor Airport is considered one of the most important battlefronts in the city because of its strategic importance as the key to control over the whole province. Since the beginning of September, ISIS has been waging a ferocious war against Al-Assad regime forces in DeirEzzor Airport site, and each of them is gathering their military and media capabilities in those battles to achieve their personal objectives under the current military and political developments.

This paper seeks to highlight the fighting and battles around DeirEzzor Airport, and to identify the possibilities of the two conflicting parties, ISIS and the regime, under the field military developments, and international political control over this important strategic location.

## **I: DeirEzzor International Airport:**

DeirEzzor Airport is the third largest international airport in Syria. Located within a walking distance of (10 km) southeast of DeirEzzor, and is a joint civilian/military airport, it extends over an area of (3.5 km square) and it has two takeoff and landing roads, used for civilian transport (inland transport or the transport of goods), and used for military aircraft, as well as reception halls, warehouses, administration buildings, and workshops for maintenance and engineering, and modern control systems. The airport is surrounded from its southeastern side by

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<sup>(1)</sup>They are four neighbourhoods in the city of DeirEzzor, in addition to the Al-Bghaileyeh village next to them, Harabesh in the eastern side, Al-Jafrah village next to DeirEzzor Airport, in addition to the mountain overlooking the city which secures a road for the regime to those two islands through the roadway across the graveyard

the rockets brigade, and the southern side by the artillery brigade on the mountain overlooking the city of DeirEzzor.

### 1 – DeirEzzor Airport during the revolution:

After the start of the liberation movement battles in the province of DeirEzzor, DeirEzzor Airport was transformed into a military airport containing a huge military arsenal, and it became a major center for tanks and artillery used to shell the close-by villages and towns, and a springboard for warplanes and helicopters to bomb the villages and towns near by and further away, and was considered the main supply point for arms and ammunition as well as food supplies for the Assad regime's army in the neighborhoods they control, and the other Assad regime sites in other nearby cities : "Al-Hasakah, Al-Raqqqa".

The Assad regime brings many reinforcements, whether it be soldiers or gear and equipment to DeirEzzor Airport according to military needs.

No accurate figures are available for the numbers of Al-Assad regime forces stationed at the airport, but assumptions indicate the presence of approximately (1300) fighters, between military and militias supporting Al-Assad regime and they are subject to supervision by all security forces in the airport security branches, in addition to military transports from helicopters, warplanes to heavy armor. They are explained in the following table<sup>(2)</sup>:

Table (1): illustrating the number of Al-Assad regime fighters and the war materials inside DeirEzzor Airport:

A. Class	Number	Notes
Combatant officers	20	Of different military ranks
Security members	30	Who follow different security branches in the city

<sup>(2)</sup>According to estimates by military dissidents from Al-Assad regime's army in 2014, and the leaders of military brigades fighting in the DeirEzzor Airport.

Military fighters	300	Members of the Brigade 137 MICA
Military fighters	300	Members of the Republican Guard Brigade 104
Military fighters	300	Members of the 17th Division
Loyal militias (clans army)	150	Defectees from the rebels brigades after the control of ISIS on the province
Loyal militias (National Defense Army)	200	Formed by the regime from its loyalists in the province
Fighting planes	15	MIG 23 and 21
Military helicopters	7	
Tanks model T72	7	Mobile
Tanks model T52	15	Stable
Armored vehicles BMB	10	Mobile
120-mm field cannon	7	Stationed on the mountain overlooking the city
57 mm antitank cannon	20	Based on the first lines on the mountain overlooking the city

## 2- Geographical nature of DeirEzzor Airport location:

DeirEzzor Military Airport is considered a very fortified site due to the geographical nature of the region it's situated in, where the mountain overlooking DeirEzzor city forms a natural fort protecting the airport from the south, on which the artillery battalion is stationed which gives the airport a military superiority and a high defensive force to repel any attack. In addition to having a supply route which runs through the graveyard in DeirEzzor which secures an easy navigation for the members and arms between the airport and the 137<sup>th</sup> MICA brigade and the neighborhoods that Al-Assad regime controls.

