

Despite Airstrikes, Iran Continues to Permeate Western Syria

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Brief Analysis

Efforts to counter Iran in Syria are solely focused on Iran's military presence in the country, and have ignored the soft-power, cultural spheres of influence being developed by Iran as a long-term strategy.

Over the past several weeks, an uptick in U.S. and Israeli airstrikes have emphasized these parties' interest in curtailing Iranian operations throughout Syria. The United States' response to drone strikes on al-Tanf base from Iranian-backed militias marked the first American airstrike in Syria in over a year. For its part, Israel's repeated airstrikes have been much more widespread, including the August 31 targeting of Aleppo airport and its previous attack on Damascus airports—both instances targeting Iranian weapons transfers and storage in these airports.

The attacks also reflect how Iran has doubled down in Syria in the past several months. Its ongoing transfer of weapons to the Lebanese Hezbollah, which has provoked the intensification of the Israeli air strikes, is one obvious sign of this maneuver.

Yet as Syrians living in the west of the country can observe, an exclusive focus on airstrikes in Syria has done little to deter the larger years-long Iranian project of shaping the area in its own image. These increasingly successful efforts are likely to provide Iran with both a military and soft power win in the years to come if left unchecked.

Global Events Shift Iran's Role

Iran's role in Syria has adapted to two major recent events this year. The first shift involves the rippling repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which have reshaped both the Russian-Turkish relationship as well as Russian priorities in Syria itself. The other major event is Biden's visit to the Middle East and ongoing attempts to build strong regional alliances in the face of Iran.

The Ukrainian war has contributed to a tightening of the international noose by Western countries against Russia,

with European countries and the United States responding in a manner very different from their previous reactions to Russian maneuvering. All of this has led to a change in Russian strategies, including an increased willingness to coordinate with Turkish and Iranian interests inside of Syria. Moreover, Russia's lack of access to alternative weapons sources has left it turning to Iran for drones to deploy in the war, suggesting the potential for a closer security cooperation that can easily impact the Syrian theater as well.

The recent U.S. visit to the region focusing on Israel and Saudi Arabia has likewise appeared to influence a rapprochement between Russia and Iran in Syria. In response to this visit, which included Washington's effort to resurrect the notion of a 'Middle Eastern NATO' to combat Iranian expansionism, it seems that Russia is now willing to grant Tehran a larger purview in Syria to expand its influence and operations.

In return, Iran continues to increase its penetration of Western Syria. Iran has specifically benefited from the Syrian chaos through vigorous attempts to develop the missiles owned by Hezbollah from regular missiles to precision missiles—a goal Nasrallah has publicly articulated. Of course, this possibility greatly concerns Israel. Furthermore, Iran is determined to intensify its efforts and support its Lebanese and Syrian allies as well as test its missile capabilities—of which Iran has a large arsenal—on Syrian soil and sometimes in Iraq, as happened in its bombing of Erbil months ago.

Iranian attempts to change the rules of the game by introducing an air defense system to protect Tehran's military interests in Syria have already led to Israeli strikes in July targeting a site near Tartus, Syria. Yet Iran still maintains more than 20,000 armed militias in the area, with many of these troops stationed in key areas of Syria—namely Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zour.

These indicators all demonstrate how Iran continues to cement itself in Syria. Within the past few months, Iran has demonstrated that it is more than willing to take full advantage of Russia's tacit approval of its increasing role in the country, even if Russia's continued allowance of Israeli airstrikes—with the exception of one recent **point of confrontation (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-russians-fired-its-jets-over-syria-may-one-off-2022-07-26/>)**—suggests this approval is ambivalent.

Iran's "Cross-Border Revolution"

Iran's Islamic Republic was founded on the idea of "exporting the revolution," and it has continued to apply this ideology whether in Iraq, Yemen, or Lebanon. Sunni-majority Syria has also proved a necessary, if unlikely component in this desire to form a "Shia crescent" loyal to Iran.

To this end, Iran is working hard to establish its feet in Syria socially and ideologically by strengthening its influence in pre-existing shrines while also building new ones, such as the shrine of Sayyida Zainab in Damascus. In areas such as Deir al-Zour, which have an absolute Sunni majority, it has worked to change the very makeup of the region by attracting young people to its militias and attempting to convert youth through social benefits or via cultural activities. These include "The Mahdi Scouts," Quran memorization courses, Persian language classes, and trips to its recently built shrines such as the "Ain Ali" shrine. Iran has also sought to bring Afghans, Iraqis, and other militia members to visit from outside Syria, and has been sure to secure places for new converts.

