

Iran in Syria: From Expansion to Entrenchment

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Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war has often made headlines in Israel. Particularly in the context of the Israel Defense Force (IDF)'s so-called campaign between the wars (the Hebrew acronym is *Mabam*), which has included attempts to prevent Iran from establishing military bases in Syria, keeping Iranian forces away from the Syrian-Israeli border, and thwarting the transfer of precision weapons to Hizballah. But Iranian involvement in Syria goes far beyond the confines of the Israeli-Iranian conflict. As a result of the "Arab Spring" uprising and the Syrian civil war, Iran has succeeded in establishing itself in areas far from the Israeli-Syrian border and extended its influence in Syria beyond the military sphere.

From the outset, the Syrian civil war has been perceived by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a serious threat. In fact, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the alliance with Syria has served as an important pillar of Iran's pursuit of regional dominance. Syria was, and still is, a vital backbone in safeguarding Iran's most important strategic asset in the Middle East — Hizballah. Unlike Iraqi, Pakistani, or Afghan Shi'i militias, Hizballah is not a mere proxy organization in the service of Iran. The Lebanese organization is, in fact, the Islamic Republic's greatest success in its effort to export its revolutionary Shi'i ideology in the Middle East. Therefore, when Bashar al-Asad's regime faced existential danger following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Tehran was quick to intervene militarily in order to save it. Iran initially ordered Hizballah to assist Syrian regime forces, but when it became clear that this would not suffice, Iran did not hesitate to use its own forces. Following the joint Russian-Iranian intervention in September 2015, the number of IRGC forces in Syria peaked at around 8,000 to 10,000, in addition to 5,000 to 6,000 soldiers from the regular Iranian army.¹

¹ Majid Rafizadeh, "[Iran's Forces Outnumber Assad's in Syria](#)," Gatestone Institute, November 24, 2016.

When the tide of the Syrian civil war turned in Asad's favor, Iran began to withdraw its forces from this country and relied mainly on its proxies. According to various estimates, in the summer of 2018, some 2,000 Quds Force (IRGC special units) commanded tens of thousands of fighters from various militias in Syria, mostly Shi'i groups from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Iran has also established local Shi'i militias, such as Imam al-Hajaj and the Mahdi Army in the Aleppo province, the Rukia Brigade in the Damascus province, and the Imam Rada Force in Homs. In November 2020, the number of Syrians in these Shi'i militias was estimated at 5,000 to 8,000. This is in addition to Hizballah fighters, who hold military outposts throughout Syria.² The Jusoor Centre in Istanbul published a map in January 2021, which showed that Iran and its subordinate militias have 131 military sites in Syria scattered in ten districts, 38 of them in and around Daraa, 27 in Damascus, 15 in Aleppo, 13 in Deir al-Zur, 12 in Homs, six in Hama, six in Latakia, five in Suwayda, five in Quneitra, and four in Idlib.³ In addition, Hizballah holds an additional 116 military points across Syria. It is estimated that Hizballah and other Shi'i militias control approximately 20 percent of Syria's borders.⁴

And yet, Iranian involvement in Syria extends beyond the military sphere. Since 2013, Iran has deepened its grip on Syria's civilian and economic sectors. This effort was intended to make the task of pushing Iran out of Syria in the aftermath of the civil war all but impossible. The decision made in 2019 to build a railway network from western Iran to the port of Latakia in Syria through Iraq is perhaps the most prominent expression in this context: Iran clearly identified the strategic importance of the port of Latakia, which would provide Iranian oil exports with direct access to the Mediterranean Sea. In fact, Iranian companies have been seeking management interests in the port even before signing this agreement.⁵

Iranian companies have also gradually seized shares in Damascus's real estate market through networks of Iranian institutions, real estate dealers, and banks linked to the IRGC. Tehran has provided convenient loans to individuals who wanted to purchase real estate in Syria, hence in recent years Iranian contractors, businessmen, and militia members have

² Nader Uskowi, "[The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel](#)," Atlantic Council, September 2018, p.2; Navvar Saban, "[Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria](#)," Atlantic Council, November 5, 2020.

³ The map is presented in: "[Maps - 477 sites of foreign forces in Syria](#)," [Arabic] *Enab Baladi*, January 6, 2021.

⁴ Fabrice Balanche, "[The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria](#)," *Policy Watch 3433*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), February 10, 2021.

