

# Qassem Soleimani's Ghost in Deir Ezzor

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

**Two years after the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC general's name still holds a lot of power for many Syrians as one of the Iranian officials directly responsible for the ongoing Iranian efforts to change the culture in the country's southeastern region of Deir Ezzor.**

**D**eir Ezzor continues to suffer from an uneasy [balance of power \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-general-and-fragile-peace-deir-ez-zor\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-general-and-fragile-peace-deir-ez-zor), split between the Assad regime and Autonomous Administration (AA) control. However, Iran is making [significant efforts \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/iran-groups-east-syria-presence-influence-recruitment.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/iran-groups-east-syria-presence-influence-recruitment.html) to become the prevailing influence here, and the past year has seen an increase in both military and soft power activities in the ongoing 'Shi'itization' of the region, while Russia and Iran have both [attempted \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-iran-russia-recruit-private-security-companies.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/syria-iran-russia-recruit-private-security-companies.html) to attract the region's youth to fight in its ranks.

As with the rest of Syria, Deir Ezzor faces difficult economic conditions and a fragile and lacking infrastructure. The standard of living is deteriorating in the region as a result of the lack of work, with little opportunity to rehabilitate the infrastructure and secure job opportunities for unemployed youth.

Adding to these woes are the ongoing [attempts \(https://npasyria.com/en/46945/\)](https://npasyria.com/en/46945/) of the Syrian Democratic Forces to close the region's Euphrates river crossings between AA and regime-controlled sections of Deir Ezzor, which provide vital incomes for many families. Civilian demonstrations [continued \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/people-demonstrate-against-sdf-in-deir-ezzor/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/en/people-demonstrate-against-sdf-in-deir-ezzor/) in the SDF areas to demand the improvement of living conditions and the release of detainees from the tribes, against the background of the ongoing arrests—a thorny issue where concern over ISIS cells can merge with civilian arrests due to false or malicious reports.

Soleimani was one of the [main architects \(https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/iran-deepens-its-footprint-in-deir-ez-zor\)](https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/iran-deepens-its-footprint-in-deir-ez-zor) of Iran's expansionist policy in Deir Ezzor to capitalize on these woes to extend Iranian soft power. In

a highly symbolic gesture, he stood [stood \(https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/qassem-soleimani-spotted-in-syria-near-the-iraqi-border.php\)](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/qassem-soleimani-spotted-in-syria-near-the-iraqi-border.php) on the Iraqi-Syrian border and prayed in a symbolic representation of the unity of these lands, as well as IRGC control over the two countries. His last documented field visit before his death likewise took place in Deir Ezzor, and it was clear that he attached great importance to the region and its role in linking Iraq with regime-controlled Syria in the western part of the country and Lebanon.

### **Soleimani's Plan Continues**

With the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, there was an unmuffled joy among many Syrians as they [distributed \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrians-idlib-celebrate-qassem-soleimanis-death-sweets-and-cakes\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrians-idlib-celebrate-qassem-soleimanis-death-sweets-and-cakes) sweets. Of course, supporters of Assad, al-Muhandis, and Nasrallah lost their Iranian backer that day, but the events of the past year have proven that Soleimani's efforts to extend Iranian influence in Deir Ezzor continued after the IRGC leader's death.

Financial contributions have proved an effective way to attract and influence the struggling residents of the region. Deir Ezzor City's Iranian Cultural Center proved a particularly active center of activity throughout 2021. As part of Iran's attempts to portray itself as a savior of the people by exploiting their needs, the Center distributed 7 dollars each to families from Deir Ezzor in the first quarter of the year—a more reliable currency than the free-falling Syrian pound. The center likewise [financed \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-opens-central-park-in-deir-ezzor-on-february-12/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-opens-central-park-in-deir-ezzor-on-february-12/) the reopening of the city's Central Park—destroyed by regime bombing years earlier.

The Iranian Cultural Center also conducted a variety of [activities \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-organizes-activity-for-children-in-deir-ezzor/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-organizes-activity-for-children-in-deir-ezzor/) during the month of Ramadan in the park, including children's recitations of the Noble Quran. During these events, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps distributed meals to the children who were involved—while applying strict security measures to the park area at the highest level. The IRGC prevented parking, motorcycle access, or photography by passers-by, leading some residents to feel that the center had explicitly targeted children with this programming while hiding it from the rest of the city. The center also [provides \(https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3003326/iranian-campaign-promote-persian-language-northeastern-syria\)](https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3003326/iranian-campaign-promote-persian-language-northeastern-syria) courses for children in topics such as Persian, Iranian history, or Shia theology, while promising a sum of 250 thousand Syrian pound upon completion—an attractive sum for many families.

Moreover, Deir Ezzor's crumbling architecture has provided opportunities for the Iranian Cultural Center's investments, including the [rehabilitation \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-targets-highly-symbolic-mosques-in-deir-ezzor/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-targets-highly-symbolic-mosques-in-deir-ezzor/) of the Al-Hussein, Ali Inn Abi Talib, and Al-Urfa mosques. In the summer of 2021, it began extensive efforts to win projects to rehabilitate Sheikh Abdullah Hospice, Al-Rawi Hospice, and Abu Abed Mosque in the city of Deir Ezzor. The center held several meetings with Mukhtar Al-Naqshabandi, director of Deir Ezzor religious endowments and Mohammed Ayada, director of the Sharia Institute in Deir Ezzor. The two parties promised that the tender would go to the Iranian Cultural Center.

