



European
University
Institute

ROBERT
SCHUMAN
CENTRE FOR
ADVANCED
STUDIES



Middle
East
Directions

Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities

Ziad Awad

**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**

Research Project Report
21 October 2019
2019/13

© European University Institute 2019
Content and individual chapters © Ziad Awad, 2019

This work has been published by the European University Institute,
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

This text may be downloaded only for personal research purposes. Additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copies or electronically, requires the consent of the authors. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the year and the publisher.

Requests should be addressed to med@eui.eu.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Middle East Directions
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Research Project Report
RSCAS/Middle East Directions 2019/13
21 October 2019

European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/
cadmus.eui.eu



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget.
This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot
be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Iran in Deir ez-Zor: Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities

*Ziad Awad**

* Ziad Awad is a Syrian journalist and researcher who works under the aegis of the 'Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria' research project in the Middle East Directions Programme supervised by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University in Florence. His work focuses on the eastern regions of Syria, and especially on the dynamics of local conflict in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa.

This research paper was written in September 2019 and was published in Arabic on 7 October 2019 by Middle East Directions (<http://medirections.com/index.php/2019-05-07-15-50-27/wartime/2019-10-07-07-56-40>). It was translated into English by Alex Rowell and Moayad Hokan.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
1. The Iranian Presence in Deir ez-Zor	3
1.1. IRGC Militias: Yesterday's Newcomers are Tomorrow's Settlers	4
1.2. Iran's 'Soft' Hands	7
2. Powerful Iranian Influence in a Weak Country	10
2.1. Easy Expansion to Local Authorities and Communities	10
<i>Relationships with Local Authorities and their Senior Representatives</i>	10
<i>Relations with Local Communities Through New and Old Actors</i>	11
2.2. Comfortable Work in a Near-Empty Space	14
3. Obstacles to Iranian Policy in Deir ez-Zor	17
3.1. Iranians are Persian Shia Amid Sunni Arabs	17
3.2. Other Actors in the Arena	19
3.3. Iran's Lack of Adequate Financial Resources	21
Conclusion	22

Executive Summary

Since late 2017, militias affiliated to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have been deployed in areas west of the Euphrates River, and parts of the region to its east in the governorate of Deir ez-Zor, which was previously under Islamic State (IS) control. Within two years of their being there, these militias from various backgrounds – foreign, Syrian and local – have succeeded in recruiting thousands of local youths into their ranks, thus providing the IRGC with important contact with the local communities. Iran is attempting to get closer to the local population and gain legitimacy with it through its civil, charitable and humanitarian activities, for which it has mainly relied on the Iranian Cultural Centre and the Jihad al-Binaa organisation.

At the same time, Iran has succeeded in building important relationships and friendships with the governor of Deir ez-Zor, leaders of the regime's intelligence services and other influential officials in the higher circles of local government. It has also succeeded, especially through the Iranian Cultural Centre, in bringing local figures from the economic, social and professional elite and official religious institutions into the diverse networks it is currently forming, which extend from Deir ez-Zor to the capital Damascus, where other Iranian institutions are active. The weakness, disintegration and exhaustion of the local communities resulting from the prolonged war in the governorate have enabled Iran to infiltrate the fabric of these communities, which have lost their ability to oppose Iranian influence, even if Iran raises sensitivities, particularly religious ones.

Despite the strength and opportunities available to Iran in Deir ez-Zor, major obstacles still stand in its way. The most important of these is the sectarian disparity, given the overwhelming Sunni majority, which wishes to preserve its faith and is influenced by the prevailing Sunni view of Shiism as a deviation from original Islam. This view owes much to the Salafi-jihadism embodied by IS, which has survived as both a set of rejectionist ideas and a physical militant group still capable of launching attacks from its pocket of influence in the Syrian desert (Badia). Escalating Israeli airstrikes on IRGC positions in the governorate and the presence of US forces east of the Euphrates are other threats to Iranian influence there. Moreover, another primary challenge to Iran in the region is the strict economic sanctions imposed by the United States, which have hindered recruitment and led to the salaries of local militiamen in Deir ez-Zor being lowered.

Introduction

Following the victory of the Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979, Iran, which then named itself the Islamic Republic of Iran, launched Shia conversion campaigns in Syria. This represented a broad resumption of the Shia activism which had initially been limited in the mid-1970s, being concentrated in the then-remote area of Sayyidah Zaynab south of Damascus.¹ As in other Syrian regions, Iran's first contact with Deir ez-Zor began following the launch of Shia proselytism there in the early 1980s. These campaigns particularly focused on the town of Hatla, and by 2011 had managed to convert nearly 4,000 of the town's approximately 22,000 residents, along with hundreds of others from nearby villages.

In the summer of 2017, the Assad regime and its Iranian and Russian allies launched a joint military operation against IS in the governorate, breaking the siege imposed by the group since 2015 on the regime-controlled pocket in the city of Deir ez-Zor.² The final outcome was a takeover by the regime and its allies of more than half of the governorate's administrative area, with the remainder falling under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and their American ally following a separate military operation which began at about the same time and concluded in March 2019.

Nearly two years on from the military defeat of IS in the Deir ez-Zor governorate, the IRGC has maintained its militia presence in the province, and this has become the broader front of the Iranian-American cold war being waged in Syria. The issue of the Iranian presence has become a subject of broad debate with various opinions as to its reality and implications, and only a few field studies have been conducted on the matter. This begs questions as to the reasons for the Iranians' success and their influence in this region, together with the factors that could potentially limit or hinder this success in the medium and long terms.

This paper first examines the forms of Iran's presence, and its military and civilian activities in the regime-controlled parts of Deir ez-Zor. It then analyses the factors contributing to Iran's power at the levels of local authorities and society, and the challenges faced by Iran, the most notable of which are sectarian differences, the presence of other active forces in the governorate and Iran's diminishing financial resources due to tightened US sanctions.

The researcher has drawn on more than fifty meetings conducted with the help of six assistants residing in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Damascus. These meetings between February and September 2019, some of which involved several encounters, were held with people familiar with developments in Deir ez-Zor who either reside in the governorate or have been displaced from it. Other interviewees included members of IRGC-affiliated militias, other Shia figures and members of the regime's army and its affiliated militias. For security reasons, the identities of most of the interviewees and their specific places of residence are omitted. The researcher has also undertaken lengthy monitoring and tracking of published content relevant to the subject through open-access sources on the websites of research centres, media outlets, social media sites, forums and personal blogs.

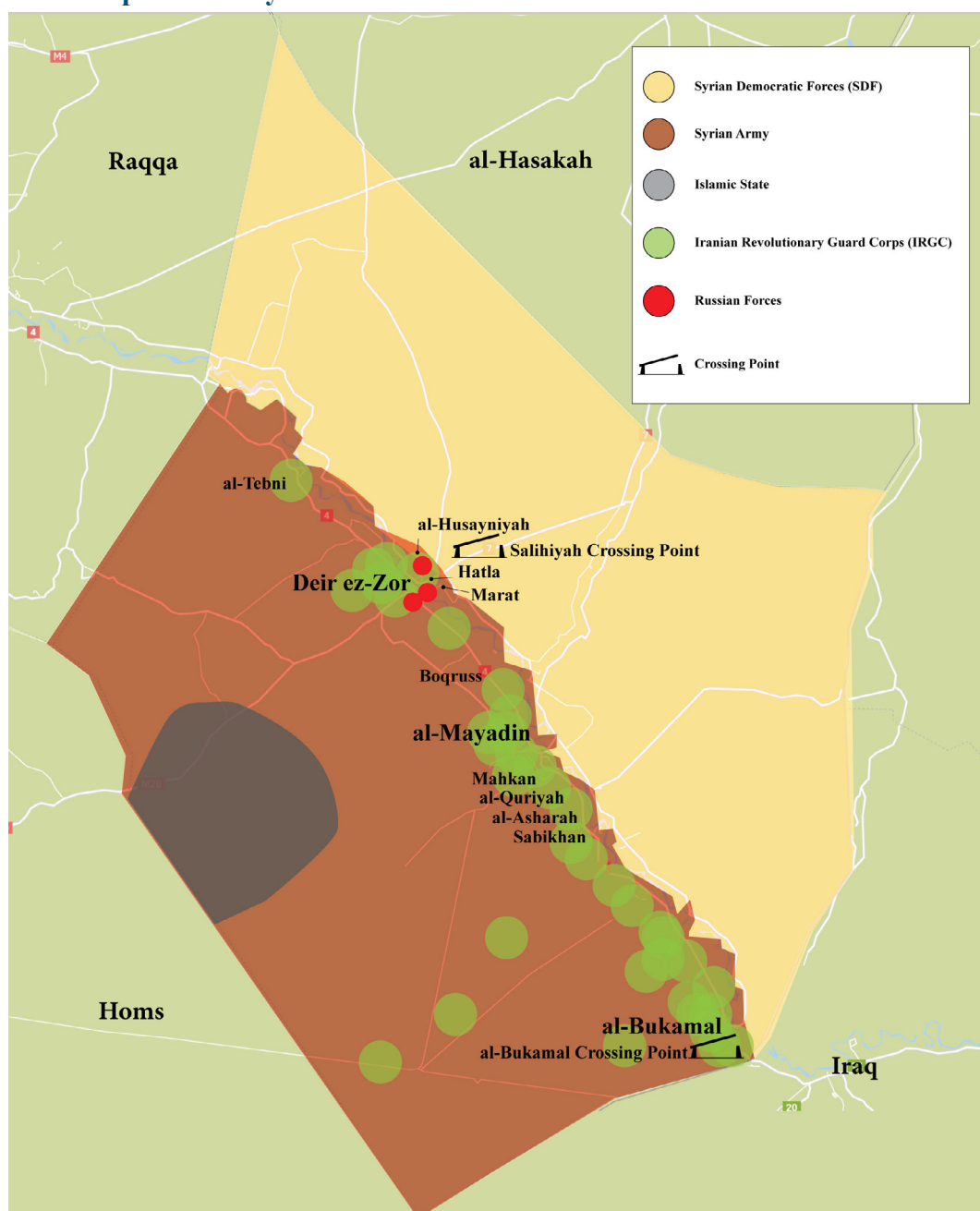
¹ Abdulrahman al-Hajj, *Shiite Baath in Syria 2007-2019* (in Arabic), (Beirut: Jusoora for Translation and Publishing, 2017).

