

How Iranian Militias Have Swallowed Deir Ezzor

by [Omar Abu Layla \(/experts/omar-abu-layla\)](#)

Feb 16, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-abtltt-almlyshyat-alayranyt-dyr-almazr\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omar Abu Layla \(/experts/omar-abu-layla\)](#)

Omar Abu Layla is the executive director of Deir Ezzor 24 and an expert on security and governance in northeast Syria. He can be found on Twitter at @OALD24.

The Syrian governorate of Deir Ezzor is currently a heavily militarized area, where militias and armed forces patrol and pursue their varied interests at the expense of local civilians.

Deir Ezzor has [faced](https://www.timesofisrael.com/syria-says-israeli-airstrikes-hit-sites-near-iraq-border/) numerous issues over the past several years due to the buildup of militias, along with threats from the Islamic State and a local youth increasingly recruited or conscripted into the area's various militias. The most prominent of these militias are Iran-affiliated, and serve to stabilize the Assad regime's control while increasing Iranian influence on the ground.

First are the militias affiliated with the IRGC, which serves as the administrative, military, and financial nucleus of the Iranian-backed militias in Deir Ezzor governorate. One of these militias, stationed in Deir Ezzor city and the eastern region, is headed by [Haj Mahdi](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2020/12/08/feature-02), an Iranian military commander. The militia's strength is concentrated in al-Mayadin city, east of Deir Ezzor, where about 3000

[members](http://www.alraafed.com/2021/07/17/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252584%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A5%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584/) of the IRGC are deployed. The IRGC's largest headquarters in the eastern region is near the Al-Assad Hospital in southern Deir Ezzor, and is comprised of over 400 members—all Syrians from across the country. The IRGC-affiliated militias facilitate the [transfer](https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3344336/iran-backed-militias-use-vegetable-trucks-smuggle-weapons-syria) of unknown, often suspect cargo in this area. Recently, one such delivery raised concern when the IRGC imposed a security cordon at the time of arrival, and the delivery vehicles stopped at an IRGC warehouse housing a "boom" crane.

In addition to the IRGC-backed militias, Iran-affiliated Afghan forces are also stationed in Deir Ezzor. The Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun militias are located in the Afghan security square near Albukamal's city center. A number of leaders including [supervise](https://euphratespost.net/%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%252586-%2525D9%252586%2525D9%252588-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A3%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252580%2525D9%252581%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B7%2525D9%252585%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525B0-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525AF/) these militias, whose forces number around 4,500 members [following](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/ma-aldhy-tkht-lh-ayran-fy-dyr-almazr) a Russian request, Fatemiyoun and other Iranian-backed brigades removed banners and flags from their vehicles, as these emblems identify the militias as Iranian-affiliated targets. Still, the presence of these groups is increasing in Deir Ezzor, as militia members roam within the city's neighborhoods and ramp up activity.

To read more, see: ["The Rise of the Taliban and Iran's Critical Problem in Afghanistan \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rise-taliban-and-irans-critical-problem-afghanistan\)"](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rise-taliban-and-irans-critical-problem-afghanistan)

There are also Iranian-affiliated militias comprised solely of Syrian recruits in Deir Ezzor. This includes the Village Guard militia led by [Hajj Hussein](https://baladi-news.com/ar/articles/76564/%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A6%2525D8%2525AF-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525AD%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525B3-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525AB%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A7-%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252585%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525AE%2525D9%252584%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252581%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252587-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525B4%2525D9%252583%2525D9%252584-%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525A4%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525AA) with approximately 1,500 mostly local members in the eastern area between Al-Bouleel and Sabikhan. The Village Guard's primary mission is to patrol the Euphrates river bank in Deir Ezzor [opposite to the areas](https://deirezzor24.net/en/village-guards-have-honorary-positions-and-symbolic-salaries/) controlled by the SDF.

Meanwhile, the National Defense Forces (NDF)—a pro-Assad militia formed originally under the purview of both the Syrian regime and Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani—and the Tribal Army—a regime-affiliated militia with ties to Iran—are strengthening their positions in the [Deir Ezzor desert](https://deirezzor24.net/en/for-the-second-day-in-a-row-daesh-attack-assad-militias-in-the-western-deir-ezzor-countryside/). The militias have also deployed about 125 members near Al-Jalaa and Al-Fayda. Notably, the NDF is the primary group for drug smuggling in Deir Ezzor, trafficking narcotics from Lebanon and Iraq and selling them in regime-controlled areas like Deir Ezzor city in addition to SDF-controlled areas in northeastern Syria.

