

THE IRANIAN CRESCENT

IRAN'S POLITICAL, GEOSTRATEGIC AND
ECONOMIC INTEREST IN SYRIA

PART THREE – SYRIAN | IRANIAN RELATIONS

BY NAWAR SHABAN

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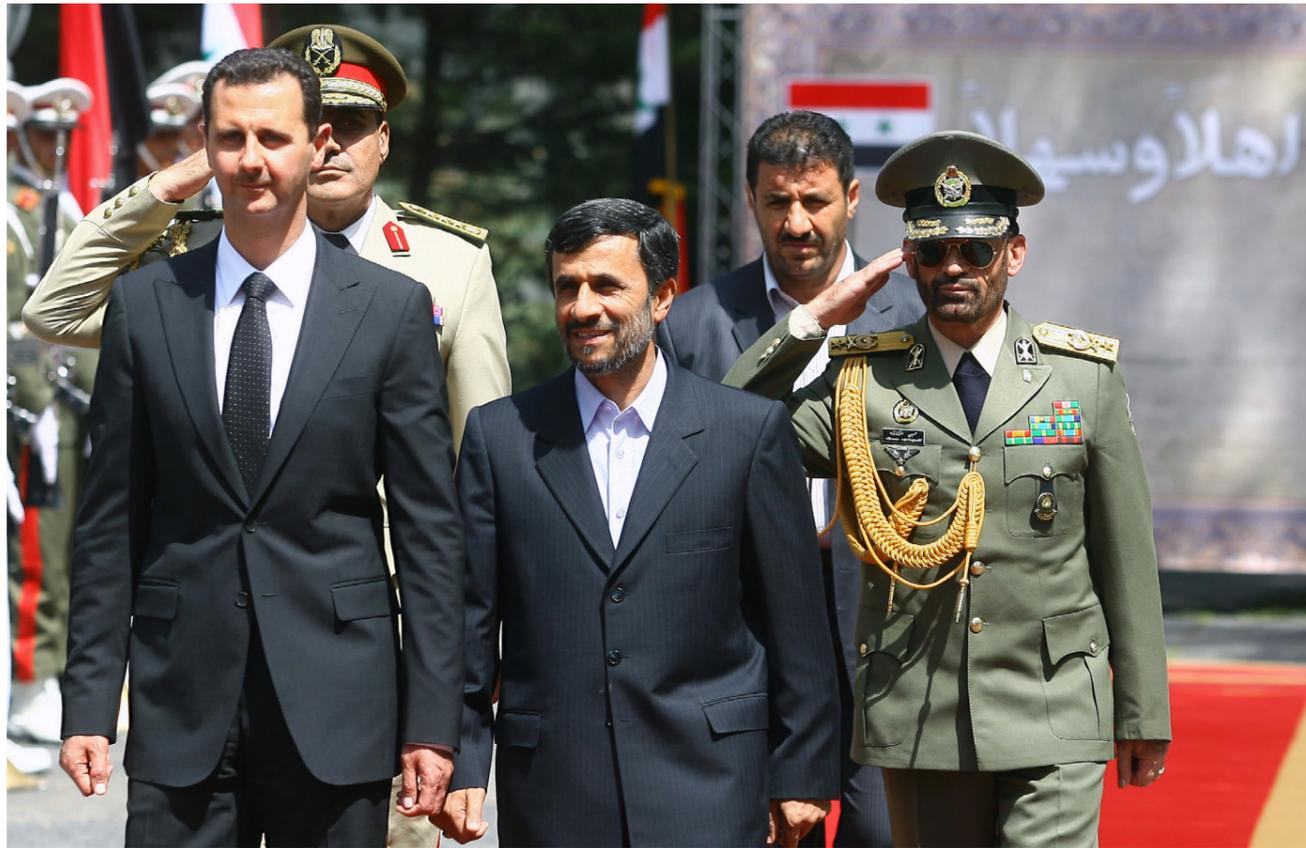
SYRIAN – IRANIAN RELATIONS SINCE 2000

BY NAWAR SHABAN

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SYRIAN – IRANIAN RELATIONS SINCE 2000

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian-Iranian alliance began to expand in 2000 when Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency of Syria. Later on, events such as the Iraq War in 2003 and the 2006 Lebanon War brought the two countries closer together. Syria became increasingly dependent on Iran for political and military support, as Bashar al-Assad has failed to maintain positive relations with other Arab states.

On June 16, 2006, the defense ministers of Syria and Iran signed an agreement for military cooperation against “common threats” from Israel and the United States. At the time, Iranian Defense Minister Najjar said: “Iran considers Syria’s security as part of its own security, and we consider that our defense capabilities belong to Syria.”¹ The visit also led to the sale of Iranian military equipment to Syria. In addition to acquiring military equipment, Iran has continuously invested billions of dollars into the Syrian economy.

Since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Iran has taken various approaches to increase its military and security in-

fluence in Syria. The first approach was to work directly with foreign militias and recruit local militias. The second approach was developed from the core of the first approach. Its main goal was to integrate local Iranian militias into Bashar al-Assad’s military and security departments, giving them a legal position in Syria and a shield from possible Israeli or US airstrikes.

“TO ENSURE A LONG-TERM PRESENCE IN SYRIA, IRAN TRIES TO WIN OVER LOCAL COMMUNITIES BY PROVIDING SOCIAL WELFARE AND BASIC NEED SERVICES.”

However, with the decline of military operations in Syria, Iran began to look for new ways to expand its control and influence in various Syrian provinces, especially after infiltrating the regime’s army and security apparatus. Over the years, Iranian military involvement in Syria has increased and become more

visible, making it very easy for the Israeli Air Force to target its presence. As a result, Iran was forced to change its military approach to better hide its militias in 2017 and 2018. Thus, Iran embarked on an ambitious plan to redefine its presence in Syria. The plan included creating the Local Defense Forces (LDF), supporting certain brigades in the Syrian regime’s army, and most recently, establishing private security companies.

Iran continued to alter its tactics in 2018 and 2019, specifically with regards to foreign Iranian militias. To reduce the risk of Israel and the US targeting these militias, Iran limited their activities and used local intermediaries to complete tasks on behalf of the militias, a good example being the Bader Corp.² Iranian militias still have three bases in Southern Aleppo and near Aleppo International Airport, although all their social media accounts have stopped reporting on their activities in the region.³ The Iranian militias have been operating under the umbrella of the Syrian LDF. Moreover, Iran has attempted to infiltrate Syrian society and strengthen its ties with Syrian businessmen since the beginning of 2017.

This study will provide an overview of Iran’s influence and power in Syria and highlight the extent of its influence on Syrian society and economy. In addition, the study will highlight the different tactics used by Iran, its strategic goals and the different means to achieve them in Syria.

IRAN’S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA

Although Iran supported the Arab Spring movements against pro-Western regimes (in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain), the regime opposed protesters in Syria. Iran did not support the Syrian protest movement because it feared losing its Syrian ally, which constitutes a pillar of Iranian regional influence. Obama’s security adviser Thomas E. Donilon confirmed this assumption when he said: “Iran considers Syria a strategic bridge, and the loss of Syria means the collapse of Iran’s influence in the region.”⁴

As a result, Iran provided technical support and equipment to the Syrian security forces to stamp out the protest movement. Furthermore, Iran provided armed forces to the Syrian regime, transforming the Syrian conflict into a proxy war. In particular, Iran sent members of the IRGC and Basij forces to counter the Syrian opposition and to form local militias. Moreover, the Iranian government provided economic assistance by granting the Syrian regime loans worth \$4.6 billion to \$5.6 billion between January 2013 and 2015 to buy oil and products from Iran. James Mattis, the ex-Commander in Chief of the US forces in the Middle East, pointed out the importance of Iranian patronage in stabilizing Bashar al-Assad’s regime when he said: “Assad cannot hold power for six months without Iran’s support.”⁵

Iranian objectives in supporting the Syrian regime include:

- Securing Iran’s areas of influence in the Middle East by establishing two corridors connecting Iran to the Mediterranean through Syria.⁶
- To achieve the first objective, Iran must support regional allies in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, as their collapse would strengthen opponents.⁷
- Establishing an East-Mediterranean Iranian economic bloc comprising Iran, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which would allow

Iran to strengthen its economy by exporting petrol and gas to Europe and selling its products in the region’s countries.⁸

Iran’s Syria-policy gained momentum in 2015, after Tehran reached a nuclear deal with the 5 + 1 group, the JCPOA agreement. The agreement eased international pressure and facilitated Iranian operations in Syria. The lifting of sanctions and the release of funds worth \$100 million boosted Iran’s financial support for its militias. Iran also benefited from the Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015,⁹ and the cooperation with Moscow against the Syrian opposition that followed. Moreover, the expansion of the terror organization “Islamic State” (ISIS) legitimized Iranian militias by turning them into allies of the international coalition against ISIS. In addition, Iran profited from Turkey’s concerns about the expansion of the US-backed Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD). Rapprochement with Turkey resulted in the formation of the political process of “Astana” (January 2017) with Russia to facilitate a settlement to the Syrian crisis.

Despite these developments, Iran remains concerned that the Syrian regime will open up to the West and normalize relations with Arab and Western countries to obtain financial support for the reconstruction of Syria. It also fears the increasing dependence of the Syrian regime on Russia, which reduces Iranian influence inside Syria. For this reason, Iran seeks to secure its influence in Syria by strengthening tools of influence like militias.



1. Pouladi, Farhad, “Iran and Syria sign pact against ‘common threats’”, The Daily Star, 16 June 2006. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2006/Jun-16/72583-iran-and-syria-sign-pact-against-common-threats.ashx#axzz2tsRyr16V>
2. The Bader Corp is an Iran-officered Iraqi Shia militia that fights in Syria alongside Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.
3. Saban, Navvar, “Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria”, Atlantic Council, 5 November 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>
4. Salehzadeh, Alan (2013), “Iran’s domestic and foreign policies”, National Defence University Department of Strategic and Defence Studies, Series 4, Working Papers no. 49, p. 24. <https://goo.gl/voaXkC>
5. Gray H., David, “Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah: A Strategic Alliance”, Global Security Studies, Winter 2014, Volume 5, p. 32. <https://goo.gl/qiFJ8X>
6. Yaari, Ehud, “Iran’s ambitions in the Levant”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 May 2017. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-ambitions-in-the-levant>
7. Ansari, Ali and Bassiri Tabrizi, Aniseh (2016), “The View from Tehran. Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict”, Royal United Services Institute, pp. 7-8. <https://goo.gl/YuEz9q>
8. Badawi, Tamer, “Economic relations between Iran and the Syrian regime: indicators of imbalance”, Al-Jazeera Center for Studies (Arabic), 2 July 2015. <https://goo.gl/3aYqCU>
9. Brian Murphy, Iran claims \$100 billion now freed in major step as sanctions roll back, The Washington post, 1 February 2016, shorturl.at/cnwL3

IRANIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD GREETING HIS SYRIAN COUNTERPART BASHAR AL-ASSAD ON AUGUST 19, 2009 AT THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE IN TEHRAN, IRAN. COURTESY OF UPI/MARYAM RAHMANIAN/UPI/SHUTTERSTOCK

A SYRIAN ARMY TANK IN JOBAR, DAMASCUS, 2016. COURTESY OF GORAN_SAFAREK/SHUTTERSTOCK

“IRAN HAS RECRUITED MEMBERS OF SYRIA’S SHIITE MINORITY, FORMING SEVERAL MILITIAS WITH AN ESTIMATED 5,000 TO 8,000 FIGHTERS.”