² Ziad Awad, "The Rebuilding of Syrian Regime Networks in the City of Deir ez-Zor: Identifying Key Local Players," research project report, (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, March 2019), <https://bit.ly/33jVu4s>

1. The Iranian Presence in Deir ez-Zor

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps³ commands a variety of militias in the governorate of Deir ez-Zor working to achieve its military objective of protecting its sphere of influence. By recruiting local young men in the ranks of these militias, the IRGC meets its need for greater numbers of fighters, producing affiliates that can be integrated into larger more consolidated local formations in the future serving as alternatives to other foreign militias and thus entrenching Iranian influence in Deir ez-Zor. Furthermore, the civil activities of the Iranian Cultural Centre, and the Jihad al-Binaa organisation in particular, provide a ‘friendly’ image of Iran among local communities, through which Iran attempts to gain legitimacy and acceptance of its various roles.

Map 1. Military Control and Influence in Deir ez-Zor Governorate



Source: the author. Graphic designer: Laura Pigneri, 20 September 2019

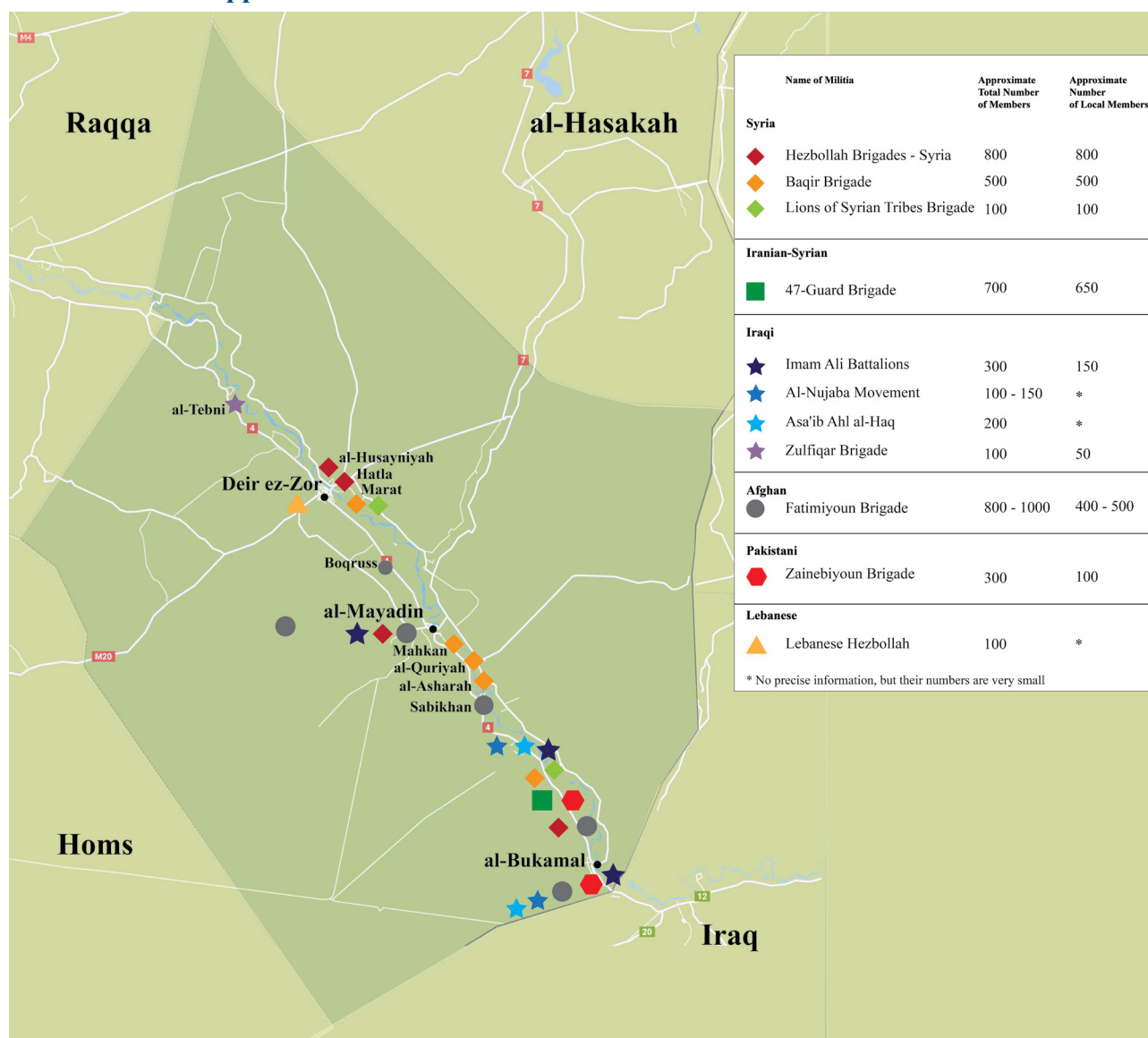
³ Strictly speaking, the IRGC's external arm is known as the Quds Force, but here it is referred to as the IRGC for the sake of simplicity.

1.1. IRGC Militias: Yesterday's Newcomers are Tomorrow's Settlers

Iran's military presence in Deir ez-Zor governorate is embodied in three types of IRGC-affiliated militias: foreign groups formed at various times before and after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011; Syrian militias, represented by the Baqir Brigade, which was established in its current form in 2014 in Aleppo governorate; and local militias established in preparation for the military campaign against IS in Deir ez-Zor in the summer of 2017.

These militias primarily comprise local residents. They are all under the command of a cell of IRGC officers, typically operating from their headquarters in Deir ez-Zor. The cell comprises an estimated 25 to 30 officers, headed by a supreme commander known as Haj Ali, who is assisted by four or five senior aides specialising in armaments, logistics and support, recruitment and finance. Leaders from the Lebanese Hezbollah group also offer their assistance, performing various tasks such as preparation, training and field command during the course of battles.

Map 2. Militias Affiliated to the IRGC: Names, Origins and Approximate Numbers of Total Members and Local Members



Source: the author.⁴ Graphic designer: Laura Pigneri, 20 September 2019

⁴ All the maps were created by the author on the basis of online interviews conducted between March and June 2019 with local members of the militias and other informed and well-connected persons.

This overall IRGC umbrella undergoes continual organisational changes. These are usually influenced by two main factors: the special programme set by Iranian leaders for the recruitment, structuring and redeployment of each militia; and the militia's structure, age, history and the social environment of its founding elements.

In the case of the Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade, the Pakistani Zainebiyoun Brigade and the Iraqi Imam Ali Battalions, the need for more fighters is met by the recruitment of local young men. This need is dictated by the important combat roles played by these brigades in confronting IS in the Syrian desert (Badia), protecting the border with Iraq and confronting the SDF across the Euphrates. In the event that these militias redeploy or if their military functions in Deir ez-Zor decline, the IRGC is likely to integrate their local members into Syrian or other formations affiliated to it.

In contrast to the foreign militia phenomenon, the recruitment of young men from Deir ez-Zor governorate into the local branch of the Baqir Brigade militia represents a deliberate expansion. The brigade was formed in stages by members of the Baggara tribe in Aleppo governorate,⁵ and started to take its present form under IRGC auspices in 2014, before a local branch was established in Deir ez-Zor in early 2018. Since then, the branch has maintained its cohesion, benefiting from a consolidation of the brigade's structure in recent years and the special attention the IRGC gives to the militia in its Aleppo stronghold.

Unlike the stable Baqir Brigade, the structure of the Lions of Syrian Tribes Brigade (LSTB) appears to be fragile and unstable. This is a result of the personal characters of its founder, Nawaf al-Bashir, and his son, Laith. The former is a fickle political activist and dignitary of the Baggara tribe, while the latter – the military commander of the LSTB – lacks sufficient military qualifications or expertise. The militia has undergone significant changes since al-Bashir announced its founding in June 2017, relying first on Syrian workers in Lebanon from the Baggara tribe⁶ and then on young men in Damascus displaced from Deir ez-Zor governorate. In the first six months after its establishment, the LSTB was organisationally associated with the Baqir Brigade, which was then its military incubator. In early 2018 after the LSTB split from the Baqir Brigade forming an independent body, its numbers rose from nearly 200 to 400. However, the membership fell to 200 after a split in favour of the al-Qaterji groups⁷ in the spring of that year. The LSTB maintained this size for almost a year, until it entered a phase of erosion as a result of individual defections. Its membership had fallen to around 100 by July 2019, with total dissolution now being its likely fate.

Among the IRGC's militias, the 47-Guard Brigade is a special example of direct Iranian command, which operates through an IRGC officer nicknamed Haj Salman. The brigade was established in unclear circumstances in 2016 in the governorates of Hama and Homs, drawing on former opposition fighters there after their security status had been 'settled' through so-called 'reconciliations'.⁸ Since its deployment in the al-Bukamal area at the end of 2017, the 47-Guard Brigade has launched a campaign to recruit local members. These now constitute its core force. It appears to be growing rapidly due to the regular salaries and other financial benefits it provides its ranks with. The Brigade initially recruited young men returning to al-Bukamal after being displaced at the height of the battles against IS in the autumn of 2017. It then attracted local elements who had initially joined other militias, such as al-Nujaba and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which apparently did not intend to set up local

⁵ The main settlement of the Baggara tribe in Deir ez-Zor governorate.

⁶ Lions of Syrian Tribes Brigade, "An appeal to every honourable man inside and outside the homeland" (in Arabic), Facebook, 10 June 2017, <https://bit.ly/2KRJsZX>

⁷ These groups belong to the brothers Baraa, Hussam and Muhammad al-Qaterji, who became wealthy during the war. They first appeared as groups to protect their commercial interests in 2014 and 2015, before expanding and engaging in hostilities sponsored by the Military Intelligence Division and later by the IRGC.

