Vol. 9, No. 11, November 2021

Editor: Giovanni M. Quer

Celebrating Ashura in Syria

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Since the start of the Syrian Civil War, Iran has been the primary external actor safeguarding the continued survival of the Asad Regime. Iran’s involvement in Syria has undergone a substantial evolution.

What was initially a military intervention aimed at saving the Asad regime through the Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force and its allied Shi’a proxy forces, including

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Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization forces, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigades, and the Pakistani Zaynabiyoun Brigades,¹ has now evolved to utilizing soft power—through Iran’s influence aimed at institutionalizing Iran’s presence by engaging in religious outreach and spreading Shi’a thought. This has been done most prominently in conjunction with the Alawite minority, seeking to change the demographic and socio-cultural dynamic within Syria.²

While most mainstream Muslims, both Sunni and Shi’a, have considered the Alawites to be heretics, the Iranian-born Lebanese cleric Musa al-Sadr declared in a 1973 fatwa that they were Muslims. Since 1979, Iranian outreach has focused on unifying the Alawites with Twelver Shi’a Muslims through substantial investments in education, Persian language courses, and mosque building.³

Unlike Russia, which has aimed to influence policy in Syria through its substantial connections and patronage in state institutions, Iran has pushed to create local allies, for helping Damascus regain total sovereignty over its territory.

Tehran’s efforts serve a dual purpose: entrenching support for the Asad Regime by changing the demographics in primarily Sunni-populated areas.⁴ This has also been aided by the enactment of Law Number 10, which enables the Syrian government to designate reconstruction areas, allowing the government to claim particular areas for ‘reconstruction’ if the property owner does not register him/herself, enabling the government to claim large parts of the country from their previous, majority Sunni occupants.

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This, together with entrenching Iranian interests, both security and cultural, within the Syrian state helping create a class of Syrians who are sympathetic to Tehran’s standing.\(^5\)

As a result, Iranian bases have been constructed throughout the region, housing not only IRGC troops, but also that of its proxies, most prominently with the construction of Imam Ali base in the Iraqi border town of al-Bukamal,\(^6\) aimed at securing the highways from Deir ez-Zor to Raqa and Homs province, and western Syria across the border to Lebanon.\(^7\)

The expansion of Iranian influence in the governate of Deir ez-Zor is illustrative of both Tehran’s security-focused expansion as well as its push to spread its soft power. Deir ez-Zor’s strategic location both on the Euphrates River and its long border with Iraq has underscored its importance, guaranteeing the flow of supplies to Iran’s proxy forces from Syria, all the way to Lebanon.

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This tweet shows a poster from the Iranian-allied Ahl al-Bayt Organization, during the Husseintiya processes during the holiday of Ashura, in Hatla, a town in Deir ez-Zor Governate Eastern Syria. 8

Iran’s military presence in Deir ez-Zor has also been coupled with substantial civilian outreach. Hatla, a town on the Euphrates river, has been historically populated by Sunni Muslims, further underscoring Iranian advancements in the strategic eastern part of Syria. This is emblematic of Iranian strategy, where Iranian-linked groups have sought to embed themselves amongst the locals – a useful strategy for retaining patronage and shoring up a local base of support.

In towns such as Hatla, the Iranians have preyed on the poverty of the local residents and have offered significant sums encouraging local residents to convert to Shiism, particularly with the aim of recruiting substantial numbers of local youth to Iranian-

8 @tw_almukawama3, Twitter, 17 August 2021.
allied militias. The Ahl al-Bayt Organization is just one among many Iranian groups whose primary purpose is the conversion, outreach, and institutionalization of Iran’s presence in Eastern Syria.

The establishment of the Iranian Cultural Center in Deir ez-Zor, under whose aegis many of these educational outreach activities have taken place, and whose stated objective is to provide Persian language courses to young Syrians has served as cover for more nefarious activities. Groups such as the “Bright Light Institute” (al-Noor al-Sattah), and the “Mahdi Scouts” (Kishafat al-Mahdi), have served as institutions to recruit large amounts of Syrian youths, and spread Shia thought amongst them, bringing them within Iran’s orbit.

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12 “‘The Mahdi’s Scouts:’ Iran is filling its tank of Fighters with Syrian Children” Enab Baladi, 10 November 2019 [in Arabic], accessed 2 November 2021.
The tweet reads: “Mercenaries from the Afghan Fatemiyoun Division celebrate Ashura (the month of Muharram) in the heart of the Syrian capital, Damascus.”

The result of Iranian efforts to spread Shiism has been a significant expansion of overt Shi’a symbols and solidarity in the public sphere. While Syria before the Civil War had a substantial Sunni majority, the exodus of millions of primarily Sunni refugees has

14 @dyaaaddoor, Twitter, 17 August 2021.
substantially altered Syria’s demographic balance. During Ashura celebrations in Damascus, Afghan members of the Fatemiyoun brigades openly and visibly flaunted Shi’a symbols in the heart of Damascus, as well as in the vicinity of the famed Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqayya shrines.¹⁵

With Iran’s continued investment in Syria’s reconstruction and its substantial outlay in aid to the Asad regime’s policy to reshape Syria’s demographics, one can expect greater entrenchment of Shi’a cultural symbols in the public sphere in the coming years.