While there has been significant integration of regime-affiliated officers into IRGC command structures, the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Regiment militia is affiliated with the regime's People's Army and possesses a sectarian focus. It receives its military and administrative orders from the Sayeda Zainab area in Damascus, and the militia's general regional commander is Adnan al-Saud Abu al-Abbas from the city of al-Mayadin, an informatics engineer who left the Al-Mayadin area when regime forces [lost control in 2012](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_state1.pdf) and settled in Damascus. He returned to the region with the Syrian regime forces when they regained control in 2017.

The Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas militia is one of the largest sectarian military factions in the region, comprised of about 7,310 active members. [Some members](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/al-abbas-combat-division-model-reducing-iranian-influence-iraqs-security-forces) are Syrian, while others are from Afghanistan or Irani. They supervise

weapons stores and detention centers in the ancient castle of al-Rahba, south of al-Mayadin, and guard the nearby Ain Ali shrine.

The flow of recruits goes both ways: in 2021, a new batch of Deir Ezzor residents traveled to Libya with Russian coordination prior to the ceasefire in Libya. Reports suggest that the Russian forces sent hundreds of young men from Deir Ezzor to Libya to fight alongside the Moscow-backed militia of General Haftar.

The Iranian militias likewise send Syrians to the country's various fronts, transferring 65 members of Deir Ezzor governorate who are wanted for compulsory service from both the clans' Lions militias and the al-Baqir Brigade to serve in the ranks of Assad's forces in Palmyra, Idlib, and Hama. Iranian militia leaders are known to play games with their volunteers, promising them that their service is counted among their mandatory service to Syria when in fact it is not.

The Military Geography of the Region

In addition to affiliated militia units, Iran owns over three hundred military sites

(<https://www.jusoor.co/details/Foreign%252520Forces%252520Points%252520in%252520Syria%252520End%252520of%2525202021%252520and%252520Beginning%252520of%2525202021>) in Syria: these include military, operational, and security bases, observation points, reconnaissance and other logistical and security sites. Said sites are spread over thirteen districts, with Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Deir Ezzor containing the most. The Jusoor Center for Studies (<https://www.jusoor.co/details/Foreign%252520Forces%252520Points%252520in%252520Syria%252520End%252520of%2525202021%252520and%252520Beginning%252520of%2525202021>) reports that the Iranian forces have seen the largest increase in the number of their military sites in Syria when compared to the other foreign forces in the country.

The most important of these is the T2 or Al-Kum base, located in the desert opposite the city of Al-Bukamal. Al-Araby Al-Jadeed has noted that this base is situated near the American bases and near the remaining ISIS strongholds. Others from Deir Ezzor report that there is alleged cooperation between the organization and the Iranian militias in this area regarding smuggling fighters from the east of the Euphrates, specifically from the Baghouz area. Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani visited al-Kum in July 2019, and subsequently appeared in video clips taken inside the base. Another key site is the Al-Ward oil field base in the Al-Bukamal countryside, where the Popular Mobilization and Al-Nujaba militias are stationed.

The highest concentration of Iranian militias in Deir Ezzor city is in the Sa'iqa and Al-Tala'i camps, located near the governorate building and Al-Jura neighborhood. These camps are typically used as training and assembly camps for militia fighters heading towards the central region.

From both a military and a religious perspective, the most important military site is the Ain Ali base, located in the desert of the al-Quriah city in the eastern countryside. Iran's Fatimiyoun militia—consisting primarily of Afghani fighters—established a religious shrine there, which is now considered a pilgrimage site for Iranian visitors. Quds Force leader Hajj Abu Abdullah supervised the establishment of the shrine under the guidance of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself. The Ain Ali base has been subjected to a large number of raids and missile strikes by Israel and the international coalition, but these strikes have not impacted the site significantly because it is heavily fortified and defended.

Israeli raids on Deir Ezzor

The construction of these bases has led to Israeli strikes against them—which are facilitated by Russia's tacit acquiescence. In response, Iran has resorted to several strategies. The first was to withdraw from strongholds near the Syrian border in the wake of Russian-Israeli agreements. Forces then resorted to stationing themselves among civilians by establishing smaller centers and attempting to smuggle weapons via food shipments and foodstuffs during Israeli bombings.

In January 2021, Israel carried out a major missile attack targeting Deir Ezzor city and Al-Bukamal in eastern Syria as part of its targeting of Iranian and Assad regime military targets, killing and wounding dozens of militia members loyal to Iran and the Assad regime. Israeli warplanes targeted a number of Syrian and Iranian bases, including the IRGC base in the Al-Thalat area in the Al-Bukamal desert, east of Deir Ezzor, and the IRGC and 47th Regiment base in Bir al-Hammar in the Al-Bukamal desert. The raids also targeted the Siba area, where other IRGC militia are located.