⁸ Online interview with a local member of the 47-Guard Brigade, July 2019.

branches in Deir ez-Zor. The Brigade also attracted members of disintegrating militias, such as the local branch of the National Defence Forces in the town of al-Bukamal, whose members had been trained by the IRGC during its formation,⁹ and members of smaller groups affiliated with Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence. Today, the brigade looks set to absorb the ‘al-Harbi Combat Forces – Republican Guard’, formed by Hatem Saleh al-Harbi under the umbrella of the Republican Guard’s Popular Defence Forces, comprising dozens of young men from the town of al-Jalaa and the villages adjacent to al-Bukamal.

Hezbollah Brigades-Syria established their local branch after an intensive recruitment campaign among a very small Shia minority from the town of Hatla which was launched during the preparations for military operations in Deir ez-Zor in summer 2017. The campaign involved recruiting some 400 Shia youths from Hatla into IRGC-affiliated groups, bringing in dozens of the town’s residents who were already hardened by previous combat experience. In late 2013, a group of local fighters emerged in uniforms belonging to Hezbollah, which since 2014 had acknowledged its active participation in the fighting in the regime-controlled enclave in and around the city of Deir ez-Zor.¹⁰ Announcements of the deaths of Shia individuals from Hatla, which began to appear in 2015,¹¹ revealed the organised involvement of these young men with fighting groups subordinate to Lebanese Hezbollah, or with the Iraqi militia then known as ‘Hezbollah Brigades – 5th Regiment.’¹² Hezbollah Brigades-Syria soon deployed in the town of Hatla in late 2017, where they launched a new recruitment campaign targeting young Sunni residents displaced from the town into SDF-controlled areas. By spring 2019, about 400 young Sunnis had been recruited into the militia¹³ after their security situation had been settled.

Local young men appear to have three main motives for joining IRGC-affiliated militias. The first, especially for those who have recently returned from displacement outside regime-controlled areas, is a desire to eliminate security-related suspicions and potential prosecution by the intelligence services. These people find in the IRGC a force capable of granting them protection.¹⁴ In Sukkariyah, a rural suburb of al-Bukamal, local mediators supported by Haj Salman managed to persuade more than 200 young men displaced to areas outside the regime’s control¹⁵ to return and join the 47-Guard Brigade. Sure enough, none of the young returnees were summoned by the intelligence services, owing to the guarantees and protection the Guard granted them. The second motive is to avoid compulsory or reserve conscription in the Syrian army, with its indefinite timeline and low pay.¹⁶ The third motive is to get a job with a fixed monthly salary (approximately 100-140 USD), given the poor economic situation and scarce work opportunities.

⁹ Lovers of National Defence Commander in Deir ez-Zor, Mr. Firas al-Jaham, “Men who pledged to Allah, and were true in what they promised” (in Arabic), Facebook, 7 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/2PcAmuF>

¹⁰ Al-Mayadeen, “A Hezbollah Leader: What Happened in Deir ez-Zor is a Strategic Victory” (in Arabic), YouTube, 9 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/313QJeb>

¹¹ Such as Hassan Omar al-Hammadi, killed in May 2015, and Hamza Nidal al-Hammadi. See: Ayman Abu Haidara, “[...] We bring you the news of the martyrdom of the martyr and mujahid Ahmed Ibrahim al-Mashhoudh (Karrar)” (in Arabic), Facebook, 13 November 2017, <https://bit.ly/2KLTCVm>

¹² An Iraqi militia the Syrian division of which was known by this name. See: Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi, “Hezbollah Brigades, Syrian Wing: Interview,” Blog, 17 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2zbUhzc>

¹³ Online interview with an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) from the northern Syrian town of Hatla, April 2019.

¹⁴ As in other Syrian regions. See: Ninar al-Ra’i, “Facets of Syrian Regime Authority in Eastern Ghouta,” research project report (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 31 July 2019), <https://bit.ly/2OH8tZV>

¹⁵ The most notable of which in Sukkariyah are the former bus driver Khodr Khalil al-Hamdan and former cement tradesman Yusuf Mahmoud al-Hamdan, who joined the militia and became a leader of it.

¹⁶ The approximate monthly salary is 9 USD for a private performing compulsory military service, 30 USD for reserve servicemen other than those who were employed in government institutions before joining the reserve service, and approximately 45 USD for employed reserve servicemen (at an exchange rate equivalent to 600 SYP per USD).

The recruitment of growing numbers of Sunnis into the IRGC's militias poses no threat to its Shia character or ideological allegiance to Iran. The Sunni fighters recognise that their affiliation means acquiescence to ideological preparation and mobilisation programmes run by religious counsellors in the training camps and on courses they attend, and also in the normal course of operations after graduation.

In this complex and fluctuating scene, and regardless of the differences between one armed group and another, IRGC-affiliated militias are united in their primary objective: to eventually become established local militias that obviate Iran's need for foreign militias by replacing them with formations that are more disciplined, loyal and deeply-rooted within the communities of Deir ez-Zor.

1.2. Iran's 'Soft' Hands

Iran's civilian presence in Deir ez-Zor city varies in size, form and substance from other cities and villages under regime control. It overlaps with its military presence, especially in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, where IRGC militias are concentrated.

In terms of humanitarian aid and service provision, Iran relies on Jihad al-Binaa, which established its Syrian branch in 2013 and opened its Deir ez-Zor governorate sub-branch in early 2018.¹⁷ In September 2017 a few days after breaking the siege of Deir ez-Zor, Iran sent a convoy of trucks delivering food, medical aid and clothing to the city.¹⁸ This was done through the Syrian branch of Jihad al-Binaa, and a medical centre was opened the following month providing services free of charge.¹⁹ In one of its few announcements revealing its activities, the organisation claimed to have provided extensive assistance to the population, restored public facilities and undertaken the construction and maintenance of parks, swimming pools, clinics and factories.²⁰ However, most of these charitable projects were actually implemented by IRGC-affiliated militias, particularly in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside. In the town of al-Bukamal, the IRGC has set up a relief committee that semi-regularly distributes aid to the families of its members and poor households on its lists, while militias have restored and maintained a swimming pool at a former recreational site. In the city of Deir ez-Zor, members of IRGC-affiliated militias have participated in the restoration of public parks.²¹ The IRGC has also opened four free clinics, two in the city of al-Bukamal, one in the city of al-Mayadin and another in the town of Boqruss. To date, Jihad al-Binaa's projects in Deir ez-Zor still do not appear to be on a par with those implemented in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs governorates, perhaps due to the precarious military situation in the region, where the conflict with the United States and its ally the SDF has not been resolved.

In addition to humanitarian and charitable work, IRGC militias also undertake economic activities, operating oil wells in the desert and smuggling across the border with Iraq. They seized small oil wells in the desert equipped with pumpjacks formerly belonging to al-Ward oil field 110 kilometres southeast of Deir ez-Zor. They then transformed the main site of the field into a large military base. Thus, the IRGC monopolised the production of these wells, which is in excess of 1,500 barrels per

¹⁷ Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi, "Reconstruction in Syria: Interview with Jihad al-Binaa," Blog, 4 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2lnUrA4>

¹⁸ Tasnim International News Agency, "Islamic Republic Sends 1,000 Tons of Aid to the People of Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), 19 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2SRTtIM>

¹⁹ Known as the Euphrates Field Hospital. It has an in-patient and pediatric clinic.

²⁰ Jihad al-Binaa, "Definition and Objectives of the Jihad al-Binaa Foundation," Facebook, 16 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2yuoZ64>

²¹ Sada al-Deir, "Fierce in Their Fight Against Terrorism" (in Arabic), Facebook, 29 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HqdEJf>

day²² and produces a revenue of 15-20,000 USD per day.²³ It has set up small refineries²⁴ to extract oil for its own use, producing fuel to operate its militias' vehicles. The remainder, which is the largest proportion of the output, is sold as fuel to traders in the local market, or as crude oil to the al-Qaterji company, which in turn transports it in tankers protected by the company's forces from al-Bukamal to the Homs refinery,²⁵ under an ambiguous relationship brokered between the IRGC, al-Qaterji and the Syrian Ministry of Oil, which appears to buy or extract Syrian oil from Iran.²⁶

Trade and smuggling have also flourished on the Iraqi border.²⁷ Before its official re-opening on 1 October 2019, this was through the al-Bukamal–al-Qa'im border crossing between Syria and Iraq. The smuggling was monopolised by local militia leaders such as Khallouf al-Shawi and his sons, along with tribal dignitaries affiliated to the IRGC such as Faisal al-Kassar, leader of the Jaghaifa clan in the village of al-Hari, Jamal al-Hardan, a leader of the al-Hassun clan in the village of al-Suwayiya and other well-known smugglers such as Hussein al-Ali, aka Abu Saddam, and his sons.²⁸

While IRGC-affiliated militias play an important role in charitable and economic activities in the countryside of the governorate, Iranian civil activities take different forms in the city of Deir ez-Zor, which today has a population of just 250,000, down from approximately 600,000 in 2010. Here, the Iranian Cultural Centre, which opened in early 2018, is at the forefront of this Iranian intervention. Since its inception, the Centre has sponsored joint activities with the governorate,²⁹ the Baath Party,³⁰ government institutions and unions.³¹ It has organised joint events with civil society organisations, such as the Nahda Women's Foundation³² and the local branch of the Syrian Youth Fingerprint Foundation (*Basmat Shabab Souria*).³³ The Centre has also announced scholarships at universities in Iran and offered monthly financial rewards to outstanding secondary school students.³⁴ It has co-organised activities and events set up by Iran-sponsored centres and organisations operating in Deir ez-Zor and based in Damascus.³⁵

²² According to production estimates during the operation of IS field wells. See: Ayn Al-Madina, "Deir ez-Zor Oil: From the Revolution to the Islamic State," 25 August 2016, <https://bit.ly/2lnC1j1>

²³ This yield is split half and half with the regime's oil ministry, with a profit margin for the intermediate trader, at a price of 30-40 USD per barrel.

²⁴ Al-Bukamal has two oil refineries, one in the al-Sina'a district and the other in the Green Belt area south of the city.

²⁵ Crude oil convoys from Iraq are also protected.

²⁶ Online interview with a militia member from the town of al-Bukamal, August 2019.

²⁷ Especially smuggling tobacco and petrol from Iraq to Syria.

²⁸ Online interview with a local of al-Bukamal, August 2019.