The maps on the following pages (pg. 10, pg. 13, pg. 14) show how Iran’s control has developed in the various Syrian governorates and illustrate the most prominent ways in which Iran can benefit from influence in the country.

The following graphs provide a general overview of Iranian control in Syria within various sectors. They aim to draw a clear picture of how Iranian influence in Syria has evolved between 2013 and 2020 at the military, security, economic, social and cultural level, which is shown in diagrams (1) and (2). Diagrams (3) and (4) provide a deeper insight into Iranian influence and presence in Deir Ezzor and Aleppo, as they show the main developments of Iranian influence in 2020.

In designing the figures, the researcher relied on several tools to gather information. The tools used include direct interviews with informed sources, the use of a special archive on Iranian control in Syria, the use of information available on the internet, official reports from local Iranian and foreign armed groups, the websites of Syrian companies and organizations affiliated with Iran, and reports of Syrian personalities affiliated with Iran. The most important points were then gathered through interviews and cross-checked with the other sources to produce the analysis.

| | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Less than 1 | No presence and control |
| Between 1 and 3 | Low presence and control |
| Between 4 and 5 | Medium presence and control |
| Between 6 and 8 | Strong presence and control |
| Over 8 | Very Strong presence and control |

The researcher conducted 27 interviews with local figures in Syria, both civilian and military, 11 of whom were affiliated with Iranian civilian and military organizations. All interviews were conducted via Skype or WhatsApp and included a questionnaire about Iranian influence on security, military, economy and services. The researcher used multiple choice questions to give sources an opportunity to provide a more direct assessment about Iranian sway in the respective region. The scale used in the interviews was as follows:

RECRUITMENT LOCAL MILITIAS

As Iran’s main tool of influence, the structure and organization of its militias require special attention. Iran encouraged the Shiite minority in Syria to form special militias and recruited Sunnis¹⁰, especially clans in the provinces of Aleppo, Raqqah and Deir Ezzor. In general, some of the Shia militias were recruited on a sectarian basis under the pretext of defending sites sacred to the Shia community. Recruitment campaigns take place at holy sites, such as among Shiites in Damascus in the district of Sayeda Zeinab. Following recruitment, mem-

bers undergo three to six weeks of light and medium weapons training and sometimes as much as six months of heavy weapons training.

Iranian-backed militias can be divided into the following groups:

NATIONAL DEFENSE FORCES (NDF)

The establishment of the NDF began in 2012 in the city of Homs with the support and guidance of Iran. The NDF includes members from all sects (Sunni, Alawite and Druze) with headquarters in each province. With an estimated number of 40,000 fighters, the NDF is considered the largest Syrian militia. Iran has called on the Syrian regime to legitimize these forces like the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq and integrate them into the regime’s military. However, in 2016, the Syrian regime took a series of decisions to disband this militia, forcing Iran to completely neglect the NDF and turn its focus towards the local defense forces.

Russia, however, wanted to keep the NDF alive and attempted to incorporate the group into the Russian-led 5th Corps in 2018 in order to strengthen their regional ground forces. This was only successful in Deir Ezzor however, one of the Iranian strongholds in Syria.

SYRIAN SHIA MILITIAS

Iran has recruited members of Syria’s Shiite minority, forming several militias with an estimated 5,000 to 8,000 fighters. The most prominent of these militias are the Imam al-Hajjah and the Mahdi Soldiers, as well as the Mahdi Army in Nubul and Zahra “Aleppo,” the Brigade of Rukia “Damascus,” Al-Waed al-Sadiq Corps “Idlib,” forces of Imam Reza “Homs,” Zin El Abidin Brigade, “Deir Ezzor” Brigade 313 Busra al-Sham in Daraa and Mukhtar al-Thaqafi Brigade (Lattakia and Hama).

LOCAL DEFENSE FORCES (LDF)

Iran played a clear role in establishing, training and advising the LDF. After focusing mainly on Aleppo (the LDF claimed to have tens of thousands of members there), the group opened branches in Lattakia, Tartus, Damascus, and Hama. The LDF expanded in 2018 by incorporating groups such as the Forces of Wrath (Qwat al-Ghadab), a key Christian-loyal militia in Suqaylabiyah and fighters from Aleppo and Raqqah, increasing the number of fighters to 50,000. Today, the most prominent militias within the LDF are the Nayrab Brigades - Special Operations, Al-Sefira Corpse, Al-Baqir Brigade, the Nubul and Zahra Brigades and the Qatraji forces.

While the LDF works directly with the IRGC and other Iranian-backed militias, the group is administratively linked to the Defense Ministry and even considered part of the regime’s army rather than an auxiliary force. Illustrating these close ties, Defense Minister Fahd Jasim al-Fureij granted immunity to all LDF-affiliated Syrian youth in 2017. These governmental ties demonstrate the futility of attempts to remove Iranian-backed militias from Syria. Even if groups like the Lebanese Hezbollah withdraw, the LDF will remain, with many of its units ideologically linked to Iran.

10. The number of fighters depicts the current situation and is based on recent interviews (2021) the researcher conducted with sources from Aleppo and Deir Ezzor province.

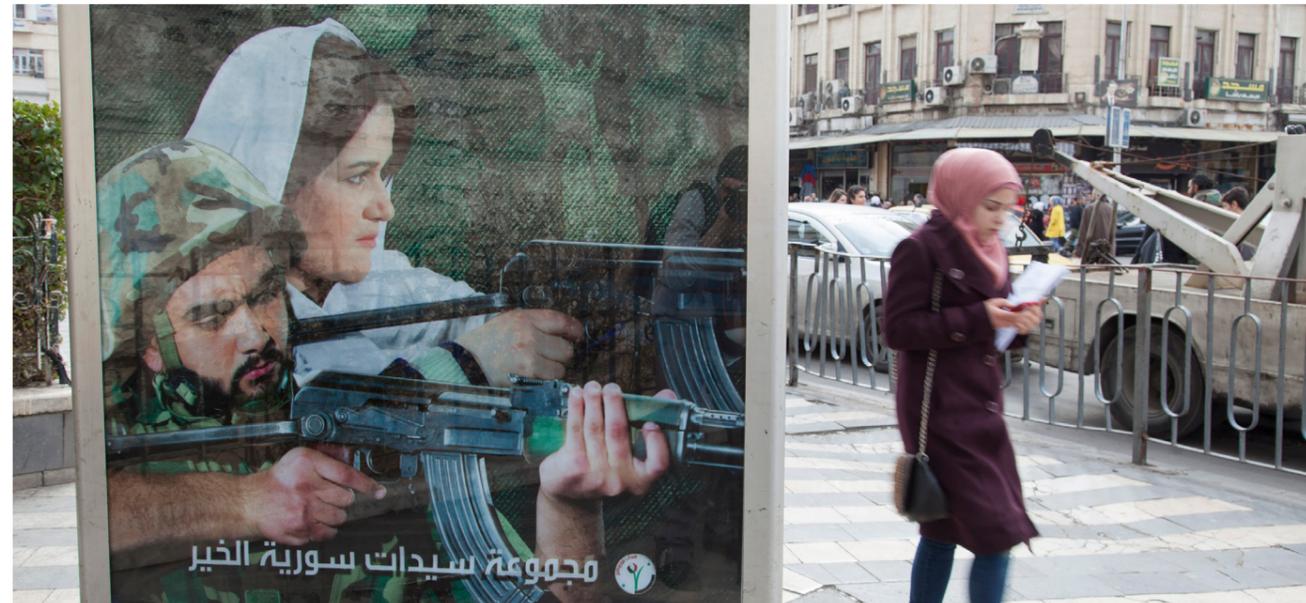
MAIN SUB-GROUPS IN THE LDF

| Arabic Name | Name | Current Location in Syria |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| لواء الإمام زين العابدين | Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidin | Aleppo – Deir Ezzor |
| قوات الرضا | Quwat al-Ridah | Homs – Daraa - Aleppo |
| فوج السفارة | Liwa al-Sayyda Ruqayya | Rif. Damascus |
| المقاومة العقائدية | The national ideological resistance | Aleppo – Deir Ezzor - Raqqah |
| لواء الإمام المهدي | Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi | Aleppo – Deir Ezzor |
| لواء الباقر | Liwa al-Baqir | Aleppo – Deir Ezzor |
| جنود المهدي | Al-Mahdi Soldiers | Aleppo – Deir Ezzor |
| سرايا الغالبون | Saryya al-Ghalbon | Aleppo |
| فوج الإمام الحجة | Fawj al-Imam Huji | Aleppo |



MINOR LDF GROUPS

| Arabic Name | Name | Fighters # | Location in Syria |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------|--------------------------------|
| مجموعة قرش | Al-Qarsh Group | 300 | Northern Lattakia |
| كتيبة التبريد للمهام الخاصة | Al-Nairab SWAT | 200 | Sheikh Najar - Aleppo Air port |
| فوج السفيرة | Al-Safira Regiment | 300 | Al-Sfira Military Base |
| مجموعة ساجد | Sajid Group | 100 | Northern Lattakia |
| صقور الصحراء | Suqur al-Sahra | 150 | Aleppo City |
| لواء خيبر | Liwa Khaybr | 100 | Aleppo – Deir Ezzor |
| القوة 313 | Forces 313 | 500 | Deir Ezzor |
| قوات الغضب المسيحية | Qwat al-Ghadab | 200 | Hama |
| المقاومة الإسلامية | The Islamic Resistance | 250 | Homs – Hama – Deir Ezzor |



FOREIGNER MILITIAS

To recruit foreign fighters, Iran's "Husseiniat Scouts" appeal to Shia volunteers on an ideological level under the motto of "Protecting Shia shrines." Moreover, Iran uses economic incentives. Iranian-led Fatemiyoun brigade fighters receive a salary ranging from \$450 to \$700.

