

## Tehran's Shiification of Syria

by **Rauf Baker**

**A**fter a bloody war that saw hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced over a decade, Syria has been effectively divided into spheres of influence and de facto protectorates controlled by regional and international powers. Foremost among these has been Iran, which has come to exert huge influence not only over the Assad regime but also within Syrian society as a whole through a systematic Shiification strategy that has changed the country's sociocultural character—a risky game in a region long afflicted by sectarian, religious, and ethnic conflicts.

### **Iran and the Assad Regime**

Two main reasons underlie Tehran's Shiification strategy. Geopolitically, the Syrian civil war provides a unique opportunity for the Islamic Republic to expand its hegemony across the region by cementing its presence in a pivotal Arab state as it believes it has historical rights to parts of it (e.g., Aleppo was once ruled by a Shiite dynasty). Ideologically, the ayatollahs view the Syrian civil war as a continuation of the succession struggle attending the death of Islam's prophet Muhammad between Ali bin



*Photo: Yousef Alhelou*  
*Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (L) and Iranian supreme leader Khamenei meet, Tehran, February 25, 2019. Damascus and Tehran have maintained a close relationship since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.*

Abi Talib—Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law and the last of the four "rightly-guided caliphs" who succeeded the prophet, whom Shiites consider their first imam—and Muawiya bin Abi Sufyan, founder of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus, who challenged Ali's authority. In this view, the Syrian conflict, which meaningfully takes place in the country where the decisive battle between Ali and Muawiya was waged in 657, is a prelude to the arrival of the Mahdi, the Muslim messianic figure and the Twelfth

Imam for Shiites, who will spread worldwide justice at the end of times.

The pronounced secularism of Syria's Alawite-led Baath regime notwithstanding, Damascus and Tehran have maintained a close relationship since the establishment of the Islamic Republic as their interests coincided on several levels. The first step was taken in the early 1970s when Hafez al-Assad, Syria's first Alawite president, persuaded the influential clerics Musa Sadr, head of Lebanon's Supreme Shiite Council, and Ayatollah Hassan Shirazi, who fled to Lebanon in 1970s, to recognize the Alawites as a part of Twelver Shiism, the largest branch of Shiite Islam.<sup>1</sup> This opened the door to collaboration between the ayatollahs and the Assad regime, which provided financial and military support to their sustained effort to topple the Iranian monarchy. With this goal achieved in February 1979, Syria became the closest ally of the newly-proclaimed Islamic Republic: It was the first Arab state to recognize the post-shah regime and threw its weight behind Tehran against fellow Baathists in Baghdad in its 8-year war against Iraq (1980-88).<sup>2</sup> In 1981, Assad's younger brother Jamil founded the Latakia-based al-Murtada Association, which sought to convert Alawites in their western coastal

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strongholds and Sunni Bedouins in central and northeastern Syria. It was abolished two years later after establishing its own military wing and causing Alawite resentment.<sup>3</sup>

For their part, the ayatollahs were willing to provide a formal document affirming the Alawite position as Twelver Shiites.<sup>4</sup> Iranian perception of Damascus's strategic importance was made clear by Hujjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, a close adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who described Syria as Iran's thirty-fifth province that is even more important than the oil-rich province of Khuzestan.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Iranian cleric Abdul Sahib Musawi, one of Khamenei's Shiification ambassadors, founded a Shiite cultural center near the city of Aleppo as early as 2000,<sup>6</sup> it was only after Bashar Assad's ascension following his father's death in June 2000 that the bilateral relationship began irrevocably inclining toward Tehran. This process gained considerable momentum with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Capitalizing on their vital contribution to the survival of Assad's beleaguered regime, both directly and through proxy Shiite militias, notably Hezbollah, the Iranians not only strove to turn Syria into a forward military bastion

<sup>1</sup> Yaron Friedman, "[Musa al-Sadr](#) and the missing fatwa concerning the Alawi religion," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, [Sept. 2022](#), pp. 4-8.

