



In the Service of Ideology: Iran’s Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria

Oula A. Alrifai



“Syria is the 35th province and a strategic province for Iran...If the enemy attacks and aims to capture both Syria and Khuzestan our priority would be Syria. Because if we hold on to Syria, we would be able to retake Khuzestan; yet if Syria were lost, we would not be able to keep even Tehran.”

— Mehdi Taeb, commander, Basij Resistance Force, 2013*

Iran’s policy toward Syria is aimed at providing strategic depth for the Tehran regime. Since its inception in 1979, the regime has coopted local Syrian Shia religious infrastructure while also building its own. Through proxy actors from Lebanon and Iraq based mainly around the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab on the outskirts of Damascus, the Iranian regime has

Pictured are the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in Damascus, youth scouts, and a pro-Iran gathering, at which the banner reads, “Sayyed Commander Khamenei: You are the leader of the Arab world.”

*Quoted in Ashfon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards* (2016). Khuzestan, in southwestern Iran, is the site of a decades-long separatist movement.

consolidated control over levers in various localities. Beyond religious proselytization, these networks have provided education, healthcare, and social services, among other things. The provision of such assistance has been bolstered as a consequence of the Syrian civil war, whereby Iran has further embedded itself within the local milieu by building up a Syrian Hezbollah and establishing a broader religious and service infrastructure.

Unlike his father, Hafiz al-Assad, Syria's current president, Bashar al-Assad, has ceded partial control of religious sectors to Iran's revolutionary religious designs. At the beginning of Hafiz's rule in the 1970s, when Iran's clerics were in exile and the shah was still in power, the Syrian leader had more leverage to extract what he wanted from Iran. Today, however, Iran has more control over the relationship. Indeed, after years of degradation of the Bashar regime and military following the Syrian uprising in 2011, Iran's relationship with Syria has transformed from a key alliance into a sort of strategic dominance.

These shifting dynamics have consequences that are detrimental to Syrian residents. Thus, the United States and its allies in the Middle East should not ignore them, since doing so would undermine both Washington's and its allies' interests in the region. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Iranian influence in Syria is not confined to the military realm; the Iranian regime today has the upper hand in Syria's political, economic, cultural, and social spheres. Therefore, deterring Iran in Syria will require a holistic approach to its decades-long imperialistic and expansionist strategy in the country.

Iran's Religious Project in Syria

The relationship between the Assad regime and what became the Islamic Republic of Iran dates back to Hafiz al-Assad's "Corrective Movement" coup d'état

against fellow Baathists in Damascus on November 13, 1970. At the time, Iran's Shia clerics were in exile as Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was still in control of Tehran. During that period, Hafiz could exert his influence to get what he wanted—mainly religious legitimacy—from the Khomeinists who planned to overthrow the shah. Historically, most of the Sunni and Shia *ulama* have considered Alawites to be heretics. Knowing this, Hafiz's government in 1973 drafted a new constitution that omitted the phrase "Islam is the religion of the state." The move drew severe criticism and led to immense unrest among Syria's Sunni community. Yielding to great pressure, Hafiz amended Article III of the Syrian constitution, stating that "the religion of the President of the Republic is Islam" and thereby declaring himself a Muslim.¹ Hafiz's search for quick religious legitimacy further explains his plea for help from Twelver Shia clerics, who issued fatwas to bring the Alawite faith under the Shia umbrella.

Ayatollah Hassan Mahdi al-Shirazi, a leading Iranian-Iraqi militant cleric who needed Hafiz's protection from threats made by the shah's regime, stated the following:

God made it possible for me to visit our Muslim brothers [the Alawis] of the Arab Republic of Syria on 3 Sha'ban 1392 [September 11, 1972]...We talked together and I found them—as I expected—to be Shi'a of Ahl Al Bayt [the house of the Prophet] who are loyal and totally committed to the truth.²

More importantly, in 1973, Imam Musa al-Sadr—born in Qom, Iran, founder of the Supreme Islamic Shia Council in 1967 in Tyre, Lebanon, and one of the most respected Shia clerics in the Middle East—issued a fatwa in support of Assad's obtaining the highest post in the Syrian government. He emphasized that Alawites and Shia Muslims are one, and that refuting such a fatwa meant compliance with the history of persecution against Shia. In July 1973, Sadr said, "The Alawis and the Shia are partners in distress, since they were persecuted like the Shia... Today those Muslims called Alawis are the brothers of the Shia; or 'Matawila' as they are called

by their opponents, and we will not allow anyone to condemn this generous creed.”³

Afterward, Sadr began assigning local Alawite clerics in Lebanon as muftis, Muslim legal experts whose posts had traditionally belonged to scholars of Jafari jurisprudence.⁴ In return, both Shirazi and Sadr—who found refuge in Syria and Lebanon, respectively, after being forced to flee their home countries—relied on the support of Hafiz al-Assad, who later became a powerful regional player. Ali Shariati, an Iranian dissident and religious sociologist, was another key actor. Having fled the shah's persecution, Shariati was best known for his fundamental role in inspiring and laying the foundation for Iran's Islamic Revolution. His burial in 1977 near Sayyeda Zainab in Damascus was not an accident, but rather a calculated effort to make it easier for Shia mourners to visit his grave without fear. Thanks to Imam al-Sadr, who officiated Shariati's funeral, ties between the Assad regime and the Iranian religious opposition were greatly strengthened. Even when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had to flee Iraq in 1978, he considered settling in Damascus before ultimately seeking refuge in Paris.

Today, Iran has more control over its relationship with Syria. Having witnessed the current decade-long degradation of Bashar al-Assad's government and armed forces, Iran has helped bolster the regime through its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and proxy Shia forces from Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Thus, unlike most studies, which describe Iran-Syria relations as a critical alliance, this research presents direct evidence that the relationship has transformed into what might be described as one of “strategic dominance.”⁵ With regard to those ties, the scales are tipped largely in favor of Iran not only as a result of its military and security endeavors to save the Assad regime since 2011, but specifically because of the rapid expansion of Tehran's religious, social, and economic projects inside Syria in that same timeframe. Iran's long-term goal is the ultimate consolidation of influence over Damascus by means

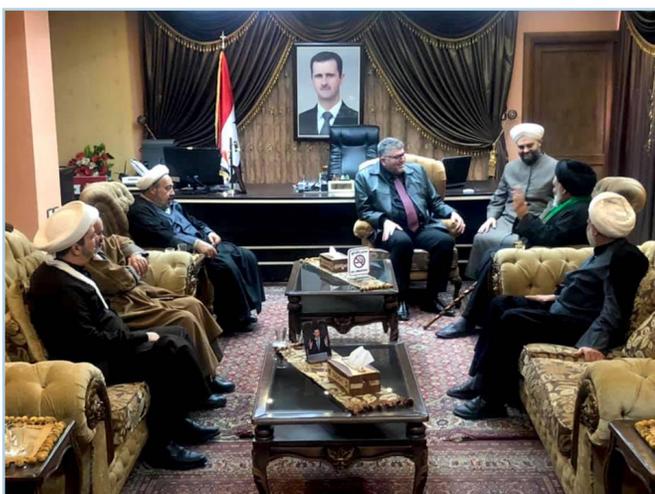
of utilizing Bashar al-Assad's persona as a thin cover in the face of local and international criticism. Thanks to the Assad regime, the seeds planted by the Khomeinists more than four decades ago have grown roots that threaten Syria's current and future identity, as well as regional security. By promoting Twelver Shia Islam as an integral part of Syrian society, Iran is altering Syria's geopolitical landscape and social fabric.

Ahlul Bayt World Assembly

After 1979, Iran began exporting its Islamic Revolution under a religious umbrella of regional and international geopolitical activities.⁶ Having survived the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Islamic Republic began not only to advance military allies such as Lebanese Hezbollah, but also to use its native clerics as a means of promoting a Shia political and social agenda in the region. In May 1990, Ali Khamenei, who rose to power as Supreme Leader the year before, invited more than three hundred influential Shia religious scholars from the world Muslim community to Tehran for the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly's first international conference;⁷ *Ahl al-Bait* (as the term is commonly transliterated, distinct from the spelling of the assembly) refers to the House of the Prophet Muhammad. Members of the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly's Supreme Council are distinguished Shia clerics from Afghanistan, Bahrain, India, Iran, Iraq, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.⁸ The organization claims to have a presence in thirty-nine countries in Asia alone.⁹ Its centers are active in the fields of Shia education and Quran studies, and in providing social and cultural services, including access to the internet and multimedia. The assembly sponsors indigenous Shia preachers to teach *tafsir*, hadith, ethics, Islamic law, and Islamic history. These preachers are also tasked with overseeing media efforts to further spread the message of Twelver Shiism, with the aim of proselytizing local populations. The assembly also “pays particular attention to infrastructure development and building lasting edifices,” and has professional associations in such fields as physics,



Ayatollah al-Sayyed Abd al-Saheb al-Mousawi, head of cultural affairs, Ahlul Bayt World Assembly



Meeting of the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, Damascus



Celebrating the forty-second anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution, Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, Damascus, February 2021

law, journalism, business, and sports.¹⁰

Supreme Council Member Imam Nabil al-Halbawi, one of the most prominent Syrian Shia figures, is responsible for leading the assembly's activities in Syria.¹¹ The assembly aims at "introducing pure Mohammedan Islam, spreading the teachings of [Ahl al-Bait], strengthening solidarity among Muslim communities, and managing the affairs of followers of [Ahl al-Bait] through education."¹² Its branch in Damascus claims to have serviced the community for the past thirty-two years.¹³ Although the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly is based in Tehran, it operates around the globe to spread the teachings of Twelver Shiism and to generate support for the Islamic Republic of Iran through education, religious endeavors, and social services. The institution currently has active local assemblies and centers in 141 countries.¹⁴ Through its Facebook page, the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly broadcasts its activities to a worldwide audience, targeting Shia Muslims who are interested in relocating to Syria. The page features photos, videos, and announcements of events in the Syrian capital as well as in other cities, including Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia. The followers of the page have Shia names and actively engage with the content through positive online interactions.

Religious Tourism

Syria is currently home to nearly fifty sites of alleged significance to Twelver Shia Islam. While the number of Shia pilgrims in the late 1970s was in the tens of thousands, this rapidly increased to hundreds of thousands in the early 2000s. In 2008, 330,000 Iranians alone traveled to Syria, primarily on religious pilgrimage to the Sayyeda Zainab and Sayyeda Ruqayya shrines, as well as to the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, site of Imam Hussein's head. Indeed, Iran has heavily relied on religious tourism to advance its religious-political agenda in Syria. Thus, Iran has renovated and expanded key Shia shrines, and has even built new *hawza ilmiyah* (seminaries) and *housseiniyeh* (congregation halls), at which

training in Shia jurisprudence, *fiqh* commemoration ceremonies, and discussions of political developments take place. It is worth noting that no Shia seminaries existed in Syria prior to 1975, when the first (al-Hawza al-Ilmiyah al-Zaynabiyah) was built. The second Shia seminary in Syria (Hawzat al-Imam Khomeini) was built in 1981.

