

**T.C.
HASAN KALYONCU ÜNİVERSİTESİ
LİSANSÜSTÜ EĞİTİM ENSTİTÜSÜ
SİYASET BİLİMİ VE ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLERANABİLİM DALI
İNGİLİZCE TEZLİ YÜKSEK LİSANS PROGRAMI**

COBWEB OF PROXY WAR IN SYRIA: IRANIAN CASE

YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ

**HAZIRLAYAN
MUAZ ALABDULLAH**

GAZİANTEP – June 2021

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GAZİANTEP – June 2021

TEZ ETİK VE BİLDİRİM SAYFASI

Yüksek Lisans Tezi olarak sunduğum “**COBWEB OF PROXY WAR IN SYRIA: IRANIAN CASE**” başlıklı çalışmanın tarafımda, bilimsel ahlak ve geleneklere aykırı düşecek bir yardıma başvurmaksızın yazıldığını ve yararlandığım eserlerin kaynakçada gösterilenlerden oluştuğunu ve bunlara atıf yapılarak yararlanmış olduğumu belirtir ve onurumla doğrularım. 08/06/2021.

MUAZ ALABDULLAH

ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss how the proxy War served multiple purposes for several actors in Syria as a battlefield and how the proxy war was used as a tool for the main actors fighting in this country. We will be focusing mainly on Iran as a case of study and how the Iranian regime in Tehran used its militias to achieve its goal in Syria. However, on the other hand, how the other actors in Syria, including Russia and the Syrian Regime, used Iran and its militias to achieve their goals.

In the first chapter, I will discuss how Iran established several local and foreign militias under its control and how Iran used these militias and the Syrian army to achieve its goals in Syria. The second chapter will illustrate how the Syrian regime used the Iranian intervention to serve its own goals and, most importantly, to stay in power in Syria. The third chapter will discuss the Russian strategy after its intervention in the Syrian war, how Russia used the pro-Iranian militias to maximize its benefits from the war, and what are the main militias that Russia began to support in the Syrian war.

Keywords: Syria, Iran, Russia, Proxy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IRGC	:	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
NDF	:	National Defence Forces
SDF	:	Syrian Democratic Forces
SAA	:	Syrian Arab Army
Lafa	:	Liwa Abu al Fadel al Abbas
ACLED	:	Armed Conflict Location and Event Database
CENTCOM	:	United States Central Command
ISIS	:	The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
IS	:	Islamic State

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Violence continues in several conflicts burning simultaneously in Syria, with the increase in the number of deaths in that war that has been going on for more than ten years now, while there are no signs that it will stop soon. Since 1972 Al Assad's family has been ruling this country, where several minorities like Alawite, Christians, Druze, and others live with the Sunni majority. As the Arab awakening, AKA Arab Spring revolutions, started in the Arab world, several sectarian regimes had changed. However, this was not the case in Syria.

The Syrian regime decided to face the peaceful protests of the Syrian people using arm power and used the Syrian army for this purpose. Which led to a dramatic change in the Syrian revolution as it transformed into an armed conflict between the regime forces and the Free Syrian army. After several coming back and forth battles between the regime forces and rebel factions, Assad's regime has recently succeeded in establishing control, in large part because of the military support he received from Iran and Russia.

Since the first years of the Syrian war, the idiom of proxy warfare has been repeatedly used to describe the ongoing conflict between the actors participating in this conflict. Given the strategic location of Syria, several regional and international actors showed interest in interfering in this war to try and manipulate the outcomes to their own strategic benefit.

For example, as the Syrian revolution became a full-fledged war, the Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates started to support the Free Syrian Army groups in their war against Assad, as these countries wanted to break the alliance between Iran, who is their main enemy in the region, and Syria. The Gulf countries were not the only ones that wanted to break this alliance. Other international actors showed interest in the same goal, such as the United States, France, and other regional and international actors who supported the Free Syrian Army. Through this support to the rebel factions opened the first chapter of the proxy war.

However, the Gulf Support to the Free Syrian Army factions was not the last chapter of the proxy war in Syria, as the Iranian and Russian support to the Syrian regime has characterized a new phase of the proxy war.

Syria was an ally of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, where it was buying Russian weapons. Russia intervened militarily in Syria in 2015 at a Syrian and Iranian request, eventually turning the tide in favour of the Syrian president.

The term "proxy war" conjures up images from the Cold War, when outside powers, namely the United States and the Soviet Union and regional powers, treated local fighters as pawns on the geopolitical chessboard.

The proxy war tends to appear in vulnerable states that cannot protect themselves from either an outside or an inside threat, and this was the case when the Syrian regime couldn't manage the protests in Syria and eventually led to the intervention of several regional and international powers in the Syrian war.

After his army suffered a series of military setbacks in 2012, Assad exaggerated the jihadist threat to motivate Russia and Iran to send more weapons, money, and foot soldiers, but in fact, these weapons were also on their way to killing the Syrian people and other local actors.

Likewise, the Syrian rebels have managed to secure the constant flow of money, weapons, and other aid from the Gulf states, by reconfiguring their conflict to match the Gulf States' fears of the Iranian expansion in Syria.

1.2 Research Background

Since the first years of the Syrian war, the idiom of proxy warfare has been repeatedly used to describe the ongoing conflict between the actors participating in this conflict. Given the strategic location of Syria, several regional and international actors showed interest in interfering in this war to try and manipulate the outcomes to their own strategic benefit.

The Iranian support to Assad's regime through the establishment of multiple pro-Iranian militias added a new feature to the proxy war concept in Syria because of the complicated relations between these militias and their sponsors, as well as the fact that these militias are part of the counter-insurgency campaign of the state actor against the rebels where Iran has created its own cobweb of proxies in Syria, where each militia in this cobweb has different roles in terms of fighting, coordination, and training.

On the other hand, the Russian intervention in the Syrian war, created more complicity in terms of understanding the relations between the multiple actors who are supposedly cooperating, but at the same time competing to maximize their benefits from their Intervention in this war.

As the Syrian conflict started to wind down, after the Syrian regime consolidated its control over most of Syria, the proxy war started to take a new turn, when allies started using their proxies to achieve their goals at the expense of their previous allies.

The increased coordination between Russia and the Syrian Democratic Forces, created added a new feature to the proxy warfare, which involve two superpowers the United States and Russia coordinating with one militia, which is considered to be a US proxy.

These Russians actions can be understood as an attempt to attract more militias to act like Russian proxies even though these militias are supported by an enemy.

1.3 Problem Statement

The Older studies of proxy warfare concentrated on the mutual relation between State actors as the sponsor and non-state actors as the proxy. However, these studies neglected the role of the non-state militias in supporting the state actors in the counter-insurgency campaigns.

The other aspect that older scholars didn't study was when a state actor uses another state actor as a proxy, not to mention the complicated cases of proxy warfare when several state actors use each other as proxies to achieve specific gains. Therefore, contemporary studies of the multiple aspects of proxy warfare are needed in order to conclude a better understanding of this phenomenon.

1.4 Research Question

The research question of this thesis was presented upon the fact that proxy warfare seems to be more complicated and multi-faceted than the previous scholars previously explained it.

In order to clarify the complexity of proxy warfare in the Syrian Context, we will study the relationships between Iran, the Syrian regime, and Russia. to highlight the features of these relations, we will explain what the main pro-Iranian militias operating in Syria, who are the actors supporting these militias by weapons and fund, then we will explore the areas of operations of these militias, and we will highlight how these militias interacted with each other and with the Syrian army. Then we will answer the first research question which is,

- Did Iran use these militias to solely support Bashar Al Assad's regime in the war against the rebel factions, or Iran had further goals in Syria, and in order to achieve these goals, it used these militias and the Syrian army at the same time?

- Did this apply to the Iranian-Russian relation?

After that, we will highlight the Syrian regime's main gains from the Iranian intervention in Syria. Here we will answer the second question,

- Did the Syrian regime use the pro-Iranian militias to increase its gains in Syria?

- Did the Syrian regime benefit from the Iranian and Russian intervention on the military level only?

Later on, we will illustrate the Russian strategy in its intervention in Syria in order to answer the third question,

- Did the Russian use the pro-Iranian militias to only support the Assad's regime, or Russia had a further plan, and it used the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias to maximize its benefits in Syria.

1.5 Research Objectives

This research aims to investigate the relationships between Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime, and in order to do this, we will conduct desk-based research to understand the behaviour of these countries in the course of the Syrian context. Then we will analyse the data that involve the actions of these actors to understand the level of cooperation between them and explain the role of the pro-Iranian militias in the relations between these actors.

Lastly, we will analyse how each actor used the other two actors to achieve its goals; what are the methods each actor followed to maximize its benefits and identify the factors that led to complicated proxy warfare.

1.6 Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are introduced based on the comparison between the old studies of proxy warfare and the concept of proxy warfare in the Syrian context.

As the comparison shows several differences and under-studied aspects of proxy warfare, we will try to uncover new aspects and understanding of this idiom:

Hypothesis 1: State actors can use another state actor as a proxy, and we will study the relation between Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime to illustrate this point.

Hypothesis 2: Proxy warfare could entail two actors or more acting as a proxy for each other. What are the mutual benefits of the Russian and Iranian intervention for the Syrian regime, Iran, and Russia?

Hypothesis 3: Non-state actors could play several roles in proxy warfare, including the support of State actors. We will study the various roles that Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian militias played to support and train specific divisions of the Syrian army.

Hypothesis 4: Non-State actors can play the role of sponsor of other non-state actors. We will illustrate how Hezbollah trained other militias in Syria and how Liwa Assad Allah al Ghalib received weapons and funds from another militia in Syria to help in the battles of Rural Lattakia.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This thesis will contribute to the debate of proxy warfare by exploring the Syrian case and the complexity accompanied with it. We will explain how the old concept of proxy warfare has evolved by examining the relationships between the pro-Iranian militias and the Syrian and Russian forces in Syria, in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of the new shape of the proxy warfare and present a contemporary understanding of this phenomenon which can give a new explanation of the reasons behind the intervention of several actors in a proxy warfare. Additionally, we will shed light on the aspects that can be entailed under the proxy warfare term, such as the economic and political support.

CHAPTER TOW: LITREATURE REVIEW

The Proxy warfare phenomenon requires a contemporary studies and explanations, especially after the Arab spring. Several Revolution in the Arab countries have evolved into a civil war which in turn transformed into a proxy war involving several regional and international actors.

Political science researchers started to study the proxy War in the last decade of the 20th century. According to Christopher Mitchell, this field became at the centre of academic and political attention in 1994.

Over the last decade, the research of proxy wars has made significant progress. This broadening of research yielded fresh perspectives into a major international security issue (Rauta and Mumford, in Dover et al. 2017, p. 101–103), (Rauta, 2021, p. 1).

In order to understand the notion of proxy warfare, Lovema argues that you should understand the changes of the liberalism in the new international system (Loveman, 2002, p. 33–36).

The importance of understanding the Liberalism as an IR theory to comprehend the notion of proxy warfare, came from the basic liberal assumption that the state actor would always seek to maximize its power, even though the military intervention.

As the International System leaning toward the liberalism, and the cooperation between the states internationally, the concept of military intervention became increasingly unacceptable in the contemporary international system.

Additionally, in the recent years, the international organizations started to take more important role with the new System, Also, the high costs of the direct military intervention with unguaranteed gains and the risk of a rapid escalation of conflict (Salehyan 2010, p.495), was another factor behind refusing the military intervention approach. Therefore, States who are seeking to expand their influence and gains beyond their territories started to utilize the proxy war to achieve their gaols.

However, previous efforts to define proxy warfare did not cover all of the aspects of the phenomenon being seen in Syria. Proxy wars, according to Karl Deutsch, are "an international struggle between two foreign powers, waged on the turf of a third country; portrayed as a fight

over that country's internal problems; and using part or all of that country's people, resources, and territory as means of attaining preponderantly foreign aims and plans" (Deutsch ,1964, p. 102).

Prior definitions of proxy war concentrated on state actors and the involvement of international powers, largely due to the influence of the Cold War era and the Nuclear Deterioration Strategy. However, these old understandings of the proxy war ignored the crucial role of non-state actors as a possible sponsor to other state and non-state actors. Additionally, older studies of the proxy war did not explain the relationship between two state actors as benefactor and proxy, meaning that these studies presumed that the proxy war is a relationship between state actors as patrons and non-state actors as proxy militias, which does not entirely match the proxy war in the Syrian case and its complicated situation. An example of that would be the Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria. Hezbollah managed since the first years of the Syrian war to support and provide training to specific divisions of the Syrian army and other pro-regime militias. Not only that, but Hezbollah has also trained part of the foreign militias which were brought by Iran to support the Syrian regime, like the Fatemiyoun brigade and the National Defence Forces. Additionally, as we will see in the first chapter, other non-state actors like the Desert Hawks provided military and financial support to other foreign militias in Syria like Liwa Assad Allah Al Ghalib, who supported the Syrian regime in the battles of Lattakia countryside.