<sup>2</sup> Bassam Barabandi and Tyler Jess Thompson, "[A Friend of My Father](#): Iran's Manipulation of Bashar al-Assad," The Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 28, 2014](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, [Dec. 17, 2004](#).

<sup>4</sup> Friedman, "[Musa al-Sadr](#) and the missing fatwa," p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> "Here to Stay: [Iranian Involvement in Syria](#), 2011-2021," *Strategic Assessment*, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, Nov. 2021; Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), [Mar. 11, 2013](#).

<sup>6</sup> [Al-Bayt Cultural Center, Facebook page](#).

against Israel<sup>7</sup> but also to transform it into an effective protectorate. With the Assad regime painfully aware of the extent of Sunnis' resentment of their longstanding domination by the tiny Alawite community—less than a fifth their size—the war provided a golden opportunity for both Damascus and Tehran to execute a profound demographic change under the guise of fighting extremism and protecting Syria's territorial integrity.

### Tehran's Shiification Strategy

To achieve their ambitious goals, the Iranians adopted a two-pronged strategy: converting Sunni Muslims to Shiism and settling Shiites from neighboring countries throughout Syria. The campaign focused on middle class and poor Sunnis in different regions across the country, particularly in areas deemed of strategic and demographic importance to Tehran. Contrary to popular belief, it is easier to convert a Sunni to Twelver Shiism than an Alawite. Sunnis are conservative by nature but also venerate the Shiite Ali bin Abi Talib. They also acknowledge pivotal Shiite events and share many of the sect's beliefs though they differ from Shiites in interpretation and details.

For his part, Bashar Assad supported Tehran's religious-cultural penetration of Syrian society through a string of edicts and laws. In 2011, for example, he issued a decree requiring the ministry of higher



*Photo: James Gordon*  
*Iranian Shiites at Sayyida Zaynab Mosque, Damascus governorate. To achieve their goals, the Iranians settled Shiites from neighboring countries throughout Syria.*

education to recognize as-Sayyida Ruqayya Complex in Damascus as an institution teaching Twelver Shiism under the name ash-Sham Higher Institute (which subsequently became Bilad ash-Sham University of Islamic Sciences).<sup>8</sup> Three years later, Assad issued a decree stipulating the teaching of Twelver Shiism in Syrian schools with the first government Shiite schools opening the same year in several Syrian cities.<sup>9</sup> A further presidential decree in 2018 established a jurisprudential council with a quota for Shiites, thus allowing foreign clerics to occupy senior religious positions after being granted an “exceptional” citizenship.<sup>10</sup> As a result, in 2021, six Iranian universities were operating in Syria, five of which were established after the outbreak of the civil war. These universities use curricula

<sup>7</sup> Ido Yahel, “[Iran in Syria: From Expansion to Entrenchment](#),” The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, [June 17, 2021](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Lady Ruqayya Complex, webpage](#).

<sup>9</sup> *Elaph* (London), [Oct. 14, 2014](#).

<sup>10</sup> “A glimpse of the [Jurisprudence Scientific Council at the Ministry of Awqaf](#),” [Syrian Ministry of Endowments](#), Damascus.

approved by the Iranian ministry of science and require fluency in the Persian language for registration. Likewise, more than fifteen Iranian cultural centers have opened across the governorates of Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, and Deir ez-Zor while Iran's state-owned Alalam TV news network launched Alalam Syria TV channel in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

No less importantly, Assad laid the legal groundwork that facilitated Tehran's (and his own) envisaged demographic transformation.<sup>12</sup> In 2012, he issued a decree authorizing the Syrian state to confiscate property of persons convicted of a wide range of crimes, followed five years later by another decree allowing plaintiffs to claim ownership of any unoccupied property. Then came the Urban Renewal Law of 2018 (commonly known as Decree 10) enabling the state to nationalize unclaimed properties if people failed to provide proof of ownership within a specific period and making it easier for non-Syrians (notably Tehran's proxy militias) to acquire real estate in the country. Since millions of Syrian properties had been left vacant by fleeing owners and tons of documents had been destroyed during the war, the decrees allowed the regime to deprive refugees of their lifetime possessions thus barring their possible return and enabling the redistribution of their properties. Small wonder that numerous reports during the war years narrated the arrival of hordes of Shiites to the deserted Syrian localities and their settlement there.<sup>13</sup>

