

# Iran's 'Useful Syria' Is Practically Complete

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Helping the Assad regime establish full control in Damascus is only one part of Iran's plan to create a regional Shiite crescent, and any ceasefire plan that furthers such goals could spark wider sectarian conflict.**

**A**s Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov continue seeking a deal on military cooperation and a nationwide cessation of hostilities in Syria, the Assad regime -- with Iran's military aid -- has been accelerating its evacuation of the besieged Sunni suburbs surrounding Damascus. On August 27, Bashar al-Assad's forces moved into Daraya, less than two miles from the capital's center, after convincing the approximately 8,000 local residents who remained there to leave.

The Daraya incident is not isolated -- the regime has begun negotiating similar agreements with other besieged Sunni areas around Damascus in order to protect the capital and the presidential palace from rebels, who could use these towns as points of access. Yet the fact that Iranian-sponsored militias are heavily involved in the sieges also says a lot about Tehran's interest in establishing control over these towns, which fall within the "useful Syria" (i.e., Assad-controlled Syria) and the wider Shiite crescent that the Islamic Republic has long prioritized in the region.

## "WAR OR SURRENDER" TACTICS

**T**he residents of Daraya, who have been under siege for four years, surrendered the town after heavy regime bombardment and deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Assad's "starve or surrender" tactics in the area have apparently forced many rebels to give up in exchange for basic humanitarian needs such as food and medicine.

As soon as Daraya surrendered, the regime began to threaten the residents of Moadamiyat al-Sham in the Damascus suburbs and al-Waar district in Homs with "total war," according to an August 31 report by the Beirut-based outlet NOW. Assad seems to be moving from "starve or surrender" to "war or surrender" tactics in order to eliminate any

Sunni presence around Damascus as soon as possible. This demographic strategy -- in which Sunnis are being sent to northern Syria while the regime regains control of the capital's suburbs -- is probably not going to stop with al-Waar. The remaining Sunnis in Ghouta, Zabadani, Madaya, Yarmouk, and other areas around Damascus will eventually be forced out as well.

Earlier this week, NOW and the pan-Arab news outlet *Asharq al-Awsat* noted that Iraqi families, "particularly from the Shiite-[populated] southern provinces," are being moved to Syria to repopulate the recently evacuated Damascus suburbs. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, an Iraqi Shiite paramilitary force close to Iran, has reportedly overseen the resettlement of 300 such families, who were granted homes and \$2,000 each.

These demographic changes are not new -- Assad's father **actively populated**

**(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/damascus-control-emboldens-assad-nationally>)**

Damascus and surrounding towns with Alawites and other minorities during his time as president. For example, in 1947 "only 300 Alawites lived in Damascus (out of about 500,000 metropolitan-area inhabitants)," but by 2010 that figure had soared "to more than 500,000 (of about 5 million in the metro area), or a quarter of Syria's Alawite community. More Alawites thus lived in Damascus than in any other Syrian city." Bashar now appears to be escalating his father's strategy into the realm of ethnic cleansing.

## IRAN'S BIGGER PICTURE

**W**hile Assad's demography strategy is aimed at helping the regime maintain control over Damascus, Iran and its proxy militias are also very invested in the process. Tehran hopes that the deals with besieged Sunni towns will further its own "useful Syria" strategy, which entails wresting control over a corridor linking Syria's coastal region with Hezbollah's strongholds in Lebanon. As Iran's main Shiite proxy force, Hezbollah has already conducted ethnic cleansing of its own in certain areas along the border (e.g., its 2013 campaigns in al-Qusayr and the Qalamoun region). Also, hundreds of thousands of Sunnis were evacuated from Homs between 2011 and 2014, when a deal was finally struck with regime forces after starvation reached horrifying levels.

As a result of these efforts, the corridor linking Qalamoun to Damascus, Homs, and the Alawite enclave may soon be Sunni-free. In addition to shielding the capital from the mainly Sunni anti-Assad forces, this development would give Hezbollah safe access to the Golan Heights, potentially allowing the group to open another front against Israel. Iran could also use its reinforced grip over Syria and Lebanon to project more power against Israel, whether by supporting Hezbollah in the Golan or increasing its assistance to Palestinian groups like Hamas. Indeed, this corridor should be viewed in a regional context -- it would link Iran, Iraq, and the almost-complete "useful Syria" to the Beqa Valley and southern Hezbollah military stronghold in Lebanon, and Tehran's Shiite-controlled crescent would be whole. (Although there would be no territorial link between this part of Syria and Iraq, preserving Iranian-backed governments in Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut would allow Tehran to create a political contiguity sufficient to fulfill its goals.)

Given the amount of blood, money, and political capital it has already expended in Syria, Iran will not change this plan easily, no matter what the United States and Russia agree on. Tehran might limit its scope to protecting the corridor, but it will not simply leave Syria. It has pursued a military solution from the beginning, and that solution is still its primary choice.

## LOOKING AHEAD

**T**here are of course many challenges to this plan. Although the international community has shown little genuine concern about preventing the formation of an Iranian corridor, Tehran still faces the task of helping Assad seize territory from militant rebel factions and then warding them off. More broadly, Iran's crescent would be surrounded by a sea of Sunnis, heightened sectarian rhetoric, and greater animosity toward Shiites. All of this would keep

Iranian-controlled areas vulnerable and difficult to maintain.

Therefore, to fully secure its corridor, Iran will need to impose a kind of regional buffer zone. Outside Syria, it will likely look to strengthen its control over Lebanese state institutions to make sure no one challenges its hegemony. It will also endeavor to boost its control in the Beqa area, making sure the local Sunni population surrenders to Hezbollah's control. At the same time, it will attempt to reinforce its control over Iraq's state and religious institutions while imposing its Shiite militias there as a political reality.

This means that Iran's militias, including Hezbollah, will have to remain deployed on multiple fronts to protect the crescent -- in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and wherever else they might be needed. Among other consequences, such an indeterminate deployment will likely create more discontent among Hezbollah's support base back home.

None of these gains will come easily, but the current effort to put Assad firmly in control of the Damascus area will certainly help. And none of the above challenges is likely to stop Iran and Hezbollah from securing the corridor, since they cannot afford to jeopardize their geographical link and regional sphere of control. Even as Moscow and the United States discuss a ceasefire deal, Russian planes are still bombing rebel-controlled areas, and Iran's foreign fighters are still moving in and out of Syria as they please. The Gulf Cooperation Council fears that Tehran has been given a free hand to achieve its goals, and that Assad is gaining more control by the day.

Thus, any solution that does not recognize the dangers of Iranian regional hegemony will not work, especially if Assad stays in power. The majority of the region's inhabitants are Sunnis, and they will not welcome the prospect of a murderous Alawite regime retaining control in Syria, nor an Iranian Shiite crescent that envelops several countries. Under such circumstances, sectarian rifts would only widen, and more Sunnis might turn to extremist groups that promise bloodier solutions. The Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra would likely live on in some form or another, cultivating perpetual terrorist threats within these Iranian-dominated states.

A political solution for Syria -- whether presented jointly by the United States and Russia, or by UN envoy Staffan de Mistura, who said on September 1 that he plans to present a "quite clear political initiative" -- should be comprehensive and fair. It also should take into consideration the regional context, mainly in Iraq and Lebanon. Otherwise, Syria's sectarian civil war could eat up the entire region.

*Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the inaugural Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ♦

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