Al-Assad Regime forces has worked to further fortify DeirEzzor Airport through controlling the Jafrah village, which was accounted for Al-Assad regime in the eastern side of the Airport, as well as the farms of Al-Mraeyyeh village next to



the airport's southeastern side wall, they also worked on digging defensive trenches and tunnels to prevent rebels from sneaking in through the attack tunnels to the area behind their defensive lines, and planted antitank and anti-individual landmines in Al-Mraeyyeh village front and the area of the rockets brigade.

Al-Assad Regime forces defend DeirEzzor Military Airport as furiously as they could so that their forces and headquarters in the city don't fall under a pressure that can't be handled. Al-Assad Regime Forces also seek to limit the cross-fire area inside the secure zone: "Al-Jafrah village, Al-Mraeyyeh farms, Thardah mountains" to maintain the vitality and military effectiveness of the Airport by not allowing rebels to monitor the takeoff and landing roads/runaways.

### **3- The strategic importance of DeirEzzor Military Airport:**

The strategic importance of DeirEzzor Military Airport comes from being a main supply vessel for Al-Assad regime forces in DeirEzzor province, as well as being the first line of defense and the safety valve which provides the continuous control of the western neighborhoods of the city for the regime: "Al-Thawra, Al-Qosoor, Al-Villat, Al-Bghaileyeh village". And most importantly is being close to the oil wells, where the airport staying under the regime control forms a pressure card that's important to continue getting their share from oil and gas by threatening and bombing the oil wells<sup>(3)</sup>.

In addition, the airport's geographical location gives it a great military importance, being a site located deep inside the areas controlled by ISIS, thus it forms a base of logistic supplies to link and connect the areas of Al-Assad regime together<sup>(4)</sup>

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<sup>(3)</sup>Al-Assad regime gets oil from the two fields: "Al-Taim, Al-Omar" and gets gas from "Konoco" factory according to an agreement with the battalions controlling them with a truce not to cut off electricity from the city. This agreement remained in force after ISIS's control.

<sup>(4)</sup>Al-Assad regime transported members from the Republican Guard forces and clan militias led by IssamZaher Al-Dein to Al-Hasakah city in June 2015, to fend off ISIS attacks on the city.

which is what was promoted to politically by the regime in its quest to raise itself as a partner in the war against terrorism ever since the announcement of the international coalition.

## **II: Liberation attempts before the control of ISIS:**

After the liberation of the entire countryside of DeirEzzor in August 2012, except for Al-Jafrah village next to DeirEzzor Airport in the east, and Al-Bghaileyeh village in the west which had ammo inventory and the MICA 137 battalion.

Combat battalions in DeirEzzor worked on the DeirEzzor Airport siege partially at the beginning, and fend off the attempts of Al-Assad regime forces from advancing in the eastern suburbs of the province, because they don't have the needed military capabilities to liberate the airport, and due to many battalions not participating in the liberation battle.

The most remarkable attempt was in April 2014, after the meeting between several fighting brigades who developed a military plan to storm the airport, this plan is summarized as follows: Sieging the airport from the three sides, the eastern and south-eastern sides and focusing the attack from the north-eastern side (Al-Jafrah village front) to break into the airport from its main gate, synchronized with distracting the regime forces on the inner city fronts, as well as, leaving a port for troops to withdraw through the DeirEzzor city graveyard. The rebel brigades were able to advance in Al-Jafrah village arriving to the airport walls from the East. But poor military planning and lack of reinforcements and logistics and ambulance teams has all weakened the attacking forces, along with their preoccupations with the wounded at the expense of the fortification of the sites they were able to claim, has allowed the forces of Al-Assad to bring in reinforcements and execute the process of turning around Al-Mraeyeh suburb supported by military airforce, and heavy missile coverage. Due to which, they reclaimed Al-Jafrah village and their control zones/areas were back to how they were.