By examining the proxies who supported the Syrian regime in its counter-insurgency campaign in early 2012, we will notice both; state actors and non-state actors supported several pro-Iranian militias. Occasionally, these militias were even supported by both at the same time. For example, when it was first established, the National Defence Forces militia was supported by the Syrian regime and Iran by means of weapons and salaries; at the same time, several groups of the NDF were trained in Hezbollah camps. With the Russian intervention in Syria, the National Defence Forces acted as a Russian proxy during the battles of Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Aleppo, and Damascus, and the Russian support for the National Defence forces continued even after the end of the battles in these provinces. The National Defence Forces was not the only case where Russia used a Syrian/Iranian-funded group as a proxy. When Russia started its military intervention in Syria, there were no pro-Russian militias operating on the ground. Therefore, Russia had to use the pro-Iranian and regime forces as its own proxies. This contrasts existing literature on proxy warfare, which assumes that the proxy should be rebels or insurgents in most cases. (Salehyan, 2010,

p.495); (Geraint Hughes, 2012, p. 131–158); (Loveman, 2006, p. 29–48); (Towle, 1981, p. 21-26); (Mumford, 2013bb); (San Akca, 2009, p. 589–613); (Maoz & Akca, 2012, p.720–734) and also assumes that support comes unilaterally from just one sponsor, with sponsors exclusively being state actors.

With the new complications to the proxy war, a contemporary study to this increasingly spreading phenomenon has become a necessity in order to illustrate the changing relationships between the actors involved in proxy warfare we will study the Iranian case in Syria.



CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The information for this thesis is acquired through desk-based research, using secondary sources such as studies from Research centres, books, media articles, open-source analysis, and peer-reviewed academic journals, and finally, maps and data from open-source conflict analysis organizations. There is a large body of literature with regards to proxy warfare. This paper will examine the factors that shape the post/conflict environments in Syria. The reason for Studying this part of literature is to analyse and assess how the conflict in Syria impacted the proxy warfare in previous studies and the Iranian role in this impact.

The data based on which the graphs were created is obtained from an open-source conflict mapping and analysis company called Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED gathers information regarding political violence and protests in several countries worldwide, including Syria. All the data ACLED gathers is available in real-time through their website to be viewed and used freely by those interested, as long as proper citation is in order (ACLED, 2019).

ACLED gathers data through a variety of sources, which is then verified by a trained team of local and international data experts. Therefore, they follow a two-step approach. First, they take a quantitative approach to data collection, then a team of experts in the country-specific context inspects and verifies the gathered data (ACLED, 2019).

The collected data is organized in terms of events. Each event represents an incident of political violence that occurred in a particular location. The data also includes information about the actors involved, the date, location, and the number of fatalities. It also provides the source of information, a description of the event in the form of a narrative, in addition to information that indicates how precise the date and location provided information is (ACLED, 2019).

ACLED Data track how the disorder takes place in each country. Therefore, they code all the events, even those without fatalities.

Table 1: The list of ACLED event and Sub-event types (ACLED, 2019)

General	Event Type	Sub-Event Type
Violent events	Battles	<i>Armed clash</i>
		<i>Government regains territory</i>
		<i>Non-state actor overtakes territory</i>
	Explosions/Remote violence	<i>Chemical weapon</i>
		<i>Air/drone strike</i>
		<i>Suicide bomb</i>
		<i>Shelling/artillery/missile attack</i>
		<i>Remote explosive/landmine/IED</i>
		<i>Grenade</i>
	Violence against civilians	<i>Sexual violence</i>
		<i>Attack</i>
		<i>Abduction/forced disappearance</i>
Demonstrations	Protests	<i>Peaceful protest</i>
		<i>Protest with intervention</i>
		<i>Excessive force against protesters</i>
	Riots	<i>Violent demonstration</i>
		<i>Mob violence</i>
Non-violent actions	Strategic developments	<i>Agreement</i>
		<i>Arrests</i>
		<i>Change to group/activity</i>
		<i>Disrupted weapons use</i>
		<i>Headquarters or base established</i>
		<i>Looting/property destruction</i>
		<i>Non-violent transfer of territory</i>
		<i>Other</i>

Source: (ACLED, 2019)

The way ACLED defines political violence and codes the different events are highly relevant to this paper's research. According to ACLED (2019), political violence is the utilization of force by a group that possesses a political motivation or purpose to reach a particular end.

Table 1 explain how ACLED codes the different types of political violence in the form of event types which entail numerous sub-event types. The data used in this paper include numerous types of events. Therefore, it is necessary to define these terms.

Violent Actions

Battles: According to ACLED, battles refer to a violent confrontation that takes place in a specific date and location between two armed groups. In specific cases, the armed clashes don't produce fatalities, whether because of the nature of the clashes or because the sources didn't report any fatalities. The Battle events don't necessarily include civilian fatalities. However, in rare cases, the armed clashes between two actors might result in civilian fatalities, and in these cases, civilians are not coded as an actor. Battle events include three sub-events: armed clashes, non-state actors overtake territory, and government gains territory.

Explosions/Remote Violence: These events entail the actions by one actor (perpetrator) in which the target can't respond to the attack. This includes air/drone strikes, the use of chemical weapons shelling/artillery/missile attacks, remote explosive/landmine/IEDs, suicide bombs, and grenades (see Table 1).

Violence against civilians: This event type includes violence perpetrated by the state and/or its affiliates, the rebel forces, and militias against civilians. In which the perpetrator attempts at inflicting harm (e.g., using lethal tools, beating, shooting, torture, rape, mutilation, etc.) or forcibly disappearing (e.g., kidnapping and disappearances) civilian actors', the arrests by the state actors are coded as Strategic Development. In contrast, the arrests by the non-state actors and the state proxies are coded as abduction under the violence against civilians (ACLED, 2019: p. 11).

Non-Violent Actions

Strategic Development: These events are considered to be non-violent, and therefore, don't include any fatalities. However, these events are recorded because they may lead to an escalation of the violent events, i.e., the arrest of a prominent figure might lead to an armed confrontation between the police and tribal or communal militias.

ACLED has an extensive list of actors that they in coding political violence perpetrated in Syria.

Each group of Actors in ACLED database have a unique interaction; for example, the state actors have the interaction of 1, the rebel factions have the interaction of 2, while the foreign actors have

the interaction of 8. The actors' data used in this paper was organized in six main categories, although different actors might have different political goals and use different methods to achieve those goals. The first includes the Syrian regime and all its security and military forces and all the entities that operate in support of the regime, including the Russian military and armed forces (after September 2015), Iranian militias, and pro-Iranian militias such as Hezbollah. In the second category are rebel forces and opposition factions, which include moderate groups and more extremist groups, and the third category entails the Kurdish forces, including People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF/QSD). The fourth category includes the Islamic State for Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In order to better understand and analyse the Syrian context, we will scan and triangulate information from several blogs and websites that are specialized in the Syrian case as well as the militias' activities in region. Then we will apply the findings from these sources to better explain the situation on the ground.

We will scan the information provided by Aymenn Jawad Al Tamimi blog, Ayman is a researcher who worked with several institutions and research centres, his work focuses on militant groups of all affiliations in Iraq and Syria. A written approval was granted from Aymenn Jawad Al Tamimi to use the data in his blog.

Additionally, we will use video records published by new agencies to verify particular information in this thesis. We will also use the information provided by interviews conducted by researchers and analysts with members or commanders of the militias operating in Syria to track the activities and understand the behaviour of these groups in Syria.

Scholar's work will be an essential source of information in this thesis. Moreover, we will use the information provided by the international news agencies and the research and study centres to further support the argument of the thesis.

The Study and research centres we will be using are:

- 1- Middle East Institute (MEI)
- 2- The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

- 3- Jussor for Studies
- 4- Middle East Studies Centre (ORSAM)
- 5- Institute for the Study of war

All of the sources used in this thesis are open-source websites and available to be used, and these sources will be cited accordingly in the thesis.

We will indicate to the Syrian army and the supporting militias as pro-regime forces. We will use the term pro-Iranian militia to indicate the affiliated Iranian militias, whether local (like the national Defence Forces or foreign militias like (Fatemiyoun militia), and as an exception for this paper, we will consider the actions of Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria to be directed by the Iranian schemes. Therefore, Hezbollah will be considered as a pro-Iranian militia.

The Russian air forces and the Russian advisors who operate/d in Syria will be indicated as Russian forces.

Southern Syria will indicate the areas in Dar'a and Al Quneitra that were previously controlled by the rebel factions.

Epistemology allude to the relationship between the researcher (the knower) and the finding, in another word, it describes the nature of the findings and how they are related to the method that was followed by the knower to achieve them through different means including quantitative and qualitative research.

Epistemology poses the following questions: What is the relationship between the knower and what is known? How do we know what we know? What counts as knowledge? There are two broad epistemological positions: positivism and interpretivism – constructivism (Antwi & Hamza, 2015, p. 1).

Among the different categories of epistemology, this thesis falls on the edge between the positivism, and interpretivism-constructivism, as we follow in our research a mix of qualitative and quantitative research where we applied the findings from the articles of the study and research centers to understand the figures, we used in the charts that explained specific aspects of the thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE IRANIAN PRESENCE IN SYRIA, GROUPS IDENTIFIED, FUND, ENGAGEMENT, AND ORGANIZATION.

Pro-Government militias (PGMs) had played a significant role since the start of the Syrian war. In 2013 pro-Iranian militia of Hezbollah announced its direct involvement in the Syrian war to the side of Bashar Al Assad's Regime (Choucair, 2016, p. 5–6). Hezbollah intervention will not be the last during the Syrian war, as the Iranian regime will continue Supporting the Syrian regime during the coming years. However, the Iranian support will be more organized and has further goals than supporting the Assad's regime from collapse and therefore losing a strategic ally.

By examining the proxies who supported the Syrian regime in its counter-insurgency campaign, which started in early 2012; we will notice that several militias were supported by State actors and non-state actors and occasionally by both at the same time, which contrast the works of literature on proxy warfare which assume that in most cases the proxy should be rebels or insurgents. They are receiving support unilaterally from just one sponsor and on such sponsors exclusively being state actors.

In 2013 Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) was reported to be fighting on the side of the regime forces (France 24: 2013). However, the IRGC was actively trying to recruit more militants from Syria and also trying to organize the deployment of foreign militias from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Smyth, 2014, p. 1).

For most of Syria's war period, militias have created an essential element of Bashar al-Assad's forces. Nevertheless, while Syrian nationalist militias serve the regime's priorities by fighting to defend core population cities like Damascus, Lattakia, Aleppo, and Homs, Iranian-backed militias concentrate on Tehran's interests. Chiefly it's an effort to build a land bridge between Iran and Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. Additionally, Iranian proxies in the south of Syria keep the territory they capture rather than delivering it over to the regime because of the strategic position of this area and its proximity to the Israeli and the Lebanese borders (Al-Jabassini, 2020, p. 2–8). On the other hand, we can see the Iranian-backed militias fighting in areas that were not considered as an interest in Iran, like in Idleb and Hama countrysides. The apparent reason behind that is to keep Assad in power, even though these militias are not concerned with the regime's goal of regaining the whole of Syria, which can be seen clearly in how the Iranian-backed proxies ended part of the battles along the Lebanese borders. Wherein most of the opposition strongholds in

southern Syria, in which they were surrounded by a heavy presence of the Iranian-backed militias, the battles ended with an agreement in most of the cases, these agreements allowed the opposition fighters to redeploy to other areas in northern Syria, even though this might create a massive momentum of the rebel and Islamist factions in north of Syria.

In the following part, we will explore the role of the significant Iranian-backed militia, their areas of operation, fund, and organization, to better explain the complicated relations between these militias and the 1) Iran, 2) Syrian regime and 3) other non-state actors in Syria.

4.1 Liwa Abu al Fadl al Abbas:

Liwa Abu al Fadl al-Abbas is a Shiite militia linked to Moqtada Sadr (Al Jazeera:2014). This militia was created because of the rapid and cumulative efforts by the IRGC. The leaders describe the militia as an international movement to defend the Shi'a shrines. However, most of its recruits are from the Iraqi nationality, in addition to a small number of Syrian Shi'a, and it was one of the first militias that emerged on the Syrian battlefield.