²⁹ Ibrahim al-Dalli, "Deir ez-Zor Governorate Honours Mothers on Their Day" (in Arabic), *Al-Furat Newspaper*, 22 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Msc0Kp>

³⁰ Baath Arab Socialist Party – Deir ez-Zor branch, "Under the auspices of Comrade Saher Haj Sakr, Member of the Central Committee, Branch Secretary" (in Arabic), Facebook, 30 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Zcq8iw>

³¹ Sada al-Deir, "Al-Futuwa Club Hall Screens World Cup Matches" (in Arabic), Facebook, 23 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2YsH27u>

³² Othman al-Khalaf, "Sponsored by the Governor: The Iranian Cultural Centre in Deir ez-Zor Honours 50 Orphaned Children with the Nahda Women's Foundation" (in Arabic), *Iran Al Youm News Agency*, 4 January 2019, <https://iranalyoum.com/?p=19925>

³³ Malek Abu Anas al-Deiri, "Syrian Youth Fingerprint Foundation Event in Collaboration with the Iranian Cultural Centre in Deir ez-Zor Countryside" (in Arabic), Facebook, 1 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Zmq1x5>

³⁴ Online interview in March 2019. According to a relative of one of the outstanding students, the centre provides the top ten students in the province with a monthly salary of 15,000 SYP.

³⁵ SANA, "Variety Events for Children at 'Bright Nights' Festival in Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), 16 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZoFY5I>; Al-Theqaleen Charity Centre, "Syrian News Report on al-Theqaleen Centre's Honouring of Mothers of Martyrs in Deir ez-Zor Governorate on Mother's Day" (in Arabic), Facebook, 22 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2YAasjW>; Sheikh Mahmoud al-Adai, "Certificate of Acknowledgment and Appreciation to His Excellency Major General Shawqi Ahmed Yousef, Chairman of the Security and Military Committee in the Governorate, and Honouring and Acknowledging the Governor, Abdul Majid al-Kawakibi" (in Arabic), Facebook, 4 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2NtevNe>

Map 3. Iranian Centres in Deir ez-Zor City and the Vicinity



Source: the author. Graphic designer: Laura Pigneri, 20 September 2019

Most of the Iranian Cultural Centre's activities depend on its Iranian director, known as Haj Abu Sadiq, who has mastered the Arabic language to a very high level. He also has a deep knowledge of the local communities in the governorate, despite only beginning to work with them in summer 2013, when the Iranian embassy commissioned him to look after Shia residents displaced from the town of Hatla in the Sayyidah Zaynab area south of Damascus.³⁶ Through its diverse activities and relationships going beyond the cultural realm suggested by its name, the Centre has been able to fulfil the important task of overcoming the marginalisation of Deir ez-Zor governorate, which is remote from the capital Damascus, where Iran's most prominent institutions and organisations are based. In the governorate, Iran's presence has come to be seen up close on a daily basis, creating a familiarity which may yet grant Iranian influence in Deir ez-Zor the legitimacy it still lacks.

The military and civilian roles are thus largely complementary, with IRGC militias providing the protection necessary for the various civil works that Iran carries out in Deir ez-Zor, while civic, charitable and cultural activities present a gentler side to the Iranian presence as a whole, and seek to grant it legitimacy and popular acceptance. The military work of recruiting young men coupled with the civilian activity of providing benefits to the local population has given Iran its desired access to and direct contact with the communities of Deir ez-Zor.

³⁶ At the time, he was known by another name, Haj Hussein. He is an influential and dedicated man who helped displaced Shia rent houses, receive monthly food rations and so on. Online interview with a person familiar with Haj Abu Sadiq/Haj Hussein, who requested anonymity, April 2019.

2. Powerful Iranian Influence in a Weak Country

In addition to the influence Iran has acquired through the direct military deployment of militias along a lengthy urban strip in Deir ez-Zor governorate, it seeks to gain further influence by building networks comprising powerful figures, emerging actors and various members of the local elite. Although conversions to Shiism have been limited in scale, they are nonetheless a notable consequence of the Iranian presence, which exploits the weakness, disintegration and attrition experienced by Deir ez-Zor's communities.

2.1. Easy Expansion to Local Authorities and Communities

The reclamation of territory, or part of it, in the governorate was not enough for the regime to regain sufficient power and prestige to control its own local authority figures in the way it used to before 2011. This encouraged some local figures to build closer ties with the Iranians and rely on them for support in their careers and upward mobility. Similarly, Iranian networks, still nondescript and in formation, have engaged local actors in the governorate, including government officials, merchants, businessmen, clerics and social dignitaries. In this encouraging atmosphere, it has proved feasible for the Iranians to forge multifarious relations with the local authorities and communities. In achieving this success, they have not always had to start from scratch, but instead in some cases have resumed earlier efforts and ties.

Relationships with Local Authorities and their Senior Representatives

The current governor of Deir ez-Zor, lawyer Abdul Majid al-Kawakibi, has maintained a relationship with Iran since 2008, when he was known among Aleppo's lawyers as a staunch defender of Hezbollah and Iranian policy in the region.³⁷ Taking advantage of a genealogy that considers the al-Kawakibi family, a Sunni family from Aleppo, to be descendants of the Imam Musa al-Kadhim, the seventh of the twelve Shia Imams, Abdul Majid has built important ties with Iranian and Iraqi Shia politicians. The most notable of these is Alaa al-Jawadi,³⁸ a former Iraqi ambassador to Damascus and one of the founders of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which later changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.³⁹ During his membership of the People's Assembly, after 2016 al-Kawakibi presided over the Syrian-Iraqi Parliamentary Fraternity Committee within Syria's parliament, before being appointed Governor of Deir ez-Zor in February 2018. Soon afterwards, a strong bond was formed between the governor and the head of the Iranian Cultural Centre, Haj Abu Sadiq, which went beyond the Shia sympathies of the former and the public relations requirements of the latter. Activities of a vague nature were then conducted between the two men, evidenced by their weekly unannounced meetings in the governorate building.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Haj Abu Sadiq has strengthened his relationship with Colonel, and then Brigadier-General, Jihad al-Za'al, the head of the Air Force Intelligence branch in the eastern region since November 2017.⁴¹ Neither of the men conceal their friendship and strong working relationship, which is demonstrated by their frequent meetings in several places in the city.⁴² Similar to al-Kawakibi before his appointment in Deir ez-Zor, al-Za'al had previous connections with Iran, most likely

³⁷ Online interview with a former colleague of al-Kawakibi at the Aleppo Bar Association, 16 September 2019.

³⁸ Alaa al-Jawadi, "Farewell Circles" (in Arabic), *al-Noor Foundation for Culture and Media*, 7 January 2016, <https://bit.ly/2mnCthw>

³⁹ Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in Berne, "Biography of Dr. Alaa al-Jawadi" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2mqyIHY>

⁴⁰ Meeting with a government employee in Deir ez-Zor, April 2019.

⁴¹ The eastern region includes the governorates of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqah and al-Hasakah. The Air Force Intelligence branch headquarters is located in Deir ez-Zor. Online interview with a government employee in Deir ez-Zor, August 2019.

⁴² Online interview with a government employee in Deir ez-Zor, August 2019.

starting in the Sayyidah Zaynab area south of Damascus. In particular, the majority of the al-Za'al family hails from the town of Hajira, where some of the family's young men have been recruited into Shia militias. Al-Za'al's Iranian ties also stem from his clan, the Bahatrah, a Sunni Arab tribe displaced from the occupied Golan Heights.⁴³ Al-Za'al headed the Air Force Intelligence branch in Daraa between 2013 and 2017, and at the same time assumed the chairmanship of the reconciliation committee there. Some indications of his relationship with the Iranians have emerged, including his being honoured by the Imam al-Mahdi Cultural Centre headed by Sheikh Mahmoud Nawaf al-Adai.⁴⁴

Given the new stage Deir ez-Zor entered after the defeat of IS, in which Iran was a key partner alongside the regime, it may not be a mere coincidence that al-Za'al, and al-Kawakibi nearly two months later, were appointed to their influential positions. Instead, these appointments may be the result of high-level Iranian influence in Damascus, which rewarded the two men for previous services, on the one hand, and prepared to invest in their relationship with Iran in Deir ez-Zor, on the other.

The governor, the security services, the Baath Party branch, and to a lesser extent the judiciary and the police, represent the regime's highest governing bodies in the governorate, and operate in the same sphere as the Iranians without any evident conflict between the parties. The exception is the occasional friction between members of regime forces and IRGC militias in the towns of al-Bukamal and al-Mayadin. The Iranians are generally keen to respect the appearance of regime sovereignty and avoid openly contesting the legitimacy of the state the regime claims to represent. In al-Bukamal, while Iran has effectively dispensed with the regime's military and security services, IRGC militias urge residents who wish to leave the city to obtain the approval of a security office affiliated to the 4th Armoured Division in the city.⁴⁵ The same applies to first-time arrivals after prolonged displacement in other regime-controlled areas, who are denied entry unless they have official permission from the Military Intelligence branch in the governorate capital. These formalities, along with the raising of flags and regime images and slogans, do not impede the work of the Iranians as long as the regime remains weak, nor do they limit their spheres of influence. On the few occasions when the regime has issued decisions which could hinder Iranian influence, they have been ignored by the IRGC-affiliated militias. This was the case, for example, when the Syrian Army's Recruitment Directorate sent official notices to young recruits in these militias who were overdue for mandatory and reserve service. In the towns of al-Husayniyah and Hatla, the security services and military police avoided raiding the homes of these young men or arresting them as they passed through their checkpoints, despite warrants having been issued against them for arrest and compulsory military service.⁴⁶

The importance of the special relationships Iran has cultivated with major figures, who mostly come from outside the governorate, is evident. However, Iran's investment in these relations remains a temporary one, threatened by decisions to isolate and transfer these figures that may be issued at any time from Damascus.

Relations with Local Communities Through New and Old Actors

Contrary to the short-term benefits the Iranians derive from their relations with powerful figures from outside the governorate, their investment in supporting and empowering local elite members and actors in Deir ez-Zor in networks formed under their auspices appears to be longer-term and more important, due to the access and expansion it provides them with in the fabric of the local communities.

⁴³ Online interview with an acquaintance of al-Za'al, August 2019.

