



Photo: Return of Iranian casualties in Syrian civil war, August 30, 2016. Credit: Tasnim news agency (CC BY-SA 4.0)

# Here to Stay: Iranian Involvement in Syria, 2011-2021

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Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and driven by the ideology of exporting the revolution, Iran has bolstered its efforts to expand its regional influence. The events of the last decade, marked by the Arab Spring, the undermining of traditional state frameworks, and the ongoing weakening of the pan-Arab system, gave Iran a unique opportunity to achieve this objective, including the attempt to consolidate territory under its control from Iran to the Mediterranean coast. Focusing on Iran's tightening grip on Syria, this article contends that in spite of Tehran's extensive investments thus far, it has not managed to build a strategic military front there. At the civilian level, however, it has scored some success by embedding itself more deeply in Syria's state mechanisms in a way that will be hard to reverse at any time soon. Israel must therefore reconsider its policy on this issue, and work toward supplementing an offensive military approach with long term political moves.

*Keywords:* Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Shiite militias, soft power, Israel

*“If we lose Syria we will not be able to maintain Tehran...The key is to hold on to Syria. In this sense, Syria is our 35<sup>th</sup> province and has strategic importance. If we have to choose Syria or Khuzestan—we should choose Syria.”*

Hujjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, 2012

In the years 2011-2012, the regime in Tehran reached a strategic decision to intervene in the Syrian civil war. Its goal was to preserve the strategic alliance between Iran and Syria that began back in the early 1980s and retain hold of Syria as an area of Iranian influence and activity, particularly with respect to support for Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since then, Iran has made a number of military, economic, and cultural-religious moves to establish its grip on the country, while saving the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In addition, Iran has exploited its foothold in Syria to build up its proxy forces that could challenge Israel and attack it when it so chooses.

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## The Military Dimension

### *Participation in the Civil War and Establishment of Militias*

In the first two years of Syria’s civil war, Iranian military activity was relatively minor, and centered on sending Hezbollah fighters to the country as advisors. In the summer of 2014, in view of widespread ISIS success in Syria and the growing threat to the Assad regime, the Iranians strengthened their forces with hundreds of Revolutionary Guards, increased the Hezbollah contingent to about 5,000, set up and equipped Shiite militias using foreign volunteers such as the Afghan *Fatemiyoun* and the Pakistani *Zainebiyoun*, and even “imported”

Iraqi Shiite militias that it had cultivated for many years—in particular, *Hezbollah Brigades*, *Harakat Kezzbollah al Nujaba*, and *Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq*. However, these moves were not enough to tip the scales in Assad’s favor, and in the summer of 2015 the regime reached its lowest point of the civil war. At that point Moscow and Tehran made a joint strategic decision to save the Syrian regime, and significantly increased their involvement in the fighting: Iran reinforced its ground forces, and Russia provided aerial support. By 2016 the number of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria peaked at some 2,500 fighters. Since then, as the fighting has subsided, their numbers have declined. Over the last two years there has been a perceptible Iranian attempt to reinforce the pro-Iranian militias and rely more on local Syrian fighters as a substitute for a physical Iranian presence.

In this framework Iran has worked to build the militias in Syria, just as it did in Lebanon and Iraq. First, it united the local militias all over Syria into one umbrella organization, the *National Defense Forces*—NDF. These forces, which were trained and directed by the Revolutionary Guards and operate throughout Syria, were organized according to the *Basij* model—a large armed militia, serving as a basis for popular support and a source of intelligence about public opinion toward the regime. Second, the Iranians exploited the attacks by global jihad organizations on Shiite towns in Syria—mainly along the Syria-Lebanon border, but also in the Syrian desert in the east—and set up locally-based militias, principally the *Quwat al-Ridha* forces. Finally, they created links with local Sunni militias such as the *Baqir Brigade*, which is located in Deir ez-Zur and comprises primarily two of the largest tribes in Syria, al-Baggara and al-Uqaydat, supplying them with weapons and combat know-how.

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According to a [study](#) conducted in June 2021 by the Turkish research center Jusoor, Iran and the militias under its authority occupied about 131 military sites scattered throughout Syria, from Daraa and Damascus in the south through Aleppo and Idlib in the north, and to Deir ez-Zur in the east. In addition, Hezbollah has several military strongholds in the country, 116 in all, many of which are near the borders with Lebanon and Israel. To date, however, Iranian attempts to build strategic military arrays in Syria have failed almost completely due to Israeli attacks. Nevertheless, the Iranians are trying to strengthen their military infrastructure in the country, in order to use it to promote their interests, both within Syria and in the battle against Israel.