The common feature between the Shiite militias, which were operating in Syria back then, was the purpose. Where we can notice that most of these militias started their roles in Syria by proclaiming that they were deployed to protect the Shiite shrines (Al Tamimi, 2019, p. 2); however, this role has soon extended to include other areas not limited around the shade shrines and support the Assad's regime in its war against rebels and Islamist factions managed by the end of 2013 to control vast areas all over Syria.

With the growing role of Liwa Abu al Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), several other militias were emerged from this brigade like and not limited to Liwa Dhu al Faqar, Liwa al-Imam Al Hussien, Liwa Assad Allah Al Ghalib, Rabid intervention forces, and most importantly, Asa'ib Ahl al Haqq.

4.2 The Rapid Intervention Forces:

Ahmad Al Hajji Al Sa'adi, an Iraqi member of (LAFA), operating in Al Sayyeda Zainab area, led this regiment. In 2014 when the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) controlled vast regions of Iraq, Ahmad Al Hajji moved to Iraq with several other militants to defend their homeland, and he created a new militia there to fight ISIS. In Syria, Al Hajji was replaced by Ahmad Abu Haqqi(Al Tamimi, 2017, p. 2).

In 2015 the Rapid Intervention Forces announced the formation of a new sub-group called the Martyrdom battalion (Kataib Al Shuhada'a), where this battalion was formed after the bomb attack that targeted Al Sayyeda Zainab area.

The primary role of the Rapid Intervention Forces was to defend the area of Sayyeda Zainab in Damascus, and they were also involved in the military operation in Rural Damascus and Dar'a provinces to support the regime forces in these two provinces.

4.3 Al Imam Al Hussien contingent:

Al-Imam Al Hussien contingent was established in early 2012 by Sheikh Amjad al Bahadali (Al Tamimi, 2019, p. 1); they do not recognize any relation with (LAFA); however, several reports and interviews with its militants indicated close coordination with the leaders and commanders of (LAFA).

Al-Imam Al Hussien contingent consists of both Syrian and Iraqi militants, and it was affiliated with the 4th Armored division led by Maher Al Assad, where this Armored division was in turn under a vast affiliation with Iran. The contingent received its finance and weapon support from the 4th Armored division (Al Tamimi, 2019, p. 2).

The contingent was like other similar formations, established to defend the Shiite holy shrine of Sayyeda Zainab. However, its role has soon expanded to participate in the battles with the regime forces in Rural Damascus, Dar'a, and Idleb.

4.4 Liwa Assad Allah Al Ghalib:

Assad Allah Al Ghalib militia was established in 2012 and led by Aqeel Naji Al Mousawi; it was also established to defend the Shiite holy shrine of Sayyeda Zainab in Damascus. According to Hassanain Naji Al Mousawi, the brother of Aqeel Al Mousawi, the militia did not participate only in defending the Shiite holy shrine of Sayyeda Zainab, but also took part in several battles in the Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus as well as supporting the Regime offensive operations in other provinces like Homs, Deir Ez Zor, Aleppo, and Lattakia (Al Tamimi, 2018, p. 2).

After the splinter of LAFA and the formation of several brigades, such as Liwa Assad Allah Al Ghalib, Iran started to cut its support to several militias for two reasons gradually. The first one was Iran's willingness to reorganize all the militias under its leadership, and the second reason was the Iranian financial difficulties in sponsoring the numerous militias as it could not do so back

then. And this is what the leader of Assad Allah Al Ghalib militia expressed in 2018 that they do not receive any funds or support neither from Iran nor any side. However, the relation between his militia and the air force intelligence branch proves the opposite, where this militia was in close association and cooperated closely with the air forces intelligence of the Syrian army.

In 2015 Liwa Assad Allah Al Ghalib participated in the battles of Lattakia countryside, specifically in Salma and Rabia'a areas, and the main sponsor of the militia during these battles according to Hssanain Al Mousawi was a pro-regime militia called Suqour Al Sahra'a (The Desert Hawks), which is a militia led by Muhammad Jabar and established in 2013 to assist the regime forces mainly in the battles of Lattakia countryside (Al Tamimi, 2018, p. 3–4).

4.5 Hezbollah:

Soon after, he visited Iran on 15/04/2013, where he met the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Leader of Al Quds corps Qassim Soleimani, Hassan Nasrallah, declared the involvement of the Iran-supported Shiite militia of Hezbollah in the Syrian war.

Even though the decision did not seem to be approved by all the high leaders of Hezbollah, it has still been made, and there is no retreat. Sheikh Subhi al Tufaily, a former leader of Hezbollah, said that intervention was ultimately an Iranian decision.

Even though the early involvement of Hezbollah militia in Syria was limited to providing advisors and supporting roles, Hezbollah's role in Syria significantly transformed in 2013. It was directly involved in combat activities on the Syrian regime side, where the first appearance of the group was approximately at the same time as the creation of Liwa Abu al Fadl al-Abbas in 2013, and back then, Hezbollah announced that their Intervention in Syria is to confront the Zionist and takfiri jihadists' plans in Syria (Suechika, 2018, p. 89–98).

After the victory in the battle of al-Qusayr in May 2013 (Nassief, 2013, p.1–2), Hezbollah activities in Syria significantly expanded. The participation of its fighter was not limited to the fighting near the Damascus and the Lebanese borders (Nassief, 2013, p. 3) but extended to support the Syrian regime forces in northern and eastern Syria, as Hezbollah deployed its fighter to the north of Syria, especially in Aleppo to confront the rapid expansion of ISIS-controlled areas in Syria and to support the Syrian regime forces in the ongoing battles against the rebel factions around Aleppo (Suechika, 2018, p. 89–98).

In October 2015, Hezbollah officially declared its involvement in the battles against ISIS in Syria, in which Hezbollah lost more than 1200 fighters during the fighting against what it called the takfiri jihadists and US proxies in Syria.

As Hezbollah militia has more than three decades of experience since the Iranian regime established it in the early 1980s, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war was not limited to assist the Syrian regime forces in the battles by the militia obtained more tasks during the first year of the war and was coordinating with the IRGC to establish more militias across Syria (Suechika, 2018, p. 89–98).

After the battle of Al-Qusayr, the Syrian regime sought to secure Aleppo city's surroundings to secure the road between Aleppo city and the regime pocket of Nubul and Az Zahraa. Hezbollah's participation in this campaign was expected to be similar to the battle of al-Qusayr. However, a commander of Hezbollah described their role in Aleppo battle in 2013 in a different way, where he stated that the battle would be led by the regime forces and members of the National Defence Forces (NDF), and the role of Hezbollah was to supervise and provide military tactical advice on how to coordinate and conduct the offensive (Jaber, 2013, p. 17–18). With the start of the military operations in Aleppo, several reports indicated the participant of Hezbollah's militants in the battles. However, those might be the advisors who operated on the frontlines during the operation, especially with the reports of the presence of Hezbollah's fighter in the surrounded pocket of Nubul and Az Zahraa¹ where they were responsible for the training of the National Defence Forces (NDF) which is a pro-regime militia consists mainly of the Shia 'a residents of these two villages that were responsible for defending the pocket (Corbeil, 2017, p. 2).

As the regime offensive in Aleppo failed, another role of Hezbollah started to emerge in the regime battles in the countryside of Homs, where a commander of Hezbollah characterized the group's involvement in Homs as more limited than in al-Qusayr. Hezbollah, he said, was providing special military assistance, including communications support, sniper fire, and support from Hezbollah's special forces (Prothero, 2013).

¹"Syria troops' preparing for Aleppo assault," BBC News, June 10, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22840728>

In Southern Syria, the military presence of Hezbollah was denied by its senior-level leadership till 2017. However, the death of one of the Iraqi leaders in Dar'a confirmed the presence of Hezbollah and other pro-regime forces in Southern Syria, and the role of these militias in addition to supporting the regime forces in the area was to convince the Druze community in As Sweida to fight on the regime side and join its militias.

In 2015 Hezbollah started to take a leading role in the battles on the Syrian soil and make offensive decisions on behalf of the Syrian army, as what happened in the battle of Qalamoun in Rural Damascus, where Hezbollah coordinated an attack with the regime forces and the Lebanese army. On the other hand, to control Al Qalamoun area adjacent to the Lebanese borders, supported by the armies of two countries, Hezbollah had the upper hand in the negotiations with the rebel and ISIS fighters who agreed to surrender and to be safely redeployed under Hezbollah and the Syrian army's protection to eastern Syria in exchange for declaring the approximate area where they buried several Hezbollah's fighters who were killed in previous battles with the Islamic State fighters. The participation in this battle granted Hezbollah and subsequently Iran an increased political power inside Lebanon in addition to a crucial role in the Syrian war.

In conclusion, Hezbollah undertook further and more complicated roles than supporting the Syrian regime in combat missions; as we saw, Hezbollah was responsible for training several pro-regime militias, including NDF, also establishing a parallel group like the Syrian Hezbollah.

In August 2012, the US government stated that Hezbollah had been involved in the Syrian war since 2011 and trained Syrian army personals and facilitated the training of the Syrian army and pro-regime militias by Iran (Sullivan, 2014, p. 4).

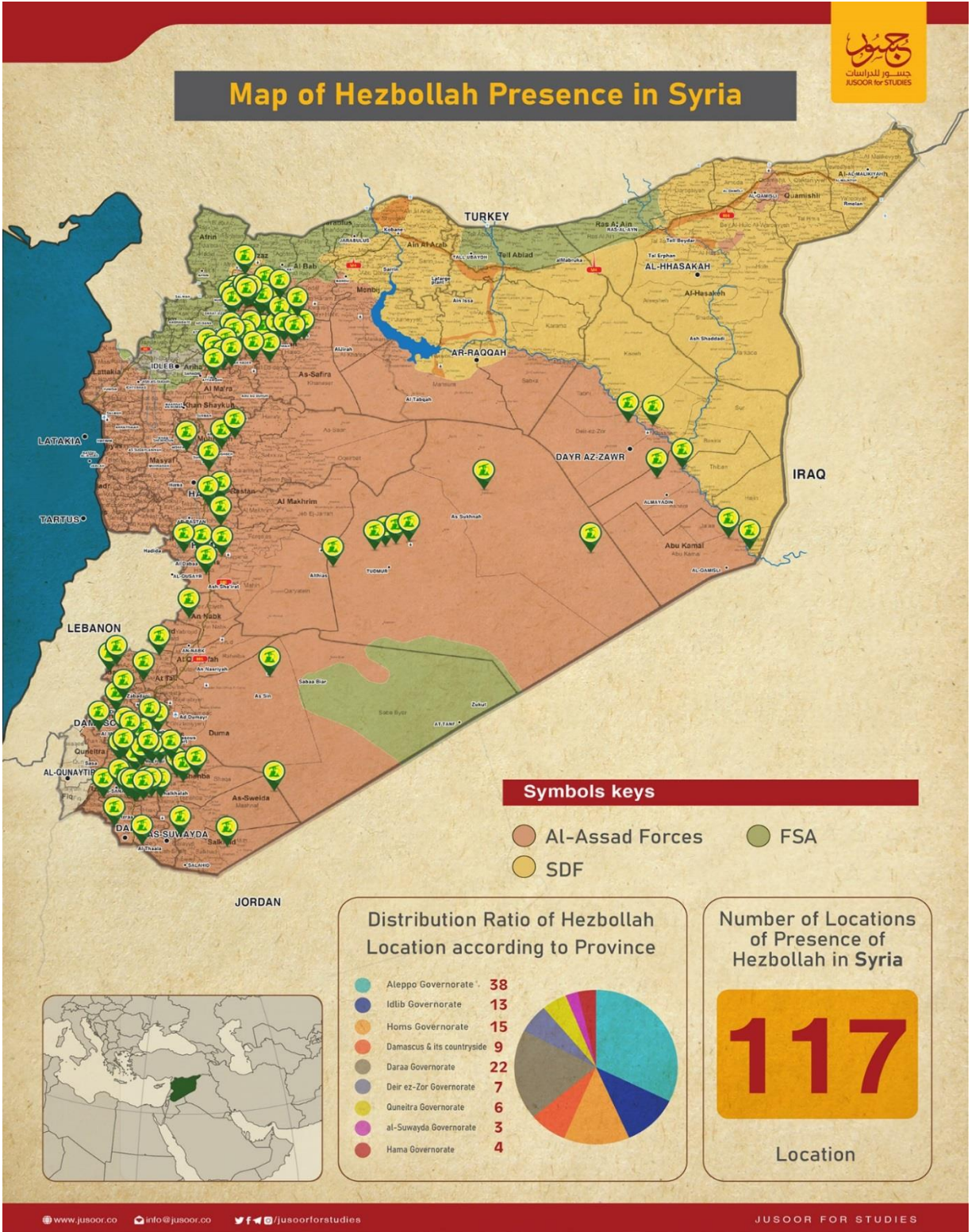
Additionally, Hezbollah provided training to the National Defence Forces (NDF) and other Iraqi pro-regime militias, which was crucial to these newly established militias with no combat experience.