### **III: DeirEzzor Airport after ISIS control:**

After ISIS took control of DeirEzzor city on 14/07/2014. Al-Assad regime forces could sense the seriousness of the change in the dominant force, as one of them possess the ability to move and do and military build-up. Unlike the rebel brigades who were always fighting and never settled for a mutual opinion.

#### **1. Securing DeirEzzor Airport:**

Al-Assad regime's forces took advantage of ISIS's confusion and its leaders' preoccupation with fighting rebels in the province's suburbs and working to stabilize ISIS's military and security control over them. The battle to secure DeirEzzor Airport started with the attempt to extend the secured area around the regime-controlled areas in Al-Jafrah village and HawijatSaqor. The beginning of the operation was on 20/9/2014 by cutting off the logistic support route of ISIS by bombing the "political" bridge (Al-Siyaseyyeh) which is the only entrance into the city of DeirEzzor.<sup>(5)</sup> After that, Al-Assad army launched an offensive attack led by "IssamZaher Al-Dein"<sup>(6)</sup> on 06/10/2014. Where Al-Assad regime's Army captured a large portion of HawijatSaqor in the north and Al-Mraeyyeh in the north-east.

Members of ISIS and rebels were shocked following this progress by the regime's forces for fear of getting the city besieged, and were able to repel the attack and stop it, as well as own the initiative; on 16/10/2014 they were able to regain control of portions from HawijatSaqor and Al-Mraeyyeh after fierce battles in which the rebels had a prominent role.

#### **2- DeirEzzor Airport break-in attempts by ISIS (The Islamic State):**

After the liberation of Al-Tabqa Military Airport late August 2014, pressures on ISIS increased by their supporters to break into DeirEzzor Airport seeing as it's a

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<sup>(5)</sup>Through a joint military unity: Officers of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and officers from the Syrian Special Ops

<sup>(6)</sup>A dean in Al-Assad regime's, Army Brigade Commander of the 104 Republican Guard, who is the military commander of Al-Assad army in DeirEzzor province

military priority for them, in addition to reclaiming the remaining portion of HawijatSaqor.

**-First battle :** Started by ISIS on 03/12/2014, known as: "Mountain Battle" because ISIS focused their heaviest offensive strength on the mountain overlooking DeirEzzor city, seeing as it's a source for military advantage for the regime, the attack wasn't prepared according to a clear military plan, it was an attack on all battle fronts with Al-Assad forces in the province, along with focusing the attacking power on the mountain overlooking the city to paralyze the defensive abilities of Al-Assad regime forces, where ISIS has commenced a wide attack on Al-Assad forces' sites: "137 Brigade, HawijatSaqor, Al-Jafrah village, Al-Mraeyyeh farms, Inner city fronts" and ISIS was able to advance deeper into Al-Assad sites in the mountain, and destroyed a number of stationed cannons on top of it and killed and captured a number of Al-Assad's regime members. However, the regime's forces' experience with the nature of the mountains and hills of the region has enabled them to get military reinforcements from Al-Talae camp and set an ambush for ISIS in which tens of them were killed, then the remaining members withdrew towards the city. Thus the operation has ended, and its results were getting back Al-Mraeyyeh suburbs by ISIS.

The number of people killed in that battle was estimated by 72 fighters from ISIS, among them were 7 Muhajereen and 55 people killed from Al-Assad regime and their loyal supporting militias.<sup>(7)</sup>

It is worth noting that the majority of deaths in ISIS ranks was from the rebels' brigades in the province of DeirEzzor who had refused to stay under the control of ISIS to continue their fights against Al-Assad regime, ISIS used their fighting experience in this battle, and to get a "free" win, and at the same time, they were forced to the first frontlines of the battle, considering them a potential source of rebellion which might destabilize ISIS's control over the region.