### ***The Syrian Army: Collaboration, Infiltration, and Arms Deals***

Revolutionary Guards officers advised the Syrian military from the start of the civil war, and as the fighting dragged on and the regime lost control of large swaths of territory, Damascus's military dependence on Tehran grew. First, the Iranians helped the army fill its ranks following the massive erosion in manpower due to the war, and by the end of 2014, [about 125,000 militia fighters](#) (both foreign and local) were active in Syria—almost half the regime's fighting force. Second, as part of the joint efforts to rebuild the Syrian army, in October 2015 Russia and Iran set up a new military framework, [the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps](#). This formation consists mainly of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, the elite Syrian force under the command of Maher al-Assad (the President's brother), Alawite militias, and parts of the NDF. It is stationed in the northwest of the country and considered the military force most loyal to Iran. By establishing this corps the Iranians achieved two goals: extending their reach and influence in the Syrian army, and uniting most of the militias loyal to them under a joint command.

Iran is even financing Syrian purchases of Russian arms as well as itself supplying weapons to the regime, mainly in the field of

air defense (in limited fashion), in order to offset Israel's aerial superiority. Relevant here is the [Iranian-Syrian agreement](#) to extend military and security cooperation, signed in Damascus in July 2020. In this framework it was agreed that Iran would send anti-aircraft missiles of two kinds to Syria: Bavar-373—a long-range ground-to-air missile that is an Iranian recreation of the Russian S-300 system with a range of 250 km; and Khordad-3—ground-to-air missiles with a medium range of 50-75 km (and which Iran used to bring down a US Hawk drone in June 2019). It is not clear whether the agreement has been implemented and if Iran has indeed sent such missiles to Syria.

### ***Action against Israel***

Since 2014 the Iranians have been trying to open an additional front against Israel on the Golan Heights, using Hezbollah fighters ([wearing Syrian army uniforms and using their vehicles](#)) and by setting up [local militias in southern Syria](#), both Sunni and Druze. These in turn have exploited the difficult economic situation in the region and local fears of Islamist organizations that spread through the area during the Civil War. Iranian activity on this front translated into [laying explosive devices along the border fence](#) and [building a rocket array facing the Israeli Golan Heights](#). Thus far, Israel's [offensive efforts to thwart attacks](#), combined with Russia's partial restraint, the ongoing armed resistance of rebels (mainly in the south), and the elimination of Qassem Soleimani from the arena have denied Iran and Hezbollah success on this front.

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### **The Iranians exploit their military presence to promote economic, cultural, religious, and other interests.**

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### **Soft Power**

In addition to its military involvement in Syria, Iran invests considerable resources in elements of soft power, which is a complementary and sometimes even central element of its [policy](#)

to export the revolution. The Iranians exploit their military presence to promote economic, cultural, religious, and other interests. In this they have made gains, both in the short term, by signing economic agreements in order to bypass sanctions and using civilian sites as cover for military action; and in the long term, with their penetration into an array of civilian areas—society, economy, education, religion—and the creation of dependency on their services, until it becomes almost impossible to uproot them.

### ***The Economic Dimension***

#### ***Top-Down: Bilateral Agreements and Infrastructure Development***

During the war Tehran signed a series of economic agreements with Damascus, ranging from [long term loans](#) given to the Syrian regime by Iranian banks, through the [supply of Iranian oil](#), reconstruction of war-damaged areas, and [the Syrian power system](#), down to [mining of its quarries](#). As such, Iran seeks to recoup some of the enormous economic resources it invested over the war years (estimated in the tens of billions of dollars), and to expand economic cooperation in order to strengthen its grip on the country.

Iran sees Syria as an important geographic link in its goal for regional hegemony, and therefore seeks to advance two significant strategic moves: the creation of a [Shiite transport corridor between Tehran and Beirut](#) (with a railway crossing Iraq and Syria) and an established presence on the coast. In April 2019, after years of futile attempts to gain a foothold in one of Syria's ports, which failed largely because of Russian opposition, the Assad regime [gave Iran permission to lease part of Latakia Port](#), and in March 2021, [a regular marine supply line](#) was launched, linking it to the Bandar Abbas Port in southern Iran.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between declarations and signed contracts, and facts on the ground. [Numerous bureaucratic hurdles](#) as well as Syria's obvious reluctance to rely on Tehran as its sole source of aid interfere

with Iranian attempts to take control of the Syrian economy. Moreover, in spite of all the declarations regarding Latakia Port, it is not entirely clear if it was in fact leased to the Iranians.