In contrast, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, nearly seventy Shia seminaries have been built in Syria. With their free education services and financial aid packages, the seminaries attract Shia students from all ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. Students are encouraged to settle in Syria, receive citizenship, and practice *dawa* or missionary work after completing their religious studies. Moreover, within the past decade, the number of Shia pilgrims to the Sayyeda Zainab shrine has jumped to 1.5 million per year. Resultantly, and in cooperation with local businesspeople from the Syrian Shia minority, Iranian officials have built hotels to accommodate pilgrims traveling from Iran to Syria. For example, Hotel al-Safir in Sayyeda Zainab is considered the primary lodging option for religious tourists because of its proximity to the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab on the outskirts of Damascus. Negotiations over construction of the hotel date back to the 1980s, and reports of local Syrians indicate that financial revenues from Shia religious tourism around the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab have aided Syria's deteriorating economy. Such economic dependence further exposes the increasing reliance of the Assad regime on Iran's activities in Syria. According to Staffan de Mistura, a former United Nations envoy to Syria, Iran spends at least \$6 billion annually to ensure the survival of the Assad regime. Revenues from Iran's regional socioeconomic activities can be more sustainable than its oil sales.

Iran's Main Shia Shrines in Syria

The following are the main Syrian shrines coopted by Iran, which has used them to buttress its long-term strategy following the 2011 Syrian uprising.

SAYYEDA ZAINAB, DAMASCUS

"Hazrat Zainab, upon whom be peace, stood up to Yazid and humiliated him in a way that his tribe, the Bani Umayyads, had never before experienced."

— Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 1982

Whether Sayyeda Zainab was buried in Damascus or Cairo does not change the fact that her shrine in Damascus is of great religious significance within the Iranian Twelver Shia community. Zainab bint Ali, known as Sayyeda Zainab, was the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the daughter of Muhammad's daughter Fatima and his cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib. Following the death of her brother Imam Hussein in Karbala in 680 AD, Sayyeda Zainab was captured by the Umayyad forces and taken to Damascus, where she later died. A small mosque near her alleged tomb in Damascus was built shortly thereafter. The shrine of Sayyeda Zainab was reconstructed during the Ottoman Empire and later renovated under the Syrian government.

Sayyeda Zainab is believed to have confronted the Umayyad dynasty by leading commemorative mournings of Imam Hussein to spread the story of the Battle of Karbala and to keep her brother's memory alive.¹⁵ Thus, Sayyeda Zainab is regarded by Shia historians as both a religious and a political figure. She was a female saint who enjoyed a degree of infallibility as the sister of the second and third Imams, Hassan and Hussein, but she also was a leader who stood in the face of the Umayyads' oppression and injustice. Since 2011, the Islamic Republic of Iran has capitalized on this narrative to rally and mobilize Shia fighters in the name of "defending holy shrines" in Syria. A pledge of loyalty to Sayyeda Zainab—"Labayk ya Zainab"—was dedicated by Shia Muslims and is often used by fighters in Syria. The slogan, which means "We are at your service, O Zainab," was also turned into a *nashid* (song) as a call to arms.

Since the 1970s, the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab has been an important center for non-Syrian Shia

students from around the world, not just the Middle East. The first Shia seminary in the town of Sayyeda Zainab, al-Hawza al-Ilmiyah al-Zaynabiyah, was founded in 1975 by Sayyed Hassan al-Shirazi from Karbala, Iraq. Having fled Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, Hassan was known for his religious authority and knowledge. He attempted to spread the transgressive rituals of self-flagellation, along with other Shia traditions, throughout the town of Sayyeda Zainab. After Hassan's death, his older brother Muhammad Shirazi became the head of the seminary. Before becoming Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei followed in the footsteps of the al-Shirazi, founding his own seminary in the town of Sayyeda Zainab in the early 1980s.

To attract a large Shia presence to Sayyeda Zainab, Khamenei had the Khomeini Hospital built nearby. The hospital even offered seminary students special prices on medical treatments. Over the years, the Iranian government, and specifically Khamenei, even came to oversee the weekly Friday sermons offered at various local offices that Shia Muslims frequent for religious and personal consultation. Additional hospitals have been built in the area in recent years, including the Bahman, Sadr, and Zahra hospitals, all of which have Persian or Shia names. In addition, a special Iran-sponsored radio station has helped to promote the shrine, attracting visitors and students to the area. During the Syrian civil war, rebels targeted the Khomeini Hospital and referred to it as the "hospital of Sayyeda Aisha,"¹⁶ rejecting Iran's increased influence over Damascus.

According to fighters in the Free Syrian Army (FSA), "There are many Shia who were brought into the area around the [Umayyad] mosque. It is a Sunni area but they plan for it to be secured by Shia, then surrounded by them [Iran]."¹⁷ Local reports state that, in 2012, Shia foreign fighters from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen largely drove out Sunni residents in an effort to settle their families, as instructed by the IRGC.

SAYYEDA RUQAYYA (SUKAYNA) SHRINE, DAMASCUS

Sayyeda Ruqayya was Imam Hussein's youngest daughter. Her primary shrine is located in the al-Amarah quarter of the Old City of Damascus, approximately one hundred meters from the Umayyad Mosque and near the remnants of the al-Khadra Palace, which belonged to the Umayyad caliph Muawiyah ibn Abi Sufyan.¹⁸ Despite disagreements among Sunni and Shia scholars on the location of Sayyeda Ruqayya's tomb—Damascus, Medina, or Cairo—Iranian businesspeople, with the blessing of Hafiz al-Assad, began buying properties around the alleged Syrian tomb in the early 1980s.¹⁹ They also made massive expansions to the shrine over the years, as the laws for protecting the Old City of Damascus did not prevent such development. Thus, the neighborhood has been heavily influenced by Shia pilgrims from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere, to the extent that the Old City's historic monuments and Sunni identity have been altered. Most recently, the IRGC has turned the area around the shrine into what local activists describe as an "Iranian settlement." In terms of significance, the Sayyeda Ruqayya shrine is second only to Sayyeda Zainab because of its location and number of daily visitors. Nabil al-Halbawi, the Syrian council member in Iran's Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, is imam of the Sayyeda Ruqayya Mosque, where the shrine is located. Another key site in Damascus is Bab al-Saghir cemetery, where it is believed that a number of fighters who were killed in the 680 AD Battle of Karbala are buried alongside Sayyeda Ruqayya.²⁰ To circumvent criticism for having two shrines dedicated to Sayyeda Ruqayya in the same city, Iranian officials used her nickname, Amina bint Hussein, at Bab al-Saghir.²¹ A Shia mosque and religious center were also built nearby.

Key historical accounts such as *Tarikh Dimashq* by Ibn Asakir, a scholar of medieval Islam from Damascus, do not confirm the burial place of Sayyeda Ruqayya.²² Thus, the lack of historical

evidence on this matter has provided Iran with an opportunity to exploit Syria's political and social landscape. More specifically, residents of Daraya (southwest of Damascus) explain that in 1999 a shrine for Sayyeda Ruqayya near the city's town hall was unexpectedly expanded on a massive scale by the Iranian regime.²³ The shrine had been allegedly rediscovered in the late 1980s.²⁴ Iranian business-people also bought a few surrounding properties; by 2003, the shrine had been further expanded and a Shia *husseiniyeh* built next to it.²⁵ Syrian activists maintain that, although there is no historical evidence behind the enterprise, its driving force is the expansion of Iran's political influence by means of religious exploitation. Local reports state that even former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the shrine in 2006.²⁶ After four years of massacres, sieges, starvation, and heavy fighting during the Syrian civil war, rebel forces in mid-2016 lost more than half of Daraya to the Assad regime's Fourth Armored Division and Iranian Shia proxies (namely, the Brigade of Imam Hussein). Located on the outskirts of Syria's capital, Daraya is strategically important for Iran and Assad's plan of demographic change. Thus, its majority-Sunni population was forced out and has since been replaced by Shia foreign fighters and their families.



Sayyeda Ruqayya (Sukayna) shrine, Damascus



al-Nuqtah/Mashhad al-Hussein shrine, Aleppo

AL-NUQTAH/MASHHAD AL-HUSSEIN (MASJID AL-MUKHTAR), ALEPPO CITY

Established during the eleventh century by the Hamdanid dynasty, the al-Nuqtah shrine gained significance among Shia Muslims for housing a stone that was allegedly stained with blood from Imam Hussein's head.²⁷ Hussein's head was severed when a caravan of prisoners passed from Karbala to Damascus following the Battle of Karbala. His shrine was renovated under Ottoman rule, and later reportedly transformed into a weapons depot and burned down during World War I.²⁸ In 1918, however, Aleppo's al-Jafari Charitable Society restored the shrine complex, which includes a tomb for a stillborn son of Imam Hussein as well as a mosque. With financial assistance from the Islamic Republic of Iran, the site was later expanded to host religious ceremonies and activities for Iranian pilgrims.

Following the fall of eastern Aleppo to the Assad regime and Iranian backers in 2016, Iranian clergy increasingly used the location to further export Twelver Shiism to local Syrians. In the al-Ansari neighborhood east of the new city of Aleppo, the strategic site was exploited by the IRGC, who rallied Shia foreign fighters to take over the territory from the FSA and other rebel groups. According to local reports, the shrine since early 2017 has been completely run by the IRGC; the corps oversees

religious ceremonies, including Ashura rituals that feature *latm* (chest-beating, flagellation, and face-slapping), and other activities such as literary competitions, which are even advertised on Facebook.²⁹ In addition to foreign Shia pilgrims, Syrians from nearby Nubl and Zahra, two minority-Shia villages formerly besieged by rebel forces, often visit this shrine.

SHRINES OF AMMAR IBN YASIR AND UWAIS AL-QARNI, RAQQA

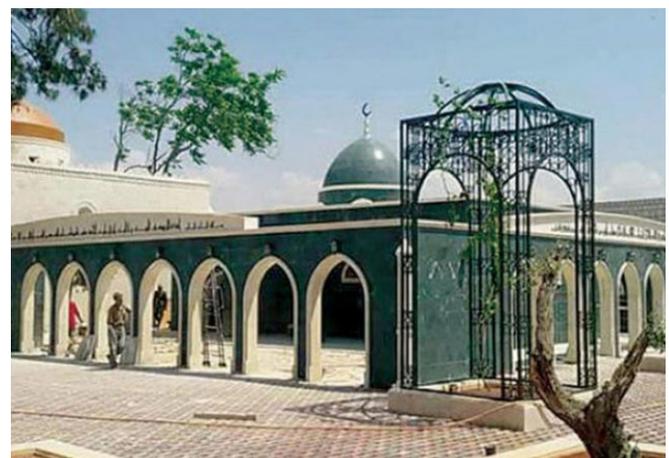
Ammar ibn Yasir and Uwais al-Qarni were companions of the Prophet Muhammad. They were also important figures in Twelver Shiism, having advocated for Ali ibn Abi Talib’s right to succeed following the death of the Prophet. Historical sources state that both men, along with other companions (*sahaba*), died in Raqqa during the Battle of Siffin (657 AD) while fighting alongside Abi Talib against the Umayyad caliph, Muawiyah. While ibn Yasir is believed to be buried in the main cemetery in Raqqa, purported tombs for al-Qarni are located in several areas outside Syria, including Pakistan. It is worth noting, however, that a second shrine for bin Yasir can be found in al-Ariqah in the Suwayda governorate.³⁰ In 2013, Iran created a Shia militia faction in his name: Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir. As part of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir recruits from the local Syrian Druze community and fights in support of the Assad regime in southern Syria.³¹ These efforts further explain Iran’s aspirations in strengthening its footprint in Syria by means of exploiting Twelver Shiism.