The IRGC budget of \$7.6 billion (in 2017) funds militia salaries. The IRGC and Hezbollah then train militias in camps in southwestern Iran and Mashhad, before transferring them to Syria, where Iran has several military bases (e.g. in Damascus International Airport, al-Tayyas (T4) Airport, Azraa Base, Sayeda Zeinab, al-Kaswa, Zabadani, and al-Qusayr).

Since 2017 and through 2022, Iran has increased its military spending by 11% each year, peaking in April 2022. Each year,

Iran allocates a different budget to the IRGC, depending on its military activities. Usually the IRGC budget amounts to 30% to 40% of the yearly military spending of Iran.

"DUE TO LARGE LOSSES, SOME HEZBOLLAH COMBATANTS REFUSE TO FIGHT IN SYRIA, AND HEZBOLLAH REFRAINS FROM INVOLVING ITS FIGHTERS OR EXPERIENCED COMMANDERS IN COMBAT."

The following table gives an approximate value of Iran's military spending and IRGC budget according to Iran's annual report by "Bit-project", and a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI):

| Year | Iran military Spending | IRCG Budget | Involvement in Syria |
|------|------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| 2017 | \$16.4 billion | \$7.6 billion | Extreme / 45% |
| 2018 | \$18.3 billion | \$7.3 billion | Extreme / 45% |
| 2019 | \$20.5 billion | \$7.1 billion | High / 35% |
| 2020 | \$22.9 billion | \$6.8 billion | Medium / 30% |
| 2021 | \$24.6 billion | \$7.4 billion | Medium / 30% |

IRAQI MILITIAS

Iran-backed militias from Iraq emerged in Syria in late 2012, most notably the Zulfiqar Brigade, Abu al-Fadl Abbas Brigades, Asaad Allah al-Ghalib Brigade, the brigades of Imam Ali, and Asayeb Ahl al-Haq. However, many of these militias returned to Iraq in mid-2014 to counter the spread of ISIS following the ISIS takeover of Mosul. Currently, the role of these militias is mainly limited to the governorate Deir Ezzor, where they ensure the protection of transportation lines between Iraq and Syria.

AFGHAN MILITIAS

The Afghan Revolutionary Guards have recruited Shia members in Iran and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, 15% of the population is Shia, 70% of whom belong to the Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups. Following recruitment, Afghan Shia members formed the Fatemiyoun Brigade in November 2012. Their number is estimated at 3,000-4,000 fighters spread across three battalions in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and Deir Ezzor.

PAKISTANI MILITIAS

The IRGC recruited Pakistani Shias (which make up 20% of Pakistan's population) to form the "Zaynabiyoun Brigade," which appeared publicly in Syria in early 2013. The brigade has an estimated 1,000-5,000 fighters deployed in Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, Hama and Deir Ezzor.

LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah first appeared in Syria in May 2011, providing training and technical assistance to security forces and the Syrian army. In addition, it launched combat operations on the ground in 2013 and now operates in several provinces, especially near the Syrian-Lebanese border. The main strength of Hezbollah is its proximity to headquarters in Lebanon, which makes it easier to send weapons to allied fighters in Syria.

In the beginning of its operations in Syria, the number of Hezbollah fighters amounted to at least 4,000, located primarily in Qusayr, the Western Qalmoun mountain range, Aleppo, Damascus countryside and Quneitra countryside. Later on, the numbers increased up to 8,000 fighters, as the group paid around \$1,200 monthly for each fighter, many of the young recruits being only 16-17 years old.

Hezbollah participated in the battles of western Qalmoun and was accused of participating in the massacres in Daraa, Bayda

Banyas, and in the Lattakia countryside. After the Russian intervention in September 2015, Hezbollah expanded its presence to Lattakia, Idlib, Qamishli and Deir Ezzor, causing an increase in casualties. The party suffered from the loss of its most prominent leaders, such as Mustafa Badreddin, the top military official of Hezbollah, and Ali Fayyad, the military official in Syria, as well as Jihad Mughniyeh, Samir Qantar, Ghasan Fakih, Hassan Hussein al-Hajj and Mahmoud Abbas. In total, Hezbollah has lost about one-third of its fighters in Syria, with an estimated 2,000 dead and thousands wounded.

Due to these large losses, some Hezbollah combatants refuse to fight in Syria, and Hezbollah refrains from involving its fighters or experienced commanders in combat. Hezbollah fighters only participate when absolutely necessary, as in the battle for Aleppo in July 2016. The group in turn tries to push other Shia militias (Afghan and Iraqi) into the front lines, where they are supposed to gain combat experience in urban warfare.

Military ties between Hezbollah and Iran are significant as they share several common interests. Hezbollah's authority increased the closer the location was to the Lebanese border, for instance during the battles for Qalmoun and Qusayr. Hezbollah exercised absolute control over the region after the fighting ended, but sometimes the battle had a political dimension involving Iran; in this case, the final command was with the IRGC-leaders.

Hezbollah also played an essential role in joint operations with Iranian and Syrian commanders during the regime's attack on Daraa Governorate. Hezbollah control stemmed from Iran's disinterest in these locations and Hezbollah's desire to protect routes used to transport drugs. Hezbollah remained part of an operational space supervised by Iran (in Aleppo, Hama and Deir Ezzor governorates), which it depends on for local weapons.

FINANCING LOCAL MILITIAS

Iran has worked to build up local militias in Syria that are economically self-sufficient, so that their funding does not conflict with foreign Iranian militia funding. By early 2017, Iran consolidated most local militias under the LDF to ease funding. The LDF groups were linked to several organizations, companies, and Iranian businessmen with close ties to Iran, such as the "Jihad al-Bina" organization and the businessman Al-Qatraji.

BILBOARD INVITE TO THE SYRIAN ARMY IN DAMASCUS, 2016. COURTESY OF GORAN SAFAREK / SHUTTERSTOCK

Consequently, local militias controlled key resources, such as the Al-Baqir Brigade's hold on transportation in Aleppo and surrounding areas, as well as Force 313's¹¹ control over several restaurants in the city of Al-Bukamal in Deir Ezzor.

IRAN'S RELATION WITH THE MILITARY INSTITUTIONS IN SYRIA

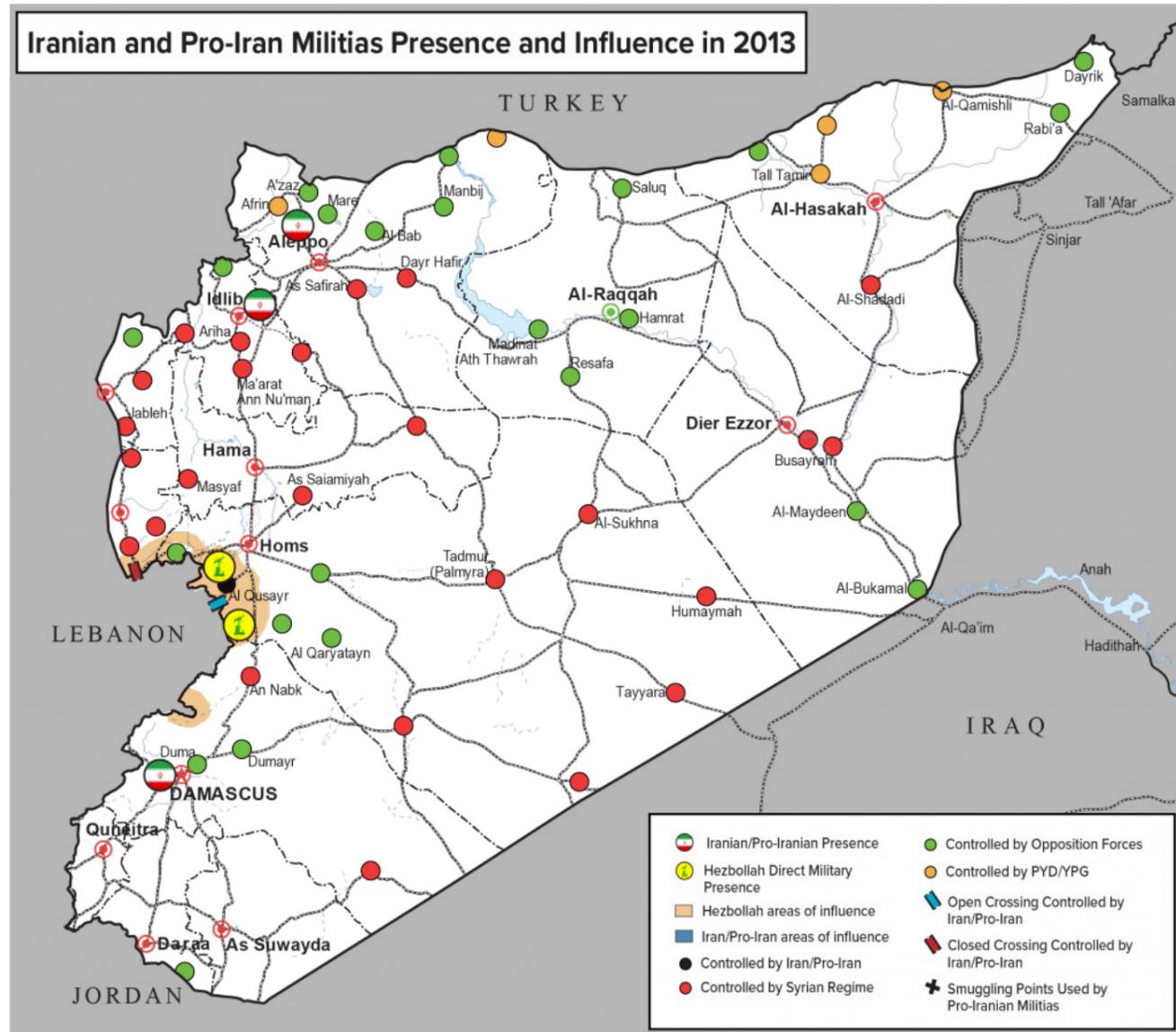
Following the 2011 uprising, Iran relied on the Syrian security apparatus to crack down on protesters. Iran shared its experience in suppressing protests – such as during the Green Movement in Iran in 2009 – and provided logistical support, equipment, advice and technical assistance for the Syrian government to monitor the opposition's communication networks and social media.