The Iranian Cultural Center also rehabilitated the [sidewalk \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-rehabilitates-sidewalk-extending-from-mufti-mosque-towards-hospital-roundabout\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-rehabilitates-sidewalk-extending-from-mufti-mosque-towards-hospital-roundabout) extending from the “Mufti” mosque towards the hospital roundabout where the Central Park is located. This coincided with the completion of this hospital's rehabilitation and renaming. The Iranian Cultural Center [obtained \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-obtains-tender-to-rehabilitate-hospital-in-deir-ezzor/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-obtains-tender-to-rehabilitate-hospital-in-deir-ezzor/) the tender to invest in the hospital from the Assad regime's Religious Endowments Directorate in exchange for an annual payment of 15 million Syrian pounds for an undisclosed period. In tandem, the Assad regime issued orders to the surrounding people that it is necessary to clear their homes prior to the start of the rehabilitation operations that were to take place the following

week. The circulating news indicates that the cultural center intends to hand over the hospital to the IRGC for it to become a medical center for its militias in Deir Ezzor.

Iran **[attracts \(https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2021/03/24/Iran-s-IRGC-accelerating-recruitment-in-Deir-Zour-Syria-Expert\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2021/03/24/Iran-s-IRGC-accelerating-recruitment-in-Deir-Zour-Syria-Expert)** locals to these militias through major financial and social incentives. These include a type of 'identity card' that grants certain privileges, such as facilitating their passage at military checkpoints, and salaries ranging from **[70,000 to 200,000 Syrian pound \(https://deirezzor24.net/en/nasr-center-delivers-the-salaries-of-its-employees/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/en/nasr-center-delivers-the-salaries-of-its-employees/)**s, distributed by the financial employees of Nasr Center for Human Resources of the Revolutionary Guards Militia in the Harabish neighborhood of Deir Ezzor along with quarterly food baskets.

These efforts are **[replicated \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-and-russia-are-exploiting-americas-absence-northeast-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-and-russia-are-exploiting-americas-absence-northeast-syria)** across the region; entire cities and towns such as Al-Bukamal, Al-Mayadin, Halts, and Deir Ezzor Al-Madinah have had their characters completely altered to conform to Iranian Shia cultural norms, and seem increasingly to visitors to resemble cities in Iran. Along with less visible efforts, changed street names and monuments also demonstrate this changed character. The IRGC accomplished some of this change through the mass flight and internal displacement throughout the region. For those who fled their homes due to the war, return was made impossible without complete submission to the Assad regime. Iran also participated in the mass **[housing seizure \(https://diyaruna.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_di/features/2020/09/17/feature-04\)](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2020/09/17/feature-04)** implemented by the Assad regime, where Iranians seized the homes and made them barracks, warehouses, or homes for leaders of their militias, especially from outside of Syria, such as Afghani and Iraqi militia leaders. Iran has also used auxiliary and directly-owned companies to seize or buy real estate at low prices, again taking advantage of mass displacement. Entire neighborhoods are now reserved almost exclusively for Iranian and Shia militia forces.

Thus, Soleimani and the IRGC have **[helped significantly \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/)** alter the demographics of the region, leaving behind a disproportionate number of those who support Assad and the Iranian project for the area. Those who remained out of fear rather than conviction were forced to hide their feelings about these forces, leaving any criticism unspoken. Meanwhile, Iranian shrines and cultural centers now **[dot the landscape \(https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-spending-hundreds-of-millions-on-religious-shrines-in-iraq-and-syria/30707198.html\)](https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-spending-hundreds-of-millions-on-religious-shrines-in-iraq-and-syria/30707198.html)**, working to ensure the loyalty—not of those who remained out of fear, but of their children who are now growing up in a very different cultural landscape than their parents.

Iran continued penetration of Deir Ezzor is an attempt to create a population in harmony with its regional goals, in a society previously dominated by an Arab Sunni tribal character. Deir Ezzor will remain the geographic link between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut—in other words, the Shia crescent—so Iran will continue to see the region as a long-term investment in Soleimani's vision. Among the other forces active in the region—namely Russia and the Assad regime—little resistance or competing visions are likely to emerge. Russia is focused on military and economic—rather than social and cultural—issues in the region. Assad's forces are helpless without their allies, and are focused on retaking Syrian territory inch by inch through any means.

It's an almost universal understanding that children are any society's future. However, societal collapse affects them as well as their guardians, and Iran has continued to build an attractive alternative to the current hardships of Syrian life throughout 2021. And those who do join are rewarded with a financial stability otherwise effectively inaccessible, suggesting that Iran's strategy is quite likely to pay off with this new generation. It is a slow strategy to alter the entire demographic makeup of a region, but one that increasingly appears to bear fruit. So long as the Iran maintains the importance of Khomeini's call to 'export the revolution,' and continues in the path set down by Soleimani in Deir

## RECOMMENDED

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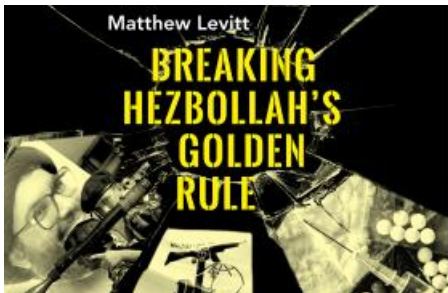
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