⁴⁴ Sheikh Mahmoud al-Adai, "In the City of Daraa, Honouring of Colonel Jihad al-Za'al for His Heroic Positions" (in Arabic), Facebook, 14 January 2016, <https://bit.ly/30E2p7A>

⁴⁵ A prominent military division in the Syrian Arab Army.

⁴⁶ Jorf News, "Arrest Campaign for Wanted Persons for Military Service in the Regime Forces in Rural Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), 26 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/317v3y0>

On the economic front, an Iranian-backed network of figures from various backgrounds has emerged which the director of the Iranian Cultural Centre in Deir ez-Zor was instrumental in forming. Haj Abu Sadiq has managed to establish strong ties with the deputy chairman of the Deir ez-Zor Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Raef Obeid, and at least two more of its ten board members.⁴⁷ Obeid, who is also politically active as the assistant secretary-general of the Arab Democratic Union Party,⁴⁸ seeks to expand his Iranian relations and improve his investment in them through large-scale projects for which Haj Abu Sadiq is asked to procure Iranian funding. These include projects to rebuild destroyed bridges in the city of Deir ez-Zor, the contracts for the implementation of which Obeid plans to secure.⁴⁹ Haj Abu Sadiq has also established a strong bond with the pharmacist and drug merchant Mohammed Badran al-Sheikh through his Shia convert business partner Fahd Khalil al-Dawood. He facilitated al-Sheikh winning a local tender to represent the Iranian pharmaceutical company Sobhan.⁵⁰ Owing to his influence in decision-making circles, the director of the Iranian Cultural Centre was able to appoint al-Sheikh as head of the Deir ez-Zor pharmacists' union.⁵¹

In Damascus, where avenues for Iranian support are diverse, Reem Shawish-Suleiman, a vastly influential woman from the city of Deir ez-Zor and widow of Brigadier-General Muhammad Suleiman, Bashar al-Assad's military adviser,⁵² has resumed the close ties her husband previously enjoyed with Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. In 2013, under their auspices she established a charity named Truthful Promise, inspired by a famous phrase coined by Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.⁵³ Although the foundation, which had 280 activists in 2017,⁵⁴ has never opened a branch in Deir ez-Zor, it has nonetheless been an important means of addressing the various needs of the people of Deir ez-Zor due to its president maintaining close ties with her home city.

Another example of an Iranian-backed entrepreneur is Khalaf Mahmud al-Mashhadani, a Damascus-based businessman from the Sukkariyah suburb of al-Bukamal, who exploited a fortuitous opportunity to expand his company, Mashhadani International Group, with Iranian support. Since 2017, the company has organised prominent exhibitions in the oil, plastic, media and automotive sectors, in which Iranian companies have been particularly active. It is currently preparing to launch a new exhibition in October 2019 in the oil sector in cooperation with the Syrian-Iranian Joint Chamber of Commerce.⁵⁵ Shortly before al-Mashhadani's rapid rise from small businessman to being one of Syria's largest exhibition organisers, he put on a successful Iranian car show in Damascus in 2016,⁵⁶ presenting himself to staff from the Iranian embassy as a man of Husseini descent, given that he hails from the Mashahda clan, which claims this lineage.⁵⁷ A claim of this kind made by any person or

⁴⁷ They are civil engineer Bashar Shbat, and Muhammad Dahmouh, a grain and food trader and former head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

⁴⁸ One of the parties in the National Progressive Front under the hegemony of the Baath Party.

⁴⁹ Online interview with a merchant from Deir ez-Zor, June 2019.

⁵⁰ Online interviews with drug distributors and traders in Syria, between March and June 2019.

⁵¹ Pharmacists' Union of Syria, "Congratulations to the Deir ez-Zor Branch of the Union of Syrian Pharmacists for the Electoral Committee Meeting and Congratulations to Successful Fellows" (in Arabic), Facebook, 17 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Owst39>

⁵² Brigadier-General Suleiman was killed in 2008 in a mysterious assassination that Israel was accused of carrying out.

⁵³ Rajaa Haidar, "Al-Waad Charity Foundation ... And a Woman of This Time" (in Arabic), *Zanobia News*, 3 January 2014, <https://bit.ly/2lbo2wz>

⁵⁴ SANA, "Al-Wa'ad Al-Sadiq Foundation Celebrates its Anniversary with a Group of Army Heroes and Civilians with the Film 'Half Moon'" (in Arabic), 12 March 2017, <https://sana.sy/?p=521299>

⁵⁵ Syrian Exhibitions and Conferences, "Cooperation between the Mashhadani International Exhibitions Group and the Syrian-Iranian Joint Chamber of Commerce" (in Arabic), Facebook, 29 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZmL7PN>

⁵⁶ Manar al-Zayed, "Managing Director of Mashhadani International Exhibitions and Conferences Group: 4th International Exhibition for Corporate and Business Services" (in Arabic), *World and Syria News*, 5 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/2m018IP>

⁵⁷ Online interview with a resident of Sukkariyah, September 2019.

group is generally welcomed by Iran, and is a key visiting card for integration into Iranian networks, especially in religious and social terms.

On the social front, the Iranians have shown particular interest in tribal structures, given their prevalence among the province's population. Iranians have found followers, allies and useful friends in certain individuals and dignitaries belonging to families with dynastic traditions in their clans. Each of them serves as a point of entry for contact with the communities and clans from which they originate. This is the case of Nawaf al-Bashir, a prominent member of the Baggara tribe and a militia leader who relies entirely on the Iranians for the role he plays and the status he enjoys today, having defected from the opposition and returned to Damascus with Iranian guarantees and protection from the regime. Another powerful ally of Iran is Saad Azal al-Dandal, president of the Bar Association, a scion of the al-Dandal family in the al-Hassoun clan⁵⁸ in al-Bukamal. Over and above his position as head of the Bar, he wields influence in his social milieu as a tribal figurehead. The Iranians added to the influence he already enjoyed thanks to support from the regime's intelligence apparatus, given his long-standing loyalty and role in brokering reconciliation agreements favourable to the regime with people displaced after the outbreak of the revolution. Since the deployment of IRGC militias in al-Bukamal, al-Dandal has succeeded in building close ties to Iran, becoming one of the most vocal defenders of its role in the Syrian war. In April 2018, he led a tribal delegation from the eastern region to visit Iran and met with political and religious leaders led by Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor on international affairs to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁵⁹

In their dealings with clans, the Iranians do not stop at sheikhs and dynastic notables, but also support other claimants to the sheikhdом who lack the necessary lineage according to prevailing norms. Iran-backed institutions represent potential paths to success for such figures, as in the case of the photographer and former broker Alaa al-Labbad from the village of Maadan Atiq in Deir ez-Zor's western countryside. After his displacement to Damascus in 2013, al-Labbad began claiming to be the sheikh of the Bu Sbei' clan,⁶⁰ which is based in villages near the administrative border between Deir ez-Zor and Raqqah governorates. After joining the Imam al-Mahdi Centre in Damascus, new relationships and opportunities became available to him, which he duly exploited in an attempt to portray himself in the eyes of his village locals as a man with the power befitting a true sheikh. By claiming the sheikhdом, he offered the Imam al-Mahdi Centre a service, allowing it to assert that it had tribal leaders in its ranks and enabling the Centre to reach other members of his social circle. Al-Labbad represents an ambitious category emerging from the middle and lower classes, one which provides another gateway for Iran to connect with new families, clans and communities, especially if they are granted the power to benefit their groups before becoming a powerful affiliate of Iran within their small communities, if possible.

There are many 'heads' of the Iranian-sponsored economic and social networks between Deir ez-Zor and Damascus, where a number of residents of the governorate live and work. The same applies within religious and political networks. For example, Safir al-Jarad, a former director of Religious Endowments in Deir ez-Zor, began his friendship with the Iranians before the revolution through his participation in the activities of the Iranian Cultural Centre in Damascus, together with other

⁵⁸ The Hassoun clan is one of two branches of the Bukamal clan, which in turn branches from the Ukaydat tribe, the largest of the Deir ez-Zor tribes.

⁵⁹ IRNA Agency, "Didar Nemayandeh Ashayer-e Sorayeh Dar Iran Ba Wilaiiti" (in Persian), Persian date: 11 Ordibehesht 1397, <https://bit.ly/2L92zNL>. In a press interview, al-Dandal said that Iran's history is known, in addition to its strength and sincerity with the Syrian people, and denounced accusations of it meddling in the affairs of the Arab region, saying that it is friendly and supportive in the victory over aggression, not an alien state or enemy. Tasnim International News Agency, "Bar Association in Deir ez-Zor to Tasnim: Iran Partner in Resistance Front and Against American Plans" (in Arabic), 19 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ZrGdjT>

⁶⁰ A branch of the Bushaabab tribe, which is concentrated in the Raqqah governorate.

religious and cultural activities.⁶¹ His ascent began after the revolution, when he grew closer to pro-regime clerics such as Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun and Sheikh Husam al-Din al-Farfour, whose daughter he married. His rise was complemented by extensive involvement in the religious and political institutions currently sponsored by Iran, such as the Cham Higher Institute⁶² and the Syrian branch of the al-Quds International Institution. The list of the board of directors of this branch reveals the depth of Iranian influence in the regime's higher circles of power, with honorary board members including Bouthaina Shaaban, advisor to Bashar al-Assad, and Bassel Jadaan, a brother of Maher al-Assad's wife originating from Deir ez-Zor, alongside Safir al-Jarad and others.⁶³ Within this pattern of religious political networks, a cleric from the town of Hatla, Hussein al-Raja, stands out as one of the most prominent figures in the history of Shia proselytism in his town of Hatla and in Deir ez-Zor.⁶⁴ His son Muhammad Amin, a member of the People's Assembly, is today considered Iran's most prominent civilian affiliate in Deir ez-Zor, and one of the main supporters of the rise of Hatla Shia in the governorate,⁶⁵ according to testimonies regarding his influence.⁶⁶

Iranian spheres of influence complement each other from one place to another, revealing a growing interaction in the different directions in which the networks of affiliates, supporters and friends are constantly expanding. They offer opportunities for social progress to everyone, and after joining these networks figures of little or no relevance find a role serving Iran.