Hezbollah militants have also led Syrian and Iraqi PGMS, and in some cases, units of the Syrian army (Blanford, 2013, p. 2) during the battles in several areas across Syria as these troops proved unreliable and lack of experience, training, and discipline.

Hezbollah was part of the joint command centre based in Damascus and included the Syrian army and IRGC. This centre was responsible for coordinating the military operations across the whole of Syria, indicating the crucial role of the Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria.

Map 1 below shows the locations of Hezbollah bases in Syria, and we can see that Hezbollah has an intensive presence around Aleppo and along the Syrian Lebanese borders, with several bases in central and eastern Syria near the Iraqi borders with Syria.





Map 1 Hezbollah presence in Syria

Source: (ASI, Kilany, 2020, P.6)

4.6 Liwa Fatemiyoun:

The pro-regime Afghan militants in Syria were initially part of Liwa Abu al Fadl al-Abbas militia; however, the Afghan militants soon after the end of 2012 became a part of a new militia called Liwa Fatemiyoun. IRGC established Fatemiyoun Brigade from the Afghan migrant Shiite militants based in Iran (Hauch, 2019, p. 1) to defend the Shiite Shrines in Syria and support Al Assad's regime (Hauch, 2019, p. 4).

Despite declaring that the newly established Liwa Fatemiyoun recruits Shiite militants from all nationalities, the aftermaths of its fighters and "martyrs" who killed in Syria indicate that the militia targets a particular sect and nationality (Smyth, 2014, p. 2–4). The brigade was led by Ali Rida Tawassoli, who was close to Qassim Soleimani. Tawassoli was killed in 2013 during the battles of Dar'a in Southern Syria.

The number of Fatemiyoun brigade militants at the beginning of the Syrian war was only hundreds of militants. However, with the increasing economic inducement, more Afghan Shiites started to join the militia in Syria, and in 2017 the estimated number of Liwa Fatemiyoun militants was 20 thousand militants (FIGHTERS, 2018, p.5).

Members of the IRGC trained the militants of Liwa Fatemiyoun in Iran or Syria (Smyth, 2014, p. 4), not only the training, but Iran was also responsible for paying the salaries of the militants of this brigade.

In 2015, they were involved heavily in the battles of Dar'a and Quneitra to repel the opposition and Islamist factions' attack on the regime positions in these two provinces².

In 2018, Zuhair Mujahid, a leader from Fatemiyoun stated that the brigade had lost more than 2000 "martyrs" and 8000 injured militants during the past five years (Times, 2018).

Iran may have reason to play up the death toll among Liwa Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun, perhaps assuming that it will mobilize the Afghan and Pakistani communities from which they draw their fighters.

²Liwa al-Fatemiyoun. (n.d.). Retrieved May 07, 2021, from <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/group/180/liwa-al-fatemiyoun>.

Liwa Fatemiyoun is a militia that is driven by a mix of ideology and carrot/stick incentives; for example, some Afghan residents of Iran can get full citizenship if they promise to sign up for the brigade; in 2015, several reports indicated that Iran is providing the families of the killed militants in Syria the Iranian citizenship (Rasmussen & Nader, 2016), while other militants are forced to join through conscription.

"Between 5,000 and 12,000 Afghans have participated in such units since they were established within the Fatemiyoun Division of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corp. Most are refugees or workers living in Iran, but hundreds come from poor, ethnic Hazara and Shiite communities in this windswept city near the Iranian border, as well as other regions of Afghanistan" (Washington post: 2018).

In 2021, several reports indicated an increased recruitment operation by Liwa Fatemiyoun in different areas of Syria (SOHR: 2021)³ targeting the Syrians mainly in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, by offering a high salary to exploit the deteriorating economic situation of the residents of these areas.

Same sources stated that Liwa Fatemiyoun has recently become the backbone of the pro-Iranian militias in Syria after the diminishing role played by Hezbollah in Syria (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

³In 70 days: Afghan "Liwa Fatemiyoun" militia recruits nearly 750 young men and men from eastern Aleppo countryside, exploiting dire living conditions in Syria • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. (2021, April 11). <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/213453/>.

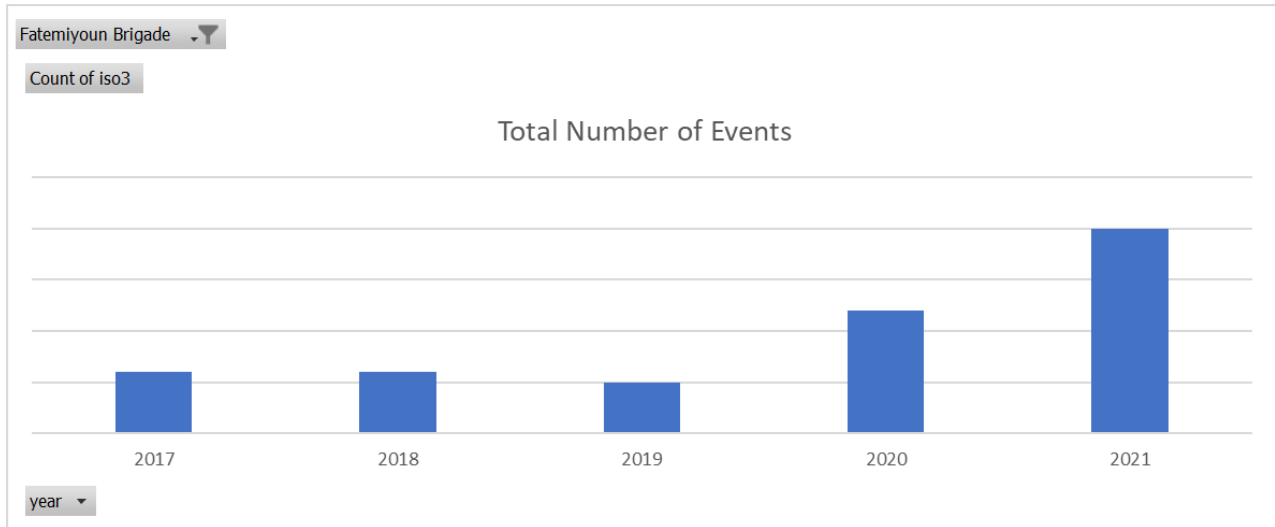


Figure 1 Total number of events involved Fatemiyoun brigade between 2017-2021

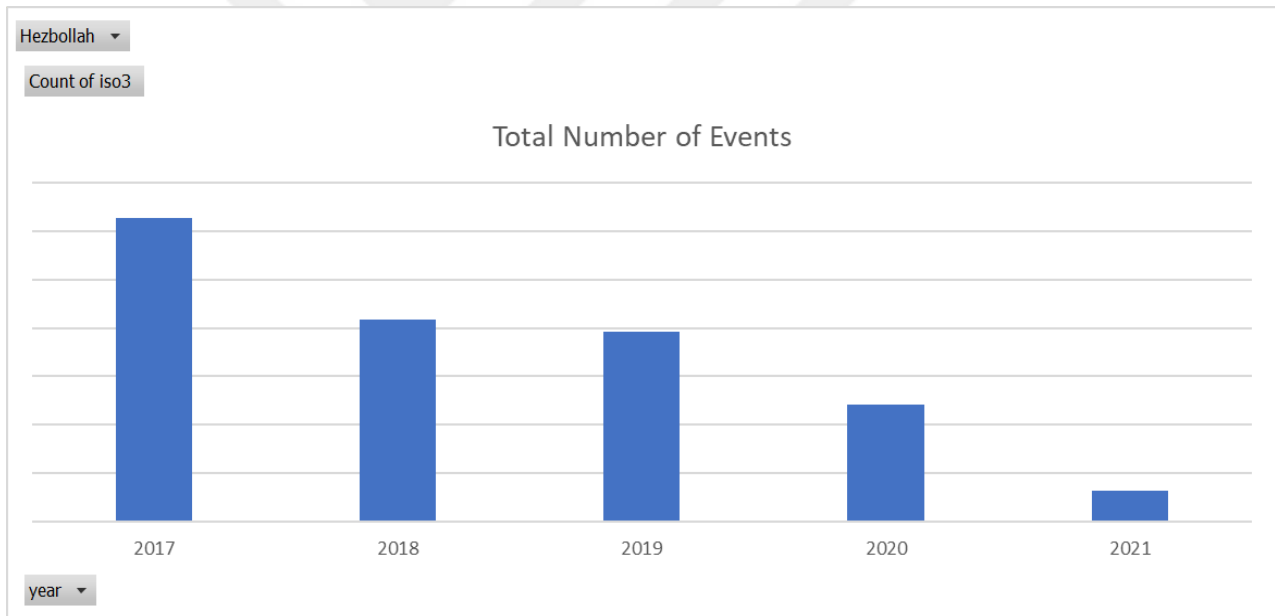


Figure 2 Total number of events involving Hezbollah in Syria between 2017-2021

Liwa Fatemiyoun participated in the battles across different Syria provinces, especially Idleb, Aleppo, Deir Ez Zor, and Rural Damascus. However, the main concentration of the brigade is currently in Southern Syria. Where the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) published a report in February 2021 saying that the members of the Afghan Shiite militia of Liwa Fatemiyoun started to buy lands and properties in Southern Syria and attempting to recruit the residents of this

region, promising to provide higher salaries than what they get by joining the Syrian army, at the same time their service in Liwa Fatemiyoun will substitute their military service in the ranks of the Syrian army.

In 2021 and after the tension and clashes between the regime forces and the US-backed Kurdish troops operating under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Liwa Fatemiyoun managed to recruit several militants in Al Hasakeh province. Several Sources⁴ reported that several NDF militants joined the ranks of Fatemiyoun brigade during this campaign. This step can be seen as an attempt by Iran to consolidate its influence in these areas to confront the Russian attempts to keep the militias operating in Al Hasakeh under its influence. Which might explain the Russian airstrike in February, which killed two militants of Liwa Fatemiyoun in Deir Ez Zor province, which is adjacent to Al Hasakeh, back then, Russian forces said that the airstrike accidentally targeted Liwa Fatemiyoun militants (ACLED: 2021).

In the years 2020 and 2021, Israeli air forces launched several airstrikes targeting Liwa Fatemiyoun, in Deir Ez Zor province on the Iraqi borders to reduce the capacity of pro-Iranian militia in the eastern and southern area and prevent the establishment of the safe corridor connecting Iran with Lebanon.

4.7 National Defence Forces:

The National Defence Forces were one of the first militias established soon after the regime forces started to lose several areas in Syria to the rebel and Islamic factions and were called the people's committees (Kajjo, 2020). In late 2012 the IRGC played a prominent role in regrouping the Syrian militants that are not part of the Syrian army and established the militia of National Defence Forces (Kajjo, 2020). The NDF was supported by both the Syrian army and the IRGC in terms of providing salaries and weapons (Sly, 2013).

The role of this militia was initially to defend the villages, towns, and cities (Khaddour, 2014, p. 1) they are initially formed in order to relieve pressure on the Syrian army, which was stretched across several frontlines in several provinces, and the NDF was originally affiliated with the

⁴Nearly 550 people recruited in five weeks: "Liwa Fatemiyoun" continues recruiting young and adult males in Al-Qamishli and Al-Hasakah • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. (2021, February 22). <https://www.syriahr.com/en/206040/>.

regime intelligence branches namely the Air forces intelligence and the military intelligence⁵ before being organized and supported by Iran as well.

Back in 2012 and 2013, the National Defence Forces (NDF) played a crucial role in improving the military situation in Syria when the Syrian regime was nearing its collapse.

Once it was established, the number of NDF militants was estimated by 60000 fighters and soon increased to 100000 fighters in August 2013 and became by far the largest pro-regime militia in Syria and operates across several provinces across the country. The NDF has a women battalion called the Lionesses of the National Defence⁶; the role of this battalion was mainly to provide support on the second frontlines as snipers and to do logistic tasks, where they repeatedly were involved in the battles around Damascus city, particularly in Jobar and Al Qaboun neighbourhoods⁷.

Even though the Syrian regime established the NDF with Iranian and Hezbollah support, the militia seemed to act autonomously in Syria. This is chiefly because of the large number of militants and the fact that the NDF is not part of any security or military apparatus in Syria.