In the 1980s, the Syrian regime under Hafiz al-Assad allowed the Islamic Republic of Iran to attend to the ibn Yasir and al-Qarni shrines. But according to residents of Raqqa, their families’ tombs had to be relocated from the city’s main cemetery, per Iran’s request, to make room for a 12-acre shrine complex. Managed by Iran’s Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, construction of the complex—which includes a mosque and a Twelver Shia religious center—began in 1988 and ended in 2004.³²

This incident illustrates how the Iranian regime, in an effort to advance its political agenda in Syria (and specifically in Sunni-majority regions), has taken advantage of historical disputes over the burial sites of these figures. During the Syrian civil war, the shrine complex was reportedly targeted twice by the Islamic State—once in 2013 and again in 2014. Both attacks were condemned by Iran’s Ahlul Bayt World Assembly and Lebanese Hezbollah.³³

GEOSTRATEGIC SHRINES

In July 2019, then commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force Qasem Soleimani visited al-Bukamal to establish a new military unit—Liwa Hurras al-Maqamat—tasked with protecting newly built Shia shrines in Deir al-Zour. In this way, the IRGC has sought to manufacture local religious legitimacy.³⁴ **The shrine of Ain Ali** in Deir al-Zour is an example of the placement of new Shia sites on or near older holy monuments previously established by Sunni dynasties.³⁵ Local reports indicate that, as of December 2019, the shrine of Ain Ali is guarded by twenty militiamen who are also members Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Iran’s militia proxy group from Iraq.³⁶ Another Shia site in Syria that Iran has exploited for alleged religious significance is the **shrine of Imam Ali Zain al-Abidin** in Hama, on top of Zain al-Abidin mountain.³⁷ A strategic military base jointly run by the Assad regime and Iran is near



Ain Ali shrine

the shrine. The base was established in the early 1980s, when the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Fighting Vanguard in Hama were threats to Hafiz al-Assad's rule, which ultimately led to the infamous Hama massacre of 1982. Since 2011, this base has contained an important operations room for the IRGC and the forces of the Syrian regime, in addition to a landing zone for hovercraft. Control of the base ensures a military advantage over Hama city and its formerly contested suburbs, as well as the M-5 highway.

The shrine of Hujr ibn Adi al-Kindi, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, is located in Adra, Rif Damascus.³⁸ The site gained geostrategic value in the early years of the Syrian civil war, when Hezbollah released a statement in May 2013 condemning alleged "terrorists attacks" on the shrine.³⁹ Although there is no evidence of who vandalized the site or why, the IRGC and its proxies (led by Hezbollah) exploited the opportunity to strategically assert their power near Syria's capital, specifically by mobilizing forces "in defense" of Muslim holy sites. Tehran-based Iranian news network al-Alam claimed in September 2014 that the Adra region was "completely" liberated by the Assad regime and that life had returned to "normal."⁴⁰ Anti-Assad activists believe that this act of vandalism was purposely committed by the Assad regime to mobilize Shia fighters.

Similarly, the **Abu Dharr al-Ghifari Mosque** in Homs was the site of heavy sectarian clashes.⁴¹ The mosque was named after a companion of the Prophet Muhammad who is regarded as an important figure in Twelver Shiism for his criticism of the rule of Uthman, the third of the *Rashidun* or Rightly Guided Caliphs. Homs has been strategically important for Bashar al-Assad's regime since the 2011 uprising; thus, losing control of several parts of the city constituted a major threat. To recapture Homs, the Assad regime relied on Iranian advisors and proxies that rushed to "defend" Shia sites.⁴² Together, they carried out a brutal campaign of siege, starvation, and bombardment from 2011 to 2015, ultimately forcing the anti-regime forces and revolutionaries to surrender.⁴³

Mechanisms of Religious Indoctrination in Syria

For decades, Iran has used various educational bodies to indoctrinate Syria's children and youth and to convert the elderly to Shia Islam. The Assad regime has facilitated Iran's ideological expansion, both in Damascus and throughout Syria as a whole. Seminaries and congregation halls, as well as schools, universities, and other academic institutions, are vital to Iran's ideological goals in Syria. These bodies not only provide free education services; they also offer financial and other incentives to attract as many Syrians as possible.

Seminaries and Congregation Halls

To expand its influence since the 1970s, Iran has widely invested in religious seminaries (*hawza ilmiyah*) and congregation halls (*husseiniyeh*) in Syria, which operate independently of Syria's Ministry of Education. Although the seminaries are primarily intended for training in Shia jurisprudence (*fiqh*), they have increasingly become the site of commemoration ceremonies as well as lectures and public discussions of regional political matters, particularly since the outset of the Syrian uprising in 2011.

Nearly seventy seminaries have been established since 1995, most of which are located near the Syrian capital of Damascus.⁴⁴ The seminaries operate under direct supervision of the Iranian regime and, in many cases, are not registered with the Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments (Ministry of Awqaf). Thus, Iran often has complete liberty over the mission and design of the curriculum. Iran also has the freedom to build and operate as many seminaries as it desires, without the restrictions of official Syrian laws and procedures. According to local reports, twelve Iranian seminaries were established in 2006 alone, following the creation of a shell directorate to circumvent Syria's Ministry of Awqaf.

Moreover, anti-Assad activists attest to the fact that Hisham Ikhtiyar, a former National Security Bureau chief, directly facilitated the expansion of Iran's landholdings in Syria.⁴⁵ Indeed, Ikhtiyar transferred the proprietorship of Syria's shrines and graves of Shia imams and public figures from Syria's Ministry of Awqaf to the Iranian regime by establishing military barracks and intelligence facilities. Ikhtiyar also acquired numerous real estate properties and agricultural lands in Rif Damascus, especially near the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab.

Attracted by the seminaries' free educational services, students of different nationalities from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Somalia travel to Syria to study Shia jurisprudence. Since the 1990s, the office of Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in Sayyeda Zainab has played a significant role as Iran's key proxy in Syria, vis-a-vis proselytization efforts and missionary activities. For example, Hezbollah in the early 1990s encouraged Iraqi Shia missionaries, including Abdulhamid al-Muhajer and Ali al-Badri, to settle in Syria, working publicly and even giving weekly lectures on state television. Hezbollah also officiated the weddings of prominent Shia figures who were loyal to Hezbollah to local Syrian women. In 2000, Iranian officials sponsored a group wedding of sixty couples in Aleppo city.

In 2010, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei sponsored additional seminaries in Homs and Latakia, and in Damascus near the shrine of Sayyeda Ruqayya. Yet the Seminary of Imam Khomeini, founded by Khamenei in Sayyeda Zainab, remains the biggest and most popular seminary in Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that, as of December 2019, five hundred *husseiniyeh* are operating in Damascus.⁴⁶ Most of these are funded by the Iranian regime, while a small number are sponsored by Shia figures from the Gulf states. Nearly eighty *husseiniyeh* are in the Latakia region; others are in Aleppo, Deraa, and elsewhere.⁴⁷ Social and cultural activities, as well as financial incentives, offered by these entities have helped convert nearly eight thousand Syrians to Shiism in recent years.

Individuals who convert to Shia Islam receive monthly stipends to help with living expenses. Increasingly, the *husseiniyeh* play a major role in provoking sectarian tensions, as they help fund and recruit Shia fighters in support of the Assad regime, which desperately needs military backing against its local adversaries.

The following is a sample of prominent seminaries and religious centers in Syria. Note that most of these institutions have expanded to include multiple locations.

- Al-Hawza al-Ilmiyah al-Zaynabiyah, est. 1975 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam Khomeini, est. 1981 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Murtada, est. 1995 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Mustafa lil Uloum al-Quraniyah, est. 1995 (Damascus)
- Hawzat Ahl al-Bait, est. 1996 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam al-Sistani, est. 1996 (Damascus)
- Ahl al-Bait Cultural Center, est. 2000 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam Ali, est. 2001 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Mahdi al-Ilmiyah lil Dirasat al-Islamiyah, est. 2002 (Damascus)
- Hawzat Fiqh al-Aimmah al-Athar, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Al-Hawza al-Haydariyah, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam Jawad al-Tabrizi, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam al-Sadiq, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Rasoul al-Azam, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam al-Mujtaba, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Imam Hussein, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat Imam al-Zaman al-Talemiyah, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Shahidayn al-Sidiqayn, est. 2006 (Damascus)
- Hawzat al-Rasoul al-Azam, est. 2006 (Latakia)
- Mujamma al-Serat al-Thaqafi, est. 2014 (Damascus)



An Iranian delegation led by Javad Turkabadi, Iran's ambassador to Syria, signs education-related agreements, Damascus.

Academic Institutions

Under mounting internal political and military threats, Bashar al-Assad has given Iran what it wants. In return, Iran has provided unwavering support in Assad's fight against the FSA and local revolutionary voices calling for regime change.

In October 2014—as a result of Iran's pressure to deepen its influence within Syria's social fabric—Assad officially decreed that the Ministry of Education provide Shia Islamic studies as part of Syria's national curriculum across schools, colleges, and universities. In conjunction, the role of Sunni *ulama* (religious scholars) in public education was to be decreased.⁴⁸ Assad gave Iran the green light to build schools for students of all ages throughout the country, and especially in what Iran saw as strategic cities, among them Aleppo, Damascus, Deir al-Zour, Idlib, and Latakia. Former Syrian prime minister Imad Khamis affirmed that Iran has worked to reconstruct more than ten thousand Syrian schools that were destroyed during the civil war.⁴⁹

According to local reports, parents of students receive up to 10,000 Syrian pounds (equal to 19.50 U.S. dollars today and 500 U.S. dollars prior to summer 2020) as an incentive for every child they enroll in these schools.⁵⁰ Moreover, during his visit

to Damascus in January 2020, Iranian minister of education Mohsen Haji Mirzaei confirmed that his country is committed to building and restoring thousands of schools in Syria—though it ignores the dire conditions of schools in Tehran and other Iranian cities, where major floods have had a huge impact.⁵¹

Iran's systematic infiltration is not new in Syria. At least forty private Iranian schools were already operating in Damascus prior to the 2011 uprising. Reportedly, only ten of those schools were officially recognized by Syria's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Education. The rest have operated unofficially, behind the scenes, in an effort to avoid public backlash. The schools are located in busy capital-area neighborhoods, including al-Amin Street, Bab al-Mousalla, and al-Hamra Street. Notably, among the first modern-style schools built in the world Muslim community is al-Madrasa al-Muhseniyah, in the Medhat Basha neighborhood in the Old City of Damascus. It was established in 1902 by Muslim Shia scholar Muhsen al-Amin al-Ameli for both Sunni and Shia students of elementary to high school age.⁵² In recent years, however, the school has been increasingly influenced by Iran's political agenda in Syria. For example, the school now offers scholarships and financial assistance to Sunni students who pledge to convert to Shiism.