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## **Iran Reclaims Aleppo Governorate**

Iranian interest in the predominantly Sunni Aleppo governorate stems from many reasons. Historically, it was the capital of the Shiite Hamdanid dynasty for much of the tenth century. Geographically, it is considered a linking point to the city of Latakia. Aleppo is also a few dozen kilometers away from the Turkish border and the Turkish-controlled regions in the governorate's northern countryside. And so, in 2014, Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, guided and supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which played a key role in the Syrian civil war, launched a major offensive (dubbed "Ants' Crawl") that culminated two years later in the reconquest of eastern Aleppo from the rebel forces. This led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Sunnis and the conversion to Shiism of many of those who remained, with many family members of Afghan, Pakistani, and Iraqi Shiite militiamen settled in the governorate.<sup>14</sup>

By way of expanding their influence in the region, the Iranians opened a consulate in Aleppo and built a religious seminary and a Persian teaching center in the town of Safira, some 25 kilometers southeast of Aleppo city, which was established as their main gateway to the governorate. They also used "charitable foundations" to infiltrate the governorate's society (notably the "Construction Jihad," which mostly focuses on restoring schools and health centers), whereas real

<sup>11</sup> Daraj (Beirut), [May 27, 2021](#).

<sup>12</sup> *Independent Arabia* (London), [June 30, 2022](#).

<sup>13</sup> Pinhas Inbari, "[Demographic Upheaval](#): How the Syrian War Is Reshaping the Region," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, [June 17, 2014](#); Daniel

Pipes, "Syria's Civil War Could Stabilize Its Region," *The Washington Times*, [Feb. 26, 2015](#).

<sup>14</sup> *Orient News* (Dubai), [Dec. 21, 2021](#).



estate brokers close to the Shiite militias bought local properties undergoing reconstruction with a view to settling Shiite families there.<sup>15</sup> The Iranians also sought to attract religious tourists to the Mosque of the Drop (Masjid al-Nuqta) in Zabdiyah. According to Shiite belief, a stone in the mosque is stained with a drop of blood from the head of Hussein bin Ali, Muhammad's grandson, whose death in the Battle of Karbala (680) is lamented by Shiites on the tenth day of the month of Muharram (Ashura).<sup>16</sup> In January 2022, Iranian officials held a ceremony in the mosque commemorating the second anniversary of the killing of the IRGC's Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, a close confidant of Supreme Leader Khamenei.<sup>17</sup>

### Struggling to Win Sunni Hearts and Minds

Serving as a bridge between Syria and Iran via Iraq, the overwhelmingly Sunni northeastern governorates of Raqqa (where the historic battle of Siffin between Ali and Muawiya took place) and Deir ez-Zor were deeply embroiled in the fighting between the Assad regime, the rebel Syrian forces, and ISIS, which occupied Raqqa city and its



*Residents near Deir ez-Zor protest Iranian-backed factions in their region, January 2022. Tehran has used financial incentives and the establishment of Twelver Shiite congregation halls to convert villagers to Shiism.*

environs for about three years (2014-17).

As early as the 1980s, Tehran had used local tribesmen to convert Deir ez-Zor villagers to Shiism through financial incentives and the establishment of congregation halls for Twelver Shiites (*husseiniyas*) in villages, and this process gained considerable momentum after the recapture of the province by regime forces and Iranian proxy militias in late 2017.<sup>18</sup> Thousands of homes deserted by fleeing owners during the war were confiscated, and frenetic efforts were made to build Shiite shrines, notably the Ain Ali shrine in the town of al-Mayadin built on a water spring alleged to have erupted under the hooves of Ali bin Abi Talib's horse.<sup>19</sup>

During the war years, many tribal leaders allied themselves with the IRGC, and a pro-Tehran local militia was founded,

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), [Aug. 21, 2019](#); Navvar Saban, "Factbox: [Iranian influence](#) and presence in Syria," Atlantic Council, Washington, D.C., [Nov. 5, 2020](#).