#### ***Bottom-Up: A Shiite Social Network***

A decade of bloody civil war joined by the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of American sanctions on the Assad regime in June 2020 (Caesar Act) caused severe damage to the Syrian economy. According to a [World Bank Report](#) of March 2021, over the past decade the Syrian economy has shrunk by about 60 percent, and the Syrian pound plummeted from a rate of 46 pounds to the dollar in December 2010 to over 3,000 pounds to the dollar in June 2021. Average wages also fell sharply, from around \$300-600 a month in 2010 to the present low of \$20-50 a month. There have likewise been many accounts of shortages of basic foods and [soaring prices](#). For example, the price of eggs is one hundred times greater (jumping from 3 to 300 pounds per egg), while bread is sixty times more expensive. According to a report from the UN Global Food Program, about two thirds of the Syrian population require monthly assistance to avert starvation.

Apart from the economic agreements designed to increase the dependence of the Assad regime on the Islamic Republic, the Iranians and their proxies also exploit the socioeconomic crisis to intensify Iranian influence at the popular level, with the focus on the most needy groups in weak peripheral areas. The Deir ez-Zur district in eastern Syria is a main focus of Iranian efforts of this kind. The inhabitants of this desert region, who rely mainly on agriculture and raising sheep, suffered high rates of unemployment even before the war, and were severely affected by the ongoing drought that struck Syria at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is therefore no wonder that this region, strategically located on the border with Iraq and relatively sparsely populated, became fertile ground for the growth of Islamist rebel



groups during the war, and in the years 2014-2017 was largely controlled by ISIS.

When the province was liberated from the Islamists, the Iranians and their proxies set up a number of military bases (in Deir ez-Zur there are [13 Iranian bases and seven Hezbollah bases](#)). Thereafter, with the aim of increasing their influence among the local population, the Iranians targeted civilian life: they give money and food baskets to the needy, offer free medical treatment, and organize trips to Shiite holy places throughout Syria. At the same time, because of the tribal nature of the population, [the Iranians seek the support of local sheikhs](#), while [driving a wedge](#)<sup>1</sup> between them and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a largely Kurdish military alliance, supported by the United States that is also present in this region.

Those who live in the region, Sunnis in origin who fled for their lives during the war, [returned home under Iranian protection](#), and some of them even joined [the pro-Iranian militias active in Deir ez-Zur](#) because of the pay almost unimaginable in Syrian terms—[\\$200 a month, and double promised to those who convert to Shia Islam](#). Without precise data about local recruitment to the militias, it is reasonable to presume that the response is not marginal, if only because of the militias' involvement in the daily lives of the community. Thus, in al-Bukamal, one of the largest towns in the Deir ez-Zur province located near the Iraqi border, the Iranians renovated the local park that was destroyed by ISIS, and each week the militias organize [leisure and cultural activities there for the locals](#), which naturally carry Shiite messages. The Iranians operate in a similar way in other weak areas of Syria, particularly in the south—Daraa, Suwayda, and Quneitra—and direct their dawaa and recruitment efforts at the poorest populations and minority groups.

### ***The Religious Dimension—Shiite “Missionaries” and Indoctrination***

One of the most interesting methods used by Iran to establish its status in Syria is the

attempt to increase the number of Shiites in the country. The goal is to achieve two objectives at once: first, the Shiite residents will serve as the vanguard of Iranian ideology in Syria, and second, the presence of a large Shiite population in Syria will provide Iran with an ongoing pretext for intervention, as the “shield of Shia Islam.” But unlike in other countries (Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen), the relatively small number of Shiites in Syria, only 2 percent, makes a significant change of the demographic balance impossible. Therefore the Iranians, with the encouragement of the Assad family, are working to bring the Alawites—who constitute [about 15 percent of the population](#) and hold all senior government and military positions—closer to Twelver Shiism (the largest Shia faction and the most common in Iran).