Further, among the most important higher education entities coopted by the Iranian regime is Damascus University's School of Islamic Studies. Located near the shrine of Sayyeda Zainab, which is administered by Imam Nabil al-Halbawi, the branch is dedicated to Shia studies but also offers students classes in history, Arabic language, and media, among other topics. Similarly, near the shrine of Sayyeda Ruqayya in the al-Amarah quarter of Damascus is the Ruqayya Institute, the Shia branch of Bilad al-Sham University and previously known as Mahad al-Sham al-Islami.⁵³ Bilad al-Sham University serves as an umbrella entity for a number of Islamic studies institutions.⁵⁴ It was established in 2011 following an official decree from Assad that the university oversee Mahad al-Fateh al-Islami, the Ahmad Kuftaro Congregation, and the Ruqayya Institute, all of which have been greatly infiltrated and influenced by Iran. Thanks to pressure from the Iranian regime, Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and local Syrian Shia businesspeople, these entities were able to officially operate without fear of being shut down, as was the case during the rule of Hafiz al-Assad. Indeed, Hafiz was stricter when it came to such religious activities in the country, but he did not face an existential threat like the one his son Bashar has dealt with since 2011.

Through Bilad al-Sham University, the Assad regime monitors and interferes in local educational affairs. The regime gives a free hand to the most unenlightened representatives of Islam to serve in its favor by preaching obedience to the ruler and, ironically, claiming to "fight" radical ideologies. Such radical ideologies, however, are in fact those of radicalized prisoners to whom Assad gave amnesty in spring 2011 and released from Saidnaya prison in June of that same year. Thus, the regime purposely returned many radicals to the battlefield. Ninety percent of the former prisoners had been accused of fighting in Iraq against the United States—combat that the Assad regime helped facilitate.⁵⁵

To further steer the dynamics on the ground in favor of the Assad regime, the Ruqayya Institute, a four-year academic institution, receives financial support

from Iran through Lebanese Hezbollah, and through some Iranian proxies fighting in Syria. Ruqayya Institute students, who come from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Yemen, reportedly number more than five thousand. Many of them are tasked with military duties in support of the fighters of Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas, among other groups. In return, the students receive housing and monthly compensation as well as opportunities to enroll for free in higher education institutions in Iran. In addition to Jafari Islamic studies and fundamentals of Shia jurisprudence, the Ruqayya Institute offers topics such as media, Arabic language, and history.

As one of the key institutions of Shia Islam in Damascus, the Ruqayya Institute works to expand its reach in Syria. It even targets the Alawite community in the coastal region, including those in the Latakia governorate. For example, Rami Makhlouf, Bashar al-Assad's maternal cousin and Iran's closest ally in Syria, ran the Jamiyat al-Bustan charity until 2020.⁵⁶ With the help of Jamiyat al-Bustan, two mixed-gender Shia high schools opened in the Latakia towns of al-Bahlouliyah and al-Daliya in 2016, under the name Thanawiyah Shariyah lil Banin wal Banat.⁵⁷ Jamiyat al-Bustan is also known for providing financial aid for students enrolling in such schools. Local reports, however, indicate that some Alawite parents have been frustrated by the school project, specifically because of Iran's increased meddling in their children's education. Indeed, families view such interference as an infringement on their culture, religion, and values; thus, these communities are extremely alarmed by the evolving ties between the teachers who educate their children and the Iranian authorities. Some Alawite families even claim that they feel closer to Sunni Syrians than to Shia Iranians.

To silence local resentment, Makhlouf ordered the Latakia Education Directorate to publicly announce that students who enroll in Shia high schools run by the Ruqayya Institute will automatically be admitted to any Syrian university of their choice, without having to go through the standard application

process. Consequently, Iran—supported by the Assad regime—has had a tremendous advantage in Syria's coastal region, given that most Alawite communities are poor and without the economic power to build their own local schools and mosques. The neighborhood of al-Datour in Latakia city is one such place that Iran has targeted through Shia missionaries and Iranian clergy; many of these individuals even participate in Alawi religious holidays to distribute books and pamphlets on Twelver Shiism.

Additionally, in cooperation with Iran's cultural consulate in Damascus in 2017, a Persian-language department was established at Syria's third-largest university—Latakia's Tishreen University. Persian studies eventually became one of the academic majors offered to Tishreen University students, and individuals not enrolled at the university are welcome to register for low-cost Persian classes. As an incentive to attract as many students as possible, free Persian-language classes are available to individuals traveling to Iran for academic purposes. Similarly, Hama University president Muhammad Ziad Sultan signed academic cooperation agreements with three major Iranian universities: Mashhad's Ferdowsi University and Tehran's Amirkabir University of Technology and al-Zahra University.⁵⁸ Sultan also stated that female Syrian students are an essential part of these new initiatives, and that they are equally encouraged to travel to Iran to continue their studies as are their male counterparts.

Moreover, Damascus in April 2018 celebrated the opening of a branch of Tehran-based Islamic Azad University, as reported by Mehr News, a prominent Iranian media outlet.⁵⁹ Syrian minister of education Atef al-Naddaf discussed with Ali Akbar Velayati—a senior advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader on international affairs and head of the university's board of founders and board of trustees—steps for opening branches in major Syrian cities including Aleppo, Damascus, and Latakia.⁶⁰ The Iranian ambassador to Syria, Javad Turkabadi, also attended the meeting, emphasizing along with Iranian academics the importance of Syria as a base for Iran's educational endeavors in the Middle East. That same year, two

other Iranian universities established branches in Damascus: Qom-based al-Mustafa International University and the College of Farabi.⁶¹ Talks about opening a branch of the Tehran-based Tarbiat Modares University in Damascus also took place.



Sheikh Samer Ubaid, dean of al-Mustafa International University

Other Iran-backed institutions that preach Shia Islam in the name of influencing local religious beliefs are located in different parts of Syria. For example, in Idlib city, Sheikh Khalil al-Shadi administers a Shia studies branch of the Damascus-based Islamic Studies Institute.⁶² In Tabqa city in Raqqqa governorate, Ali al-Shuaibi (who is known for converting to Shiism himself) runs the school of *dawa* and *ijtihad* (a legal term referring to independent reasoning, or the thorough exertion of a jurist's mental faculty in finding a solution to a legal question).

Mujamma al-Rasoul al-Azam claims on its official website and social media platforms to have been, at least since 2008, a main sponsor of dozens of schools spreading Twelver Shiism on the basis of Decree 1109.⁶³ The association, whose Syrian employees have reportedly studied at religious institutions in Iran, was built in Latakia prior to the 2011 Syrian uprising. Iran sponsored its construction projects on approximately one acre of *waqf* land located in the al-Azhari neighborhood of Latakia city. The association runs secondary schools (equivalent to high schools) in the coastal region; among them is Madrasat al-Rasoul al-Azam in Ras al-Ain village in Jableh, Latakia. The school is overseen by the

Syrian Ministry of Religious Affairs and the head of the al-Rasoul al-Azam Congregation and Mosque in Latakia, as well as Ayman Zaytoun from al-Fua, Idlib, who studied Shiism in Qom, Iran.⁶⁴ The school offers Jafari education to students through nearly ten books on Shia Islam that have been added to Syria's national curriculum. Other schools operating in the coastal region, including Madrasat Ain Shaqaq, Madrasat al-Qardaha, Madrasat Karsana, and Madrasat Satamou, offer an Iranian educational curriculum that is divided into *al-kawniyat* (universal subjects such as math, science, and history) and *al-fiqhhiyat* (Islamic jurisprudence) according to the teachings of Shia Imam Jafar al-Sadiq. The number of students attending such schools ranges from 4,500 to 5,000 each academic year. Furthermore, another school under the name Madrasat al-Rasoul al-Azam reportedly began operating in Damascus in 2015.⁶⁵

The association of al-Rasoul al-Azam influences local dynamics in the coastal cities of Baniyas, Latakia, and Tartus, and even parts of northern Idlib province. It sponsors media and culture offices, schools, scout clubs, libraries, women's associations, and religious institutions. During the Syrian civil war, the association has also supported families and children of soldiers who have died fighting for the Assad regime. For example, special entities that care for and provide basic services to orphans and widows have become distinctly popular in recent years.



al-Rasoul al-Azam school, Qardaha, Latakia

Through the Basij, an IRGC force responsible for implementing socioeconomic projects at home and abroad, Iran aims to win the support of as many Alawi families as possible, specifically with regard to its “Shia crescent” project connecting Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.⁶⁶ Local lower-income families living in Syria's coastal region thus continue to witness the fundamental role the association of al-Rasoul al-Azam plays in serving Iran's political, economic, and social interests in the area.

In January 2020, representatives of the Syrian and Iranian ministries of education signed a memorandum of understanding in Damascus. The memorandum, effective immediately, outlined the exchange of scientific and academic expertise between Iran and Syria, as well as Iran's provision of technical and engineering services to restore Syria's schools. Thus far, at least eleven educational and cultural agreements have been initiated between Iran and the Assad regime.⁶⁷ Iranian minister of education Mohsen Haji Mirzaei emphasized the importance of integrating Persian-language and culture studies into Syria's national education system to “deepen and consolidate” aspects of Iran-Syria cooperation. Similarly, Syrian minister of education Emad al-Azeb stated after signing that the memorandum is a “step in the right direction” to train and develop the capabilities of Syria's teachers and to support the reconstruction of Syria's schools. Local reports estimate that tens of thousands of primary and secondary students in Syria are pressured into enrolling in Persian-language classes. As of 2019, official numbers range from forty thousand to fifty thousand.⁶⁸ Unofficial numbers are higher, especially in areas where Iran-backed Shia militias are heavily present, such as along the Syrian-Iraqi border in Deir al-Zour, as well as in Homs and Aleppo. Iranian officials claim that there is no shortage of bilingual teachers who travel from Iran to Syria to fulfill the mission of jihad in the “land of al-Sham,” what the Khomeinists call Syria.

Iran's cultural and educational activities in Syria heavily target children and students at the

pre-college level, given their greater receptiveness to ideological indoctrination. In fact, Iran's minister of education confirmed that his country is sharing its experience in managing Syria's national school system.⁶⁹ In 2012, the Imam al-Mahdi Association (based in Sayyeda Zainab, Damascus) established the Mahdi Scouts for boys and girls in an attempt to plant the ideals of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the minds of Syrian youth ages eight to sixteen. The Mahdi Scouts are directly funded by Iran's cultural consulate in Damascus and were led by IRGC commander Hassan Shateri until his death in February 2013. The Mahdi Scouts program offers a variety of activities, including theatrical shows, sports competitions, religious ceremonies, and even

military training classes that highlight the story of the Battle of Karbala and the death of Imam Hussein at the hands of the Umayyads. Photos published by Ahlul Bayt News Agency show the scouts wearing military uniforms while carrying Iranian flags and portraits of Imam Khamenei. Many of these children continue to be killed on the frontlines as they fight alongside Shia militias in different parts of Syria. Kashafat al-Wilayah is another Sayyeda Zainab-based scouts organization for boys and girls; it dates back to October 2014 and carries out activities similar to those of the Mahdi Scouts, according to its Facebook page.⁷⁰ In addition to recruiting child soldiers, these groups are notorious for trafficking young girls and forcing them to be child brides.

Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, Damascus



al-Wilayah Scouts, Damascus; in bottom-left image, President Assad is pictured with Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah



To target higher education students in Syria, Iran has established a variety of programs, some of which were founded in the early 2000s. For instance, Iran's cultural consulate in Damascus opened the first Persian-language department at Damascus University in 2005. Other Syrian state universities in Aleppo, Deir-al-Zour, Homs, and Tartus eventually followed suit. Thus far, Iran's cultural consulate has sponsored at least one hundred Persian-language classes in Damascus and more than fifty in Latakia—two major strongholds of the Assad regime. Even in the town of Tabqa in Raqqa, a Shia religious college opened during the 2006–7 academic year with an enrollment of hundreds of students. Similar institutions have also been established in Hasaka, Idlib, and other locations.

The IRGC, through its local cultural center in the strategic province of Deir-al Zour, has also interfered with academic programs at a number of schools. Among such programs are those in al-Bukamal and its suburbs, including at Madrasat Hittin, al-Thanawiyah al-Shariyah, and Madrasat al-Banat. These are in addition to schools in the villages of al-Sukkariyah, al-Hari, and al-Suwaiyah, as well as in Mayadin and Deir al-Zour city, where Persian-language and history classes have been imposed on the curriculum.⁷² The Iranian cultural center in Deir al-Zour has also sponsored restoration and reconstruction of schools destroyed by the Islamic State. In an effort to attract potential students, the cultural center pressures Syrian youth to participate in social events, religious ceremonies, and sports competitions organized by the IRGC; in return for their participation, the students receive school credit and financial aid. Hundreds of Syrian students in all grades have even traveled to Iran in pursuit of attractive academic scholarships. Beyond education, locals report that the IRGC pressures imams to perform the call to prayer according to the Shia creed in majority-Sunni areas such as southeast Deir al-Zour. Pushback from residents and imams is usually punishable by jail.

Forcing the Syrian population's hand into submission is not limited to areas heavily affected by war.

Indeed, Iran's infiltration tactics have also reached key coastal cities and suburbs, thanks to past and present figures in the Assad regime. In the early 1980s, mounting local threats from Syria's Muslim Brotherhood led Jamil al-Assad, oldest brother of Hafiz, to establish Jamiyat al-Murtada. The charity organization aimed to counter the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood's Syrian branch by empowering Alawism, connecting it to Twelver Shiism and the ideals of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The charity was among the first to perform such missionary activities, which the Assad regime itself sponsored against domestic threats. Jamiyat al-Murtada received financial support for a wide range of projects from Shia *maraji* (references) in Iran and Iraq, and sponsored dozens of *husseiniyeh* in Latakia and Tartus, where the majority of Alawites reside. It also sent hundreds of Alawites to study Twelver Shiism in Qom, Iran.

Additionally, Jamiyat al-Murtada targeted Ismaili populations in Hama, including the towns of Masyaf and Salamiya. By appealing to elderly and respected Alawite sheikhs and other figures who believed in the teachings of the Jafari school, the charity focused on linking Alawis to the Iranian axis and the Shia crescent project. Hafiz al-Assad even occasionally gave Shia imams airtime on national radio and television, in an effort to expand his support base. Moreover, the charity targeted Sunni and Shia tribal leaders through philanthropy and provision of social services in Deir al-Zour, Deraa, Qamishli, and elsewhere. Thousands of locals across Syria became involved out of fear of sectarian and ethnic cleansing, as happened in the Hama massacre. Public figures such as Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, a prominent Twelver Shia cleric from Lebanon, joined the Assad regime in this mission. The charity guaranteed its members safety and offered them employment opportunities and other privileges similar to those offered by the Baath Party. The charity closed in the mid-1980s but was reactivated in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising in 2011 by Sheikh Fadhel Ghazal and his sons.

In 2014, local news outlets reported that Ali Akbar

Velayati, a senior advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader, had repeatedly expressed that Iran felt “secure” vis-à-vis its borders, especially in light of the “demise” of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, two major rivals of the Iranian regime. Iran could now focus on its regional aspirations—particularly its “vital role in Syria,” which entails both soft and hard power approaches. Consequently, Shia missionaries, encouraged by Syrian officials, were seen more frequently throughout Syria, recruiting trusted personnel to establish their hundreds of religious institutions, including *husseiniyeh* and *hawza*, as well as schools, libraries and book fairs, and cultural centers in many cities.⁷³ As mentioned earlier, Iran sometimes even builds Shia shrines on top of or close to older Sunni holy sites, as at the shrine of Ain Ali in Deir al-Zour. Such actions are intended to establish local religious legitimacy, especially in strategically important parts of Syria. Shrines and mosques are also used as education centers for Twelver Shiism.⁷⁴ A number of mosques, such as the Imam Ali bin Abi Talib and al-Zahra mosques in Damascus, were coopted by the Iranian regime; nearby neighborhoods—such as Zain al-Abidin and al-Jourah—thus became home to Shia foreigners and local converts alike.

Infiltration Through Aid and Infrastructure

Iran relies heavily on Syria and benefits tremendously from its relationship with the Assad regime. Likewise, Syria is the only country in the Arab world that maintains close relations with Tehran. That cannot be said about Iraq or Lebanon’s relationship with Iran, at least not to the same degree. Syria provides Iran what it needs for its hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East, and Iran views Syria as integral to its Shia “axis of resistance” against the “great Satan” that is America and the “little Satan” that is Israel. Indeed, this narrative

is fundamental to Iran’s domestic support for its regional ventures. Iran has sent thousands of Shia fighters and militiamen to Syria since the civil war began, but its involvement in the war-torn country is not limited to military support. In fact, Iran’s military presence in Syria helps to fortify its long-term socioeconomic plans and projects for decades to come. And the Assad regime cannot survive without this relationship: Iran’s support for Assad is militarily, financially, and economically fundamental to the regime. Through such interference, Iran directly influences the state of affairs in Damascus.

Under the cover of cultural relations and charitable cooperation, Iran over the past decade has shown tremendous interest in expanding its roots in Syria through infrastructure projects including not only real estate, hospitals, and hotels, but also communications and electrical infrastructure.⁷⁵ In addition, Iran sponsors security, information technology, agriculture, water, oil and gas, food and beverage, and other sectors.⁷⁶ Iranian charities and associations are moving into war-torn areas of Syria to buy off locals by offering financial aid, food (including rice, flour, and sugar), medicine, and other supplies. Iran’s Ministry of Roads and Urban Development has even entered Syria’s housing market by pledging to build an initial two hundred thousand residential units in Damascus.⁷⁷ Such initiatives are indeed taking place in the Syrian capital, but also in major strategic cities including Aleppo, Deir al-Zour, Homs, and Raqqa (though on a small scale in Raqqa, since most of the area belongs to the Syrian Democratic Forces). Iran also targets Alawi-majority cities and towns—including Qardaha, the hometown of the Assad family—for real estate and investment purposes, by coopting local Syrian businesspeople, public figures, imams, and officials who help facilitate the implementation of projects. To support Iran’s plans, Bashar al-Assad publicly announced in December 2018 his intention to grant Iranian public and private companies special privileges, thereby giving priority to their reconstruction and aid work in Syria. Despite Iran’s alarming alteration of local demographics through such



Iranian trucks delivering aid to Syrians (undisclosed location)

projects, as evidenced by numerous reports from Syrian anti-regime activists and journalists, Syria's minister of economy and trade, Mohammad Samer al-Khalil, continues to meet regularly with his counterpart in Tehran to sign related agreements.⁷⁸ Moreover, Khalil often emphasizes the “great desire” of both Iran and Syria to further develop relations, specifically economic ones. He also calls for the opening of joint banks, noting the importance of cooperation between the two central banks of Syria and Iran in light of international sanctions.⁷⁹

In the highly strategic Deir al-Zour province, Iran has taken over a great deal of key public and private infrastructure. Some systems are in the public health domain, such as the Hospital of Modern Medicine in Mayadin, where the IRGC treats its injured Shia fighters and militiamen. Iran has also built its own medical facilities, among them al-Qusur Hospital in Deir al-Zour city. Local journalists report that medical institutions in Deir al-Zour do not operate independently from Iran or its Shia militias, and Syrian natives of Deir al-Zour cannot be admitted for treatment to such facilities without the approval of the IRGC or its local affiliates. Further, Iran exploits the immense needs and cries for help of local Syrians through informal methods of indoctrination. The deterioration of the Syrian pound, coupled with a lack of security and difficult living conditions, has given Iran room to win over local communities in

Deir al-Zour. Iranian organizations of a sectarian nature provide emergency assistance and development aid to families in need in return for loyalty and openness to Twelver Shia teachings, values, and ways of life. Iran's IRGC also recruits Syrian youth into the ranks of its militias by offering attractive financial incentives. Conversion to Shia Islam guarantees additional privileges, leaving young Sunnis with no option but to convert. According to locals, the well-organized IRGC financial practices are far superior to the Assad regime's “chaotic and bankrupt” security structure.⁸⁰ Thousands of local Syrians have been recruited in this manner, while hundreds of Shia fighters have settled with their families in housing properties guaranteed, bought, and managed by Iranian businesspeople.⁸¹

Tehran financially supports community dignitaries and leaders from the Baggara tribe and the “Tribal Army” militia. A Baajin tribal official in Mayadin, Saleh Muhammad Ismail al-Baaj, is considered Tehran's main ally in spreading Twelver Shia Islam, in cooperation with the Iranian cultural center in Damascus. These figures often provide intelligence and security support to facilitate the movements of Iranian forces and proxies in Deir al-Zour province. Local reports indicate that more than three thousand residents in a single village, al-Hatla, have converted to Shiism thanks to Iranian efforts. Other towns in the province, such as Kasra, al-Saawah, and al-Mual, are also seeing the effects of Iran's influence.

Cash-strapped locals often find themselves having to submit to the IRGC's demands, including participating in Shia events at local *husseiniyeh*, where prizes and aid are offered to orphans, women, and families of martyrs. Tehran even distributes free fuel to locals in need in some areas of Deir al-Zour, including al-Bukamal.⁸² In the past few years, Iran has invited tribal sheikhs and imams from Raqqa and Deir al-Zour to Tehran to discuss ways to cooperate. Anti-regime activists report that some sheikhs are offered cars and money in exchange for their loyalty. Iran sponsors a variety of economic and social initiatives in Syria, and has shown a strong interest

in and commitment to reconstruction. Economic conferences, workshops, and other ventures help cement Tehran’s influence over Damascus. Some Iranian officials have stated that the Syrian market is one of Tehran’s best options for mitigating the severity of U.S. sanctions, and that long-term investment deals in Syria provide a sustainable market for the Iranian regime. According to Iranian deputy minister of roads and urban development Amir Amini, Iranian investors are involved in reconstruction projects in Syria worth \$600 billion. Such projects include investments in phosphate and cement production as well as manufacturing, which are key for reconstruction. A prominent IRGC official stated in December 2018 that the Revolutionary Guards will help facilitate the work of Iranian private and public companies interested in pursuing reconstruction efforts in Syria.