This situation yielded a unique position in Syria, where there were several NDF units or groups in the different provinces of Syria, but they are not linked to a central command. In other words, there are different NDF groups of Damascus, Lattakia, Aleppo, and Deir Ez Zor, and each of these groups was led by a different leader; this gave the NDF as one group the ability to be involved in more military operations across Syria as separate groups.

In Damascus, the NDF militia was led and sponsored by Fadi Saqr (Lund, 2015, p. 2–3), also known as Fadi Ahmed, was an employee at the Consumer Corporation in Damascus, but originally from Jablah city in the countryside of Lattakia, Fadi Saqr was known for his close ties with influential Alawite political and business leaders in Syria. Therefore, Saqr is largely deemed

⁵ حمزة, ي (2019, March 17). "الدفاع الوطني" في سوريا ودور "الباسيج وفيلق القدس" في تشكيله". Retrieved May 11, 2021, from <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/arab-world/2015/08/01/national-defense-syria-role-basij-qods-force-in-moans>.

⁶Liz Sly and Ahmad Ramadan, "The All-Female Militias of Syria", Washington Post, 25 January 2013. Available from www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/01/25/the-all-female-militias-of-syria.

⁷سوريات يشاركن بدور رمزي محدود في قوات الأسد (2013, June 06). Retrieved May 11, 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/oegtp-syria-wmn-mn6-idARACAE9B2QLB20130606>.

untouchable, and in August 2020, the US department of treasury designated Fadi Saqr as part of the Caesar-related Sanctions on the Syrian Officials who are part of the regime.

In Lattakia, Hilal Al Assad, whose father was a half-brother of the late president of Syria Hafez Al Assad, was the commander of the NDF in the province, where the NDF played a significant role in repelling the rebel and Islamist offensive on the villages of Lattakia countryside in 2012 and 2013. Hilal Al Assad stayed at his positions as the commander of the NDF militia in Latakia until he died in 2014, where he had an official funeral (Lund, 2014, p.1).

The NDF militia was active in several other provinces, as mentioned. It consisted of a mix of Syrians from different sects (Lund, 2015, p. 1–2), contrary to popular belief that it only consists of Syrians of the Alwite minorities that Bashar Al Assad is from originally.

With the increased activities of the NDF militia, accusations of war crimes had risen, where several reports indicated that NDF militants were the primary perpetrator of several massacres across Syria and especially in Homs.⁸

The NDF was also accused of being behind several looting and property destruction events in Syria, as this act was a common activity of these militias after controlling a village, town, city, or even a neighbourhood during the first years of the Syrian war and continue till now.

In order to contain the NDF, the Syrian regime tried to institutionalize this militia and include it in the Syrian army, where the Syrian regime sought to control the activities of such militia that might constitute a source of threat to the regime power when the war wind down. Additionally, the Syrian regime was also trying to take these militias as a shield in case of any future accountability for the war crimes that took place in Syria. We saw the regime's efforts when Hilal Al Assad managed to become the commander of the NDF in Lattakia, which was considered as a step to keep this militia close to the Syrian regime. However, the regime's efforts to do so were not successful, as this militia is still considered an autonomous body that operates alongside the Syrian army but not under its complete control. The implications of this were evident in 2018 when the NDF and other pro-Iranian militias entered Afrin to support the Kurdish fighters of the YPG, where the NDF played an additional role in supporting the regime forces, where it intended to support a non-state

⁸Homs, Syria: Update. (2015, December 02). Retrieved May 11, 2021, from <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/video/2011/11/10/homs-syria-update>.

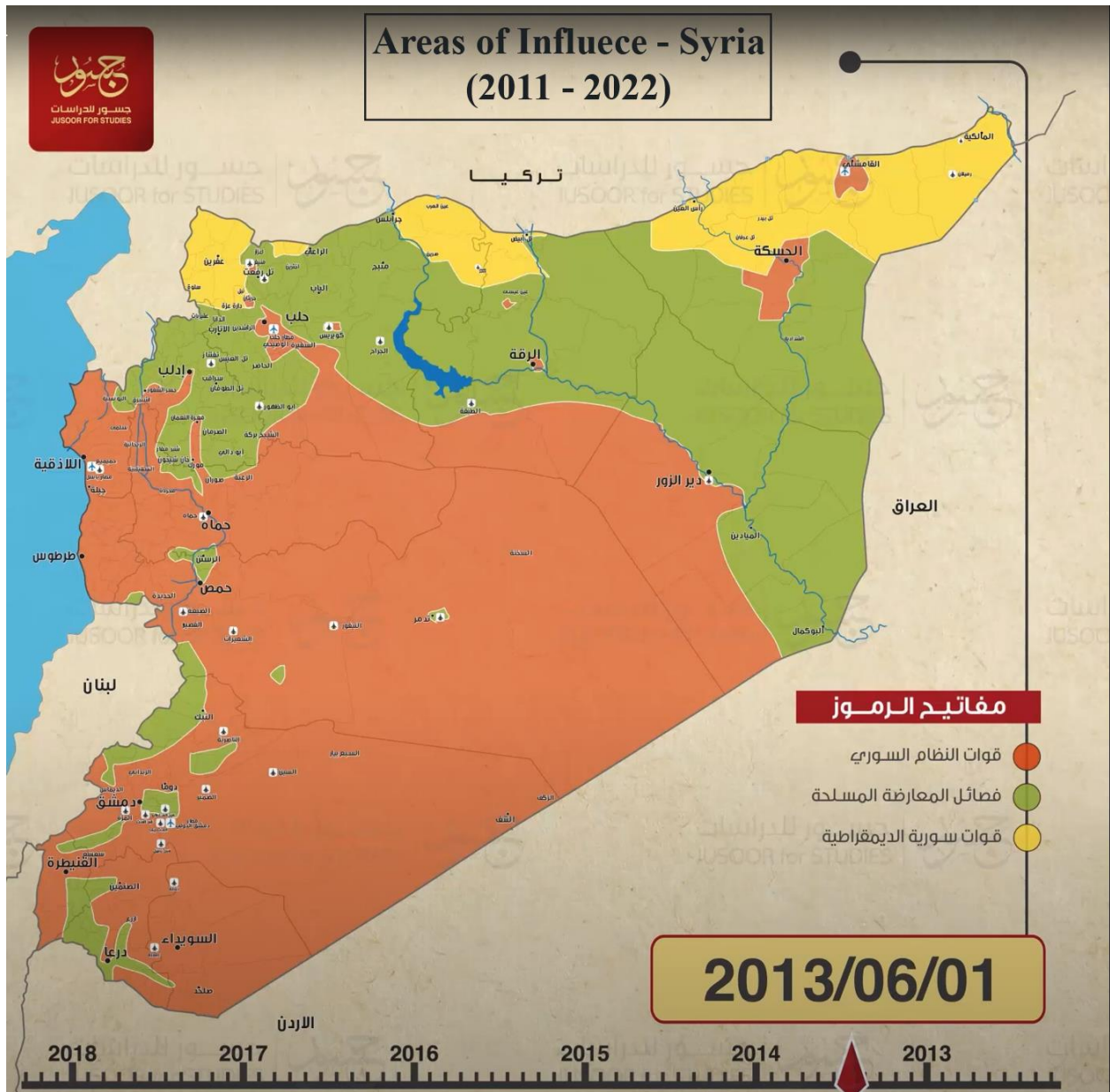
actor that was controlling wide areas of Syria. In 2018 the Turkish president announced that any group aiding the terrorists of the YPG in Afrin is a legitimate target of the Turkish forces, and there will be consequences mainly that the operation in Afrin was discussed with the presidents of Russian and Iran (Kelly, 2013).

The Assad's regime took additional steps in its attempt to institutionalize this militia and to highlight the Syrian regime's struggle further to ensure its loyalty, "Assad decreed in 2014 that 50 percent of all state jobs must henceforth be reserved for the families of martyrs from the security forces and militias". As a way of ensuring the loyalty of the regime's most important constituency, it makes perfect sense, but it also shows that Assad is giving up on the reintegration of rebel-held Syria into the state apparatus. Thus, entrenching himself among the militias and what remains of his army, he has precious little left to offer anyone else" (Lund, 2015, p. 4).

The Iranian strategy in sponsoring and recruiting militias was not limited to supporting foreign or local pro-regime militias. It's clear that Iran was also supporting and using the state actor as well; this Iranian strategy focused on specific divisions or brigades of the Military forces of Syria, like the 4th armoured division led by Maher Al Assad, the brother of the head of the Syrian regime. Several cases provided support and training to the Tiger Forces led by Suhail Al Hassan, which has later joined the 5th corps of the Syrian army that Russia created and ended the loyalty bonds with Iran.

This strategy of Iran is not only contrasting the earlier studies of the proxy War, which assumed that the proxy warfare is limited to support only non-state actors. However, now we are witnessing a whole new strategy in using the state actor as well to achieve the goals of another foreign state actor like the relation between the IRGC and the 4th division and the Tiger Forces.

The influence of the pro-Iranian militias on the situation in Syria was apparent when comparing the control maps of Syria in 2013 and 2015 (see Map 2, Map 3, and Map 4) and the role that the pro-Iranian played in supporting the regime forces to regain control of most of Syria. In 2013 the factions of the Free Syrian army were in control of vast areas of Syria (Trenin, 2013, p. 7–8), including approximately all the borders' areas of Syria, including the borders with Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon, leaving Assad only small areas along the borders with Lebanon and Turkey, in a case that can only be described as a besiegement.



Map 2 The control map of Syria as of June 2013, before the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

Source (Jussor for Studies Centre, 2021)

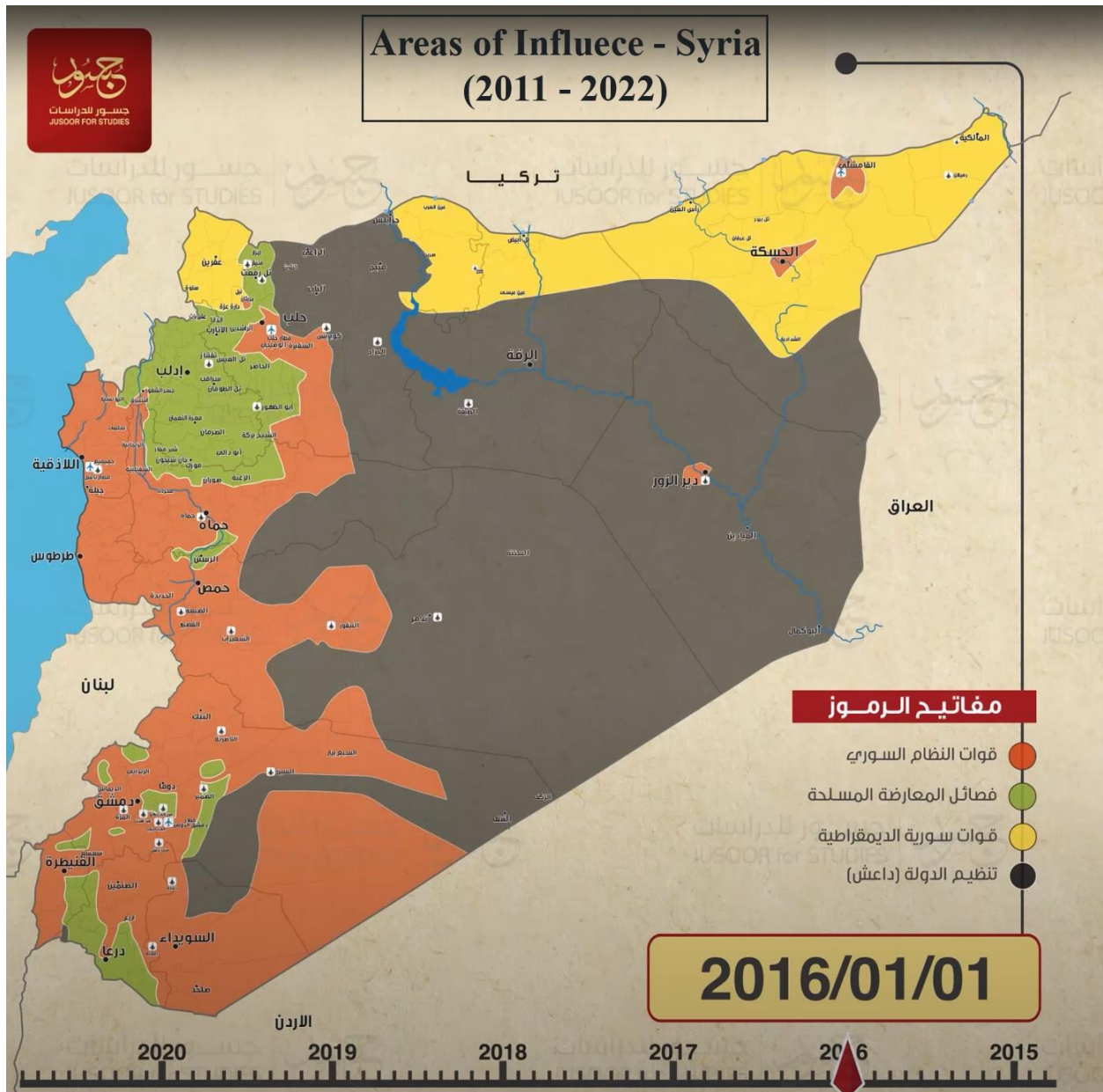
Jussor⁹ Centre for Studies is an independent institution specialized in the management of information, the preparation of studies and research on political and social matters, the Syrian Arab Republic, and the Middle East region in general.