In addition, the raids targeted the Zainabiyoun militia on the Al-Hamdan Airport road, and on Al-Haggana Street inside the city of Al-Bukamal, as well as the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) stations situated nearby at the Al-Bukamal border gate. Warplanes also attacked a Hezbollah militia base near Aisha Hospital in Al-Bukamal. In the city of Al-Mayadin, the raids targeted IRGC sites near farm areas and Fatemiyoun militia sites near "Al-Maka" and Al-Rahba Castle. In the city of Deir Ezzor, raids targeted weapons depots for the Fatemiyoun militia and other sites in Tal al-Hajif, a site near the College of Education in the Al-Omal neighborhood, a military security headquarters in the Ghazi Ayyash neighborhood, and areas near the military hospital.

Violence and Terrorism

Aside from the militarization of the governorate, politically-motivated killings are also a threat to civilians living in Deir Ezzor. For example, on January 12, 2021, four people including a prominent tribal leader were assassinated. Haj Taliush Al-Shatat, a dignitary of the Al-Aqeedat clan, his son, and a guest at his house were killed in the village of Al-Hawajj in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor when unidentified gunmen stormed the house. Later, in the town of Al-Shuhail, a young man was killed as a result of gunfire from masked gunmen when he was passing the town's hospital.

The sheikh of the Al-Bu Saleh clan, Mohammed Al-Asaad Al-Badr, was injured and his brother Hamid Al-Badr was killed after unidentified gunmen attacked their car on the Jazra Albu Hamid-Abu Khashab road in northwest Deir Ezzor. The gunmen rode a motorcycle and used machine guns. On social media, reports circulated that the sheikh and his brother were targeted after voicing opposition to demonstrations that protested the ongoing Russian presence in Syria.

Additionally, bloodshed caused by ISIS has returned to the fore; assassinations and murders bearing signs of ISIS tactics have occurred in the Deir Ezzor countryside recently. In Deir Ezzor city, a decapitated corpse appeared in town center, bearing a document threatening everyone who cooperates with "the Awakening"—a reference to the so-called "Anbar Awakening" during the Iraq War, when a coalition of powerful Sunni tribes in Anbar province aligned themselves with the United States against Al Qaeda and its affiliates in Iraq. In April 2021, masked gunmen killed Syrian Democratic Forces who were guarding a gas station in Markada, in the countryside of Hasakah.

ISIS threatened dozens of people living in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor by distributing a written statement that listed the names of 27 people from the town of Jadeed Akidat, describing the individuals as "apostates" as a result of affiliations with the SDF. The statement claimed that unless they "repented" quickly, they would face death and demolition of their homes.

Local residents of Deir Ezzor and those affiliated with the IRGC militia are drivers and technicians in the garage. Some IRGC leaders, including Hajj Mahdi and Hajj Askar, run agricultural projects (<https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-militias-tighten-their-grip-on-projects-in-deir-ezzor/>) on land that the Assad regime seized from its opponents in 2018.

Dozens of families in the city of Al-Bukamal are prohibited from returning to their homes due to the so-called "friends office," run by the IRGC, which prevents displaced Syrians from returning to their homes in Al-Bukamal, despite requests from a number of families who wish to return. The militias also played a role in displacing the local population, forcing dozens of families to empty their homes so that they can be used as a military headquarters.

This ongoing militarization of this region is one aspect of the violence that has plagued Syria for the past decade. And while outright military action has ebbed, the buildup of militias in this area is a daily reminder for the residents of Deir Ezzor that the conflict itself is far from over. Iran in particular has demonstrated its intention on remaining in Deir Ezzor indefinitely, both through its military structures and its 'soft power' (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/qassem-soleimanis-ghost-deir-ezzor/>) efforts to reshape the population into one with Iranian sympathies and believers in Khamenei's brand of Shia Islam. Such a process may take decades to complete, but in the meantime the residents of Deir Ezzor will continue to suffer from the challenges that the process of militarization has already wrought. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

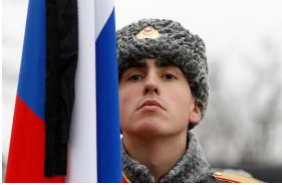
Khamenei Breaks His Silence on the Nuclear Negotiations

Feb 17, 2022

•

Omer Carmi

(/policy-analysis/khamenei-breaks-his-silence-nuclear-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before

Feb 16, 2022

•

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter

Feb 16, 2022

•

Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)