

Mapping Russian Soft Power: How Coastal Syrians Engage with Russia

by [Ishtar Al Shami \(/experts/ishtar-al-shami\)](/experts/ishtar-al-shami)

May 26, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/rsm-khrytt-alqwt-alnamt-alrwsyt-kyf-ytaml-alswrywn-fy-alsahl-alswry-m-rwsya\)](/ar/policy-analysis/rsm-khrytt-alqwt-alnamt-alrwsyt-kyf-ytaml-alswrywn-fy-alsahl-alswry-m-rwsya)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ishtar Al Shami \(/experts/ishtar-al-shami\)](/experts/ishtar-al-shami)

Ishtar Al Shami is a Syrian writer and activist.

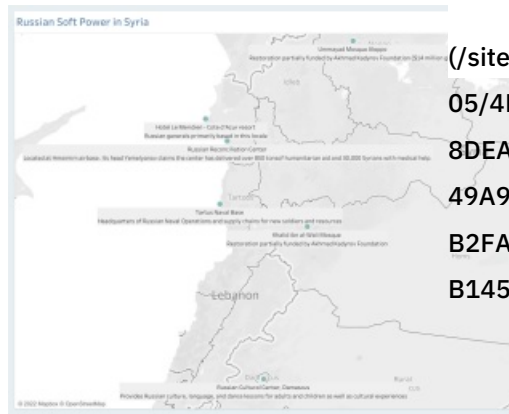


Brief Analysis

Mapping Syrians' attitudes towards Russia's presence in the country demonstrates a variety of perspectives, indicating the mixed record of Russia's soft power efforts.

The Syrian coast is one of the most important areas of the Russian presence in the county, as this area supports Russia due to its sectarian diversity. Russian involvement on the coast takes various forms, but the Russian military is not well established outside the Hmeimim Base, despite having integrated with local society. Russian generals are primarily based in the Hotel Le Meridien in the Cote d'Azur resort in Latakia. There are also Russian experts working in various non-military spheres.

One commonly sees Russian vehicles cruising through Latakia's neighborhoods, especially in formerly rebel-held zones, such as al-Sleibeh and the surrounding area, al-Tabiyat, and the Southern Corniche. However, mapping Syrians' attitudes towards Russia, while an inexact science, help demonstrate where Russian soft power is succeeding and failing. The map that emerges is one of division over the question of Russia's involvement in Syria, with Russian influence radiating outwards from their positions on Syria's coast.



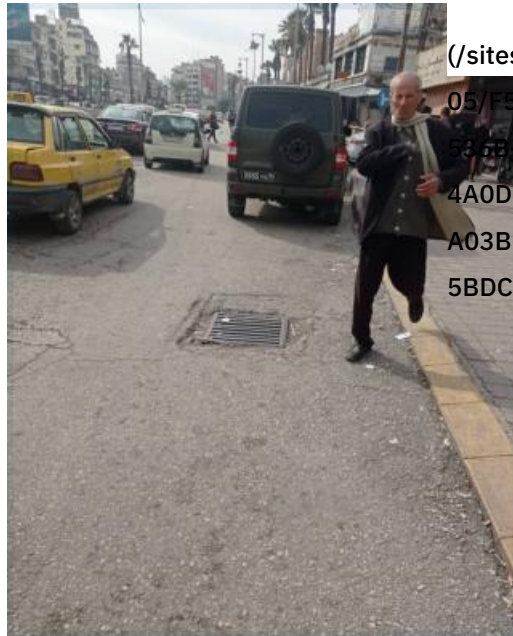
(/sites/default/files/2022-05/4BC9C6EE-8DEA-49A9-B2FA-B1456200FABF.png)

Russian Involvement by District

Qardaha District and Countryside: This is one of the areas most supportive of Russian involvement on the Syrian coast and in the country in general, as the region considers Russia to be a key backer of Assad in his war against “terrorism.” These feelings are also bolstered since the Assad family is originally from this district. Children in school are pushed to learn Russian, a language required in official educational institutions, and families are encouraged to send their children to study in Russia. According to local sources, this district produces the highest number of graduates of Russian universities.

Jableh City and Outskirts: According to local sources, this district is split into two camps over the Russian presence in regime-held Syria. The area adjacent to the Russian Hmeimim Base (within a 20-km² area) is one of the country’s most strongly anti-Russian areas for several reasons: problems with communications infrastructure and internet due to military activity in the base; reduced value of agricultural land because of its proximity to the air base; and constant plane activity, which the population considers a major nuisance. In contrast, the areas outside the immediate vicinity of the base are strongly pro-Russian. Like those in Qardaha, many residents see Russia as crucial to the victory of al-Assad’s Syria in the war on terrorism.

City of Latakia: Latakia is likewise divided in its views on Russia. The old city is primarily Sunni and not particularly amenable to Russian control on ethnic or religious grounds. There are areas that witnessed widespread protests during the beginning of the revolution, and Russian influence has not spread extensively in these areas. In fact, there is resistance to normalization with the Russian occupation despite ongoing Russian attempts to change attitudes.



(/sites/default/files/2022-05/F55DAEAD-537B-4A0D-A03B-5BDC0C203B46.jpeg)



(/sites/default/files/2022-05/A5D57911-970C-4569-B3DB-D75CCFF3CEFF.jpeg)

Russian military vehicles on the streets of Latakia

However, the newly built areas of the city and its outskirts, which were constructed during the early Hafez al-Assad era and are constantly being renovated, are a different story. The residents are primarily naval officers and employees of various security, police, or state forces and come from the surrounding countryside. This area fully supports Russia due to the local families' ties with the regime, regional demographics, and sectarian affiliations. The extensive Russian presence here includes cafes frequented by Russians in the Mashrou al-Ziraa and Mashrou al-Ashir neighborhoods, among others. There is even a specific cafe in the al-Ziraa neighborhood for Russian officers known as "Moscow Cafe."