⁹<https://www.jusoor.co/en>

However, with the emergence of radical Islamist groups in Syria like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014¹⁰ and Jabhat Al Nusra (Al Qaeda branch in Syria), the scene in Syria has totally transformed into a more complex situation in which ISIS managed to expel the rebel factions from most of the north and north-eastern Syria and create a new source of threat to the Assad's regime and the rebel factions at the same time (Lister, 2017, p. 125).

The emergence of these radical Islamist groups has given Iran the reason to advocate its intervention in Syria and recruit more militants from all over the region to join its militias in its war against the jihadists who want to control Syria and destroy the holy shrines of Sayyeda Zainab in Damascus.

¹⁰Specia, M. (2019, March 20). The Evolution of ISIS: From Rogue State to Stateless Ideology. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/world/middleeast/isis-history-facts-islamic-state.html>

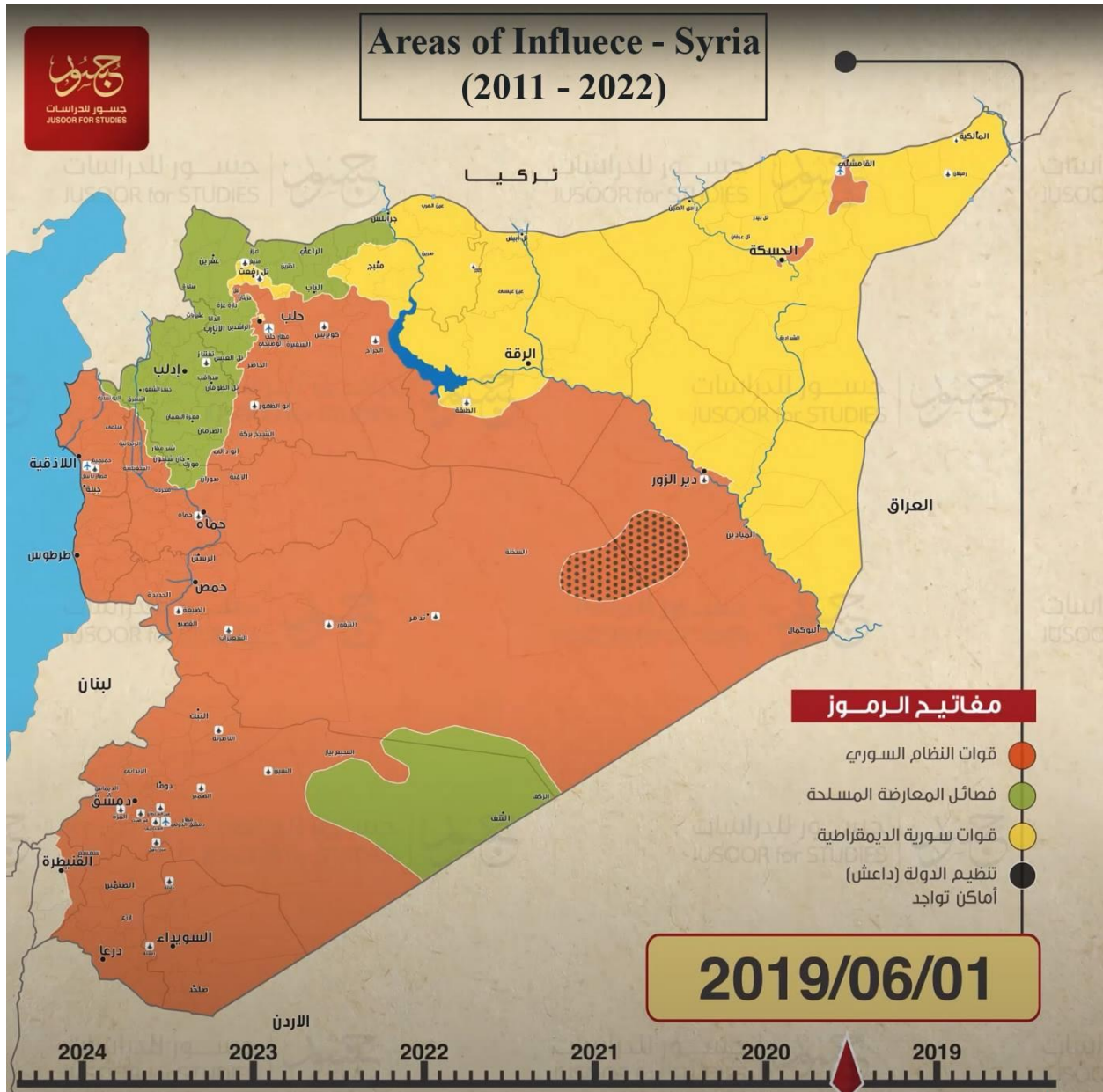


Map 3 The control map in Syria as of January 2016, 3 years after the emergence of the Islamic State and three months after the Russian intervention in Syria.

Source (Jussor for Studies Centre, 2021)

Following these huge gains by the rebel and the Islamist groups, Iran has recruited an army of Shi'a fighters to support its ally Bashar Al Assad and to extend its arc of influence from Iran to the Mediterranean. Hezbollah was the first pro-Iranian proxy in Syria, the Shi'a fighters of Hezbollah militia who were funded and trained by the Iranian were diverted from their main mission in confronting Israel to save the Syrian regime instead when the Syrian revolution was militarized.

Since then, the Iranian militia, with the Russian support (as of September 2015), played a significant role in regaining the control of several key positions across Syria, especially on the Lebanese borders (Al Qusayr and Al Qalamoun Battles) and other strategic areas for Iran in Syria like Damascus and Dar'a.



Map 4 The control map of Syria as of June 2019, as the regime forces are controlling the majority of Syria.

Source (Jussor for Studies Centre, 2021)

In Rural Damascus, Iran saw an important and strategic area of interest, especially the area surrounding Damascus International airport. The main reason behind that was the Iranian willingness to secure the accessibility to the Iranian weapons shipments to support its militias in Syria and Lebanon (Levitt, 2019, p. 1–9).

To do so, Iran had a heavy presence in the battles of Rural Damascus and mainly in the Eastern Ghouta area, and that was clear even before the campaign on the Eastern Ghouta, where one of the main pro-Iranian militias, the NDF, was the main militias that supporting the regime forces in all of the battles in this area. When the regime started its military campaign in February 2018 with the support of the Russian forces, the Iranian militias played a crucial role in this campaign as well.

In this campaign, the pro-Iranian militias participated in more than 45% of the total number of battle events in Rural Damascus, giving us a clearer picture of the extent of how these militias were involved in the battles.

Following the control of Rural Damascus, the Iranian militias started to play a different role in the area in order to consolidate its achievements. The pro-Iranian militias increased their presence in pre-selected areas across Syria, such as Damascus, Deir Ez Zor, and southern Syria.

Figure 3 below shows the count of Battle events in Damascus and Rural Damascus in which the presence of pro-Iranian militias is recorded or not.

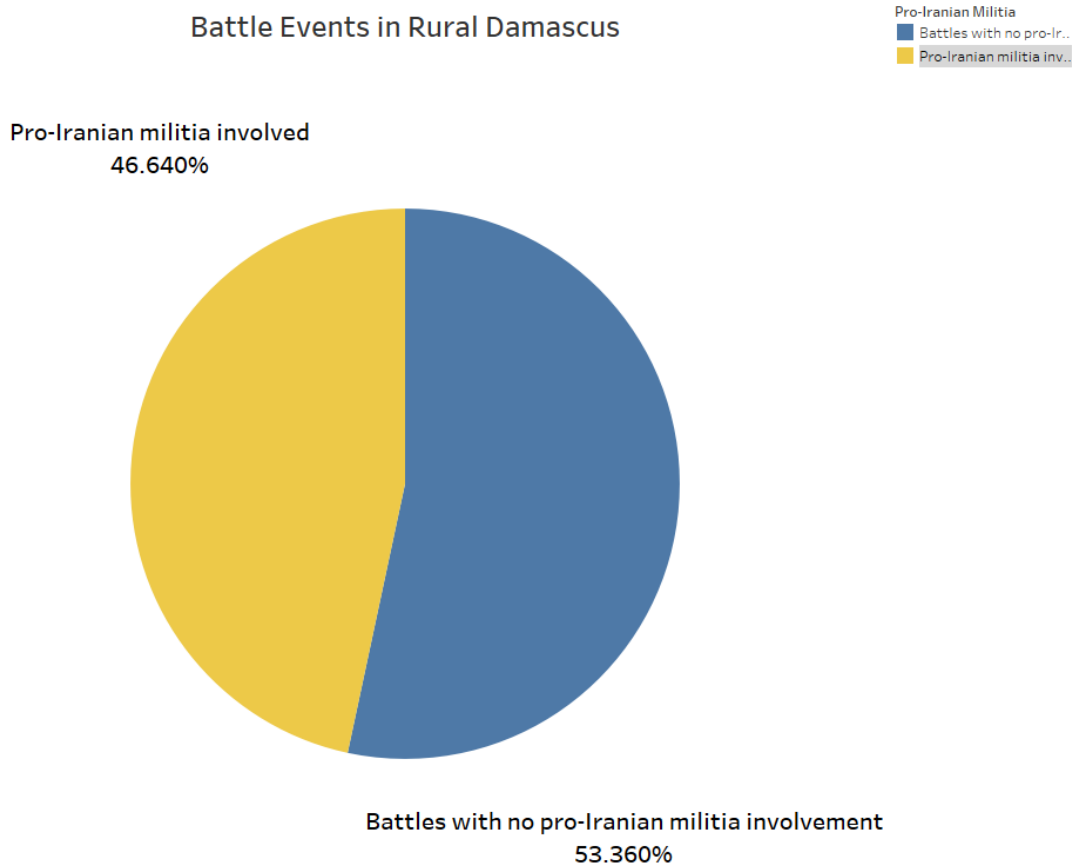


Figure 3 The participation of the pro-Iranian militias in Damascus and Rural Damascus provinces.

Source (ACLED, 2021)

In Damascus, several foreign and local militias supported by Iran, such as Hezbollah, Liwa Dhu Al Faqar, in addition to the IRGC have a heavy presence in the province and its countryside; these militias are responsible for securing the vital positions of Iran such as Sayyeda Zainab, and Damascus International airport.

The International airport of Damascus is considered the most important base of the pro-Iranian militias. Additionally, these militias have several other bases in Rural Damascus, such as the base in Al Keswa town south of Damascus, and this point considers to be a storage point during the transportation of the weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the Israeli air forces have repeatedly targeted this base (Al Abdullah, Al Baik, 2021, p.4).

Additionally, the pro-Iranian militias have several other bases and command centres in the southern provinces, such as the Zaynab base in Dara'a, which consider Hezbollah's central command centre, Fatemiyoun brigade in southern Syria.

In the East of Syria, the Iranian and pro-Iranian proxies have several bases as well, and eastern Syria considers to be a vital area for the Iranian proxies since it is the gate to link the pro-Iranian militias between Iraq and Syria. To keep this area under its influence, several command and training centres were established there. In 2019, a report¹¹ from Jussor for Studies⁴⁰ listed the Iranian bases in eastern Syria, where the Iranian forces dominate the whole western bank of the Euphrates River with several command centres for the IRGC, NDF, Fatemiyoun, and other pro-Iranian militias.

The main bases of these militias are located in Al-Bukamal city on the border with Iraq, where Iran established a considerable command and logistic centre for these militias.



Figure 4 Imam Ali Iranian Military Base in Al Bukamal

Source (ISI, 2020)

¹¹https://www.jusoor.co/public/details/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B7-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-01-08-2020/741/ar?fbclid=IwAR3VisyJIZPUPRsEewyBiXE75pUkThFLW7OurT5F97x_Zdpxq6XLgzoPHQ

ISI¹² is an open-Source website that provide space-based persistent surveillance solutions, including development of mission effective satellite systems, AI based intelligence solutions and multi satellite command and control ground systems designed for the operation of large-scale high revisit satellite constellations.

