

Iran's Evolving Strategy in Eastern Syria


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Jul 18, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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 Brief Analysis

The Iranian model of creating and supporting proxy groups is consistent across the “Shia Crescent,” but recently Tehran has begun employing new and troubling tactics that threaten to only expand their influence.


Since first intervening in support of the Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War, Iran has continued to entrench itself, bolstering pro-regime elements and actively working to suppress the Syrian popular movement. While Iran's active military presence is the most visible projection of its power, Tehran is simultaneously making deep inroads in the social and political sphere as well, playing on sectarian cleavages and drawing an ever-growing number of militias into its orbit. These efforts make Iran the most effective power in the Syrian arena, and its recent activities in eastern Syria showcase Iran's multi-faceted approach to further expanding its influence.

For those closely following, Iran's goals, both immediate and long-term, are manifold. However, the principle aim for the Iranian government is maintaining the [strategic route \(https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/\)](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/) running from Iraq to Syria and then Lebanon, symbolized by the capitals in the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut route, which Iran fully controls as a land belt for transporting weapons and equipment to its myriad allies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and militias in Iraq.

Iran's grip on Syria relies heavily on this network, specifically support from Iraq-based groups. These militias are a fundamental part of the existing regional alliances and dynamics. A study titled "[Iranian Infiltration Networks in the Middle East \(https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/\)](https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/)," published in November 2019, stated that Iran's total expenditure on its militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen is about \$16 billion annually, while the Iranian regime spends about \$700 million annually in support of Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranian model of creating and supporting proxy groups is consistent across the “Shia Crescent,” but recently Tehran has begun employing new and troubling tactics that threaten to only expand their influence.

Increased Weapon Shipments in Eastern Syria

Since the start of the war in Gaza, Iran and its proxies—the so-called “Axis of Resistance”—have been clearly embarrassed. The intense and bellicose rhetoric of these groups is now juxtaposed with their tepid response to Israel's military operation. Despite claims of a transnational network of solidarity, the Axis of Resistance has failed to intervene decisively in support of Hamas. In order to cover for this perceived weakness, it appears that Iran has focused on fortifying its supply line through Syria and Iraq, with the ultimate goal of funneling more weapons into the hands of Hezbollah.

Regardless of the goal, there is an increase in the movement of these weapon shipments.  According to field monitoring, especially in the west of the Euphrates, there is a noticeable uptick in weapon shipments and their transfer from Iraq to Syria. This influx reflects in part the inefficacy of Israeli and U.S. strikes against Iran and its militias in addition to the weakness of the [Syrian Democratic Forces \(https://ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/syrian-democratic-forces-syria/\)](https://ecfr.eu/special/mena-armed-groups/syrian-democratic-forces-syria/) (SDF). The SDF, allies of the United States, have exerted control over the area of Deir ez-Zor for years. Recently however, the security situation has deteriorated significantly as Iran-backed militias have empowered local military leader Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hafil and the Adiqat tribes to challenge SDF control. This diversion aims to cover the movement of large weapon shipments, undermining U.S. interests and its fomenting unrest in areas administered by U.S. allies. In addition to Iranian influence west of the Euphrates, this instability on the eastern side has the potential to open a new corridor for even more pro-Assad, pro-Iran militias to enter the scene.

It is worth noting that various Iranian militias possess approximately 100,000 members, at least in Syria, distributed across 70 militias in Syria, as [stated \(https://www.majalla.com/node/303006/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1\)](https://www.majalla.com/node/303006/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1) by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC) commander Hussein Salami. Some of these active militias in Syria include the [Fatemiyoun Brigade \(https://jamestown.org/program/the-shia-fatemiyoun-brigade-irans-prospective-proxy-militia-in-afghanistan/\)](https://jamestown.org/program/the-shia-fatemiyoun-brigade-irans-prospective-proxy-militia-in-afghanistan/) consisting of Afghans, the [Zainabiyoun Brigade \(https://jamestown.org/program/the-zainabiyoun-brigade-a-pakistani-shiite-militia-amid-the-syrian-conflict/\)](https://jamestown.org/program/the-zainabiyoun-brigade-a-pakistani-shiite-militia-amid-the-syrian-conflict/) consisting of Pakistanis, the Saada Brigade consisting of Yemenis, Lebanese Hezbollah, [Kataib Hezbollah \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-part-iraqs-pmf\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-part-iraqs-pmf) and Nujaba Movement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba>) from Iraq, and the [Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas).

Iran's Strategy, Old and New

Iran's strategy in Syria is multilayered, including military, political, economic, sectarian, and cultural strategies. A joint study published by the [Jusoor Center \(https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-foreign-forces-military-points-in-syria-mid-2023\)](https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-foreign-forces-military-points-in-syria-mid-2023) in the summer of 2023 concluded that the number of Iranian military sites

in Syria has increased to 570 sites (55 military bases and 515 military points), marking the largest foreign influence on the Syrian map. Of this number, Deir ez-Zor has seven military bases and 70 military points. According to the [International Institute for Strategic Studies \(https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/\)](https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/) (IISS), Iran's strategic importance through its networks and militias lies in: maintaining the land corridor from Tehran to Beirut, controlling the Mediterranean coast, signing long-term agreements with the Syrian regime, controlling the health, electricity, food, and finance sectors, and expanding Iranian "advisory, financial, and military" support, with Iran's trade value in Syria reaching \$869 billion.

Despite the numerous Iranian checkpoints and bases in Syria, Deir ez-Zor is the most important for multiple reasons. Deir ez-Zor governorate forms the main connecting bridge for Iranian militias between Syria and Iraq in the vicinity of the Euphrates. Therefore, if the Iranians weaken or lose this point, it will be impossible to find a corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean coast except through the air as the United States maintains a military presence at al-Tanf base in neighboring Homs.

On the cultural and sectarian side, Iran has succeeded in forming local sectarian militias and non-sectarian ones, employing multiple methods to win them over to the Shia sect or at least sympathize with it, then enticing them to Shi'ism (a strategy aiming for sectarian change in multiple areas of Syria, especially in the eastern regions of Deir ez-Zor with a deep Sunni Arab background).

Besides political and military strategies, Iran continues its soft strategy to increase its cultural/sectarian influence by opening more cultural centers in various areas, especially Deir ez-Zor. For example, the Deir ez-Zor 24 network recently monitored two cultural centers in Deir ez-Zor city. Although the activities of these cultural centers are diverse, including computer courses and scouting trips, they also showcase Iran's history and offer Persian language courses, enticing participants with all things Iranian, and softly and gradually nudging locals towards Shi'ism. Those who agree to adopt the Shia sect receive several rewards and incentives.

Iran's cultural activity is viewed as part of its strategy to spread Shi'ism, which can be considered among several strategies to win a larger popular base and penetrate Syrian society, whose long-term impact cannot be guaranteed without a religious/sectarian connection.

There is no doubt that Iran's evolving intervention in Syria represents one of the most significant transformations in the Syrian conflict. Tehran has managed to establish its presence in multiple ways, including military, political, social, and cultural dimensions. With its growing influence, which has not only focused on military support for the Syrian regime but also continuous attempts at sectarian and cultural change through establishing cultural centers and promoting Shi'ism in Syrian society, Iran has become a major player that cannot be ignored in the Syrian issue, raising many questions about the future of the region and the balance of power within it. Monitoring Iran's movements and tactics will remain essential to understanding the changing dynamics in Syria and the broader region, especially amid the ongoing challenges and tensions faced by international and regional powers involved in this complex conflict. ❖

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