Since 2015, Damascus has held the “Rebuild Syria” exhibition, where hundreds of Iranian businesspeople participate.⁸³ The 2020 exhibition was postponed

until 2021 because of the Covid-19 crisis; but in August 2019, ahead of that year’s trade fair, Trade Promotion Organization of Iran head Mohammad Reza Modoudi claimed that his country had given Syria \$11.5 billion worth of commodities in the spring of 2019. Iran’s deals with Syria are financed through lines of credit. Iran claims it has extended \$20 billion in oil sales and \$8 billion for reconstruction, plus it has helped develop more than 12,000 acres of agricultural projects, although it is not clear if the reality corresponds to these claims. Iran can use these claims to hold the Syrian economy hostage to Iran for decades, even if Syria does not make payments on the loans, which is more or less what happened with the billions of dollars Syria owed Iran for low-price oil sales in the 1980s. Indeed, Iran has guaranteed the economic life of Syria since the beginning of the civil war, which has caused a decline in trade with Turkey and other regional players. Free trade with Tehran and sales of Iranian crude oil to Syria have increased, while customs costs have dropped in favor of Iran. According to local sources, sales of oil exceeded 125,000 barrels per day in March 2015. And over the past nine years, Syria has received an average of 70,000 barrels of oil per day—which is nearly half the amount it requires.⁸⁴ In 2019, Iran’s trade with Syria increased 25 percent in the first five months of the Persian year.⁸⁵ Additionally, Iran signs a new agreement to open a line of credit for Syria almost every year. Earlier during the civil war, Iran extended a \$1 billion line of credit to Syria, which was approved by Syria’s parliament. Later, Iran extended a second line of credit, worth \$3.6 billion, to buy oil products.⁸⁶

Dimashq al-Sham al-Qabedah is another organization established by the Assad regime in cooperation with the Iranian business sector.⁸⁷ Having started operations in December 2016 under the management of Rami Makhlouf, Syria’s biggest tycoon, Dimashq al-Sham al-Qabedah is an umbrella holding company for a variety of subsidiary businesses with foreign ties. It administers and invests in properties in Damascus, while sponsoring additional commercial and economic projects in other parts of the country.



The text of this Iran-Syria unity banner reads, “We are together in war, through sanctions and floods.”

Local Syrian activists report that although Dimashq al-Sham al-Qabedah claims to be “rebuilding” Syria, it is in reality selling much of Damascus’s land, property, and infrastructure to Iranian entities. These entities then carry out a number of projects, such as those in historic Sunni neighborhoods near the Umayyad Mosque in the Old City of Damascus. Legislative Decree 66, issued by Bashar al-Assad in 2012 to privatize public lands in the Damascus governorate, made such projects possible given existing shortages of capital and lack of capacity for reconstruction in the governorate. The decree grants holding companies extensive powers and even exempts them from inspection, auditing, and liability. Beyond Makhlof, other businesspeople with close ties to Iran are also involved in these efforts, among them Samer al-Fawz and Mazen al-Tarazi. With the regime’s permission afforded by the decree, Iran has taken advantage of the situation in Damascus to implement what locals call “suspicious activities” throughout the governorate, including areas surrounding the Iranian embassy. Under Dimashq al-Sham al-Qabedah are several smaller reconstruction companies—Ramak, Aman Dimashq, and Rawafed—all of which belong to Makhlof. Additionally, under the controversial Law 10 issued in April 2018, Syrians had only one month to claim their private property. This legislation was later amended in November 2018 (Law 42), thereby giving Syrians up to one year to claim their property.⁸⁸ Regardless of the amendment, however, the Assad regime and Iran were already far ahead in terms of their plans for ethnic cleansing across Syria—especially around Damascus, home to most of the territory designated for reconstruction. The civil war has forced from their homes more than half of Syria’s pre-war population of 22 million. In turn, the Assad regime has auctioned off land of displaced persons in an effort to carry out its plans for demographic change.⁸⁹

In Damascus, Dimashq al-Sham al-Qabedah is currently sponsoring two multimillion-dollar projects that cater both to regime loyalists and supporters and to Iran’s Shia militiamen and their

families. The first is the Marota City project, in the zone behind the Iranian embassy known as Basateen al-Razi in Kafr Souseh. A former hub for protests during the 2011 Syrian uprising, the area is home to most of the city’s working class. The project is meant to provide 12,000 residential units for more than 50,000 residents espousing loyalty to Iran as well as Syria, according to Assad regime statements. Ironically, *marota* means “sovereignty” or “homeland” in Syriac.⁹⁰ The second project, which is four times the size, is in fact an extension of the first, stretching across southern parts of Damascus (including al-Qadam, al-Asali, Babila, Beit Sahem, Shari’ al-Thalathin, Sidi Meqdad, and Yalda) and reaching as far as Aqraba in the east and al-Sabinah and Sayyeda Zainab in the south. This project is marketed as Basilia City, which—also ironically—means “paradise” in Syriac.⁹¹ These two projects have caused farmlands and centuries-old orchards to be destroyed, and thousands of local residents have been evicted without any compensation for their razed properties.⁹² Moreover, Iran has reportedly bought entire neighborhoods in Damascus, to help ensure its influence even if Assad is overthrown.⁹³ Major demolition has been going on for a few years in areas the Assad regime took from rebels both within and around the capital. These include al-Qabun, Barzah, Daraya, and Jobar—all of which were extremely active in the early days of the Syrian uprising. The regime aims to alter local demographics through Shia gentrification projects that force out Sunni families who have revolted against Assad. As further punishment, no alternative housing is offered to such families. Massacres against thousands of peaceful protestors have also been committed in these areas, though Iran and the Assad regime hide the evidence by building new cities on top of mass graves. It is not a secret that Tehran aims to create a stronghold around Syria’s capital similar to that in the Dahiya suburb of southern Beirut, where Shia Muslims espousing loyalty to Iran as well as Syria constitute a majority. Iran’s influence has also reached members of Syria’s parliament, known as the People’s Assembly. According to a defected member of parliament, Iran has requested

immunity to protect its “suspicious” economic endeavors in Syria, particularly those related to buying land and real estate.⁹⁴ Iran implements some projects through Syrian ministries by establishing joint contracts with Syrian officials. Additionally, Iran’s investments in Syria are not made through the Assad regime alone; Syrian Shia groups and private citizens also sell land to Iranian businesspeople and

officials. This strategy guarantees that, even if the Assad regime falls, Iran will continue to be a major economic player in Syria.

A similar Iran-funded construction firm, Jihad al-Binaa, has been officially present in Syria since 2013.⁹⁵ Its projects range from provision of aid and services to reconstruction, particularly in areas

Images from the Marota City project. Situated in a working-class district in Damascus, the project is meant to provide 12,000 residential units for more than 50,000 residents demonstrating loyalty to Iran as well as Syria.



around Damascus such as Set Zainab and Hujairah. Jihad al-Binaa is one of Iran's key economic and philanthropic bodies in Syria, with a growing presence throughout the country. In addition to Damascus, Jihad al-Binaa has offices in Aleppo, Deir al-Zour, Deraa, and Homs. Some locals even suggest that, with its monopoly on services and economic initiatives, Jihad al-Binaa has socioeconomically replaced the Assad regime in such areas as al-Hatla and Marat in Deir al-Zour. For example, Iran has allocated \$8 billion for reconstructing Syria's communications infrastructure, including that in the southern part of the country (especially Deraa).⁹⁶ Jihad al-Binaa has implemented large projects such as the reconstruction of schools and roads in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour, as well as provided assistance to those loyal to the Assad regime and Tehran. In the past few years, Jihad al-Binaa has taken over local land and properties; in return, the company provides aid and basic services to area communities. Most of the occupied and cheaply purchased land and properties are located near Shia shrines in Aleppo, Damascus, and Deir al-Zour; The Iranian firm exploits such locations to alter local demographics. Jihad al-Binaa is run by the IRGC and Hezbollah figures and has ties with Syria's local defense forces. In this way, it can infiltrate local businesses and more easily disguise its geostrategic and

security activities in Syrian territories. Locals in the strategic Deir al-Zour region have reported that Jihad al-Binaa has an office in al-Bukamal; there and in the western suburbs of Mayadin the firm is helping to establish IRGC bases. The office also coordinates purchases of property by Iranian businesspeople, and provides financial and medical aid to locals. According to local tribal figures, Jihad al-Binaa hides behind humanitarian work, while its true aim in Syria is to help Tehran gain control over key border routes. Among these areas are the route from al-Bukamal north to the T-2 oil pumping station in Mayadin; then west to Tiyas, home to the T-4 pumping station and Syrian air base; and finally to Lebanon's Beqa Valley, Hezbollah's main stronghold.⁹⁷ The Syrian Ministry of Industry is believed to be facilitating Jihad al-Binaa's activities on the ground.⁹⁸

To plant and grow its seeds in Syria, Jihad al-Binaa appeals to Syrians in need not only by providing food baskets, which it touts as gifts from the Iranian people, but also by supporting local hospitals and medical facilities in areas impacted by the war. For instance, Jihad al-Binaa established the Shuhada Halab Hospital in 2017. In 2018, it built a \$2 million electricity station near the villages of Nubl and al-Zahra. Jihad al-Binaa is also involved

Jihad al-Binaa truck in Homs, Syria; Jihad al-Binaa office, Sayyeda Zainab



in public works and attracts Syrian workers by offering competitive wages. Its designation by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2007 and sanctions in 2017 have not deterred Jihad al-Binaa's activities in Syria. Rather, the firm brazenly raises the Iranian flag during events and prints images of Iranian leaders on the donations and aid it distributes. It also openly provides housing on its claimed Syrian land to the families of the IRGC, Hezbollah in Syria, Liwa Fatemiyoun, and Harakat al-Nujaba militias. Moreover, Jihad al-Binaa has a reputation for indoctrinating Syrian children through charities that cater to families and orphans impacted by the war. Al-Furat, for example—a charity with branches in Syria and other Middle East countries—serves Iranian interests in the region. Its Damascus office is located in close proximity to Iran's embassy, in the Mezzeh 86 neighborhood. Al-Furat follows instructions from Jihad al-Binaa with regard to organizing social events, sports competitions, field trips, and marches in support of the Assad regime.

Hundreds of Syrian children participate in such activities.

Jamiyat al-Bustan is another key organization, established in 1999 in Bustan al-Basha village in the suburbs of Latakia.⁹⁹ Bashar al-Assad's cousin Rami Makhoul was the organization's head until Asma al-Assad took over during the summer of 2020 in an effort to contain Makhoul's actions, which posed a short-lived threat to Bashar and Asma.¹⁰⁰ The name of the foundation was changed in June 2020 to the al-Areen Humanitarian Foundation, per Asma's request.¹⁰¹ Alawites in Latakia, where the foundation was created, were introduced to its new name, which means "the lion's den" in Arabic; Assad means "lion" in Arabic, so the new name emphasizes that the Assad family is in charge—not the Makhouls. Regardless of its name, however, the foundation is no mere civilian charity. Claiming its dedication to providing poor Alawites with food and medicine, the foundation in fact has militias fighting on the



Bashar al-Assad is pictured here with Syrian tycoon Rami Makhoul. The text, as translated, reads: "A charity in Jableh, in Bustan al-Basha village. Provides cheap treatment for the sick: exams, medicine, and operations. It helps medical, engineering, and pharmacy students with special needs in their homes. Ambulances and aid are always available."

frontlines, alongside regime troops as well as the IRGC and its proxies. At the onset of the 2011 uprising, Makhlouf opened an office for the foundation in the Mezzeh 86 neighborhood of Damascus, within walking distance of the Iranian embassy. In Damascus, Jamiyat al-Bustan began recruiting youth fighters and distributing weapons in an effort to crack down on peaceful protesters. In 2013, the organization's fighting militias officially appeared in battles at Hama and Homs, where they suppressed dissent—especially in majority-Alawite neighborhoods such as Homs's al-Zahra. As previously discussed, the foundation also sponsors schools and proselytization campaigns in cooperation with the Iranian embassy.