Despite Iranian support, Syrian security forces failed to quell the protest movement and gradually lost control of several cities and towns, as the armed resistance backed by regional and international forces grew in the first years of the uprising. This forced Iran to increase its support for the regime. Iran has since attempted to penetrate and establish stronger links with the Syrian security apparatus by building personal relations

with several military and air force intelligence chiefs, particularly in the southern region.¹² For instance, Iran has established close ties with former General Staff officer Rustom Ghazali.

However, the Syrian regime does not always welcome Iranian involvement. In 2015, Ghazali was targeted by members of the military intelligence service led by Major General Rafiq Shehadeh. Their aim was to limit growing Iranian influence in the security services and throughout Syria, where General Ali Mamluk, head of the National Security Bureau, is personally active.

In Iraq, Iran has recognized the need to legitimize its militias and to integrate them into the military and security system. Thus, Tehran began to pressure the Syrian regime to do the same, fearing that Russia would assume Iran's role. In November 2017, General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the IRGC commander-in-chief, called on the Syrian government and parliament to vote on the law recognizing the legitimacy of the National Defense Forces.¹³ Consequently, the Syrian regime issued a military decree to regulate the forces supported by Iran and to legalize the status of its fighters in terms of military services by organizing them into the LDF.



Map 1: Iranian and pro-Iran militia's presence and influence in 2013.

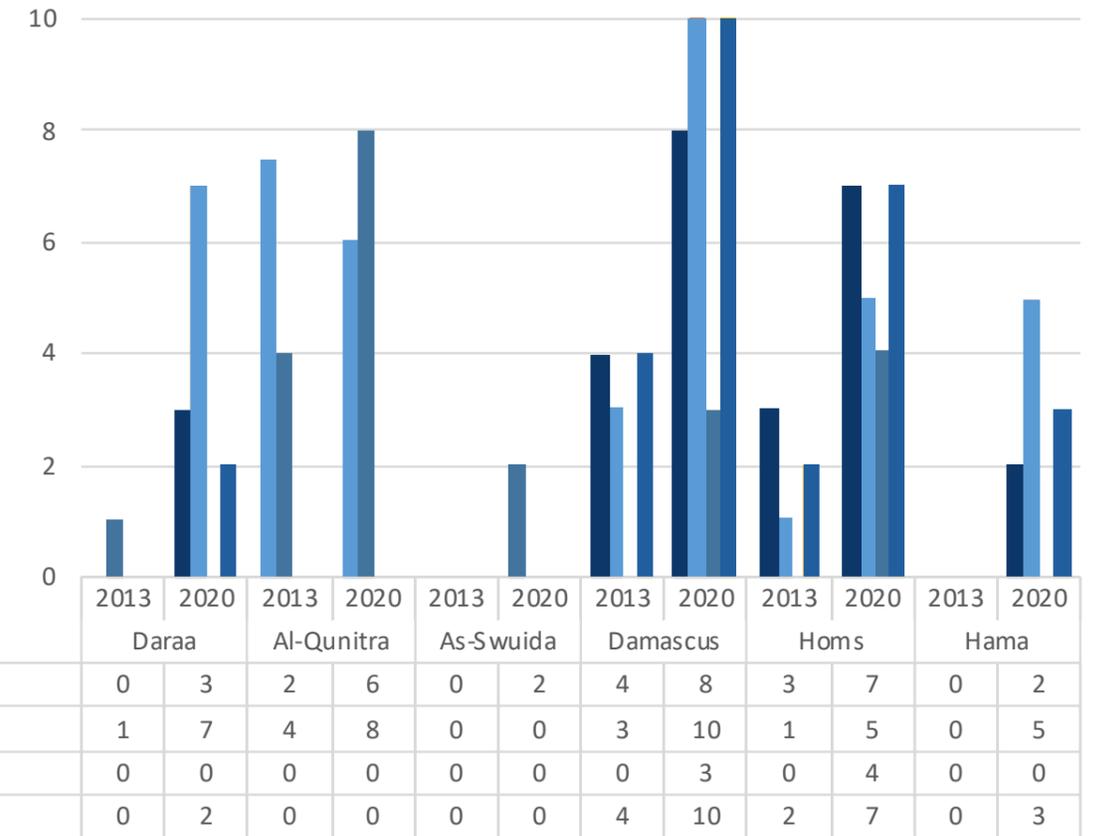


Diagram 1: Iranian influence and role in the Syrian province 2013 vs. 2020

In August 2018, Iran and the Syrian regime finally concluded a military agreement that would ensure Iran's status in Syria and would rebuild the regime's defense infrastructure. Bashar al-Assad, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami and a number of military officials from both countries were present at the signing of the agreement in Damascus. The treaty ensures that Iranian military advisers will remain in Syria indefinitely.¹⁴

THE IRANIAN ROLE BEYOND THE MILITARY AND SECURITY SECTORS

Iran has provided crucial economic aid to the Syrian regime to prevent its overthrow. In return, Iran has demanded access to significant investment opportunities in key sectors of the Syrian economy – particularly with regards to state property, transportation, telecommunications, energy, construction, agriculture and food security. Iran has supported Assad through two main channels. First, it provided two lines of credit for the import of fuel and other commodities worth a total of over \$4.6 billion. This way, Iran can continue to supply the regime with goods and energy and controls key parts of the economy. Iran limited the beneficiaries and executors of these lines of credit to its own national companies.

Iranian influence over Syria's reconstruction and potentially lucrative investment opportunities are intended both to compensate for Iran's role in supporting the regime and to preserve its influence in the post-war period. Therefore, Iran is eager to win over key players in Syrian politics and business. Iran has established economic councils to oversee its ventures and organize relations with Syrian partners.

THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN BUSINESS COUNCIL

The Syrian-Iranian Business Council (SIBC), headed by Hassan Jawad, was reconstituted in 2014 with nine members (see Table (1) – Annex). Due to the council's small number of Syrian members, Iran is making additional efforts to recruit Syrian businessmen. According to private sources, Syrian businessmen are seeking contracts with Iranian companies, and several Iranian officials and private sector representatives paid visits to Damascus in January 2019. These visits were preceded by visits of Syrian officials and businessmen to Tehran, which led to the 14th session of the Syrian-Iranian High Joint Committee in Damascus. Following this meeting, 11 agreements and memoranda of understanding were signed between the two countries, notably the agreement on long-term strategic economic cooperation and a joint Syrian-Iranian Chamber of commerce (see Table (2) – Annex).

A delegation of Syrian businessmen and several members of parliament visited Iran to participate in the Syrian-Iranian business forum. Secretary-General of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Mohamed Hamsho, headed a

11. The militia Al-Quwa/Forces (313) is present in the city of Deir Ezzor, Al-Mayadin and Al-Bukamal and has about 300 members who are part of the local defense forces. All members and leaders of the militia are from the city of Deir Ezzor, but general supervision of Troop 313 lies with Iranian officers.

12. "The arrest of the head of the Military Security Division in Syria after his dismissal", Arab48 (Arabic), 20 March 2015. <https://bit.ly/3ofLa9Y>

13. "Tehran urges Damascus to legitimize the National Defense Forces", RT (Arabic), 26 December 2017. <https://bit.ly/2Ystqzd>

14. "Iran and Syria sign deal for military cooperation", Reuters, 27 August 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-syria-defence-minister-idUSKCN1LC0GL>

business forum. Secretary-General of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Mohamed Hamsho, headed a delegation of 50 businessmen and held numerous meetings with Iranian officials to discuss customs, investment, stock exchange, development projects and free trade agreements.¹⁵ One of the most important results of this visit was the signing of a Syrian-Iranian understanding with the Tehran Chamber of Commerce for cooperation in various fields. The Syrian delegation obtained the initial approval from the Iranian side to reduce the tariffs on 88 Syrian merchandise items from 4% to 0%. The meeting's main results are listed below:

- Establishment of a Syrian-Iranian joint bank to facilitate the operations of local currencies.
- Establishment of a joint Syrian-Iranian holding company.
- Rental of large warehouses in the free zones of the two countries where the required goods are deposited.

This visit was the first of its kind since 2011, followed by a series of visits by the Iranian economic and political delegations to Damascus. Visits included the Minister of Electricity's trip to Tehran and the announcement of the conclusion of various agreements in the construction and maintenance of power plants in Lattakia, Aleppo and Deir Ezzor.

Tehran wants to use Syria as a transshipment point for exporting Iranian goods to Arab markets via the Nasib border crossing on the Syrian-Jordanian border in Daraa. Iran is also counting on attracting prominent Syrian merchants loyal to the regime for business partnerships and investment contracts. For instance, there is a growing partnership between Iran and the businessman Mohamed Hamsho, after the latter acquired Sultan Company's share in the Syrian-Iranian car manufacturer "Siamco" (see Table (3) – Annex).

MAIN SECTORS OF IRANIAN INVESTMENT

Iran seeks to obtain lucrative investment opportunities in different sectors of the Syrian economy, whether through tenders or monopolies. Below are the most important sectors that Iran aims to increase its influence on:

AGRICULTURE

The contribution of the agricultural sector to the Syrian economy amounted to 19% of Syria's GDP in 2011 (ESCWA data), around 4 million tons per year. However, Syrian wheat production declined by 60% and amounted to only 1.3 million tons in 2016. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that losses in Syria's agricultural sector between 2011 and 2016 amounted to \$16 billion or more.

Iranian investments compete with Russia's contributions to Syria's agrarian sector. However, Iran's ability to match Russia's investments has been severely constrained by international sanctions, except from 2016 to 2018, when sanctions on Iran were temporarily lifted. Since 2013, Iran has extended two lines of credit worth \$4.6 billion, mostly for agriculture. Main Iranian investments are:

- Supply of wheat since 2015 through the Safir Nour Jannat.
- An agreement with the Syrian government to establish a joint company to export surplus Syrian agricultural products.
- An investment of \$47 million for the second implementation phase of the Iranian credit line to establish a plant to produce animal food, vaccines, and poultry products.
- A contract to build five mills in Syria at the cost of \$82 million in the provinces of Sweida and Daraa.
- A MoU with the Syrian General Organization of Sugar (Sugar Corporation) to establish a sugar mill and a sugar refinery in Salha in Hama (2018).