2.2. Comfortable Work in a Near-Empty Space

War and displacement have weakened most of the local communities in Deir ez-Zor. The brutal repressive practices of the Assad regime and IS have also robbed people of their ability to oppose any action undertaken by the powers dominating them. Deteriorating economic conditions, an absence of public services and the lack of security have eliminated what little interest in political, social and religious issues remained among the local population. While most Deir ez-Zor residents have not previously engaged in anti-regime activities, they remain under suspicion in the eyes of the security forces unless and until they prove their allegiance, deepening the sense of danger and defeat, and ultimately of indifference. The principal concern of each individual is their own private affairs, while public affairs recede into a narrow space limited to discussion of high prices and interruptions of drinking water and electricity.

In this fragile society, Iran has found a more accommodating working environment than the one which preceded the revolution. For example, in 2007, the Iranians were unable to turn a water spring near the city of al-Quriyah in the desert into a religious shrine as a result of what was at the time

⁶¹ Online interview with a friend of al-Jarad, in September 2019. See: Ayn Al-Madina, "Safir al-Jarad, the 'Rascal' Who Will Become the Minister of Religious Endowments" (in Arabic), 30 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/2kVvKKNV>

⁶² This was established by Bashar al-Assad by decree in 2011. It includes under its umbrella religious institutes, both Sunni and Shia, whose certificates are not recognised by the Ministry of Education. See Omar al-Malki, "Cham Institute: A New Extension for Higher Education" (in Arabic), *eSyria*, 10 September 2011, <https://bit.ly/2mnKoLv>

⁶³ The board also includes Khalaf al-Miftah, a local of Raqqa, former member of the Regional Command of the Arab Socialist Baath Party and husband of Shia convert Fulla al-Sheikh (Online interview with a relative of Mrs. Fulla al-Sheikh, September 2019) and Fayez Sandouk, a Damascene Shiite.

⁶⁴ Global Al-Mostabserin Centre, "Sayyid Hussein al-Raja" (in Arabic), 23 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2mgvk2A>

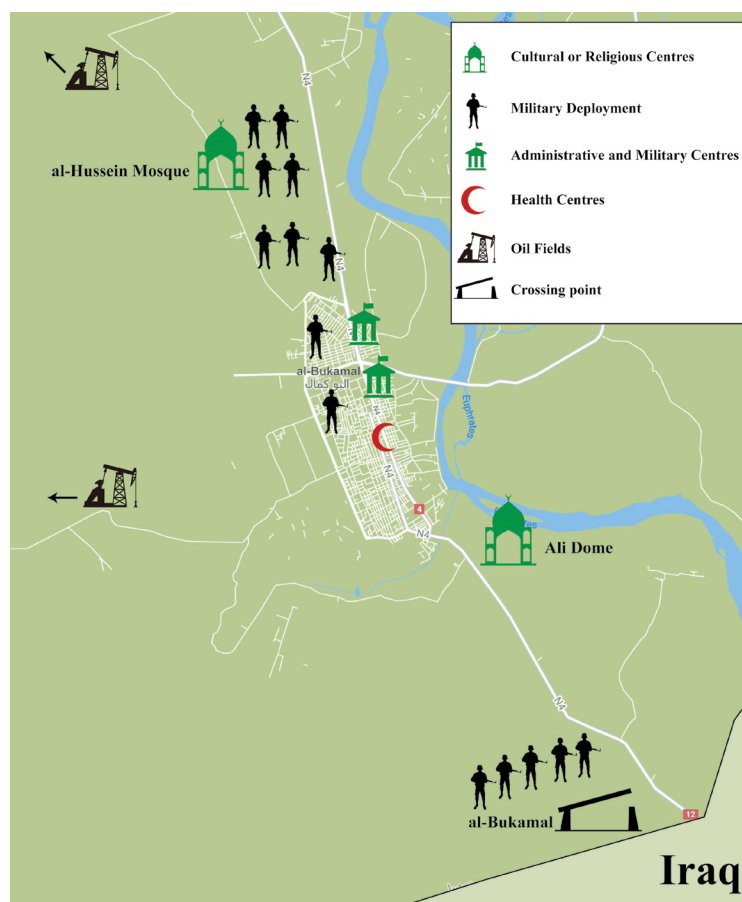
⁶⁵ One example of the rise of Hatla's natives is the appointment of the town's Shiite journalist, Osman Salama al-Khalaf al-Hilal, as editor of the local official al-Furat newspaper in April 2018. Euphrates Post, "Iran Expands Influence within Assad Government Departments" (in Arabic), Facebook, 1 May 2018. <https://bit.ly/2ywGHG5>. Another example is the appointment of small entrepreneur Yasser al-Ali as president of al-Yaqza Club, the second largest sports club in Deir ez-Zor. See Yaqzawiya 'Yaqza Club's Only Official Page,' "Haj Yasser al-Ali, president of al-Yaqza Club" (in Arabic), Facebook, 19 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LbUkAD>

⁶⁶ Ayham al-Badrani, "Muhammad Amin Hussein al-Raja, Iran's Foremost Agent in Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), *Ayn Al-Madina*, 23 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2F1shXs>

a categorical rejection by the inhabitants of the city motivated by Sunni sectarianism.⁶⁷ In 2018, by contrast, the IRGC militias were able to construct a shrine there without any reaction from the residents of al-Quriyah, which today has just 4,000-5,000 inhabitants, down from a population of around 50,000 before the revolution. The shrine is visited by Shias from the Sayyidah Zaynab area in Damascus or from Iraq via al-Bukamal because of the sanctity of the place and its ‘holy’ water.⁶⁸

In the same way, a demolished clay house on the outskirts of al-Bukamal known as Qubbat Ali (The Dome of Ali) was transformed into another Shia shrine. War and displacement have emptied al-Bukamal of its traditional leaders, who were heads of families,⁶⁹ influential mosque sheikhs,⁷⁰ Salafi religious activists who emerged after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and civilian and military revolutionary activists who emerged after the 2011 Syrian revolution. In this city, where the population of roughly 3,000 to 4,000 people⁷¹ is equal to the number of IRGC militiamen, no one is able to oppose the latter’s threat to their Sunni identity.

Map 4. Iranian Centres in al-Bukamal City and its Environs



Source: the author. Graphic designer: Laura Pigneri, 20 September 2019

⁶⁷ Online interview with a local of the town of al-Quriyah.

⁶⁸ Zaman al-Wasl, “Deir ez-Zor: Shia Shrine on ‘Ain Ali’” (in Arabic), 23 January 2018, <https://bit.ly/2YiAUDu>; Euphrates Post, “‘Ain Ali’ Spring in the Countryside of Deir ez-Zor After Being Turned Into a Shrine for Sectarian Militias” (in Arabic), YouTube, 14 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2LQACx7>

⁶⁹ Such as the Mullah Hmeid, al-Debs, al-Barghouth, al-Siyyad and al-Allaw families.

⁷⁰ Like Sheikh and Doctor Siddiq al-Sayyid Ramadan, still displaced to Damascus, and his brother Shahir, who is displaced to the Turkish province of Elâzığ, and revolutionary sheikhs Abdul Wahid al-Mhaimeed and Samir al-Debs, displaced to the town of al-Bab, and Mullah Saleh, displaced to al-Shaafa town under SDF control.

⁷¹ The population of al-Bukamal was 100,000 before the revolution. Today, it is less than the number of those displaced from it to the opposition-controlled city of al-Bab in eastern Aleppo and to Idlib province, and less than the number of its refugees in the Turkish province of Elâzığ. Online interviews with two members of the al-Bukamal Association in al-Bab, July 2019.

Of the 41 mosques where Friday prayers were held in the city of al-Bukamal before the revolution, none of the preachers of the ten that remain today has any significance, as their role does not go beyond leading religious rites and holding rituals. In the town of Sukkariyah, where Shia conversion is taking place faster and more publicly, religious militia leaders seized one of the eight mosques and converted it into a Shia one.⁷² All the rituals in this mosque are held in accordance with Shi'ism, the adherents to which in the town rose from none in 2010 to almost 150 in the summer of 2019. The Shia population in the city of al-Bukamal rose from four before the revolution to more than 50 in less than two years after the deployment of IRGC militias in the area. This is indicative of broader Iranian influence in sectarian terms, and the relative leaps made during the past two years compared to 30 years of Shia preaching before the revolution. A comparison between al-Bukamal and its Sukkariyah suburb in terms of the numbers of new Shia followers shows that the urban community of al-Bukamal has a greater adherence to Sunnism than the tribal community in Sukkariyah. In Sukkariyah, the Iranians attracted the population by exploiting the Husseini genealogy of the majority of the Mashahda clan, despite a failure of Iran-backed reconciliation brokers to persuade some of the town's displaced dignitaries in SDF and opposition areas to return.

In the city of Deir ez-Zor, the most populous area of the governorate, a close relationship based on mutual interests has developed between the director of the Iranian Cultural Centre and that of Religious Endowments in Deir ez-Zor, Mukhtar Naqshbandi. The former is seeking to expand the Centre's public relations, while the latter hopes to diversify his channels of support and maintain his position. The director of the Centre has also established similar links with the director of the preachers' committee of the Religious Endowments Directorate, Sheikh Mahmoud Hammour, and Sheikh Nabih al-Mufti, who preaches in mosques intermittently. It is difficult to gauge the impact of these relations on the official religious atmosphere dominated by the Religious Endowments Directorate. However, new expressions and previously-unfamiliar terms have begun to permeate the discourse of mosque preachers in some Friday sermons, such as the term 'authentic Muhammadi Islam' associated with the Ayatollah Khomeini and his revolutionary ideology. Beyond public discourse, this could indicate the birth of a Sunni religious stream which leans toward Iran in Deir ez-Zor, as in the Iraqi province of Anbar, where several Sunni groups drawing inspiration from the political and religious concepts formulated by Khomeini⁷³ have emerged in cities.⁷⁴

In dozens of mosques in the city of Deir ez-Zor run by the Religious Endowments Directorate, which appoints the preachers, imams and muezzins, preachers avoid addressing any political issues other than declaring allegiance to Bashar al-Assad and his army in every sermon, and accusing dissidents of treason and of having caused the destruction of the city. They also avoid mentioning sectarian issues, effectively acting as though Iran did not exist in Deir ez-Zor, in complete disregard of their supposed function as guardians of Sunni doctrine in the face of Shia proselytism. These calls for conversion have not only a religious but also a political significance, given that the majority of Shia converts in Hatla support the regime, in contrast to their Sunni counterparts.