According to local sources, Jamiyat al-Bustan has recruited more than twenty-five thousand fighters and *shabiha* (militiamen). Each militiaman receives, on average, \$150 as a monthly wage. Since 2013, the foundation has expanded its presence across Syria's major cities, including Aleppo, Deraa, Homs, Tartus, and others. With Iranian funds, Jamiyat al-Bustan employs more than one hundred thousand people across different fields (military, security, media, relief, and so on). Its forces also protect strategic regime points, such as Shaer gas field in Homs, in return for millions of dollars from the Assad regime and its backers. Most recently, Jamiyat al-Bustan has granted Iran a more rooted influence in southern Syria's Deraa province under the guise of relief initiatives. Through the IRGC, the Iranian regime is taking advantage of the severe economic hardships in Deraa by providing jobs with the foundation to local citizens. While some Syrians have no other choice but to swallow the poison pill, taking whatever job opportunity comes their way in order to feed their children, others point out that what they see in Deraa is just another form of Iran's alarming expansion in Syria. Through its three offices in Deraa (al-Mahatta, Izraa, and Sayda), Jamiyat al-Bustan provides cover for Iran-backed Shia militias, some of which have merged with Assad regime troops; these include the Fourth Division, led by Maher al-Assad, and the Air Force Intelligence, both of which directly report to Iran.¹⁰² These groups incite chaos in towns and

villages that are hard for Hezbollah to penetrate. They are also tasked with buying land, real estate, and other properties from local Syrian residents.

Furthermore, under the guise of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and with logistical help from the IRGC, Jamiyat al-Bustan confiscates regional and international aid donations—food, medicine, and so on—and sells them in regime-held areas; in turn, such efforts fuel sectarian tension and divisions in Syria. Alawite residents in the coastal region have witnessed other suspicious revenue-generating activities by Jamiyat al-Bustan, such as the black-market trafficking of organs. To facilitate this trade, organs are taken from the bodies of hospital patients, without their consent, while they are sedated for treatment of war injuries. Among such patients are often soldiers of the Assad regime itself.

Bab al-Amr, Homs's former Sunni-majority neighborhood, was the epicenter of the revolution; as such, the district was under siege and heavily bombarded by the Assad regime from 2011 to 2014. Today, Asma al-Asaad's al-Areen Humanitarian Foundation claims to be carrying out "humanitarian and reconstruction plans" in the area.¹⁰³ In truth, however, most of Bab al-Amr's former residents starved to death, were massacred or imprisoned, or have since fled the area. Assad regime loyalists, including Shia foreign fighters and their families, are gradually repopulating the neighborhood.

Other entities in Syria (see subsequent list) are carrying out similar plans under the direction of giant Iranian engineering firm Khatam al-Anbia. Reporting directly to the IRGC, its parent entity, Khatam al-Anbia has projects in Syria across many sectors, including energy (oil and gas), transportation, reconstruction, communications, banking, and even tourism.¹⁰⁴ Despite being sanctioned in 2007 by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Khatam al-Anbia has financed Shia militias in Syria since the 2011 uprising, mainly with revenues from selling oil on the global black market. The company relies on illegal operations and money laundering to survive international sanctions. Among its most prominent



In Homs, a banner promotes the al-Areen Humanitarian Foundation, joined by images of Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma.

investments in Syria is the Preservation of Oil and Energy project, which starts in Iraq and extends all the way to Latakia's port on the Syrian coast; the project is facilitated by a railway that links Iran to Syria via Iraq. Reports indicate that the value of the project's official contracts exceeds \$10 billion.¹⁰⁵ Also through Khatam al-Anbia, the IRGC has bought and built a number of hotels in and around Damascus, in an effort to both better manage religious tourism in Syria and control domestic commercial traffic. In addition to construction, the firm is involved in agricultural endeavors in Syria, especially in Deir al-Zour governorate, with its large fields for growing grain as well as saffron, among the most expensive spices in the world. Deir al-Zour is also critical to Iran's economic plans because of its oil fields, from which five thousand barrels can be produced daily. Iranian companies have thus reportedly signed contracts with the Syrian Ministry

of Agriculture to invest in five thousand hectares of agricultural land inside Syria.¹⁰⁶

It is worth noting that illegal drug dealing and trafficking, in cooperation with Lebanese Hezbollah, help finance the activities of the IRGC and its affiliates in Syria. Areas along the Syrian-Lebanese border are known for growing and producing narcotics, and Iran has even rented a portion of Latakia's port since October 2018 for commercial and smuggling purposes.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Syrian anti-regime activists express that, contrary to popular belief, not all Shia settlers, fighters, and students are pious and self-righteous. In fact, brothels, illegal drugs, and narcotics are easily accessible in areas where they congregate, and the neighborhood of Sayyeda Zainab is known among local Syrians to be a hub for such illicit activities.

Among additional Iranian charities and companies in Syria are the following:

- Al-Theqaleen Charity
- Astan-e Qods Razavi
- Hamrah-e-Aval
- Hayat Shabab Ali al-Asghar—Karbala al-Muqaddasah
- Hayat al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi
- Hayat Iyadat al-Imar al-Iraniyah
- Hayat Khadamat Ahl al-Bait
- Hayat Khiyam al-Imam al-Hussein
- Hayat Shabab Ahl al-Bait
- Hayat Shabab Jafar al-Tayyar
- Iran Construction Engineering Organization
- IRIS Group
- Jamiyat Bait al-Najmah al-Mahmadiyah
- Jamiyat Kashafat al-Imam al-Mahdi

- Mahad al-Razi
- MAPNA Group
- Tajammu Enmaa¹⁰⁸

Participants in the “Rebuild Syria” exhibition include the following:

- Electronic Afzar Azma
- Gam Arak Industrial Company
- GITI Pasand Industrial Group
- Hamrahan Pishro Tejarat Trading Company
- Hooman Polymer
- Iran Electronics Industries
- Lotus Pars
- Shahid Julaie Marine Industries
- Shahid Ghandi Corporation Complex
- TEPS (Goldis-Teps)
- Wagon Pars



Left to right: a representative of al-Theqaleen, an Iran-based charity operating in Syria; a truck from Iran's Tajammu Enmaa charity, delivering aid to Shia residents of Idlib, Syria; the booth for Iran's Khatam al-Anbia construction firm at the “Rebuild Syria” exposition



Food aid from Iran's Ahlul Bayt World Assembly for delivery to Syrians in need, Damascus

Pictured here and on the next page are key Syrian figures loyal to Iran:



Rami Makhlouf
*Businessman and
cousin of Bashar al-Assad*



Samer al-Fawz
*Businessman serving as
Iran's economic facilitator
in Syria*



Muhammad Hamsho
Businessman



Muhammad Abdul Sattar
Minister of religious affairs



Nabil al-Halbawi
*Imam and member of
Ahlul Bayt World Assembly*



Ayman Zaytoun
*Imam and head of
Mujamma al-Rasoul
al-Azam, Latakia*



Ahmad Badreddin
Hassoun
Grand Mufti of Syria



Abdullah Nizam
*Imam and head of al-Jamiya
al-Muhseniyah*



Mahmoud Akam
*Professor,
Damascus University*



Hani Murtada
*Former minister of higher
education*



Hussein al-Raja
*Imam and influential
author*



Abdul Razzaq Sheikh
Issa
*Former assistant to minister
of higher education*



Abbas Sundouq
*Member of parliament,
professor at Bilad al-Sham
University*



Ali Saad
*Former minister of
education*



Saeb al-Nahas
*Businessman and owner of
Hotel al-Safir, near Sayyeda
Zainab shrine*



Sheikh Ahmad
al-Sayyadi,
*Head of Awqaf, Deraa;
replaced Anwar al-Nabulsi
in 2015*

Altering Syria's Demographics

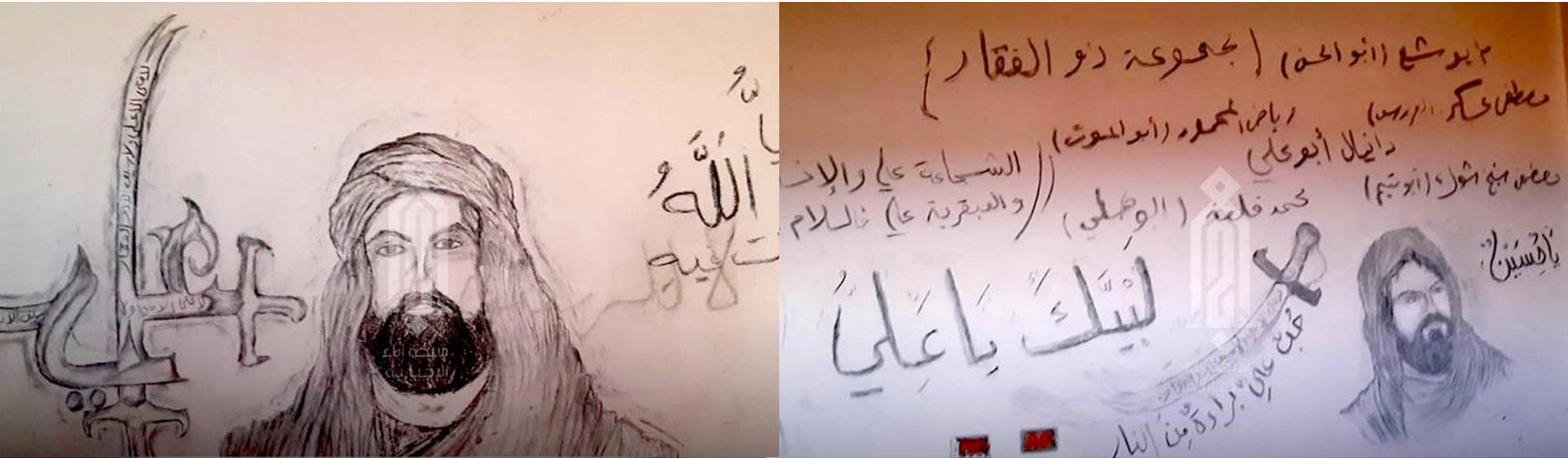
Changing Syria's social fabric and demographics is key for the survival of the Assad regime.¹⁰⁹ Doing so is also fundamental to Iran's long-term strategy in the war-ravaged country, where it seeks to create zones of influence that will foster exportation of its Islamic Revolution to Arab states.