The idea of Shiite missionizing activity toward the Alawites in Syria is not new, and is a shared interest of both Iran, eager to spread Shiism, and the Assad family, which seeks religious legitimacy for its rule. For hundreds of years the Alawite sect was considered heretical in Islam, and it was only in 1974 that the well-known Shiite scholar Musa al-Sadr, who was in alliance with Hafez al-Assad, published a *fatwa* (religious ruling) stating that the Alawites were part of Shia Islam. Alawite-Shiite links grew stronger after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and since then there have been a number of Syrian-Iranian attempts to bring the Alawites closer to Twelver Shiism. For example, in the 1980s, Jamil al-Assad, the brother of then-President Hafez al-Assad, set up a charity [under the name al-Murtada](#), which called on Syrian Alawites to adopt Twelver Shiism, and also sent hundreds of Syrians to Shiite religious studies in Qom, so they could act as missionaries in their country.

The missionary process gathered pace [when Bashar al-Assad came to power](#). The Iranians opened *hussainiyas* (Shiite meeting places) in poor towns of Deir ez-Zur and a-Raqqa; they donated money to build hospitals in Syria and gave aid, in money and subsidies for basic food

items, to needy Sunni groups in Syria; and they also tried to lure public opinion figures to convert to Shiism with money and gifts (mainly given to the heads of the large tribes in the east, who had the most influence over their followers). However, the Alawite sect in Syria has a clearly [educated](#) and [secular](#) character, and tends to regard Iranian efforts at Shiization with at least some suspicion.

Since the outbreak of the civil war and Tehran's uncompromising loyalty to Assad, the Syrian government has allowed the Iranians to do almost anything they please. First, the Iranians have significantly increased their "[cultural centers](#)" in Syria. Those centers that were ostensibly intended to enrich local leisure culture were actually used to spread the Shiite message, mostly through sermons from clerics. Second, in 2014, following an Iranian request, [Assad required the Ministry of Education to include Shiite studies](#) in all schools, colleges, and universities in the country. At the same time, and not by chance, restrictions were imposed on the role of the Sunni *ulama* in Syrian public education. In addition, since the start of the war, Iran opened some [40 Shiite schools in Damascus](#) and several more in Latakia, Deir ez-Zur, and al-Bukamal, where the Iranians subsidize the studies and also give small stipends to the pupils (which are like oxygen in economically suffocating Syria). With Iranian encouragement, the Syrian regime set up ten institutions of *sharia* studies all over the country, which teach according to the Jafari system (the most common system in Shiism). Iran is likewise active [on the academic front](#); in recent years it established [five extensions of Iranian universities](#), which also encourage applications from Shiite students from the region (Iranians, Iraqis, Afghanis, and others) with generous scholarships to encourage them to remain in Syria after their studies. Finally, targeting informal education, the Iranians established two youth movements in Syria, [Imam al-Mahdi Scouts and al-Wilayah Scouts](#),

which combine Shiite education with semi-military training.

Another step taken by Tehran to strengthen the Shiite identity in Syria is to promote [Shiite holy sites in the country](#), by encouraging religious tourism (such as the Shiite Ziyara) and establishing centers of Shia studies. They have renovated holy sites that were damaged in the fighting and established some new ones, encouraging Shiites from all over the Middle East to visit and study there, and some have [even settled permanently](#) in Syria. The best example is the shrine to al-Sayeda Zeinab on the southern outskirts of Damascus, which according to Shia faith is the burial site of Zeinab, the daughter of Ali and Fatma and the granddaughter of Mohammed. In the civil war the shrine became a symbol: local Shiites took refuge inside from repeated attacks by global jihad organizations; [several severe suicide attacks](#) took the lives of dozens of pilgrims; and the desire to defend the shrine led to impressive recruitment of Shiite fighters, while Hezbollah and Iranian fighters were sent repeatedly to try and break through to the besieged shrine. In recent years, after the final conquest of the site, [Iran purchased several buildings in the area](#) to create a protective belt around it. Today the entire area, like other Shiite sites in the country, is a [base of Hezbollah control](#) and of pro-Iranian militias.

### ***The Demographic Dimension: Resettlement and Encouraged Shiite Migration to Syria***

Another method adopted by Tehran to strengthen Shiite identity in Syria is to resettle Shiites in towns that were destroyed or abandoned during the war. The Iranians understand that Syrian demography is far from ensuring Shia hegemony, so they focus on areas of more strategic importance for them: the larger towns, for their proximity to economic and government centers, and the borders with Iraq and Lebanon, because of their goal of achieving

an above-ground corridor and securing the Hezbollah rear.