⁷² Al-Hussein Mosque in al-Hamdan neighbourhood, south of Sukkariyah.

⁷³ Hawzah News Agency-Iran, "Imam Khomeini and Imam Khamenei are the Bearers of the Banner of Authentic Muhammadi Islam of Our Time" (in Arabic), 24 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/2luJHQ0>

⁷⁴ Ibrahim al-Obeidi, "Khamenei Sunni Gangs in Iraq Claim 'Muhammadi Islam'!" (in Arabic), *Baghdad Post*, 8 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2luHAQY>

3. Obstacles to Iranian Policy in Deir ez-Zor

The Iranian role in Deir ez-Zor governorate faces various obstacles that may limit its impact to varying degrees at one stage or another, and from one place to another. The Iranians cannot overcome these obstacles, but they can adapt to them either temporarily or in the long term. They can do so by using clever strategies to counter sectarian barriers, by showing flexibility towards the stance of the Russians and the regime's quest to revive itself, and patience in confronting the United States.

3.1. Iranians are Persian Shia Amid Sunni Arabs

No matter how large the Iranian presence in Syria grows, sectarian disparity remains a key factor reducing its impact on the local communities in Deir ez-Zor governorate, which is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab. In the three decades preceding the Syrian revolution, the prevailing position was renunciation of Iran-sponsored Shia proselytism, as is confirmed by the small number of people who converted to Shiism from the early 1980s to 2011 – no more than 5,000⁷⁵ in a governorate with an estimated 2010 population of 1.6 million.

Although the number of Shia has increased since 2017, their proportion is still marginal compared to the current total population, estimated at 350,000-400,000 in regime-controlled areas. As noted above, local residents appear largely indifferent or fatalistically resigned to the various aspects of the Iranian role. However, their hearts and minds preserve inherited views about the Iranians. Many people believe that Iran's key goal is to tempt them to embrace a new doctrine, one they view as heterodox, hostile and having a historical vendetta against Sunnis. This view is reflected in the population's low rate of participation in ceremonies organised by IRGC militias on Shia religious holidays or in evening entertainment on the streets of cities.⁷⁶ As for their willingness to benefit from Iranian aid and charitable activities, this merely indicates the urgency of their needs rather than any positive interaction with the Iranians *per se*.⁷⁷

Today, in Deir ez-Zor's regime-controlled communities, there are no apparent public rivals to Iran. However, large segments of the population have opted to steer clear of its influence, especially in religious terms, viewing Iran not only as a political enemy of the regime's opponents but also as a religious enemy of all Sunni Muslims regardless of their politics. This silent rejection is shared by hundreds of Sufi followers, who have been active since late 2018,⁷⁸ along with many other 'ordinary' religious and non-religious people. Having been repressed under IS rule, Sufi orders have now begun a resurgence free from Iranian influence. No current within the Sufi orders welcomes the role of Iran. Moreover, their adherents assert that their revival in itself constitutes a defence of Sunni beliefs and identity. They provide a framework for religious education permitted by the authorities. Iranian influence in the Religious Endowments Directorate, and in the intelligence services and Baath Party, does not threaten these Sufi orders, whose leaders mastered the art of dealing with authorities for decades before the revolution.

⁷⁵ Approximately 4,000 people in the town of Hatla, and nearly 600 in the villages of al-Sa'wa, al-Kibar and al-Kisra in the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor. Online interviews with three people from these villages, April 2019.

⁷⁶ Online interview with a person from the governorate who was present at some of these celebrations, 15 September 2019.

⁷⁷ Just as need pushes them to benefit from the assistance of Christian charities and organisations, such as the Monastery of Saint James the Mutilated, the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East – Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development, without there being any religious sensitivity towards the nature and objectives of these organisations.

⁷⁸ The most important of these orders in the governorate of Deir ez-Zor today are the Shadhili Qadiri order, the Rifa'i order and the Naqshbandi order.

Official authorities, in turn, recognise Sufism as a religious movement devoid of political substance and a framework that meets the innate religious needs of people. This attitude was underscored during the revolution, which the majority of Sufis opted not to participate in. A notable percentage of them even supported the regime ‘for fear of sedition and bloodshed’ and ‘for the sake of stability’ in the hope of quiet reform.

These profound mutual interests between the Sufi orders and the authorities, whose appreciation of Sufism increased as a result of its submissive or loyalist position, and the spread of Salafi opponents of Sufism on the other side of the rebellion, allow the leaders of Sufi orders to take a stand that distinguishes between Iran and the regime. They support the regime, and through it passively opt out of supporting Iran’s role. The former mufti of Deir ez-Zor, Abdul Qader al-Rawi, who has been displaced to Damascus for many years, is an ideal example. Considered one of the clerics most supportive of the regime, he nonetheless expressed an anti-Shia stance before the revolution, strongly criticising the Shia’s view of the first three Rashidun Caliphs.⁷⁹ He gave no indication of having changed his position after 2011 as a head of the Rifa’i Sufi order. The same also goes for the Rifa’i cleric Adel Hallat and his son Muhammad, the young Shadhili cleric, along with other active Shadhili followers who, during their resumed Dhikr rituals,⁸⁰ are keen to praise the first three caliphs more than is usual in an implied affirmation of their Sunni belief.⁸¹

Indeed, anti-Iran attitudes in Deir ez-Zor have formed in stages. They were shaped by the Iran-Iraq war, in which the majority of the population supported Saddam Hussein, the ‘Sunni Arab,’ against Khomeini, the ‘Persian Shiite.’ They then grew with the emergence of the political partnership between Iran and the Assad dynasty (father and son, both of whom belong to the Alawite sect),⁸² considered by most local communities to be ‘oppressive, corrupt and sectarian.’ Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a state of sectarian tension has emerged, exacerbated by clear Iranian intervention in Iraq – right on Deir ez-Zor’s doorstep – whence the Salafi-jihadi phenomenon spread, albeit initially on a small scale. Against this backdrop, Iran’s massive military involvement alongside the Assad regime since 2012 in the guise of ‘protecting Shia shrines’⁸³ has contributed to the rise of Salafi jihadism embodied in the al-Nusra Front group and then IS, which monopolised jihadist activity in most of the governorate for three years.

During IS’s war against the regime and the IRGC militias, which were perceived as the clearest manifestation of ‘cross-border Shiite jihad,’⁸⁴ the organisation adopted a unified rhetoric that it was confronting the ‘Safavid project’ and fighting the ‘Nusayris and Rawafid’ (derogatory terms for Alawites and Shia respectively).⁸⁵ This discourse, together with the Salafi jurisprudence applied extensively by IS and even spread among those who were hostile to it or living away from its authority, has had long-term effects on the local communities. Almost two years after the military defeat of IS, dozens of young men in Deir ez-Zor city continue to pray and practice in accordance with Salafi jurisprudence. Beyond mere jurisprudence, this behaviour may reflect a view quietly held by more young men, namely that the Salafi approach is right, and that its adoption is the most powerful means

⁷⁹ Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab and Uthman ibn Affan, considered by the Twelver Shiites to be conspirators against Ali ibn Abi Talib’s succession after the Prophet’s death.

⁸⁰ These are held once a week at Abu Dharr al-Ghafari Mosque in the al-Moadhafin neighbourhood and the Khalid bin al-Walid Mosque in the al-Qusour neighbourhood in Deir ez-Zor.

⁸¹ Recurrent online interviews between August and September 2019 with four Sufi adherents in Deir ez-Zor governorate.

⁸² An underground religious group which began to emerge after seceding from the Shiite sect in the third century AH.

⁸³ Afshon Ostovar, “Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 30 November 2016, <https://bit.ly/2PRwrPc>

⁸⁴ Firas Elias, “Shia Jihadism ... The Other Manifestation of the Khomeinist Revolution” (in Arabic), *New Iraq Center*, 16 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2lwysae>

⁸⁵ Descriptions derived from the historical religious debates.

of repelling Iranian influence and defending the faith.⁸⁶ IS's media and propaganda arms, although declining, persist, especially through social media, new applications and technology,⁸⁷ and word of mouth. Finally, the failed governance model revived by the regime, along with the role of Iran with its religious implications in particular, feed IS's image as representatives of defeated Sunnis, and their defenders and avengers.⁸⁸ For example, in the daily conversations of many members of the population the current state of insecurity in the regime's areas of control is often contrasted with the policing established by IS and its violent deterrent approach to criminals in terms of accountability and punishment.⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ People often express a wish that certain militia leaders and members, or corrupt local officials, would fall into the hands of IS to receive their supposedly just retribution, indicating a sense of helplessness and despair about any justice the governing authority may bring.⁹¹

At this stage, and amid this fraught sectarian atmosphere, it will not be an easy task for Iran to find loyal followers in a defeated Sunni environment. This will increase its reliance on allies pursuing their interests and on hired fighters lacking the conviction necessary for successful religious advocacy.⁹² A revival of Sufism as a religious phenomenon would hinder Iranian policies, particularly on the religious front. In another vein, the persistence of IS as a militant group staunchly opposed to Iran and capable of launching attacks from the depth of its control in the desert⁹³ is another obstacle and threat to these policies. This reinforces the state of uncertainty as to the eventual victor, undermining Iran's prospects as a surviving power. These prospects are further undermined by US forces remaining on the other side of Deir ez-Zor and their ongoing cold war against Iran.

3.2. Other Actors in the Arena

In the course of the unresolved conflict in Deir ez-Zor, the presence of US forces and the escalating air strikes by Israel since the summer of 2019 threaten Iranian ambitions in the region. Israeli attacks on IRGC positions in Deir ez-Zor, although limited in their effects on the ground, create confusion among the IRGC and its militias.⁹⁴ They threaten a broader Israeli intervention, which, if coupled with greater involvement by US forces, would be a serious impediment to the Iranian pursuit of a long-term military presence in its current deployment area of Deir ez-Zor and its military expansion east of the Euphrates – an oil-rich region.

