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Iran's Long Game in Syria

by [Oula A. Alrifai](#), [Nakissa Jahanbani](#), [Mehdi Khalaji](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Oula A. Alrifai](#)

Oula A. Alrifai is a fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



[Nakissa Jahanbani](#)

Nakissa Jahanbani is a researcher at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center and an assistant professor in the academy's Department of Social Sciences.



[Mehdi Khalaji](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Three scholars explore the stunning breadth of Iranian dominance over Damascus and what this means for any U.S. plans to foster stability in Syria or reopen negotiations with Tehran.

On March 25, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Oula Alrifai, Nakissa Jahanbani, and Mehdi Khalaji. Alrifai is a fellow in the Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics and author of its new study [***In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria***](#). Jahanbani is a researcher at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center and an assistant professor in the academy's Department of Social Sciences. Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shia theologian, is the Institute's Libitzky Family Fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Oula Alrifai

Iran's policy toward Syria is intended to provide the Islamic Republic with strategic depth. Yet while conventional wisdom tends to focus on military activities, Tehran has also invested significant soft-power resources in a bid to manipulate the Syrian state. Some of these, such as educational, healthcare, and infrastructure development programs, appear innocuous at first glance but often come with strings attached.

In the past ten years, Tehran has coopted Syria's existing Shia religious infrastructure and built its own. Unlike his late father, who had more leverage in the bilateral relationship, Bashar al-Assad has ceded significant control of religious matters to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). After years of degradation in the Syrian regime and military, Iran is betting on strategic dominance, not an alliance. And by promoting Twelver Shia Islam as an integral part of Syrian Shia identity, it is changing the country's social context. Thousands of Syrians have converted to this branch of Islam in the past few years, in many cases because doing so grants them more favorable treatment by Iranian-backed militias at a time when [**the economic situation remains desperate**](#).

Tehran is also trying to boost religious tourism to Syria. Up until the mid-1970s, Syria had no Shia seminaries, but it now has at least seventy. These institutions attract Shia of all nationalities, and many eventually become Syrian citizens. Moreover, these seminaries often avoid registering with the Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments, granting Iran complete control over their curriculum.

In October 2014, Assad decreed that Syria's Education Ministry must provide Shia studies as part of the curriculum in schools, colleges, and universities nationwide. In conjunction, limits were placed on the role of Sunni *ulama* in public education. Iran already ran many Syrian schools at the time, but the number increased significantly in the years to follow, and attractive academic scholarships brought many foreign students to these schools.

Parallel to this formal educational infiltration, Iran has launched newer youth programs such as the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts and al-Wilayah Scouts. These groups are led by the IRGC and often include military training; this has made them a pipeline for pulling children to the frontlines, where they are often killed fighting for Shia militias and the Assad regime.

Iran also uses aid to gain a foothold in the Syrian economy, including through housing and infrastructure projects.

These programs tend to target areas heavily populated by the Assad regime's core Alawite constituency, and often come with secondary goals that benefit Iran's interests (e.g., shifting local demographics to promote Shia gentrification).

In all, Iran currently spends at least \$6 billion annually to prop up Assad, but this project is quite expansive and not restricted to any one sector or senior official. For instance, the death of the powerful and popular IRGC-Qods Force leader Qasem Soleimani did not put a dent in any of Iran's soft-power initiatives inside Syria. Tehran is operating on a much longer timetable, perhaps twenty-five or even fifty years, and its educational and religious programs have been steadily raising a generation that could wind up being very committed to the Iranian regime.

For these and other reasons, airstrikes will not be enough to counter Iranian influence inside Syria. The international community also needs to support local civil activists and citizen journalists who are breaking stories about Iran's activities. Furthermore, any new nuclear deal with Tehran needs to address its regional strategy. That was a huge problem with the previous deal—it gave Iran a green light in Syria, and the Biden administration should not repeat that mistake.

Nakissa Jahanbani

Iran's soft-power investments and indirect military engagement in Syria have grown since 2015. Before that, Tehran relied on direct military engagement, but heavy losses forced the IRGC to shift to more indirect methods to achieve its aims.

In general, militia proxies are a primary component of Iran's grand strategy, enabling it to counter adversaries with deniability, reduce reputational repercussions, and cultivate its worldview among Shia communities abroad. Meanwhile, the militias in question benefit from receiving weapons they would not otherwise have access to, bolstering their strength relative to rival groups.

In recent years, Iran's support for militias has been divided into two basic categories: kinetic and nonkinetic. Kinetic support peaked around 2015-2016 and entailed direct involvement by Iranian military forces. Nonkinetic engagement, which is now more prominent, entails assisting militias with recruitment and sending them funds, among other support. The IRGC's high casualty rate in Syria partly explains this shift to indirect support, but foreign sanctions may have played a role as well by giving Tehran more incentive to minimize its visibility in the conflict.

Many of Iran's recruitment efforts in Syria have focused on cultivating ties with minority populations (including the Druze), often through financial assistance, social services, and direct aid to families of "martyrs." Yet the IRGC tends to provide better benefits to people who are willing to convert to Shia Islam. Thus, offering financial incentives to Syrians could help limit the appeal of militias. Addressing online recruitment strategies by armed groups is also important.

Mehdi Khalaji

Iran is a totalitarian and expansionist regime, and its leaders consistently define Syria as a "province" that they have the right and capability to control as they see fit. Accordingly, their strategic interest in Syria and the Assad family has continued for decades.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein often portrayed the conflict as a struggle between Arabs and Iranians. Tehran sought to undercut that pan-Arab message by cementing friendly relations with Damascus. These strategic implications persist today, with Iran needing friendly Arab partners to help it gain a foothold and boost its reputation in the broader Middle East.

Tehran would like to see more Syrians convert to Shia Islam, and its proxies have taken steps to facilitate that goal. *Taqiyya*, or the denial of one's faith to avoid persecution, has become more widespread at the local level. When

facing heavy pressure to convert, many Syrians have done so discreetly in order to receive better treatment from Iran-backed militias, but without making a formal announcement.

In terms of broader geostrategic implications, Iran's involvement has led to a tacit alliance with Russia. Tehran is trying to threaten U.S. and Israeli interests in the region, and this posture **benefits Moscow as well**. Although the two countries compete and disagree on certain issues, they share many goals in Syria.

Going forward, negotiations with Iran should not exclude the IRGC's regional activities. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action treated the nuclear file and regional file as separate issues, but they are connected as part of the same strategy. Any new deal should require guarantees to block Tehran from trying to dominate the region through proxies.

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1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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