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<sup>(7)</sup>The number of deaths in the study is according to some media activists and media pages in the province.

### **3– ISIS's defeats compel them to try and break into DeirEzzor**

#### **Airport:**

Since February and until early August 2015, ISIS has fought several battles on fronts that have a strategic priority compared to DeirEzzor Airport: "Kobani, Tal Abyad, Al-Hasakah city" and moved many fighters from DeirEzzor city towards those fronts.

Throughout this period, those clashes were limited on the fronts in DeirEzzor Airport perimeter only to intermittent clashes, mutual bombardment, and the only military operation launched by ISIS was to regain control of HawijatSaqor, by detonating an armored booby-trapped vehicle in the front of Al-Sinaa neighborhood inside the city, on Jumayyan checkpoint which has made the regime forces withdraw from HawijatSaqor for fear of being surrounded.

ISIS has faced many pressures due to the high number of deaths from DeirEzzor city in the battles: "Tal Abyad, Al-Hasakah", whereas the DeirEzzor Airport remained under the control of Al-Assad forces, which resulted in arguments between the pro-ISIS citizens from the province and ISIS leaders from Al-Muhajereen<sup>(8)</sup>At the same time, ISIS's need to accomplish an important military victory that would bring back its reputation among its supporters, and through which it could reclaim the ability to initiate and progress after its huge losses in those battles, as well as feeling the threat against ISIS due to the Russian presence on the Syrian ground, which has pushed them to attempt to break in DeirEzzor Airport again.

**-Second battle:** ISIS has commenced an attack on DeirEzzor Airport on 08/09/2015. After they made some military management changes in DeirEzzor city due to the failed first attack on Al-Assad regime sites, and they suffered heavy casualties.

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<sup>(8)</sup>Those differences have evolved to an exchange of fire between the two sides several times.

ISIS –in their military plan– have abandoned fighting the regime forces stationed on the mountain overlooking the city and followed their well-known military strategy through suicide attacks and booby-traps to cause a gap and create a confusion state among the enemy ranks and then attack in large numbers. ISIS detonated two armored vehicles in sites and fortifications of Al-Assad forces in Al-Mraeyyeh fish-tank and Al-Jafrah, then attacked Thardah mountain area which is next to the rockets battalion, then its fighters advanced in the depths of Al-Assad forces in Al-Jafrah village and got close to the airport walls and its main gate, then they advanced inside the farms surrounding the airport from Al-Mraeyyeh village. That progress of ISIS fighters has pushed Al-Assad forces to use the poisonous Chlorine gas <sup>(9)</sup>to repel the sudden and quick attack, as well as intensify the air raids on ISIS military sites in Al-Jafrah village, accompanied by its control on Thardah Mountains.

The number of deaths in that battle was estimated by 91 from both sides, 48 of them were from ISIS, 8 suicide-bombers, and 13 cases of suffocation. ISIS arrested a number of soldiers from Al-Assad regime and beheaded them then crucified them in Al-Mayadeen city <sup>(10)</sup>.

**-Third battle:** It wasn't too long before ISIS re-attacked DeirEzzor Airport on 05/10/2015, an assault that is considered the deadliest of all after they got military reinforcements from Iraq due to the insufficient members needed to commence the battle <sup>(11)</sup>ISIS used detainees in its prisons to dig trenches and build barricades on the frontline of DeirEzzor Airport, it also got heavy weapons and vehicles from Al-Raqqa city to the battle-fronts in DeirEzzor Airport <sup>(12)</sup>and into the city. And with the same combat strategy, ISIS could advance in several

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<sup>(9)</sup>According to doctors and field hospitals in the province of DeirEzzor.

<sup>(10)</sup>ISIS deals with all their military prisoners this way

<sup>(11)</sup>Because of the huge losses ISIS has suffered and never revealed, and due to defection of the leaders and members of ISIS and running away outside their control.