The presence of US forces creates additional threats for Iran in its current sphere of influence. They are protecting an important part of the bloc rejecting Iran formed by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from regime-controlled areas. This influences public opinion and constitutes social, political and sectarian pressure on individuals and communities under regime control and IRGC influence. Demonstrations by IDPs near the border between the regime's areas and those of the SDF in September

⁸⁶ Online interview with a Salafi activist from Deir ez-Zor governorate, September 2019.

⁸⁷ Arabi Post, "IS Has Found Its Online Safe Haven. Its Supporters Broadcast Their Propaganda Over ZeroNet Network which Uses a Unique Method to Avoid Surveillance" (in Arabic), 22 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/2m2RCVj>

⁸⁸ For more, see Hassan Abu Haniyeh and Muhammad Abu Ramman, "IS: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle for Global Jihadism" (in Arabic), *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2na1vkb>; Hazem Al-Amin, "On What It Means for Iran to Win" (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 3 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2kTon72>

⁸⁹ For the majority, this attitude was formed in the city of Deir ez-Zor through direct contact with about two thousand people who returned to the city from formerly IS-controlled areas, and it is influenced by verbal accounts and news circulated on the subject.

⁹⁰ Online interview with a former Friday preacher residing in Deir ez-Zor governorate, 16 September 2019.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Online interview with an elderly Shia convert from Deir ez-Zor governorate, August 2019.

⁹³ Asharq al-Awsat, "IS Escalates Attacks in the Syrian Badia" (in Arabic), 22 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2lZJlfo>

⁹⁴ Editorial Board, "Has Israel Put an End to the Largest Iranian Plan to Station in Syria?" (in Arabic), *Jadeh Iran*, 9 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2nM258h>

2019 demanding for the International Coalition and SDF to liberate their villages and towns from ‘Iranian militias’⁹⁵ indicate the role US forces can play in exploiting these popular demands against the regime and the IRGC in Deir ez-Zor.

The map of military control appears to show that the IRGC has prepared for a broad confrontation through methodical deployment linking together its various spheres of influence within Syria, and with Iraq and Lebanon – where it has considerable power and influence.⁹⁶ In the same context, the IRGC is attempting to build military and security networks in SDF-controlled areas, which, along with IS security cells, contribute to undermining the already fragile stability there. This could deepen the crises faced by the US and its allies east of the Euphrates.

Conversely, threats from IRGC-affiliated militias have yet to be carried out,⁹⁷ which reveals their reluctance and perhaps inability to inflict serious damage on the US. The threat of guerrilla warfare waged by Iran faces several obstacles in its practical implementation, most notably the lack of social incubators in the US sphere of influence east of the Euphrates and the emergent Syrian militia affiliated to the IRGC’s lack of the expertise and ideological fervour necessary to launch such a war against so powerful an enemy as the US. The contribution of Hezbollah and other trained and experienced forces will be insufficient in these circumstances, which are radically different from the previous confrontation, in which guerrilla warfare proved effective against the US.

In Deir ez-Zor governorate today, where the broader cold war between Iran and the US is unfolding in Syria, the Iranian alliance with the Russians, important as it is to both sides, does not appear to be of much benefit to Iran in its confrontation with the US. On the contrary, the deployment of hundreds of Russian soldiers in the governorate may itself constitute an obstacle to the Iranians.⁹⁸ Russia, which has various means of influence over the regime, its military and its intelligence services, can inevitably limit the Iranians’ room for manoeuvre and their influence. However, the structure and hierarchy of these authorities and the map of Russian force deployment around Deir ez-Zor confine the Russians’ ability to obstruct Iran to the city and its surroundings and, to a lesser extent, the city of al-Mayadin, where dozens of Russian soldiers man checkpoints in the city and its outskirts.⁹⁹

On the other hand, the Russians control the Salihiyah crossing, limiting Iranian influence on the issue of ‘reconciliation’ with IDPs outside the regime’s area of control. This is the only land crossing between the regime-controlled areas and SDF areas north of Deir ez-Zor. In early 2018, Russia opened a reconciliation centre there, which receives young returnees and issues them with papers facilitating their transport to the city of Deir ez-Zor to resume their security ‘settlement’ procedures at the city’s intelligence headquarters. This takes precedence over the role of the IRGC, which only begins if the returnee wishes to reside in the main areas of influence of IRGC-affiliated militias in the

⁹⁵ Halab Today, “Demonstrations in Deir ez-Zor Countryside Demanding the Expulsion of the Regime from the Area” (in Arabic), 20 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2mgjgOX>

⁹⁶ Kheder Khaddour, “Much More Than A Border,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 3 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/3123hSY>

⁹⁷ For example, the Baqir Brigade’s threats of retaliation for the deaths of IRGC militiamen who died in US bombing. The strikes took place during a failed and costly attack by joint forces which included: the Fatimiyoun Brigade, the Baqir Brigade and the Lions of Syrian Tribes Brigade on the IRGC side, and the Wagner Group mercenaries on the Russian side, targeting the Conoco gas plant under the control of the SDF and its US allies in February 2018. Al-Kawthar TV, “Al-Baggara Clan and Imam al-Baqir Brigade Issue Explosive Statement to US Forces” (in Arabic), 9 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2nOTVMx>. Another example is the statement issued by the Baqir Brigade in April 2018, declaring “the commencement of military and jihad actions against the American Occupation and Its Allies in Syria.” Jorf News, “Baqir Militia Declares ‘Jihad’ against US Forces in Syria” (in Arabic), 6 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ndyAfc>

⁹⁸ Ali Hashem, “Causes of the Russian-Iranian Confrontation in Syria” (in Arabic), *BBC Arabic*, 6 July 2019, <https://bbc.in/2m6VF3n>

⁹⁹ Smart News, “Russian Forces Take Over Management of Entrances to Deir ez-Zor and al-Mayadin” (in Arabic), 22 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2K5diti>

town of Hatla or between the towns of al-Mayadin and al-Bukamal. Generally, the Iranians have so far succeeded in adapting to the Russian presence and have shown flexibility in dealing with Russian desires, which may often contrast with their own.

3.3. Iran's Lack of Adequate Financial Resources

Funds in the hands of the IRGC have been curtailed by US sanctions on Iran, which have been in effect since August 2018. While the impact of the sanctions may not always be apparent, certain sporadic indicators point to a contraction in IRGC financial allocations. For example, the salaries of local members of the Fatimiyoun Brigade fell to 60,000 SYP in early 2019, down from 100,000 when they joined the militia the previous year.¹⁰⁰ This decrease also coincides with a slowdown in recruitment since the beginning of summer 2019, and even a temporary halt regarding the local population of youths, in an attempt by the IRGC to allocate resources economically and reduce expenditure to the minimum required at every stage.¹⁰¹

The Iranians have grown averse to directly launching projects, even small ones run by militia leaders or their own organisations and entities that have an immediate impact on the lives of the small population in eastern Deir ez-Zor. This may be further evidence of the shrinking financial resources at Iran's discretion. Without this downturn, the Iranians would surely have seized the easy and available means of infiltration and propaganda offered by small projects and programmes in, say, agriculture, such as providing seeds, fertilizers, pesticides or fuel to farmers free of charge or at favourable prices. They would also not have missed the opportunity to court people in cities and towns with inexpensive public service projects.

At a higher level, Iran may not have the same capacity it once had to support Bashar al-Assad's regime economically with a credit line that has eased the pressure on the regime's economy with successive loans since 2013.¹⁰² Attention has recently turned to Iran, monitoring any major internal unrest resulting from the worsening economic crisis due to tougher sanctions, potentially reflecting weakness and decline in its external activities. Even if Iran manages to pursue its current policies in Syria in the short term using alternative options, the sanctions, if they remain effective, will inevitably have more tangible implications for its foreign policy as it loses the resources needed to mobilise more affiliates in local communities. So far, the crisis has not spiralled out of the control of the Iranian government, which at this stage has at least been able to absorb the severe effects of the sanctions and adapt to their intensification.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Online interview with a local Fatimiyoun militia member, August 2019.

¹⁰¹ Online interview with a member of an IRGC-affiliated militia, July 2019.

¹⁰² Sylvia Westall and Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Syria Approves New 1 Billion USD Line of Credit from Iran" (in Arabic), *Reuters*, 8 July 2015, <https://bit.ly/2m3qt4k>

¹⁰³ Raz Zimmt and Tomer Fadlon, "The Economic Crisis and the Protest Movement in Iran: One Year after the Renewal of Sanctions," *The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, 28 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/2kJxreO>

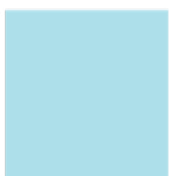
Conclusion

In the policies it is pursuing locally in the governorate of Deir ez-Zor, Iran relies on a range of integrated military tools and methods implemented by militias affiliated to its Revolutionary Guard Corps. These militias provide the necessary protection for Iran's civil charitable activities aimed at giving its military role and tools the legitimacy they lack.

In these policies, Iran exploits the regime's weakness to co-opt senior local officials, instrumentalise them in its service and bring local actors and elite members into its diverse networks, which also accommodate less important aspirants seeking broader and deeper outreach to local communities. The exhaustion and depletion of these communities is also being seized on to expand Iran's public presence in various contexts, particularly religious ones, where it has launched calls for Shia conversion, which are beginning to make some progress.

However, all this easy access to the authorities and the fabric of communities will not change the attitudes of the latter, as there are substantial obstacles limiting Iran's influence: the sectarian disparity that feeds on chronic Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions; the US-backed Israeli intervention in areas where Iran-backed forces are deployed east of the Euphrates; the role, albeit limited, of Russian forces in hindering Iranian influence; and, finally, US sanctions, which have begun to directly affect Iranian capacities in Deir ez-Zor.

Its top-down infiltration of high-level circles of power in Damascus, its breakthrough in the fabric of Syrian communities and its widespread military deployment on the ground offer Iran the opportunity to stay longer in Syria, and implicitly in Deir ez-Zor, especially because the governorate is of strategic importance to Iran. The persistence of Iranian influence will only be undermined by drastic changes, whether political through regime change in Damascus, or in the form of military action to uproot Iranian settlement on the ground in Syria.



Research Project Report
21 October 2019
2019/13



ISBN: 978-92-9084-795-3
doi:10.2870/724874



Publications Office
of the European Union