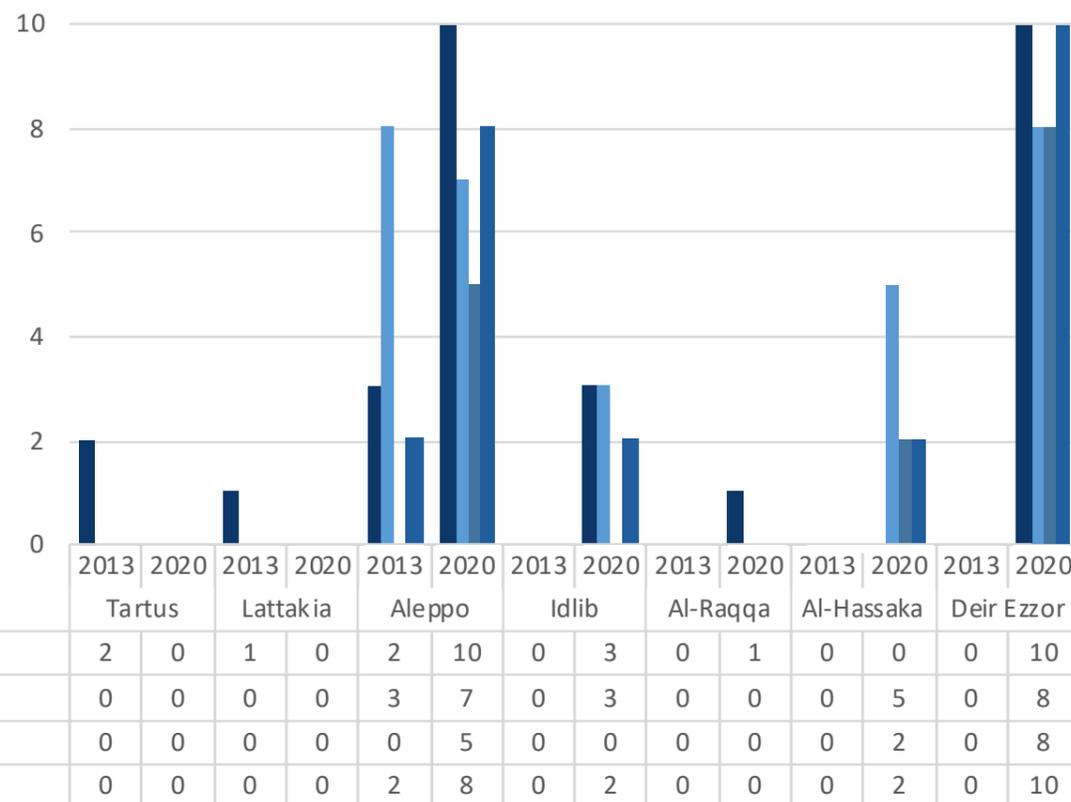
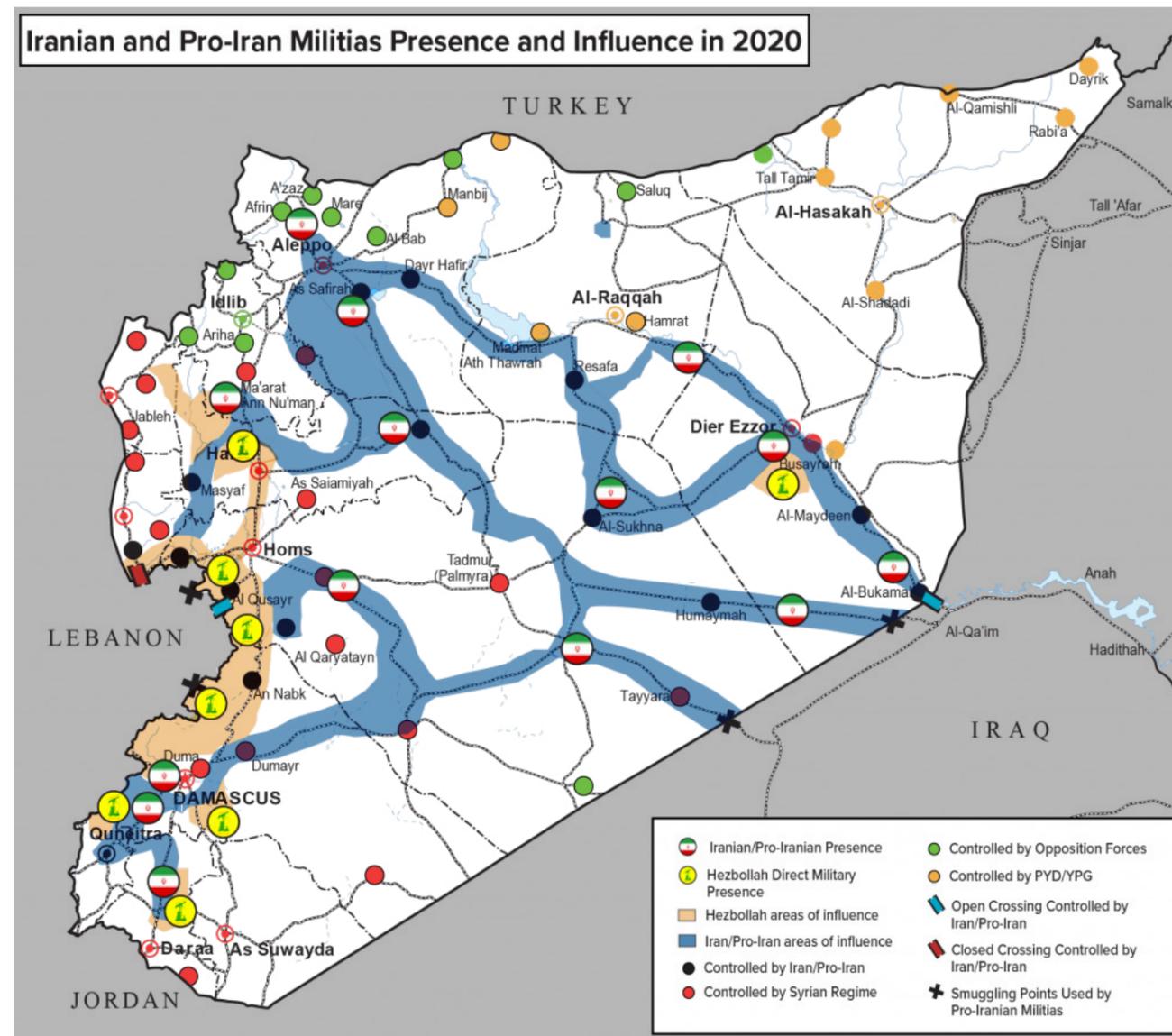


Diagram 2: Iranian influence and role in the Syrian province 2013 vs. 2020



Map 2: Iranian and pro-Iran militia's presence and influence in 2020.

- A MoU between the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Agriculture and the Iranian companies Nero and ITM for the import and distribution of 3,000 tractors (2018).

TOURISM

Tourism is one of the most important sectors of the Syrian economy. It accounted for 14.4% of Syria's GDP in 2011 (\$64 billion). It was severely affected by the war, with tourism revenues declining from 297 billion Syrian Pounds (\$577 million) in 2010 to 17 billion Syrian Pounds (\$33 million) in 2015, while tourism infrastructure suffered a loss of nearly 14 billion Syrian Pounds (\$27 million).

Tehran mainly invests in this sector by supporting religious tourism. 225,000 religious tourists from Iran, Iraq and the Gulf countries visit Syria every year, bringing in about 2 billion Syrian Pounds (\$3.9 million) in revenue. In 2015, Syrian Minister for Tourism signed a MoU with the Iranian Hajj Organization to activate religious tourism and to bring more Iranians and other Shiites to Syria.



INDUSTRY

The industrial sector constituted 19% of Syria's GDP in 2011 and has suffered losses estimated at \$100 billion. Iran has several industrial facilities in Syria that are concentrated in the automotive industry, including the Syrian-Iranian International

15. Mohammed Hamsho is one of the top businessmen in Syria and was at the time the Secretary of the Union of Syrian Chambers of Commerce.

Motor Company and Siamco. Iranian automaker Saipa Group reported 11% sales growth in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Azerbaijan in 2017. Car sales in Syria increased, with 50,000 cars sold in Syria in 2020 alone. Furthermore, Iran has invested in the glass industry in Adra.

Iran has been trying to win contracts in the industrial sector from the Syrian government and a number of MoUs have been signed, including:

- A MoU between the Iranian company Bihin Ghostar Persian and General Organization for Engineering Industries to rehabilitate the following companies: General co. for metal industries – Barada (located in Al-Sabinahis, a town in southern Syria, administratively part of the Rif Dimashq Governorate), SYRONICS (located in Damascus) and a battery factory in Aleppo (2017).
- A MoU between the Syrian Cement and Building Materials Company in Hama and the Yasna Trading Company of Iran for the supply of spare parts (2017). In ad-