This base is meant to connect the Iranian bases in eastern Syria with other areas of the presence of these militias to transport weapons and militants, especially in Damascus and Homs on the Lebanese Borders.

Similar to other Iranian bases in Syria, the Imam Ali base was hit several times by the Israeli warplanes to limit the capacity of these militias in transporting missiles and advanced weapons to these militias, which are considered to be a source of threat to Israel.



Figure 5 Imam Ali Base After the Israeli Airstrikes

Source (ISI, 2020)

Additionally, pro-Iranian militias established several other bases along the western bank of the Euphrates River on the border between the US-Supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); these

¹²<https://www.imagesatintl.com/>

bases include the base of Fatemiyoun militia in Al Ashara town and Zainabiyoun Base in Al Quriyah, while the NDF forces are taking Al Mayadeen city as its command centre in the area. Several other command centres and bases of the Iranian and pro-Iranian militias were established across Syria. Like in Aleppo and Hama, the role of these command centres is to provide support when needed for the Syrian army in case of any offensive on greater Idlib pocket or to provide a defensive role in case of any attacks of the rebel factions on the Syrian army points in the same area. Similar to what happened in the last military campaign of the regime forces in greater Idlib¹³, where these militias played a significant role in the attacking forces with the support of the Russian air forces.

The Same scenario as in Rural Damascus was repeated in Dar'a, However, with an additional orchestrator to this campaign which is Russia. In contrast (as we will see in the third chapter), Russia ended this campaign in an unusual way to the rest of the rebel-controlled areas, where the Russian agreed with the rebel factions to reconcile with the regime forces and stay in the areas they previously controlled and later, several members of these factions, joined the newly created 5th Assault corps, under the regime forces and include the tiger forces which became the military hand of the Russians on the ground as well as several other members of the rebel factions creating what it seems to be a militia disguised in the military forces of Syria uniform.

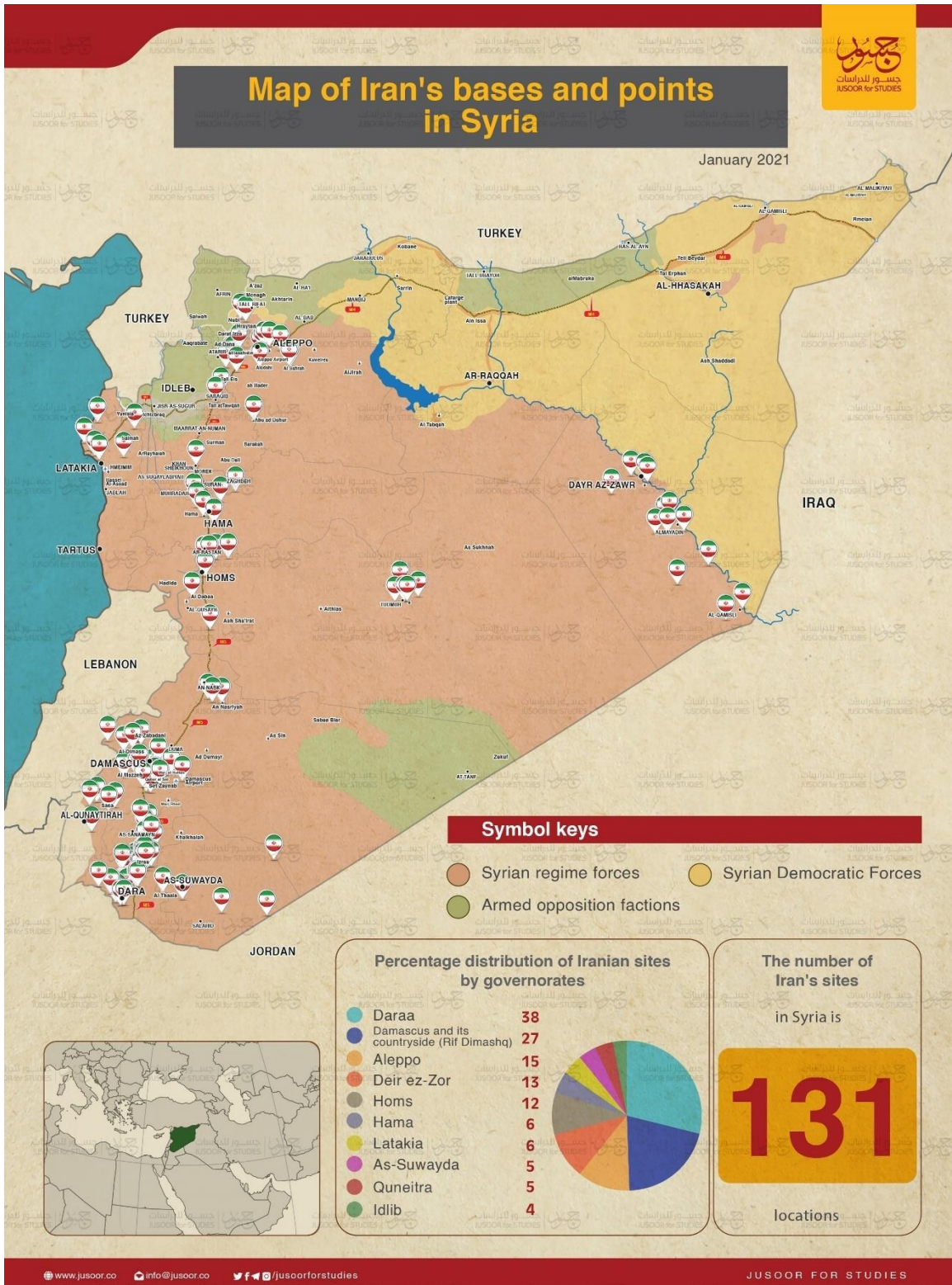
Because of the de facto situation in Dar'a, which was engineered by the Russian¹⁴, the southern provinces, especially Dar'a, remained a conflict arena between Russia and Iran in which both sides are seeking to keep this region as its area of influence, as we will see in the third chapter

This situation resulted in several confrontations between the pro-Iranian forces, including the 4th Armored division and several intelligence branches, namely the military and the air forces Intelligence and the rebel factions who joined the 5th Assault corps military campaign on Dara'a in July 2018.

Map 5 below shows the approximate location of the Iranian bases in Syria. Dar'a and Rural Damascus provinces contain a higher number of these bases, with 37 and 22 bases in these two provinces.

¹³<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51413260>

¹⁴<https://www.dw.com/en/syria-civilians-return-home-to-daraa-after-russia-brokered-ceasefire/a-44579556>



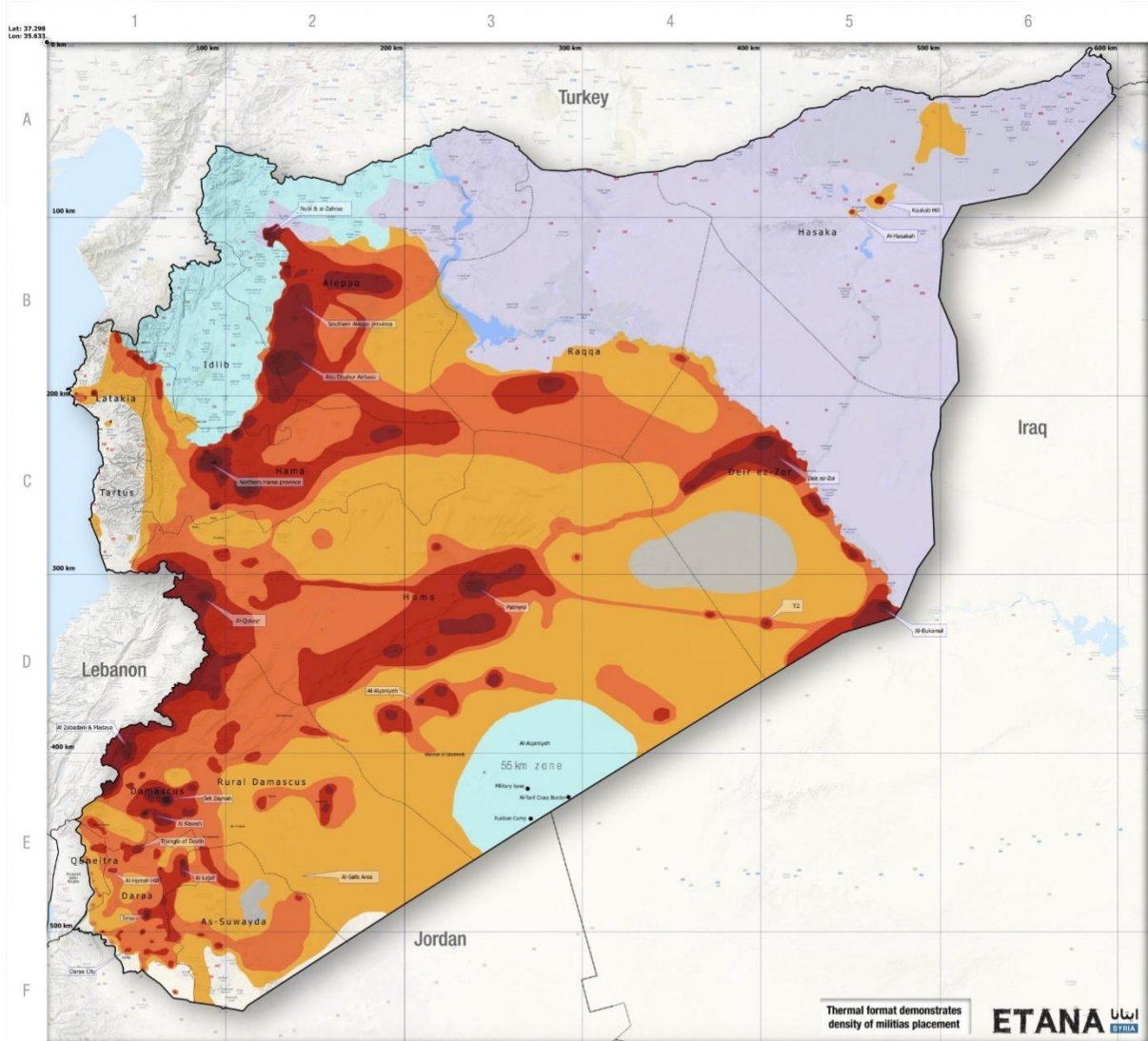
Map 5 The bases and Points of the Iranian forces in Syria

Source: (ASI, Kilany, 2020, p.5)

As the conflict in Syria started to wind down, the Iranian proxies began to reposition themselves, along the area extended from Al Bukamal city on the Syrian-Iraqi borders in the east of Syria to Al Quneitra and Homs on the Israeli and Lebanese borders, respectively, securing the road connecting Iraq with Lebanon through Syria, which is the goal that the Iranians has always sought to achieve since the first day of their intervention.

The Iranian incentives to secure its arc of influence does not mean that the pro-Iranian militias were not involved in the battles in other areas of Syria far from this road like in Aleppo and Idleb since keeping Bashar Al Assad in power in Syria has also been an important goal for the Iranians as well. However, these militias will eventually follow the Iranian strategy in Syria in securing the corridor to the Mediterranean, and they are not committed to the Assad plan of liberating every inch of Syria.

Map 6 below shows the thermal presence of the pro-Iranian militias as of the 23rd of June 2019, where we can see that these militias have a heavy presence in most of the regime-controlled areas and particularly on the Iraqi and Lebanese borders as well as in Aleppo, and this clearly shows how Iran is prioritizing its goals in Syria as we discussed above in securing the roads linking Iraq with Lebanon through Syria.



Map Legend

- Total control**
Approximately 2000 militia per 10km²
- Majority in the area**
Approximately 250 militia per 10km²
- Stable presence in the area**
Approximately 50 militia per 10km²
- Distribution spread out in the area**
Approximately 10 militia per 10km²
- Fluctuating presence**
- Possible presence**
- Opposition + Islamist forces**
- Kurdish militias**
- ISIS influence**

Presence of Iranian-Backed Militias Across Syria

23rd June 2019

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Map 6 The heat map of the pro-Iranian militias' activities in Syria as of June 2019.

Source (Etana, 2019)

Etana is an independent organization authentically linked to the Syrian social fabric while reaching the highest political levels, and it serves as a civil & diplomatic service for Syrians who want to live with freedom, dignity & justice.