These efforts are already producing a degree of success: Iran has succeeded in recruiting many young people and their families, although they are few compared to the overall composition of a tribal area such as Deir al-Zour. Nevertheless, many residents of Deir al-Zour still fear the slow but steadily effective Iranian strategy over the years.

While some believe that an overall increase in militia elements may ultimately outweigh the economic incentives, Iran is already fortifying this strategy by increasing the wages of its fighters and increasing its sectarian "missionary" activities. Iran has also developed strategies to maintain the wages of its fighters, borrowing the regime's method of financing itself through the Captagon trade. With over 50 drug manufacturing sites producing

Captagon, crystal meth, and Hashish, Syria has now been labeled the "Captagon Republic."

Confronting Iran in Syria

While airstrikes target specific Iranian military capabilities in Syria, confronting Iran's actual presence in Syria or limiting its penetration is a task that no external party is undertaking.

The recent U.S. and coalition airstrikes on August 23-24 are a case in point. Alleged U.S. warplanes bombed several targets in Deir al-Zour, including Iranian targets on Hawijah Sakar island in the section of the Euphrates that runs through Deir al-Zour city. Another Iranian militia location was also targeted in the desert of al-Mayadin in the eastern countryside of Deir al-Zour, and a raid by the Global Coalition targeted several points on the Euphrates shore in the eastern countryside of Deir al-Zour. These airstrikes came after an American raid on Ayash warehouses in the western countryside of Deir al-Zour—raids that were an American response to Iranian provocations through a missile attack on their forces east of the Euphrates.

But U.S. air strikes such as these are often punitive. They mainly serve as a message to Iran, warning it not to expand its areas of influence in the east of the Euphrates, and to prevent the transfer of missiles to Hezbollah, especially through the warehouses. In contrast, no party has taken any serious measures to limit Iran's influence west of the Euphrates.

Iran is operating with the same long-term strategy that it always has, remaining steadfast in the hope for future results. And these results are already coming to fruition. It is now possible to see Iranian features in the western city of al-Mayadin, for example. The diligent work of Iranian cultural centers, Husseinis, and shrines is a good indicator of Iran's vision beyond military expansion.

With limited international interest in concretely preventing the softer aspect of Iranian influence in Syria, the most important thing for Syrians vis-à-vis Iran is to work with local communities to confront Iranian ideological expansion. Many residents fear a real, growing and deliberate Iranian ideological penetration, and are eager to preserve their cultural heritage and separate identity even in the face of coordinated Iranian attempts to erode it.

An important strategy of countering Iran's influence so far has been the work of activists and media professionals in Deir al-Zour who are exposing the activities of Iranian militias and the soft power methods of Iran in the local media outlets. Such media coverage has played a prominent role in preventing the Syrian people in the region from being drawn into the Iranian trap, which consists of recruiting tribesmen into Iranian militias to serve the regime's political and military agendas, while simultaneously attempting to convert them to serve Iran's sectarian agenda.

The DeirEzzor24 network is undoubtedly a great example of local media exposing Iran's strategies, and the network's highly effective coverage has even garnered an Iranian response. According to the technical team of this network, the website was subjected to hacking attempts several times, and Iran was confirmed to be behind the hacks. This, of course, reflects the impact that the network—and others like it—are having on public opinion and awareness in Deir al-Zour as they expose Iran's undeclared efforts.

However, without external support of these local efforts to counter Iran's influence, Syrians will ultimately be hard-pressed to compete with the economic opportunities Iran can provide in the long term, especially as Tehran deliberately targets children and youth in an attempt to shape the new generation's views of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's external policies—both in Syria and in other Arab countries it has targeted—thrive on chaos. As such, Iran has proved to be perhaps the biggest winner amidst the instability that has afflicted the region for more than a decade. If other external actors such as the United States truly wish to limit Iranian military activity in Syria, they will ultimately need to help local Syrians address the Iranian issue at its core through aid and other forms of local assistance, rather than focusing on military strikes alone. Otherwise, with international attention increasingly

turned away from Syria, Iran will be left to build up a much more serious military and soft power threat on both sides of the Euphrates. ❖

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