<sup>16</sup> Fars News Agency (Tehran), [Nov. 15, 2020](#).

<sup>17</sup> North Press Agency (Raqqa, Syr.), [Jan. 5, 2022](#).

<sup>18</sup> *Orient News*, [Jan. 16, 2022](#); *Zaman al-Wasl* (Homs), [Mar. 26, 2020](#).

<sup>19</sup> *Enab Baladi* (Damascus), [Aug. 24, 2021](#); *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), [July 14, 2019](#).

based on the Mashahda tribe that traces its origins to the Iranian city of Mashahd. Iran is also supported in the area by the al-Baqir Brigade, named after the fifth imam in Twelver Shiism and comprising members of the influential Sunni al-Baggara tribe, which has seen thousands of its members convert to Twelver Shiism.<sup>20</sup>

The Quds Force also established a recruitment center in Mayadin where hundreds of young men joined its ranks. Its affiliate the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts set up a string of camps across the Deir ez-Zor governorate to train children in the use of weapons.<sup>21</sup> A video dating back to 2017 shows Qassem Soleimani amidst Shiite militiamen in al-Bukamal, home to the Mashahda tribe, celebrating the recapture of the strategic city where a Shiite-style call for prayer was imposed.<sup>22</sup> A later video shows the city's newly-established Iranian cultural center, which offers scholarships to youngsters who wish to study in Iran, organizing a ceremony in the town of Sabikhan in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor.<sup>23</sup>

By way of implementing its Shiification policy in Deir ez-Zor, Tehran relied on several organizations. The Construction Jihad Foundation, for example, helped restore scores of schools and distributed food, financial aid, and medical supplies to civilians, together with the Imam Kadhim Foundation. The Bright Light Institute in Mayadin, among

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others, has periodically organized religious courses and distributed Shiite books to win the hearts and minds of the local Sunni population. The Iranians have also rebuilt several mosques

destroyed during the war and renovated a park in Bukamal, renaming it Friends Park.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the Iranian position in the Raqqa and the Hasaka governorates has been more insecure than in other provinces. Not only is most of this territory controlled by the Kurds, who evicted ISIS from the area, but their strategic position on the Syrian-Iraqi-Turkish border triangle, especially that of the oil and water-rich Hasaka, have made it home to U.S., Russian, and Turkish military forces. As a result, Tehran found it difficult to spread its Shiite message across the governorate despite forming a local militia in Raqqa comprising several hundred fighters from the local Abu Hamad tribe that had embraced Shiism before the war.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for example, the Kurds rejected the Iranian request to reconstruct a large Shiite mosque built in the late 1980s on the outskirts of Raqqa city, which had been demolished by ISIS in 2014, for fear of provoking sectarian strife in the province.<sup>26</sup>

Given its precarious standing in the two

<sup>20</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, [July 1, 2020](#).

<sup>21</sup> The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (Coventry, U.K.), [Dec. 2, 2021](#); Syria TV (currently, Istanbul), [Feb. 16, 2021](#); *Daraj*, [May 6, 2021](#).

<sup>22</sup> YouTube, [Nov. 19, 2017](#).

<sup>23</sup> *Furat Post* (Istanbul), [July 15, 2018](#).

<sup>24</sup> Saban, "[Iranian influence](#)"; Dafna Messing, "'[The Bright Light Institute](#)'—Another Iranian Organization Spreading Shiism in Eastern Syria," Alma Research and Education Center, Kfar Vradim, Isr., [Mar. 14, 2021](#).

<sup>25</sup> Haian Dukhan and Ammar Alhamad, "[Iran's Growing Network of Influence](#) among Eastern Syrian Tribes," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [Apr. 6, 2021](#).