⁵ "[Syria Update](#)," Center for Operational Analysis and Research, July 4-10, 2019.

become real estate moguls in strategic locations in the Syrian capital.⁶ Iran is also building a 12-story trade center in Damascus, which is supposed to host 24 Iranian companies.⁷

Iran has also managed to leave its mark on two important aspects of Syrian society: religion and demography. Since the beginning of its involvement in Syria, Iran has tried to gain influence with the 'Alawi community and bring them closer to the Imamiyyah (Twelver) branch of the Shi'a, which is the dominant form of Shi'ism in Iran. As part of this effort, Iran has built Shi'i shrines in Syria and used them as centers of indoctrination. Iran has also sought to increase the size and demographic weight of the Shi'i community in Syria by granting Syrian citizenship to foreign Shi'is, mainly Afghans, and establishing designated neighborhoods for them in Damascus. In addition, Iran encouraged families of IRGC fighters to emigrate and settle in the Damascus area.⁸ As a result, Shi'i neighborhoods have become pro-Iranian strongholds in the heart of the Syrian capital, with a special character that is reflected, for example, in the 'Ashura events. This development has drawn criticism from the long-time residents of these neighborhoods, and some have used social media to denounce the "Iranian expansion in Damascus" and "Iran's attempts to manipulate the demographics of many Damascus neighborhoods in its favor." Some have argued that "commemorating 'Ashura is not foreign for the Syrians, but there are those who try to exaggerate the matter and give it a different meaning."⁹

In addition, the names of the streets and sites in these neighborhoods have been changed in a way that reflects the interests of the new dominant force in the area. For example, the name of "al-Tin" street in the west of the "Sayyida Zaynab" neighborhood in the southern suburb of Damascus was changed to "al-Hawra'" street, one of the nicknames of Zaynab, the daughter of 'Ali bin 'Abi Talib. The name of the market in the west of the neighborhood was changed to "Fatimiyya," after 'Ali's wife (and Zaynab's mother). In addition, Persian slogans and pictures of pro-Iranian militias' fighters who were killed during the Syrian civil war are presented on the wall that surrounds the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in the center of the neighborhood.¹⁰

Iran has also established cultural centers throughout Damascus, designed to advance the Islamic Republic's agenda in Syria. For example, Iranian media reported in December

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sarah Dadouch, "[After backing Assad, Iran and Russia compete for influence and spoils of war](#)," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2021.

⁸ Ephraim Kam, "[Iranian Stakes in Syria](#)," Special Publication, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), November 12, 2019.

⁹ "[Strangers on Syrian soil](#)," [Arabic] Syrian Anonymous Journalists, September 16, 2020.

¹⁰ "[Absence of a military uniform and presence of Iranian symbols at Sayyida Zaynab at the gates of Damascus](#)," [Arabic] *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 24, 2020.

2020 that during December and January a number of cultural centers in Damascus would hold memorial ceremonies to mark the anniversary of the assassination of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, who was killed in January 2020. The Arab Cultural Centre in the Kafr Susah neighborhood (southwest of Damascus) also presented an exhibition that included posters and pictures of Soleimani, as part of an event entitled "A Love Story." These memorial events were held under the auspices of the Center for Islamic Thought and Art in Tehran and the Iranian Cultural Adviser in Damascus.¹¹

However, the Iranian influence in Syria is evident not only in Damascus, but also through the cultural centers and religious institutions set up by the Iranian emissaries in other areas of Syria, including the northeastern Deir al-Zur province. These cultural centers also host events dictated by Tehran, such as a Soleimani's memorial service held at the "Iranian Cultural Center" in Deir al-Zur on December 27, 2020.¹²

Deir al-Zur is a strategic area for Iran, connecting Iranian interests in Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Networks with links to Iran smuggle weapons, drugs, and tobacco, from Iraq, through the Syrian border town of Albu Kamal to Lebanon. Therefore, Tehran is trying to strengthen its hold on the area through the IRGC, but also by recruiting young Syrians living in this predominantly Sunni area, by providing material incentives and humanitarian assistance, as well as medical, educational, and cultural services. According to the Syrian Centre for Human Rights, Deir al-Zur has already developed characteristics of an Iranian colony or even a protectorate.¹³ In addition, unlike the rest of Syria, the presence of Iranian soldiers in Deir al-Zur is quite prominent. It is estimated that close to a thousand Iranian soldiers operated in Deir al-Zur in September 2020, in addition to several hundred Shi'i militia fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁴ In 2018, it was reported that Iran was setting up a military base near Albu Kamal called "Imam Ali," and satellite imagery from 2019 confirmed that this base was already active.¹⁵ In November 2020, it was even reported that a commander of the IRGC, Salem Shehdan, was killed along with three of his soldiers in a

¹¹ "[Iran commemorates Soleimani's assassination in Syrian cultural centers](#)," [Arabic] *Enab Baladi*, December 29, 2020.