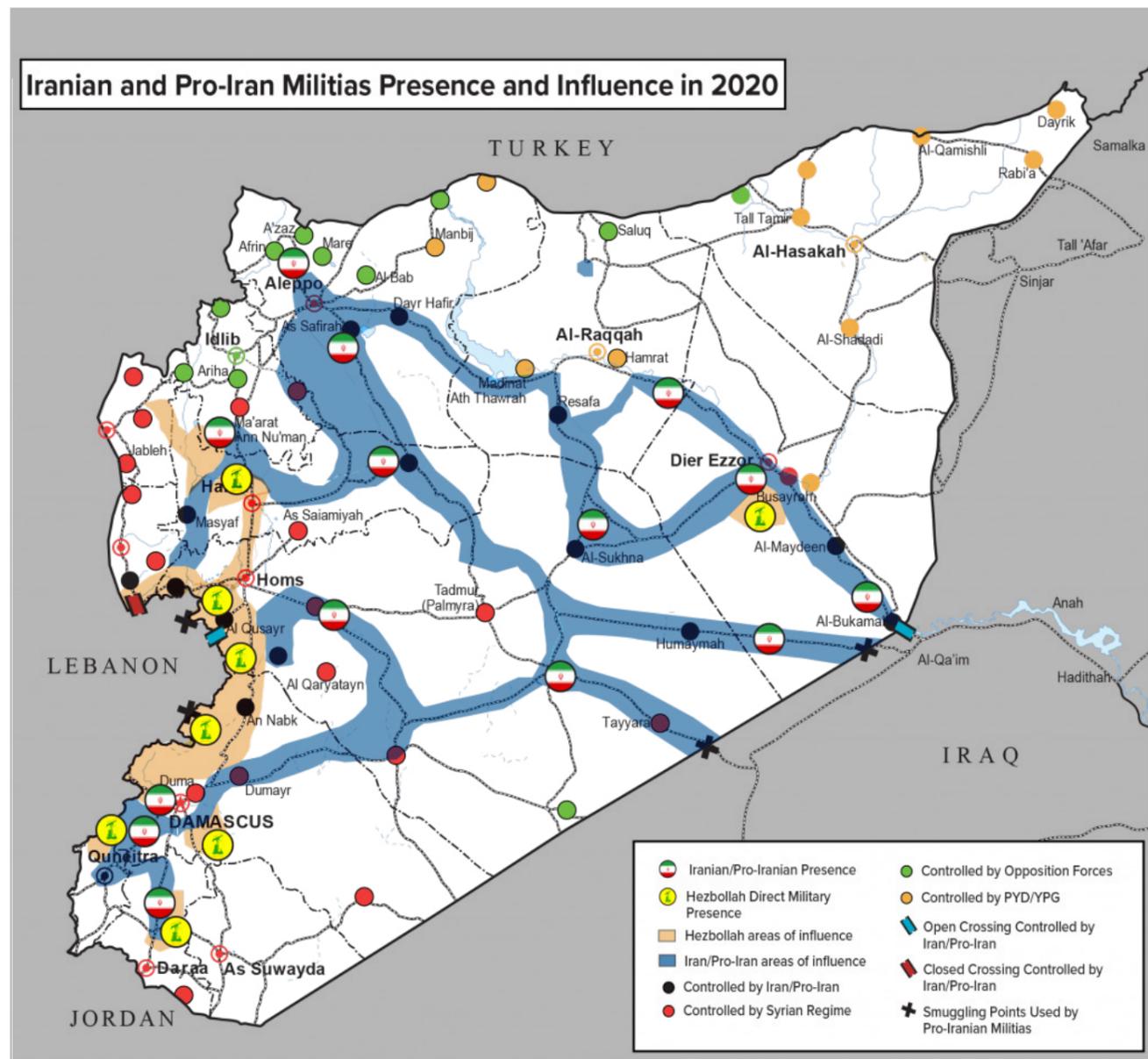
dition, the Iranian Ministry has expressed its desire to establish a cement production company in Aleppo as part of the second implementation phase of the Iranian credit line.

Iran is even interested in going beyond private sector involvement. In 2018, the Syrian-Iranian Business Council presented a proposal for the participation of Iranian companies in the rehabilitation of the Syrian public industrial sector.

RECONSTRUCTION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

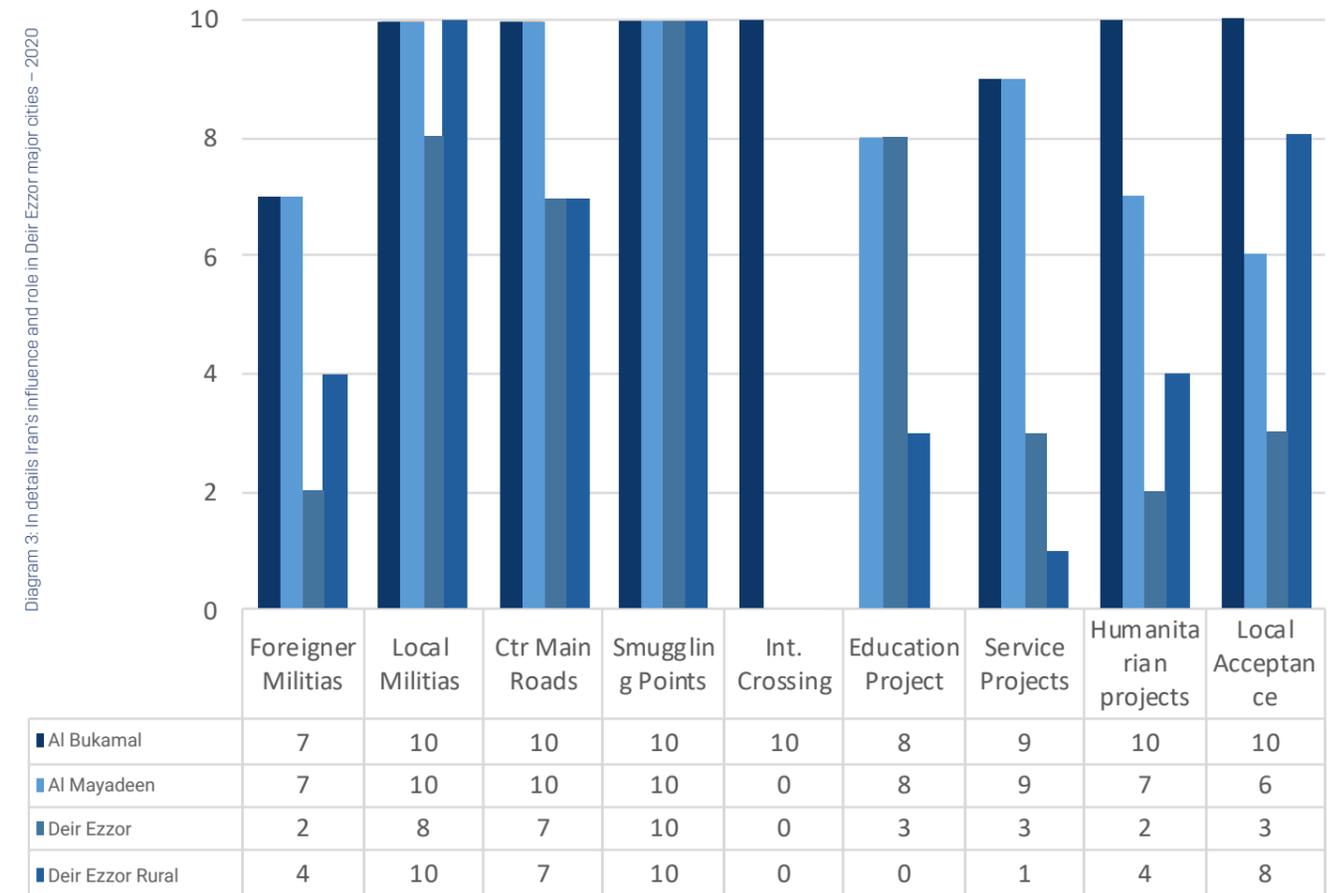
The construction sector contributed 4.2% to Syria's GDP in 2011. In the following six years, it suffered a loss of \$27 billion. Infrastructure was similarly affected by the conflict, with losses estimated at \$33 billion, including more than 3 million homes or housing units destroyed.

As with tourism, Tehran's interest in reconstruction is focused on Shia holy shrines. Iran has asked the Syrian regime for major concessions in Daraya, the old city of Damascus, Sayeda



Map 3: Iranian routes from Tehran to Damascus – 2019/20

Diagram 3: In details Iran's influence and role in Deir Ezzor major cities – 2020



A RED CRESCENT HUMANITARIAN AID CONVOY ENTERS DOUJMA NEAR DAMASCUS, FEBRUARY 2016. COURTESY OF GORAN_SAFAREK / SHUTTERSTOCK

Zeinab and Aleppo. So far, Iran has relied mainly on Syrian intermediaries to buy properties, especially businessmen. In some cases, Tehran has relied on Syrian associations such as Jaafari, Jihad al-Bina, Al-Bayt Authority and "The Committee for the Reconstruction of the Holy Shrines" to expand and acquire new properties in or near the holy sites in Damascus, Deir Ezzor and Aleppo.

IRAN'S POLICIES IN DEALING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Iran has recognized that in order to support military activities and ensure long-term presence in Syria, the regime has to replicate prior experiences, such as in Iraq and Lebanon. Working with local communities in Syria is particularly important, given the Syrian government's weak control over its territory, the erosion of state institutions and its inability to provide basic services. Iran has used three pillars to build its local networks:

Shiite religious centers: Between 2001 and 2006, Iran oversaw the establishment of 12 scholarly seminaries and three colleges for legal education in Syria in addition to the licensing of the first Shiite university (2003).¹⁶ Some sources estimate the number of Hussainiat (Shiite religious centers) in Syria between 4917 and 50018.

Charitable societies: Iran supported the formation of charitable societies, often with clearly Shia names, including the Jafari Charitable Society in Lattakia and Tartous, Al-Foua Charitable Society in Idlib, the Companion Jaafar al-Tayyar Association in Lattakia, Al-Zahra Charitable Society in Aleppo, Al-Ghadeer Charitable Society in Aleppo, Al-Mustafa Charita-

ble Society in the village of Umm al-Amad, Homs. By claiming to improve conditions for Syrian Shiites, these associations attract new members.¹⁹

Local tribes: Lastly, beyond Iran's interest in the local Shia population, the expansion of ISIS caused Iran to reach out to Arab tribes that are scattered in northern and eastern Syria.²⁰



16. Adnan, Ali, "An unprecedented 'Ashura' ceremony and a security alert", Al-Araby al-Jadeed (Arabic), 5 November 2014. <https://goo.gl/ECLGBv>
 17. Iskandar, Omar, "The main Shiite shrines in Syria", Umayya Center for Research and Studies (Arabic), 24 April 2013. <http://goo.gl/t9j0Es>
 18. Reza, Ali, "500 scholarly and Hussaini hawza in Syria ... Iranian shrines invade Damascus in preparation for the opening of the 'Muawiyah Tent'", Zaman Al-Wasl (Arabic), 10 November 2012. <https://goo.gl/acxgYR>
 19. Hage Ali, Mohamad, "The Shi'a Revival", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 May 2017. <https://goo.gl/F5IrC7>
 20. An interview conducted by the researcher on social media with a local defense employee in Deir Ezzor, on 12 January 2020.

Iran managed to win over some tribes that were attacked by ISIS and Syrian opposition factions, such as the Al-Baqir tribe in Aleppo and Deir Ezzor. The political, financial and security support tribes received explains tribal extensions of militias that have been loyal to Iran since 2014, such as the Baqer Brigade.

PROVIDING SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES

Iran has used its ally network to establish social welfare and basic need services that support the local population. Through social welfare networks, Iran seeks to mobilize and gain local support in the absence of the Syrian state. Iranian cultural advisor Mustafa Zanjibar pointed out that “the local community and civic associations represent the impregnable bulwark of Iran in facing the enemies of Syria”.²¹

Iran prefers maximum independence from state institutions in its domestic “humanitarian” activities, which are facilitated by the continuous erosion of the Syrian regime’s capabilities to provide services. Notable examples include the “Al-Thaqalin Charity Center” and “Jihad al-Bina” (see attached table No. 1). Iranian social welfare agencies target specific areas where they hope to build sustainable influence, and to link these bodies with Iranian entities. New institutions managed by Iran operate in Daraa and Quneitra²², aiming to fill the void caused by the reconciliation processes. In addition, Iran enables the return of the Shiite population of Daraa, and even attracts newly-converted Shiites (see Table (4) – Annex) by employing these tools.