<sup>26</sup> YouTube, [Jan. 30, 2018](#); *Enab Baladi*, [Apr. 25, 2022](#).

provinces, especially in Hasaka where its presence has been intermittent and limited to few locations in the southeastern part of the governorate, Tehran was forced to content itself with attempts to sow divisions between Arabs and Kurds through its newly-opened cultural and military recruitment centers.<sup>27</sup>

**One project officially designed to modernize Homs actually sought to empty the Old City of its Sunni residents.**

### Displacement and Conversion

Shiification has also been underway in central and western Syria, especially the Hama countryside and Homs. The region is seen as a “sectarian fault line” between the Sunni areas in the center and the Alawite regions farther west and constitutes a vital component of Iran’s purported land corridor between Damascus and the Mediterranean coastline (en route to the Iranian border via Iraq).

Homs, Syria’s largest governorate, witnessed one of the fiercest battles and brutal sieges and was subjected to a massive displacement campaign. As early as 2009, the regime announced a huge investment project called “Homs Dream” that was officially designed to modernize the city but actually sought to empty the Old City of its Sunni residents. The project came to a halt following the outbreak of hostilities, only to be progressively realized during the war years, culminating in an official statement about its resumption in accordance with the 2018 urban renewal law.<sup>28</sup> Within this framework, many mosques in the city were

transformed into centers for spreading Shiism and confiscation of properties became a common scene throughout the governorate.<sup>29</sup>

In the eastern parts of the Hama province, there were attempts by Tehran to convert Ismailis, members of a Shiite sub-sect, in the city of Salamiya and its environs—Ismaeilism’s foremost stronghold—as well as in the poverty-stricken villages inhabited by members of al-Murshidiyah sect, which splintered from the Alawite community in the early twentieth century. Like the Alawites, the traditionally non-religious Ismailis were averse to these efforts due to both cultural differences and the deep-rooted enmity between Twelver Shiism and Ismaeilism. Nonetheless, Tehran succeeded in converting members of the Ismaili sect, specifically from the city of Masyaf, and recruiting them to fight alongside the regime’s forces and the Shiite militias.<sup>30</sup>

Nor did the Iranians relent on their Shiification efforts of the Alawites. Apart from tightening their control over religious institutions and establishing a string of Twelver Shiite congregation halls, scores of Iranian clerics and politicians toured Alawite towns and villages in recent years, especially localities that host religious shrines, making tempting offers to restore these shrines and to extend financial and humanitarian assistance to the local populace. These efforts were no more successful than those of previous years, however, with Alawite notables and clerics taking up their anti-Iranian grievances to

<sup>27</sup> Mohammed Hassan and Samer al-Ahmed, “Iran’s [growing presence](#) in Syria’s al-Hasakah poses a direct threat to US forces,” The Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., [Mar. 24, 2022](#).

<sup>28</sup> *The Syria Report* (Beirut), [Jan. 13, 2021](#).

<sup>29</sup> *Zaman al-Wasl*, [June 22, 2022](#).

<sup>30</sup> *Al-Mudun* (Beirut), [Nov. 1, 2015](#); Reuters, [Sept. 12, 2022](#).

Russian military officers stationed at the Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia.<sup>31</sup>

### **Shrines, Charity, and Militias in the South**

The situation in southern Syria is little different with scenes of Shiite Ashura processions commemorating the killing of Hussein bin Ali a common vision in key bourgeois Sunni strongholds like Damascus's Hamidiya market.<sup>32</sup> But the story does not end here. To entrench themselves in Damascus and its environs, the Iranians have striven to establish a Syrian "southern suburb" as in the Hezbollah-controlled Dahiya suburb in southern Beirut, and ultimately, to create a Syrian version of Hezbollah.