(/sites/default/files/2022-05/357692A9-8D53-4AF4-BOAE-6876C6603B0A.jpeg)

The schools in these neighborhoods have some of the largest numbers of Russian language students. Interest in learning Russian in government schools and the area's many private institutes is largely tied to the integration of the Russian occupier here, especially since learning Russian seems to offer a better future through travel abroad and university education in Russia. Scholarships for the children of those working with the Assad regime do in fact enable many of these children there.

Kessab District and Surrounding Area: Due to the Armenian Christian presence

(<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Armenia/Armenians-of-Kessab-Hostages-of-the-Civil-War-151005>) in the city of Kessab, there is likewise a significant Russian cultural presence there, along with tourist sites supported by Russia. Some local residents have taken on various new Russian customs, such as raising Russian breeds of dogs, drinking Russian beverages, and other new behaviors due to the cultural exchange.

Al-Haffah District: In the city of Slinfah, there are some Russian cultural activities, including scouting groups for Russian tourists who visit the villages and a tree-planting project that Russia has promoted—even as the district's villages and towns remain depopulated and destroyed. The village of Salma is now a major Russian military base purportedly designed to protect Hmeimim from terrorist attacks. Russia also recently tried to form delegations to communicate with forcibly-displaced residents from the district, who now live in Turkey. The delegations have attempted to bring former residents back to the area and form local councils to manage themselves. However, these displaced persons rejected this proposal due to a lack of trust in the Russians and the regime.

Tartus: The port of Tartus is one of the most economically important areas within Russian control. The Russian government is currently employing several local residents via intermediary companies that offer salaries seen as competitive, and training employees in human development programs that aim to inculcate Russian culture among these companies' employees.

The countryside of Tartus has seen widespread interest in studying Russian language, particularly in Duraykish and Safita. However, the percentage of students learning Russian in Tartus remains lower than in the city and outskirts of Latakia. Recently, as a result of changes in conditions on the ground, there has been greater calm in this area, and it seems that Russian officers will stay longer and become more established as a result. Homes are being built for Russian generals and experts at Masbah Jawl Jamal in the Cote d'Azur Resort, which will become a protected residential area for Russian military families.

Aleppo: Aleppo is one of the most important Syrian cities for Russia's indirect exertion of soft power. After the

agreement resulting in the forced displacement of Aleppo residents in 2016, the Russian military police established themselves in depopulated neighborhoods, and Russia became involved in the city via the Akhmad Kadyrov Charitable Foundation. The foundation is backed by Russia and connected to the president of Chechnya, one of Putin's allies. This foundation supports various urban and charitable activities, such as renovating the Great Mosque of Aleppo and the al-Madina Souq—both damaged by the regime's barrel bombing of opposition factions in the area. Russia has not resorted to directly supporting these initiatives in Aleppo because of its ongoing ideological struggle with the Iranian presence in the city.

Daraa: The Russian military presence here is focused on supporting local factions involved in various small civil society and charitable projects. These efforts commenced after siege and starvation tactics led the local leadership to agree to Russian-led settlement agreements with the Assad regime. The most important factions working with the Russians in Daraa are the 8th Brigade of the 5th Corps, a pro-regime group under the leadership of Ahmed al-Awda.

Damascus Countryside: This area is outside of Russian control at the moment, despite years of direct Russian military intervention. The countryside has likewise witnessed siege and forced displacement operations, including green buses displacing residents to Idlib. This area is now under Iranian influence.

Al-Jazira Region: The Russian presence has been limited in this area to the military sphere so far. Russia does not have clear interests here except for supporting some of the local militias under the pretext of eliminating ISIS and establishing a presence through institutions of the Assad regime.

The Russian presence is also felt in Syria's oil fields. Many in Syria viewed the July 2021 agreement—when Russia allowed for maintained humanitarian assistance through the Bab Al-Hawa border-crossing with Turkey after signaling previously that they would veto the extension—as linked to the Biden administration's decision to allow the American company Delta Crescent's sanctions waiver to develop oilfields in Northeast Syria to [lapse](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/delta-crescent-energy-refining-us-stabilization-strategies-northeast-syria) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/delta-crescent-energy-refining-us-stabilization-strategies-northeast-syria>). Observers saw this as allowing Russian oil companies further control over Syrian oil fields, as well as efforts at “early recovery” programs – a move to return Syrians also supported by Turkey.

As a response to the crisis in Ukraine, Russia is currently reducing its troop commitments in Syria. Yet while this move seems to be creating an opportunity for Iran and Iranian-backed militias to increase their influence in the country, it is unlikely to have a negative impact on Russia's soft-power presence. Especially in the coastal areas of Syria, Russian efforts and official regime backing have given them popular support that is likely to remain stable for the foreseeable future. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[How Religion and Money Shape Russian Soft Power in Syria](#)

May 26, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/how-religion-and-money-shape-russian-soft-power-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Rebuilding Israeli-Turkish Relations: A Marriage of Convenience

May 26, 2022



Jalal Selmi

(/policy-analysis/rebuilding-israeli-turkish-relations-marriage-convenience)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Rebuilding a Society: the Key to Success of Turkey's New Syrian Resettlement Villages

May 26, 2022



Ammar Al-Musarea

(/policy-analysis/rebuilding-society-key-success-turkeys-new-syrian-resettlement-villages)