

The logo for Beehive Middle East Social Media features the word "Beehive" in a stylized font. The "B" is large and red, while "eehive" is in blue. A blue orbital path with three dots circles the "ee". Below "Beehive" is the text "Middle East Social Media" in a blue sans-serif font. In the top right corner, there is a logo for Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), which includes a stylized building icon and the text "TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY" and "The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies".

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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.

¹ For more see Phillip Smyth, “[The Shia Militia Mapping Project](#)” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 20 May 2019, accessed 27 October 2021.

² Hasan Arfeh, “[The Institutionalization of Demographic Change in Syria](#)” *The Atlantic Council*, 4 April 2019, accessed 27 October 2021.

³ Oula A. Alrifai, “[In the Service of Ideology: Iran’s Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria](#)” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 14 March 2021, accessed 28 October 2021.

⁴ For greater context and analysis see Ibrahim Abu Ahmad, “[Assad’s Law 10: Reshaping Syria’s Demographics](#)” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 14 September 2019, accessed 31 October 2021.

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.

⁵ Sinan Tahir, "[Russia and Syria Economic Influence in Syria](#)" *Chatham House: The Royal Institute for International Affairs*, March 2019, accessed 28 October 2021.

⁶ Trey Yingst, "[Iran building new underground tunnel to house missiles: intelligence sources](#)" *Fox News*, 10 December 2019, accessed 28 October 2021.

⁷ Navvar Saban, "[Factbox: Iranian Presence in Syria's Deir ez-Zor Province](#)" *The Atlantic Council*, 18 May 2021, accessed 29 October 2021.



This tweet shows a poster from the Iranian-allied Ahl al-Bayt Organization, during the Husseiniyya processions 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ Groups such as the "Bright Light Institute" (*al-Noor al-Sattah*),¹¹ and the "Mahdi Scouts"¹² (*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.¹³

⁹ "[Religious conversions, child recruitment: Iran expands in Syria's Deir ez-Zor](#)" *North Press Agency*, 11 July 2021, accessed 1 November 2021.

¹⁰ Ahmad Salloum, "[Gifts, Food Baskets and Boarding Schools: How Iran is Penetrating Syrian Society](#)" *Iranwire*, 14 July 2020, accessed 1 November 2021.

¹¹ Dafna Messing, "[The "Bright Light Institute" –Another Iranian Organization Spreading Shi'ism In Eastern Syria](#)" *Alma Research and Education Center*, 14 March 2021, accessed 2 November 2021.

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.

¹³ Tamam Abu al-Khayr, "[The Cultural Tools Iran Used to Dominate Syria](#)" *Noon Post*, 13 September 2001 [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.”¹⁴

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 [@dyaakaddoor](#), 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.

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¹⁵ "[Afghan 'Fatemiyoun' Militias Celebrate Ashura in Damascus](#)" *Enab Baladi*, 18 August 2021 [in Arabic], accessed 2 November 2021.