The governorate of Damascus Countryside (*Rif Dimashq*), seen as a "Sunni belt" surrounding the Syrian capital, was the epicenter of sustained fighting that ended in a resounding defeat for the rebel forces. Hundreds of thousands were displaced from its towns, and properties were acquired by force or with large sums of money so as to allow Shiites to replace the indigenous Sunni population.<sup>33</sup>

As with other areas, the Iranians struck gold with "the game of shrines." There are three Shiite shrines in Damascus and its suburbs that allegedly contain graves of sacred figures: as-Sayyida Zaynab shrine, named after Ali bin Abi Talib's eldest daughter; as-Sayyida Sakina shrine, named



*Shiite Ashura processions commemorating the killing of Hussein bin Ali have become a common sight in Syria in key Sunni strongholds.*

after his granddaughter; and as-Sayyida Ruqayya shrine, named after the woman Shiites believe to be Ali's granddaughter and Sunnis consider a fictitious figure. The Sayyida Zaynab shrine, located in a district holding the same name some 10 kilometers from the center of Damascus, is mainly populated by Iraqi Shiites who fled Saddam Hussein's regime or left their country after the 2003 invasion of Iraq as well as Lebanese Shiites who arrived after the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war. In 2020, the district was renamed the "town of Sayyida Zaynab" in parallel with a housing project named "Zaynab Suburb."<sup>34</sup>

In January 2006, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who used to claim he was in contact with the Mahdi,<sup>35</sup> visited Sayyida Sakina shrine, built by Iranians in

<sup>31</sup> *Raseef22* (Beirut), [Aug. 19, 2022](#).

<sup>32</sup> YouTube, [2018](#).

<sup>33</sup> *Zaman al-Wasl*, [June 12, 2022](#).

<sup>34</sup> SY24 news network (Syr.), [Nov. 15, 2020](#).

<sup>35</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Ahmadinejad Versus the Clergy," American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 21, 2008](#).



the Damascus suburb of Daraya in 1999, with various construction projects connected to the shrine announced thereafter.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Sayyida Ruqayya shrine, in Damascus's Old City near the Umayyad Mosque and traditional markets, has undergone massive expansion and now comprises an area of roughly four thousand square meters.<sup>37</sup>

Farther south, the Sunni towns of Bludan, Yabrud, Madaya, Serghaya, Kiswah, and Zabadani near the Lebanese border have fallen into Hezbollah's hands with their Sunni population largely replaced by Shiite families housed in confiscated or purchased properties.<sup>38</sup> This trend was vividly illustrated by "the four-town agreement" in the spring of 2017, involving Madaya and Zabadani on the one hand and the Shiite-majority towns of Fuah and Kafriya in the Idlib governorate, on the other. The agreement was widely seen as reaffirming Syria's new sectarian reshuffle by stipulating the simultaneous evacuation of the two pairs of towns, with Sunnis transferred to rebel-held regions in the north, particularly around Idlib, and Shiites moved to regime-held regions in the southwest, particularly around Damascus.<sup>39</sup>

In the Daraa governorate, where the civil war ensued, Shiification efforts were intensified after the regime's recovery of much of the territory in the summer of 2018. In the

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city of Daraa itself, Shiification efforts were largely carried out by non-native Iraqi Shiites from al-Matar district, which boasted a prominent Twelver Shiite congregation hall. A

faction comprised of Shiites from Busra ash-Sham in the governorate's countryside fought alongside Hezbollah. The town of Qarfa constituted a central hub for most of Hezbollah's activities and the heart of Tehran's military and Shiification campaigns in the south, with Shiite rituals regularly held in its three mosques. Qarfa is also the hometown of Rustom Ghazaleh, a senior intelligence officer and former commander of the Syrian forces in Lebanon. Ironically, it was the Sunni Ghazaleh family that played a key role in promoting Tehran's local Shiification agenda by providing financial aid, buying large plots of land, and facilitating the settlement of non-Syrian Shiites in the area.<sup>40</sup>

The IRGC also established a local militia in the province dubbed "al-Arin Detachment, Brigade 313," the name alluding to the "313 Companions" of the Mahdi, who, according to Shiite doctrine, will assist him in spreading justice on earth. In September 2018, Abu Fadl Tabatabai, Khamenei's special representative to Syria, visited Daraa and disbursed substantial sums to the newly-formed militia as well as to az-Zahra Association—an Iranian "charity" working in different parts of Syria with its own armed wing ("Lions of az-Zahra Association").<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Al-Mashareq website, USCENTCOM, [Jan. 10, 2022](#).

