

## In the Service of Ideology:

### Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria

by [Oula A. Alrifai \(/experts/oula-alrifai\)](#)

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Also available in

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**The dalliance between the Assad family and Iran's Shia clerics began in the 1970s. Back then, before the Islamic Revolution, the Syrian leader held leverage. Now the tables have been turned.**

Observers of the decade-long Syria war understand the indispensable role Tehran has played in ensuring the Assad regime's survival. But they may be less familiar with its stunning breadth—or its historical roots. The dalliance between the Assad family and Iran's Shia clerics began in the 1970s, when the shah was still in power in Iran and then president Hafiz al-Assad, a member of the marginalized Alawite sect, sought religious legitimacy to lead his majority-Muslim country. But whereas the Syrian leader held leverage in those days predating Iran's Islamic Revolution, the tables have now been turned. Lately, Tehran's relationship with Damascus can be described as one of strategic dominance.

In this deeply researched Policy Note, analyst Oula Alrifai, a former Syrian asylee, lays bare the extent of Iranian infiltration of Syrian religious and socioeconomic life. She details the spread of Twelver Shia ideology through seminaries, congregation halls, and academic institutions, while demonstrating Iran's massive economic clout in Syria through initiatives such as the Marota City housing project. For Washington, only a determined effort to blunt Iranian influence can help deliver much-deserved peace for the Syrian people and enduring stability for the region. ❖

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