In the 1950s, Shia Muslims constituted less than 0.4 percent of Syria's population. Today, Alawites, Ismailis, and Twelver Shia constitute at least 13 percent of the population.¹¹⁰ Conversion to Shiism in Syria is largely attributable to the role of key shrines (e.g., Sayyeda Zainab and Sayyeda Ruqayya) and to other Iran-friendly institutions—as previously discussed—which daily attract thousands of pilgrims and students from countries near and far. Syrian Islamic scholar and former member of parliament Muhammad Habash said in an interview that, in 1978, there were nearly thirty thousand Iranian visitors to Syria; following Iran's Islamic Revolution, however, that number increased nearly tenfold.¹¹¹ As a consequence, doctrines of the Shia creed are disseminated through religious ceremonies

and various community events that attract local converts.

Moreover, the political environment during the early days of Hafiz al-Assad's rule played a critical role in fostering conversions to Twelver Shiism. Hafiz pleaded for political and religious legitimacy from Iranian and Lebanese Shia clerics in an effort to counter domestic Sunni criticism and consolidate his power over Damascus. Iranian influence in Syria was later emboldened by his son, Bashar, who encouraged Iranian and Iraqi Shia students to settle in key cities and become naturalized citizens. Conversion to Twelver Shiism among the Alawite community also became common during Bashar's presidency; this was especially true during the 2006 Lebanon war, which inspired a wave of support for Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah against Israel, including among Palestinian refugees in Syria.

Longtime Alawite dignitaries and religious figures have become marginalized as a result of Iran's increased influence over Syria's domestic affairs. A new group of retired generals and security personnel with close ties to the Iranian regime gradually replaced the Alawite officials and assumed positions of leadership within the community. The

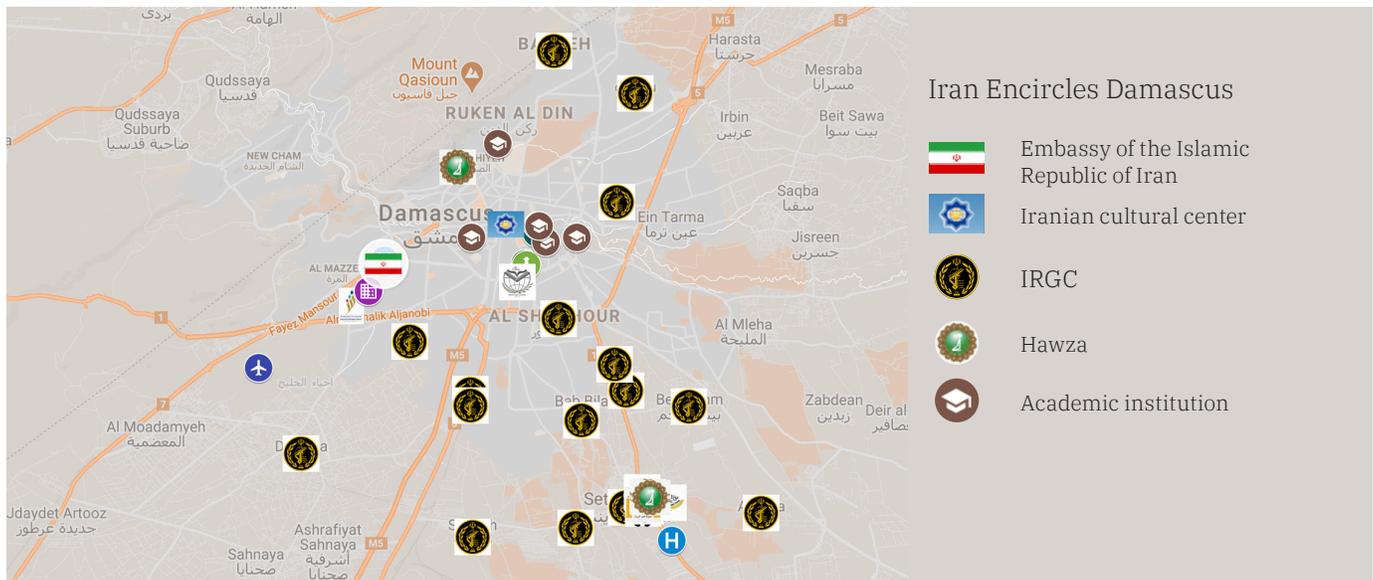


Iranian Shia graffiti in Idlib. Phrases include “For you, Ali” (Labayk ya Ali) and “Love of Ali cools the fires of Hell.”

new leaders encouraged conversions to Twelver Shiism as Iranian social and economic inducements cajoled locals into submission. Iranian regime-sponsored recruitment centers have also played a major role in attracting Alawite youth, especially those who are unemployed, into the ranks of Iran-backed militias. Each recruit is offered a competitive monthly stipend (\$100–\$300) that far exceeds what the Assad regime could provide. Recruits are

also introduced to the Iranian way of life and the teachings of the Shia creed through annual cultural and educational trips to Iran. Iran’s social influence on the coastal region has thus become widespread. Indeed, local anti-regime activists state that, unlike ten years ago, today one often hears Shia songs on the radio when taking public transportation, or sees posters of Imam Khomeini and other Iranian leaders on almost every public corner. New words such as

Iran’s Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria



Click on map to zoom in.

ayatollah have entered the local Alawite lexicon, and men are routinely spotted wearing Iranian turbans and mantels on the street.

The Iranian embassy and its cultural attaché were actively spreading the ideology of Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Shia creed throughout Syria decades before 2011. But when the regime of Bashar al-Assad was threatened by peaceful protestors, the work of the Iranian embassy greatly intensified, with the aim of altering local demographics and dynamics in favor of the regime. Missionary work as well as financial inducements, academic scholarships, healthcare, and other activities became more apparent in every Syrian province as a result of Bashar's plea for Iranian support. Young, unemployed men who convert are promised *nikah al-mutah* (pleasure marriages), which are practiced in Twelver Shiism. In other cases, Iran has sought to alter demographics by force in the heart of the capital. The al-Shaghour neighborhood southeast of Damascus, for example, has witnessed major changes since 2011. There, Shia committees have been instructed by the IRGC to govern the area by terrorizing local Sunni residents, thereby forcing them to flee. Such efforts have included a series of fires targeting local businesses in old Damascus—as happened at al-Asrouniyah Souq, a historic market and tourist attraction near the Umayyad Mosque—in an attempt to force Syrian businesspeople to take loans from or sell their properties to Iranian investors. According to anti-regime activists, the Assad regime gave Muhammad Hamsho, a rich Syrian businessman who works closely with Rami Makhlouf, the green light for Iran's financial involvement. Such interference is further explained by the regime's lack of financial resources to pay Iran its necessary dues. Owners of local businesses near the shrine of Sayyeda Ruqayya have also been pressured to sell their properties to Iranian businesspeople.

Another vital strategy of the Iranian and Syrian regimes is the continuous repopulation of Syria's war-torn towns and abandoned villages by Shia fighters and their families. In return for their service

on the frontlines, these fighters—who come from Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere—are promised Syrian citizenship.¹¹² Iranian officials also negotiate with rebel groups vis-a-vis “resident swaps” in areas around Damascus and Homs and along the border with Lebanon.¹¹³ For example, thousands of residents in Kefraya and al-Fua, two former Shia-majority villages located north of Idlib city, were moved to Sunni areas near Damascus in a 2017 Iran-sponsored swap.¹¹⁴ Other similar forced demographic changes continue to happen.

Thus, thanks to Bashar al-Assad, Syria's historic Shia monuments have been transformed into military stations, and their environs have become settlements for tens of thousands of foreign fighters and their families, who are promised citizenship sponsored by the Assad regime.

Conclusion

The Iranian regime capitalizes on the essential narrative in Twelver Shiism that Sayyeda Zainab was a religious-political figure who confronted the Umayyads' oppression and injustice in Damascus through commemorative mournings of Imam Hussein. She insisted on spreading the story of the Battle of Karbala to keep her brother's memory alive for centuries to come. Thus, the narrative goes, Twelver Shia ought to follow in her footsteps by defending both Shiism in Syria and its fundamental ally, Assad. Since 2011, this narrative has motivated Shia foreign fighters to obey the commands of the IRGC to rush to Syria, with the specific aim of ensuring the Assad regime's survival. The narrative has also served as an excuse for Iran's political interference and socioeconomic expansion inside Syria, which works to slowly force out any Western influence and to generate local support for Iran's presence.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Tehran has aspired to create and solidify a long-lasting influence

in the Middle East. That goal, however, is attainable only through efforts to secure Iran's presence in Syria. Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad's fifty-year grip on power has facilitated those efforts. Thus, Iran has entrenched itself in Syria far beyond the battle lines. Casting Twelver Shiism as fundamental to Syrian society to justify its regional behavior and utilizing Shia holy sites in support of its rhetoric have been key to Iran's strategy in the country. Indeed, scenes of Shia men beating their bare chests in mourning for Imam Hussein, only meters from Old Damascus's Umayyad Mosque, have become common in recent years.¹¹⁵ Through the lens of religion and politics, Iran's commitment to the Assad regime today has never been more solid.

Yet the international community, led by the United States, has a chance to help Syria and its people, who have been terrorized and are too weary from war to resist the brutal regime and its enablers on their own. The arduous task of removing Iran from Syria cannot be accomplished without an understanding of (1) how the relationship between the Assad regime and the Khomeinists has evolved since the 1970s and (2) the degree to which Iran is involved in Syria today. Iran is preparing armies and generations of Syrian children to follow its demands for decades to come. Undoing its methods of brainwashing and indoctrination will not be easy, but it must be done now—before reversing course becomes effectively impossible.

Moreover, efforts to counter Iran in Syria must not be limited to the military sphere. Economic and

commercial relations between the two regimes date back to the early 1980s, when comprehensive agreements and shared political goals were made public. But even vigorous economic sanctions are not adequate if they are not accompanied by serious plans to harness local disenchantment and support the will of the people in ousting Bashar al-Assad.

To tip the scales in favor of those Syrians who peacefully protested in 2011—and who continue to call for freedom and democracy—the United States should take steps to shape Syria's future both economically and socially. Terminating Iran's socioeconomic projects in Syria is fundamental to limiting its revenue streams. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action helped increase Iran's economic power and leverage in Syria, as large investments and major infrastructure projects appeared on the agenda during implementation of the deal. Therefore, the Biden administration should pay attention to this particular issue and consider adjusting its plans accordingly.

Over nearly a decade, Tehran has institutionalized its program in Syria to a degree far beyond the work of Qasem Soleimani or any other Iranian leader. Iran not only has a strong military presence on the ground, it also relies on a wide array of methods (e.g., social, cultural, religious, economic) to influence local dynamics, with plans to sustain this work for decades to come. With or without Assad in power, Iran will remain a threat to Syria and to U.S. interests in the Middle East until it is fully challenged, contained, and deterred. ❖

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The Author



OULA A. ALRIFAI is a fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics and a former asylee from Syria. She holds an MA from Harvard, where her thesis focused on the development of the Iran-Syria relationship in the 1970s and 1980s through the lens of religious-political dynamics. Alrifai's analysis has appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, the *Washington Post*, the *National Interest*, *CTC Sentinel*, as well as CNN and other outlets. A native Arabic speaker, she also speaks Persian at an advanced level. Alrifai served as executive producer of the award-winning documentary *Tomorrow's Children*, which explores the plight of Syrian refugees forced into child labor in Turkey. Previously, she worked at the Middle East Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School.



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