<sup>37</sup> *Orient News*, [May 26, 2016](#).

<sup>38</sup> *Zaman al-Wasl*, [May 31, 2022](#).

<sup>39</sup> *Financial Times* (London), [Apr. 14, 2017](#); *al-Arabiya* (Dubai), [May, 20, 2020](#).

<sup>40</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, [July 10, 2018](#); Tajamu Ahrar Hawran, Daras and Quneitra, Syr., [Mar. 9, 2022](#); Rasif22 Network (Beirut), Dec. 8, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> *Enab Baladi*, [Oct. 25, 2018](#).

As the only Druze-majority Syrian governorate, the southernmost Suwayda has maintained a sectarian particularity. While the Druze did not align themselves with the anti-regime rebels, their relations with Alawites and Shiites have been historically frosty. To woo the local population, prominent Druze clerics were invited to Tehran while Iranian diplomats from the Damascus embassy and Shiite militia leaders paid frequent visits to the governorate. Tehran also launched a string of humanitarian projects in the province, including a hospital in Suwayda city and a pharmaceutical factory in the province's countryside.<sup>42</sup>

These efforts have been largely unavailing. With the Druze faith having no ties to Shiite Islam and forbidding its followers to convert, the rates of conversion to Shiism have remained very low with the Druze seeking to counterbalance Tehran's influence by asking Moscow to act as their protector (many Druze pointed the finger at Tehran for the 2015 assassination of Wahid Balous, founder of the anti-Iran "Men of Dignity Movement").<sup>43</sup> Still, Tehran seems to view the engagement of many Druze in its local operations, especially drug trafficking networks, as conducive to its broader divide-



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and-rule strategy that seeks to curb local anti-Iranian sentiments and win people to the ranks of its militias as a first step to their eventual conversion.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

Tehran's military entrenchment in Syria during the civil war years has been highly conducive to its dogged hegemonic quest and the revenge it seeks against Sunnis on historical grounds. It enabled the Islamic Republic to tighten its grip over Iraq, to transform Hezbollah into Lebanon's effective master, to establish a land corridor between the Iranian border and the Mediterranean Sea, and to intensify the military threat to Israel and Jordan both by deploying IRGC forces and associated Shiite militias in southern Syria and by giving Hezbollah the ability to wreak havoc on Israel's population centers and national infrastructure.

<sup>42</sup> Syria TV (Istanbul), [Apr. 7, 2019](#); *al-Modon* (Beirut), [Oct. 29, 2015](#); Syrian News Agency (Damascus), [Sept. 27, 2017](#).

<sup>43</sup> Syria TV, [Aug. 7, 2022](#); *Orient TV*, YouTube, [Aug. 10, 2022](#).

<sup>44</sup> *Al-Arabi al-Jadid* (Doha), [July 27, 2022](#).

What makes these achievements all the more significant, and potentially far more enduring, is the attendant transformation of Syria's sociocultural character through a mixture of Shiification activities (e.g., establishment of shrines and institutions, initiation of Shiite practices, conversion to Shiism), humanitarian aid, and settlement of foreign Shiites in deserted localities across Syria. And while this strategy coincides with the Assad regime's short-term desire to ensure its survival (hence the string of laws and decrees aimed at barring Syrian refugees' return), it gives Tehran ever-growing grass-roots support that may enable it to keep

the regime subservient to its wishes. A bleak prognosis indeed, for just as the mayhem and devastation occasioned by the war enabled the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, so Tehran may cynically deem the continuation of the conflict as the most desirable scenario in the foreseeable future, and perhaps, for many Shiites, until the Day of Judgment.

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