PENETRATION INTO LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

Iran has gained access to local decision-making procedures inside Syria through service tools as well as military and economic influence. For example, Iran was able to infiltrate several local councils and secure loyalty of Shias or political allies among local governing boards. Iran specifically targeted the Shia population, as in Sayeda Zeinab, Nubl and Zahra, or in areas where Iranian militias are based, particularly in the eastern outskirts of Aleppo and in the city of Aleppo. In sum, Iran understood and worked with local dynamics, as it forged relationships with local regime officials in order to penetrate local administrations.

Local officials in turn understood that Iran controlled their areas and that using Iranian services and resources would strengthen their position vis-à-vis the electorate. In the future, Iran may use its influence on local decision-making for political and economic purposes (see Table (5) – Annex).

PROVIDING LOCAL SECURITY PROTECTION

Iran has realized the desire of local communities to attain protection in light of the Syrian regime’s inability to provide security. Iran has encouraged local communities to form military units, instructing the IRGC and Hezbollah to train and support these forces logistically. Iran has mobilized Syrian Shiites and organized them into military groups called Self Defense Units (SDU). The SDU is composed of Syrian Shia who are solely in charge of protecting their hometowns and surrounding neighborhoods – unlike the LDF units (see previous section) that are regularly deployed across the country. Iran also expanded its military support for local communities of all sects and urged them to form military groups loyal to Iran.

SYRIAN PRIVATE SECURITY COMPANIES AFFILIATED WITH IRAN

There are many private security companies in Syria that meet demands for special protection. Some of these companies provide services that are similar to private military operations, such as the role played by the “ISIS Hunters”, a group that combats ISIS in the Eastern Syrian Desert.

On August 5, 2013, the Syrian president issued Legislative Decree No. 55 (see Annex) regarding privacy protection and security company’s licenses. Previously, the number of private security companies in the country was limited. Well-known businessmen primarily funded the few existing private security companies, and their primary duties were providing security to banks, shopping malls and sometimes musical concerts. Starting in early 2017, new private security companies began to emerge with many important tasks and stronger international allies or even foreign indirect ownership.²³

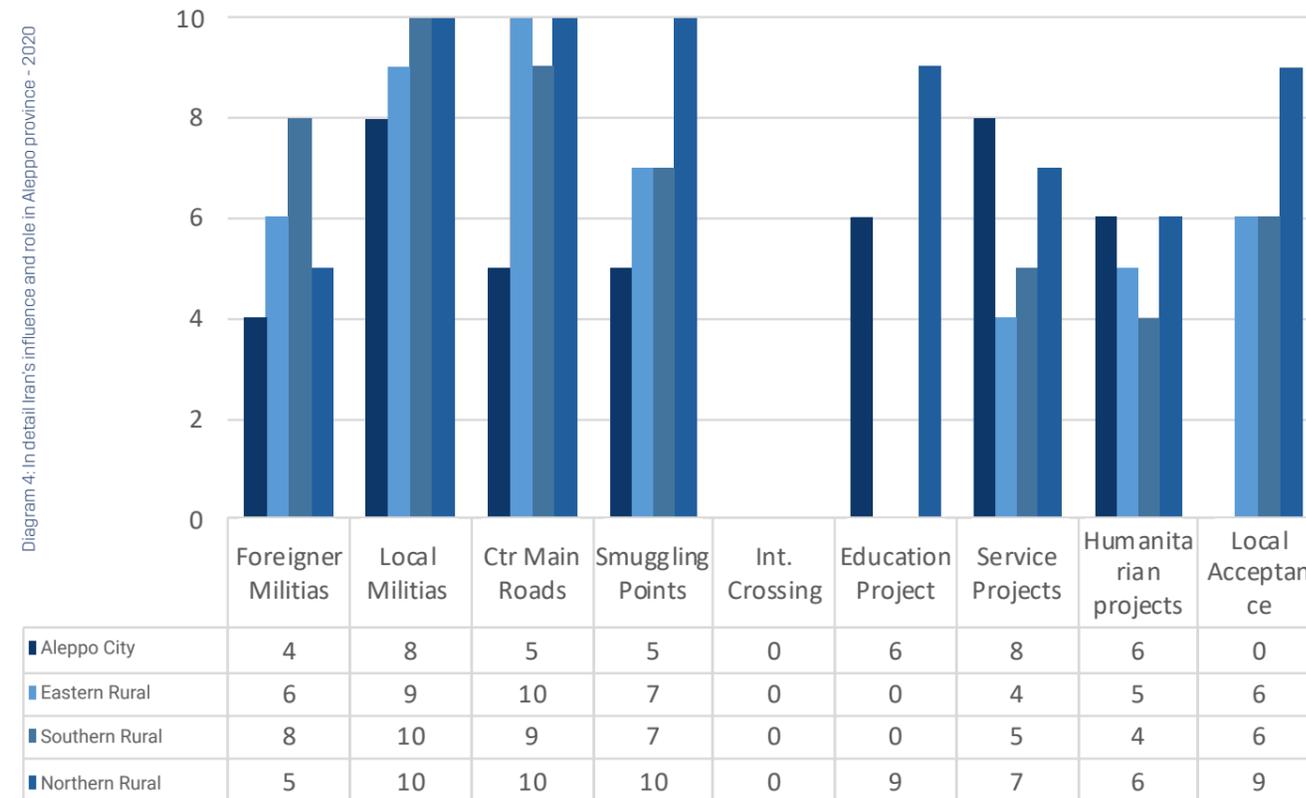
Iran has used private security companies to expand influence in sensitive areas in Syria, such as the capital, without worrying about maintaining this presence in the future, as the private security companies are part of a registered Syrian company. In addition, Iran secured its presence in key infrastructure, such as at the strategic Baghdad-Damascus highway in eastern Syria, which is partially secured by private agencies. Below is a list of pro-Iranian Syrian private military security companies that uphold Iran’s sway on the security sector.



A LOCAL FRUIT STORE OWNER IN ALEPPO OLD TOWN STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS FRUITS, APRIL 2013. COURTESY OF PORNITICHA WONGYANNAVA / SHUTTERSTOCK

Pro-Iran Syrian private military security companies (PMC) - 2020

| English Name | Arabic Name | License Date | HQ | International Relations |
|--------------|-------------|-----------------|----------|-------------------------|
| Qasiun | شركة قاسيون | 28 - Oct - 2013 | Damascus | Iran |
| IBS | IBS | 27 - Nov - 2013 | Damascus | Iran |
| Al-Qalaa | شركة القلعة | 10 - Oct - 2017 | Damascus | Iran |
| Fajr | شركة فجر | 2 - Jan - 2018 | Aleppo | Iran |
| Alpha | شركة ألفا | 15 - Feb - 2018 | Aleppo | Iran |
| Al-Hares | شركة الحارس | 8 - May - 2018 | Damascus | Iran |



CONCLUSION

Given regional and international changes, not least because of Russia’s war against the Ukraine Iran may seek to reassess its Syria strategy. The government in Tehran might increase its influence and replace Russia in different political realms and geographic areas in coordination with the Syrian regime. The reassessment could also include relations with other competitors in Syria, such as the United States and Turkey.

Provided that Iran expands its presence in Syria it will bring about increased Israeli airstrikes, as Israel does not tolerate an Iranian spearhead at its northern border. To date, Iran’s military was hesitant to counter Israeli attacks with long-range missiles, indicating Iran’s fears of sliding into a full-scale war

with Israel, as this would probably lead to US involvement in the conflict. Iranian leaders are well aware that their military forces are too small to fight in an area reaching from the Gulf to Syria, and they fear the domestic repercussions of its engagement abroad. The following scenarios are conceivable for Iran’s future in Syria:

21. Al-Khatib, Majd, “Iran and the adaptation of Syrian society: The council of clans”, Al-Modon (Arabic), 26 February 2017. <https://bit.ly/2Xlnra0>
 22. Kunit, Ahmed, “Soft Power’ ... Iran’s project to expand in south Syria under the ‘humanitarian work’, Alsouria Net (Arabic), 31 December 2018. <https://bit.ly/2GQdfSN>
 23. Indirect ownership means that the company only provides security tasks for Iran and Russia, despite being owned and managed by Syrians.



QUDS DAY RALLY, PARADE OF MILITARY FORCES, ALONG WITH PHOTOGRAPHS OF QASEM SOLEIMANI, TEHRAN, MAY 2019. COURTESY OF SAEEDIEX / SHUTTERSTOCK

- An expanded Iranian presence leads to increased Israeli (and maybe US) attacks against Iranian bases and affiliated foreign/local militias. Iran, in this case, might start a new reintegration process of its militias within the Syrian regime's military and security structure and focus on community projects.
- Iran shifts focus to soft power instruments, as this will strengthen its influence on a community/economic/political/society level. The increased soft power will shield Iran's sway over the military and security realm.
- Once a new US-Iran agreement is reached over Iran's nuclear program, with consensus on a new role for Iran in the region, Tehran might agree to withdraw the "Quds Force" and Shiite militias from Syria while continuing economic investment.
- Finally, Iran could refuse any compromise on its presence in Syria, based on the high costs it has paid throughout the last decade, and may entertain the possibility of open war with its opponents, especially Israel.

As of now, Iran focuses on expanding into new geographic areas in Syria on the security, military, economic and social

level. In 2021, Iran was able to establish a military presence in al-Hassaka Governorate and in the north of Raqqqa for the first time, benefiting from the partly US withdrawal under the Trump administration. Iran has also increased its support for local organizations in the eastern, central and coastal regions, and has sought to build a network of organizations linking the various Syrian governorates. In addition, Iran's continuous support for local transport companies (e.g. buses) has facilitated the movement of Iranian militias between governorates.

Moreover, Iran continued to expand its relations with Syrian businessmen, especially those who were not subjected to international sanctions. Thus, it is clear that Iran increased its presence in Syria throughout 2021, and is likely to continue in light of the war in Ukraine. Iran is taking advantage of the international changes related to the Syrian dossier, especially the shift of attention of the international community away from Syria.

ANNEX

LEGISLATIVE DECREE NO. 55 OF 2013

Agencies and sectors that are concerned with Legislative Decree No. 55:

- Ministry of Interior.
- National Security Office.
- Companies working in the field of protection, private custody, and the transfer of valuables.
- such as money, jewelry, and precious metals.