¹² "[Iran commemorates Soleimani's assassination in Syrian cultural centers](#)," [Arabic] *Enab Baladi*, December 29, 2020.

¹³ "['War of Influence' ... The Secret of Deir al-Zur's Bombings](#)" [Arabic], *Aman Dostor*, February 28, 2021.

¹⁴ Oula A. Alrifai, Ali Alleile, "[Russian-Iranian Tensions in Deir al-Zour](#)," *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), September 4, 2020.

¹⁵ Trey Yingst, "[Iran Building New Underground Tunnel to House Missiles: Intelligence Sources](#)," *Fox News*, December 10, 2019.

UAV attack near Albu Kamal.¹⁶ In early June 2021, two IRGC officers, Hassan Abdollahzadeh and Mohsen Abbasi, were ambushed by the Islamic State and killed on their route from Deir al-Zur to Palmyra.¹⁷

In recent years, Iran has also strengthened its economic and trade agreements with the Syrian regime, while expanding its control over the country's industrial, agricultural, trade, and banking sectors. For example, in 2013, the Syrian government signed a \$3.6 billion agreement with Iran to purchase petroleum products. In another agreement, Damascus pledged a \$1 billion credit line for the purchase of electricity and other goods from Iran. In early 2017, the Iranian government and economic entities close to the IRGC signed large-scale economic agreements with then-Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis that granted Iran, among other things, a license to build a cellular network in Syria, phosphate production contracts, 5,000 dunams of agricultural land, and 1,000 dunams for the construction of oil and gas ports.¹⁸ The agreement also provided a framework for the establishment of a joint Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, which actually serves as Iran's economic arm in Syria, and which was indeed established on January 29, 2019, following a meeting of the Syrian-Iranian Business Forum.¹⁹

Finally, the Iranian regime is also investing in the indoctrination of Syrian children and youth through informal education. Since September 2020, the "Iranian Cultural Center" offered free courses for teaching Syrian children Persian, especially in Deir al-Zur.²⁰ In addition, under the auspices of the People's Committee for Syrian-Iranian Friendship, located in Deir al-Zor, several branches of the Scout movement operate throughout Syria and bear Shi'i-oriented names, such as "Imam Mahdi Scouts in Syria" or "al-Wilayat Scouts." Similar to the Iranian cultural centers scattered throughout Syria, the activities of the Scouts are also funded and supervised by the office of the Iranian Cultural Adviser in Damascus. As part of these activities, the youth undergo weapons operations training and conduct military parades, which include Iranian flags, images of Khomeini and Khamenei, and other Iranian and Shi'i symbols. In addition, Shi'i religious leaders take an active part

¹⁶ "[Sources: Commander of the IRGC killed in eastern Syria](#)," [Arabic] *Enab Baladi*, November 30, 2020.

¹⁷ Raz Zimmt, "[Spotlight on Iran- May 27, 2021 – June 10, 2021](#)," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.

¹⁸ "[From the Military Support to the Culture and Economy: Iran Controls Syria's Entire Joints](#)," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, July 17, 2019.

¹⁹ Amar Yasser Hamo, "[From Destruction to Rehabilitation: Tehran Strengthens Its Economic Presence in Syria Through Joint Entities](#)," [Arabic] *Syria Direct*, 10 February 2021.

²⁰ "[Iranian Campaign to Promote Persian Language in Northeastern Syria](#)," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 1, 2021.

in the instruction and teach the trainees the principles of the Shi'ism. Most of the alumni of these youth movements join one of the pro-Iranian militias in Syria after the age of 16.²¹

Nearly a decade after the Iranian intervention in the Syrian civil war began, it can be said that the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Syria is a fait accompli. The task of eliminating Iran's presence from Syria would be extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible. Under the conditions of chaos that have prevailed in Syria, the Iranian octopus has spread its arms and settled into the living organism of the Syrian state. Thus it seems that similar to its success in turning the Lebanese civil war into a springboard for expanding its regional influence in the 1980s, the Islamic Republic has used the Syrian tragedy to deepen and strengthen what King 'Abdullah of Jordan referred to in 2004 as the "Shiite crescent."²²

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²¹ "[Imam Mahdi Scouts.. Iran fills its reservoir with Syrian children](#)," [Arabic] *Enab Baladi*, November 10, 2019.

²² Robin Wright and Peter Baker, "[Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election From Iran](#)," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2004.