Accordingly, in the course of the civil war, Iran and its proxies [carried out Shia-Sunni population exchanges](#), sometimes by force and sometimes as part of ceasefire agreements with rebel groups. A prominent example is the town of [al-Qusayr](#), a Sunni enclave in an Alawite and Shia region on the crossroads from the Lebanese border to Homs. The small town was the main focus of the rebel forces at the start of the civil war, and the heavy fighting in and around it prompted the residents to flee, until in mid-2013 it was captured by Hezbollah and Syrian army forces. Iran, which understood the strategic importance of the location, turned the area into a Hezbollah base and resettled Shiites from Lebanon and Syria there. The Qusayr refugees who tried to return to their homes were arrested.

In September 2015 a ceasefire was signed between the regime and the rebels under siege in the towns of Zabadani and Madaya to the west of Damascus. Iran insisted on including a [clause](#) in the agreement whereby the rebels would leave these towns and be replaced by a Shiite population from the besieged villages of al-Fu'ah and Kafriya near Idlib. A year later, in August 2016, in Daraa, west of Damascus, the Iranians [settled](#) 300 Shiite families from Iraq to replace the Sunni rebels who had left. There are also reports that during the civil war, pro-Iranian militias [systematically set fire to land registration offices](#) in many towns so that the original residents would find it difficult to prove their links to the region, making the resettlement project simpler.

In April 2018 the Syrian parliament passed the [10-2018 Law](#) (which was amended in November that year), enabling the regime to requisition land all over the country for “redevelopment.” Under this law, once the state declares that a region has been designated for development, the local authority must provide a list of all land owners within 45 days, and anyone who is not

on the list can appeal the decision within a year from the declaration, to receive compensation. In one way or another, after the declaration all residents of the area must leave. In effect, the regime and the Iranians are using this law to complete the resettlement and population exchange project in Syria.

## Conclusion

Iranian activity in Syria is conducted on several levels—military, economic, social, religious, and educational—in order to create a strong support network that is not dependent on a physical Iranian presence. Tehran is seeking to build a power base that can rival the regime by unseating its monopoly on the use of force and by wielding leverage in civil society, and is loyal to itself and the Islamic Republic. The depth of Iranian social and economic penetration will make it hard to remove Iran from Syria, or to limit its influence on the country. However, Iran has encountered some difficulties that prevent it from taking complete control of Syrian systems, such as the Russian presence, the demographic balance that is clearly tipped against the Shia, the secular nature of the Alawite minority, and the Syrian bureaucracy.

Israeli policymakers should reconsider Israel’s response to the Iranian threat posed by the entrenchment in Syria. First, it should be understood that Iran sees Syria as a primary strategic asset, and that the Iranians are working on a long term plan. In other words, military strikes on pro-Iranian militias in Syria will not deter Tehran or make it recalculate its route on the Syrian issue. If Israel does indeed wish to frustrate Iran’s long term goals in Syria, it must carry out a number of political moves to supplement its military actions:

- a. Russia on board: Iranian moves in Syria are contrary to the Russian interest of strengthening the central government. The Russians should understand that as long as Iranian forces remain in the country and the local militias are not integrated into the

Syrian security framework, the situation could deteriorate and resemble the situation in Lebanon or Iraq, making it harder for the Russians to reap any economic or political gains from a rehabilitated Syria.

- b. Carrots and sticks for Damascus: Israel should send a message to the regime (through the Russians) that it accepts Assad's rule in Syria and will not endanger it. However, if Iran continues its entrenchment in Syria, then Israel will consider attacking targets that will damage the regime's stability. Apart from that, if Assad takes steps to restrain Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, Israel will make an effort to persuade Washington to remove the onerous sanctions.
- c. Economic recovery: It is extremely important to promote a regional move toward investment in services and infrastructures in eastern and southern Syria. Israel should use its new contacts in the Arab world and enlist its friends in the Gulf on this matter (although of course its involvement must remain secret, in order to avoid endangering the process). In this way everyone wins: the dependence of

the Syrian regime and population on Iranian funds will decrease and Damascus will also gain renewed recognition by the Arab states; the Gulf states will gain a foothold in Syria and be portrayed as leaders in the inter-Arab system that provide aid to an Arab country in distress; and the Russians can reverse their image as the destroyers of Syria, and even earn points in the international system.

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## Note

- 1 In the past year a number of tribal leaders in eastern Syria [were killed](#) by unknown assailants. This has raised the already high level of tension between the tribes and the SDF.





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