In order to receive a license, a private security company must meet the following conditions:

- Be fully owned by holders of Syrian Arab nationality.
- Have a capital of no less than fifty million Syrian pounds.
- Its headquarters must be in the same area of operations.
- Be registered in the Commercial Register.

Additionally, the owners, partners, and management of the company shall be required to:

- Have been an Arab-Syrian for at least five years.
- Be at least 35 years of age.
- Have at least a high school certificate.
- Have no expulsion or dismissal from public service on their record.

Private security companies are classified into three categories:

- 1st category: companies that have 801 guards and above.
- 2nd category: companies that have between 501-800 guards.
- 3rd category: companies that have between 300-500 guards.

The number of companies owned by Syrian businessmen who are members of the board is estimated at 10.

Table 1: Major companies associated with The Syrian-Iranian Business Council

| Name | Name |
|---|--|
| Abdul Rahim & Fawzi Rahal Co. | Al Shameal Oil Services Co. |
| Rahal Money Transfer Co. | Mazen Hamour International Group |
| Dagher & Kiwan General Trading Co. | Al-Sharq Bank |
| National Aviation Limited Liability Co. | Ebdaa Development & Investment Co. |
| Development Co. for Oil Services | Concord Al-Sham International Investment Co. |

Table 2: 11 agreements and memorandums of understanding

| Agreements, memos of understanding and executive programs | Sector |
|---|---------------------|
| Agreement on long-term strategic economic cooperation | Economy |
| Memo of understanding for the meetings of the higher joint committee | Governmental |
| Memo of understanding between Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade and the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade at the Iranian Republic | Foreign Trade |
| Memo of understanding between the General Establishment of Syrian Railways and the Iranian railways | Transport |
| Memo of understanding in the domain of public works and construction | Construction |
| Memo of understanding for cooperation in domain of promoting investments between the Syrian Investment Commission (SIC) and the Iranian Organization for Investment | Investment |
| Memo of understanding in the geomatics domain between the Syrian General Organization for Remote Sensing and the Iranian National Geographical Organization | |
| Memo of understanding for enhancing cinematic cooperation between the General Establishment for Cinema in Syria and Iran's Cinema Organization | Cinema |
| Memo of understanding on exchanging information related to money laundering and financing terrorism. | Banking and finance |
| Executive program for cultural cooperation | Culture |
| Executive program in the educational domain for the years 2019/ 2020/ 2021 | Education |

Table 3: List of Syrian and Iranian businessman and politicians active in Syria

| Name | State | Position |
|------------------------|-------|---|
| Muhammad Hamsho | Syria | Secretary-general of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce |
| Hussein Ragheb | Syria | Member of Syrian Parliament |
| Hassan Zaidou | Syria | Businessman |
| Muhammad Kheir Suriol | Syria | Member of Syrian Parliament |
| Iyad Muhammad | Syria | Member of Syrian Exporters Union |
| Firas Jijkli | Syria | Manager of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce |
| Fahd Darwish | Syria | Chairman of the Supreme Committee for Investors in the Free Zone |
| Adnan Mahmoud | Syria | Syrian Ambassador in Iran |
| Asqar Fakhriyeh Kashan | Iran | Iran's Deputy Road and Urban Development Minister |
| Hossein Mir Shojaeian | Iran | Iran's Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance |
| Mojtaba Khosro | Iran | Head of Trade Promotion Organization of Iran |
| Javad Turk-Abadi | Iran | Iranian Ambassador in Syria |
| Hassan Danaei-Far | Iran | First Vice-President and chairman of the Iranian committee on the development of economic relations with Syria and Iraq |
| Mohammad Mehdi Rasekh | Iran | Senior consultant and manager of TCCIM's Iraq and Syria |
| Mohammadreza Bakhtiar | Iran | vice chairman of Tehran Chamber of Commerce |
| Masoud Khansari | Iran | TCCIMA Head |
| Hossein Mir Shojaeian | Iran | Iran's Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance |
| Ghulam-Hussein Shafei | Iran | Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce |

Table 4: Pro-Iranian charitable organizations in Syria

| N | Organization | Headquarter | Province of activities | Sector | Linked to |
|----|--|------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Noor El Huda cultural | Aleppo | Aleppo | Education | LDF |
| 2 | Alghadeer | Ismailia Village | Homs | Charity | Popular Committees |
| 3 | Otlob al-Aelm | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Education | Almawada Organization |
| 4 | Social charity committee | Rif Dimash | Rif Dimash | Charity | Sayeda Zeinab Compound |
| 5 | Al Zahraa charity | Rif Dimash | Rif Dimash | Charity | Sayeda Zeinab Compound |
| 6 | Ihsan charity | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Charity | ALMsbah Compiler |
| 7 | Al Mustafa charity | Al-Mukharram | Homs | Charity | Imam Ridha Brigade |
| 8 | Central Administration in Homs | Homs | Homs | Social services | Popular Committees |
| 9 | Martyr Foundation | Damascus | Aleppo. Damascus. Homs | Social services | LDF-NDF |
| 10 | Al Theqaleen Charity | Qardaha | Aleppo. Homs. Latakia. Deir ez-Zor. Hama | Social services. Charity | LDF- Al Bustan Charity Association- Jihad Al Binaa |
| 11 | Jihad Al Binaa | Sayeda Zeinab | Aleppo. Deir ez-Zor. Rif Dimash | Social Services. infrastructure | LDF- IRGC |
| 12 | Al Ameen Foundation for Humanitarian Works | --- | Rif Dimash | Charity | ---- |
| 13 | Al Hadi charity Association | Al-Mazraa | Homs | Charity | ---- |
| 14 | Al-Zurzuriyah Association | Al-Zurzuriyah | Homs | Charity | ---- |
| 15 | Al Serat Educational center | Sayyidah Zayna | Rif Dimash | Education | ---- |
| 16 | ALMsbah Compiler | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Education | Jihad Al Binaa |
| 17 | Al Rahma Charity | Sayyidah Zayna | Rif Dimash | Charity | ---- |
| 18 | Imam Al - Sajjad Foundation for | Sayyidah Zayna | Rif Dimash | Charity | ----- |

| N | Organization | Headquarter | Province of activities | Sector | Linked to |
|----|---|-------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 19 | Al Hajja Complex | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Charity | ----- |
| 20 | Al - Kalem Institute | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Education | ALMsbah Compiler |
| 21 | Nour Society for Relief and Development | Sayyidah Zayna | Rif Dimash | Charity | ---- |
| 22 | Al - Enmaa Charity Association | Al-Mukharram | Homs | Charity | Ahl al-Bayt Center |
| 23 | Cultural Knowledge Society | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Education | ---- |
| 24 | Ihsan charity | Homs | Homs | Charity | Popular Committees |
| 25 | Al mouada Foundation | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Education | ---- |
| 26 | Al Zahraa Association | Sayyidah Zayna | Rif Dimash | Charity | Al Serat Educational Center |
| 27 | Al moustafa Charity | Al-Mukharram | Homs | Charity | ---- |
| 28 | Al Amaal Charity | Zine El Abidine neighbourhood | Damascus | Charity | --- |
| 29 | Abnaa Al aqeela | Sayyidah Zayna | Rif Dimash | Education | Social charity committee |
| 30 | Social Development Foundation | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Social Services | --- |
| 31 | Imam Zine El Abidine Institute | Homs | Homs | Education | Popular Committees |
| 32 | Institute of Sayeda Zeinab | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Education | ---- |
| 33 | Al Kawthar Association | Al-Zahraa. Nubl | Aleppo | Charity | ---- |
| 34 | Al Zahraa Association | Daraa | Daraa. Quneitra | Social Services. Charity | Imam Khamenei Office. The Iranian Chancellery |
| 35 | Ahbab Al qaed Al khaled | Al Yadudah | Daraa | Charity | Imam Khamenei Office. The Iranian Chancellery |
| 36 | Tmmuz Association | Daraa | Daraa. Quneitra | Charity | ----- |
| 37 | Darb Charity Association | Al-Hadher | Aleppo | Charity | Aleppo Defenders Corp |
| 38 | Bokra Ahla Association | Aleppo | Aleppo | Charity | Aleppo Defenders Corp |

Table 5: Local stakeholders associated with Iran

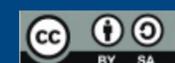
| Name | Province | Council of | Administrative units | Background |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Hussein Ahmed al-Aloush | Aleppo | Aleppo | Province | Baqir Brigade |
| Majd al-Din Ibrahim al-Dandan | Aleppo | Aleppo | Province | Tribe |
| Ali Osman Al Nabhan | Aleppo | Aleppo | City | LDF |
| Adel Mahmoud Jaber | Damascus suburb | Sayyidah Zaynab | City | Ba'ath Party |
| Bashir Mohammed Ghosh | Damascus suburb | Sayyidah Zaynab | City | Ba'ath Party |
| Yahya Marouf Jafar | Aleppo | Nubl | City | LDF |
| Fahd Fakhri Sharbo | Aleppo | Nubl | City | Ba'ath Party |

Table 6: Commanders of the Aleppo Defenders Corps

| Name English | Name in Arabic | Rank | Position |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--|
| Al-Hajj Mohsen | الحاج محسن | ---- | Commander of Aleppo Defender Corps |
| Shaaban Sawaf | شعبان صواف | Colonel | Commander of the 3rd Square |
| Zuhair Zuhairi | زهير زهيرى | Colonel | Commander of the 2nd Square |
| Mohammed Sultan Zayat | محمد سلطان زيات | ----- | Commander of the 1st Square |
| Faisal Homed | فيصل حومد | ---- | commander of the Al-Hadher Square |
| Abdul Nasser Sheikh Abdo | عبد الناصر شيخ عبدو | ---- | Commander of the As-Safira Square |
| Hassan Abu Omar | حسن ابو عمر | ---- | Commander of the 5 th Sector -2nd Square |
| Abdel Rahman Abdel Wahab | عبد الرحمن عبد الوهاب | Lieutenant Colonel | Deputy official of State Security in Aleppo Defender Corps |
| Mahmoud Yassin | محمود ياسين | ---- | Head of cultural section |
| Ahmed Abu Dan | أحمد أبو دان | ---- | Commander of the 4 th -1st Square |
| Mahmoud al-Masry | محمود المصري | ---- | Commander of the 2 nd sector-2nd Square |
| Ali Berry | علي بري | ---- | ---- |
| Mohamed Ghaleb | محمد غالب | ---- | ----- |

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