<sup>(12)</sup>News of using prisoners as human shields to receive the first hand strike during the break-in of the Airport.

areas, including: "Al-Jafrah village" and its members took over the rockets brigade next to the Airport from the south.

However, the regime forces were able to fend off the attack and reclaim huge portions of the sites they'd lost through the first attack by setting traps and ambushes, and intensifying the air raids on the attack sites of ISIS and the supply routes from Al-Omar oil field and villages next to the Airport and DeirEzzor city, the Russian air-force recorded their military presence by an air raid on ISIS sites in Al-Jafrah village.

The battles stopped after three weeks of fierce fighting, hit-and-run operations and exchange control, the sites and areas returned to what they were before except for the rockets brigade from which ISIS members had withdrawn, but the regime forces couldn't get close to it, as well as ISIS taking control of over 20% of Al-Jafrah village next to the Euphrates River-shore to the Northeast.

The estimated number of deaths in that battle is 133 fighters of ISIS, and there's no accurate number of the regime's losses in the battle, but two of their officers were killed in DeirEzzor Airport and the total number of wounded/injured was around 300 from both sides.

#### **IV: DeirEzzor Airport in the new political and military equation:**

The Russian intervention in Syria to protect Al-Assad regime has made a qualitative change in the Syrian position on all levels, locally, regionally and internationally. Especially considering it's under the cover of fighting terrorism, and this forms a pressure on the international coalition against ISIS. Despite the Russian military operations on the sites called "Useful Syria", it gives Al-Assad regime in the isolated islands a moral boost to keep their sites and intervene to enforce and strengthen the regime whenever is needed.

According to the results of the military operations so far, Al-Assad Regime managed to retain its military positions in the DeirEzzor Airport, and most likely,

under the political and military developments under the Russian declaration of forming a Quad–Coalition,<sup>(13)</sup> for fighting terrorism, which will increase its grip on DeirEzzor Airport as an important strategic site in the depths of ISIS's control areas and as a link to transport military support from Iraq and Iran towards Syria.

Whereas, ISIS's situation under pressure of many parties and getting drained by the increased amount of deaths in battles and defects in their ranks as well as the difficulty of replacing their fighters due to the big number of battles they fight in Iraq and Syria, and difficulty of transport for ISIS military through targeting them by the international coalition aircraft. All these factors negatively affect ISIS's ability in securing the logistics required to manage and win battles, especially since ISIS is battling in an un–stable environment which doesn't hold extreme loyalty to them<sup>(14)</sup> which puts a lot of security pressures<sup>(15)</sup> during their attempts to control and break into DeirEzzor Airport.

ISIS is aware of the gravitation which comes from the continuous dominance of Al–Assad regime on DeirEzzor Airport, therefore it will work on pre–sense any military operations moving against them with a Russian leadership to try and break into DeirEzzor Airport and increase the pressure on battle fronts in Al–Hasakah city, seeing as they are the candidates which will witness advance attempts of Al–Assad regime towards ISIS territory, this will force ISIS to increase their military operations frequency on those fronts, making the upcoming confrontations fiercer and more violent as well as open to all possibilities.

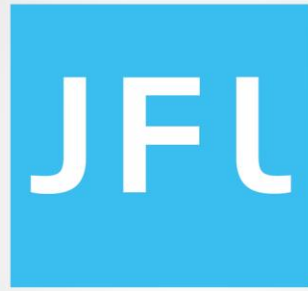
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<sup>(13)</sup>The coalition includes: "Russia, Iran, Syria, Iraq"

<sup>(14)</sup>In DeirEzzor city there's a lot of assassination operations targeting members of ISIS done by unknown people.

<sup>(15)</sup>Every time ISIS fails to break into the Airport, they tighten their grip on DeirEzzor civilians, lately they arrested the two former media activists in the province after their last failure.





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