In parallel to the military intervention, and might be more dangerous in its impact, Iran's hidden intervention was the least visible and more effective in the long term. This unobtrusive intervention includes controlling the most critical institutions in the Assad's regime, especially the political, military, and security institutions that govern the decision and its implementation force in Syria¹⁵. Iran has significant control over these institutions through the regime's head, his assistants, and senior army and security officers; through them, Tehran extends its hands to the rest of the areas where the Iranians have corrupted influential officials and employees, rendering the Iranian interests in the regime's institutions a certain thing.

Iran didn't rely only on the military influence of its proxies in Syria but also used these proxies to influence the cultural side of the Syrians. And to do so, Iran has started a huge campaign in all of its areas of influence across Syria to convert the Sunni Syrians to Shiism, which will grant Iran a permanent foothold in Syria even in case its militias were eventually expelled out of the country, as Iran has the ultimate influence on the Shiite population anywhere in the Middle East. It is worth mentioning here that this was one of the most significant concerns of Hafez Al Assad during his long relationship with the Iranian Regime since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. It seems, however, that the urging need of his son Bashar Al Assad to any form of support during the first years of war has ultimately forced him to this decision.

As we mentioned before, Iran has a heavy presence in Rural Damascus, southern Syria, along the Lebanese borders, and after the defeat of IS in 2018, Iran has maintained a significant presence in Eastern Syria. Through its militias, Iran has been trying to have its cultural and religious influence through spreading the Shiism in these areas where it can be seen that several Iranian culture centres were established in Rural Damascus and Deir Ez Zor, and other regions of Syria. These centres offered colossal assistance to the Syrians who have been suffering from the war on several levels, including the economic level, to convert them from Sunni to Shiism. The Iranian assistance took several forms, from cash support to offering the Syrians to study in the Iranian universities.

According to Anchal Vohraa Beirut-based columnist for Foreign Policy and a freelance TV correspondent and commentator on the Middle East: "But it's not only through arms that Iran has

¹⁵Sara, F. (2021, April 12). تدخل إيران العميق في سوريا. الشرق الاوسط.

secured its arc of influence from Tehran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Over the last few years, as the military conflict has subsided, Iran has expanded its cultural influence in the war-torn nation to encourage Sunnis to convert to Shiism or at the very least soften their attitudes toward their sectarian rivals. Foreign Policy spoke to recent converts and their friends inside regime-held Syria who said that the economic collapse in Syria made it hard to ignore the perks Iran offered. Iran is handing out cash to needy Syrians, a heavy dose of indoctrination in religious seminaries, scholarships to children to study in Iranian universities, free health care, food baskets, and trips to tourist spots to encourage conversion. Such small measures are not cost-intensive but could go a long way in influencing the view of Iran among impoverished Syrians".(Vohra, 2021, p.1), The pro-Iranian militias have also been actively buying the houses of the Internally displaced civilians from Rural Damascus, Dar'a and other areas of Syria.¹⁶ In recent years, the NDF started to distribute aid packages in the areas of their presence across Syria. A new role for a militia that Iran has a considerable influence over it and might be an Iranian project to create a similar political and military body to Hezbollah in Iran, especially with the difficulties encountering the Syrian regime to include it to the Syrian army. These activities by the Iranian militias sounded the alarm about the socio-demographic changes by Iran in Syria to consolidate its influence and guarantee a long-term involvement in this country.

4.8 Conclusion:

Iran, through its militias, has undoubtedly achieved most of its goals in Syria, but it was not only the pro-Iranian militias who supported Iran in this; the Syrian regime and its army was also a tool and undeniably a huge facilitator for Iran to reach its current position as one of the most important actors in the Syrian scene.

By using its militias and the Syrian Regime, Iran managed to be part of any future solution in Syria through achieving the following:

- 1- Iran has penetrated all the Syrian institutions and established strong ties with divisions of the Syrian army that will allow Iran to manipulate a critical part of the Syrian army and the Syrian official institutions any future against reformation of the Syrian army in case of any change in the authoritarian regime in Syria.

¹⁶ ایران تشری سوریا.. وتستوطنها. ساسة بوست (2016, March 31). <https://www.sasapost.com/iran-and-syria-2/>.

- 2- Through the pro-Iranian militias, Iran secured its arc of influence extending from Tehran to Beirut; these militias now controlling the area between the Iraqi and the Lebanese borders, with their bases spreading all over this area from Deir Ez Zor in the east to Homs and Damascus in the south and west.
- 3- The pro-Iranian militias positioned on the Israeli borders in Al Quneitra have given Iran a new way to practice pressure on Israel. Iran can use this card in any future negotiation with the international power about its nuclear program.
- 4- The rapid expansion of Shiism in Syria will create power in the Syrian society, and this power will secure an Iranian influence in Syria even Assad's regime collapse.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOW THE SYRIAN REGIME BENEFITED FROM IRAN THROUGH USING THE IRANIAN MILITIAS.

Even though the Syrian war laid waste all over Syria on every level, which is greatly attributed to the Syrian army and its militia, and that makes the Syrian regime one of the biggest winners now. Since the start of the peaceful protests in 2011, the Syrian regime decided to face these protests using arms power, which resulted in transforming the peaceful protests into an armed conflict between the regime forces and local gunmen whose task was to protect the protesters. However, those local gunmen soon became organized in rebel factions and started to obtain areas from the regime forces.

By the second year of the war, the Syrian army was stretched over several frontlines across the country and started to waive several areas as it was not able to protect it anymore and this was the case when the regime forces withdrew from Afrin in Aleppo and vast regions of Al Hasakeh province and handed it to the Kurdish forces without a fight.

The Iranian regime rushed to support its strategic ally and prevent the imminent collapse of Assad's Regime by providing all kinds of support, including the financial and weapons support even to create and lead militias affiliated with Iran to support the Assad's regime forces. The Iranians felt that their Intervention in Syria became a necessity after the Syrian army proved unreliable and collapsing after the second year of the war. Therefore, Hezbollah militia Iran's military hand has sent its fighter to support the defensive and offensive operations of the Syrian regime who was controlling a continuously shrinking area of Syria (Doering, 2018, p. 1–3).

Despite the loyalty of the pro-Iranian militias in Syria, the Syrian regime used the Iranian intervention by using these militias to achieve its goals by consolidating its power over the remaining part of Syria that was still under its control and also to start regaining control of the areas under the opposition and Islamist factions.

The Syrian regime did not exploit the Iranian intervention on the military level only, but it also achieved gains on several other levels like economically and politically.

This chapter will highlight how the Syrian regime used Iran through its militias in Syria to achieve its goals and stay in power even after ten years of conflict.

5.1 Military Support:

As the rebel and Islamist factions started to become stronger and more organized, the regime-controlled areas began to fall at a dizzying pace, and the Syrian army became debilitated, the pro-Iranian militias played a vital role in supporting the Syrian army to prevent the rebel factions from controlling more areas in Syria.

The Syrian regime used these militias first to secure the capital of Damascus, which in case the regime lost the rebel will take over the whole of Syria, and do so, the Syrian regime exploits the fact that the pro-Iranian militias were deployed to defend the holy shrine of Sayyeda Zainab which is located in the vicinity of the capital.

After Securing its capital, the Syrian regime started to rely more on these pro-Iranian militias to stop the advancement of the rebel and Islamist factions in other strategic areas of Syria like Aleppo and the borders area with Lebanon, where we saw that the local and foreign militias sponsored by Iran, were the leading forces in the operations that eventually stopped the rebel factions' advancement in Aleppo in 2014. Elsewhere in Syria, the regime used the Iranian proxies in the offensive operations to restore control over the several key areas along the Lebanese borders like what happened in the battles of Al Qalamoun and Al Qusayr, which were spearheaded by Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian militias with the support of Iranian advisors.

Hezbollah's control over Al Qusayr and Al Qalamoun on the Lebanese borders was translated as a win for the Syrian regime and its forces, and by controlling these areas, the regime restored control over most of the Lebanese borders and consolidated its control over a vital part of Syria and reopened the borders to facilitate transporting the militants and weapons from and to Lebanon again.

The pro-Iranian militias have also participated in the battles in Rural Damascus as well, as these militias were the main actor in these battles. These militias supported the military forces of Syria in stopping any advancement of the rebel and Islamist factions in Rural Damascus. They prevented the rebel forces from cutting a vital lifeline that supported and sustained the regime power, which is the highway of Damascus airport, where these militias secured the road between Damascus and the airport located southeast of the city.

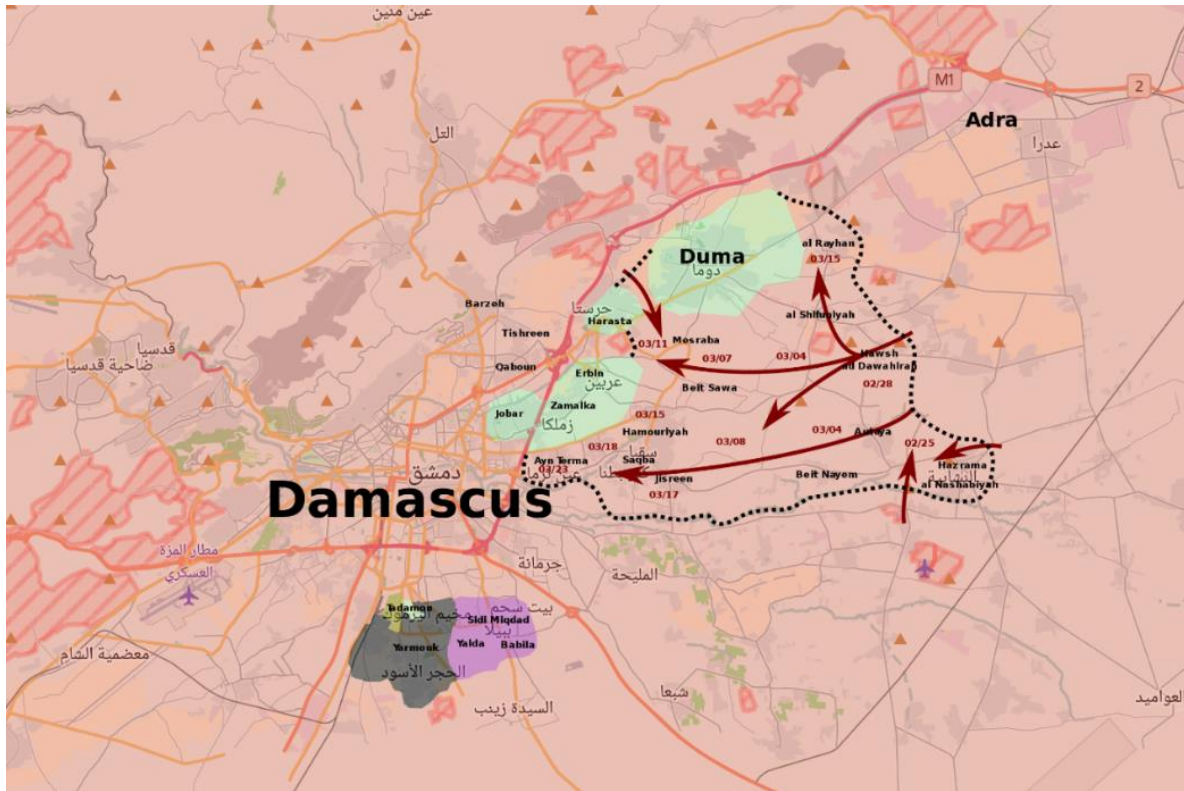
Later, between 2014 and 2018, the Syrian regime used the pro-Iranian militias to support the Syrian army in surrounding the rebel-controlled areas south of Damascus city. The Syrian army relied heavily on the foreign and local pro-Iranian proxies especially Hezbollah (Sullivan, 2014, p. 18–20) and the NDF to stop the rebel factions in Rural Damascus from making any breakthrough toward the capital or any strategic area in its vicinity, which they succeed in doing it.

In 2018 with the regime campaign to seize control over the entire Rural Damascus¹⁷, the Syrian army used the pro-Iranian militia and the Russian aerial to support the military forces of Syria during this battle.

The pro-Iranian militias constituted the majority of the attacking forces that controlled the rebel stronghold in Eastern Ghouta and secured the capital of Damascus once and for all.

After securing Rural Damascus, Bashar al Assad, the head of the Syrian regime, visited Douma city where he was surrounded by members wearing the Syrian Army uniform celebrating the control of rural Damascus and announcing the defeat of the "Islamist groups" by the hands of the Syrian army or what remained of it.

¹⁷Russia backs Syria in unlawful attacks on Eastern Ghouta. (2020, October 28). Retrieved May 20, 2021, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/18/russia-backs-syria-unlawful-attacks-eastern-ghouta>.



Map 7 The phases of the military campaign illustrated on the Eastern Ghouta pocket in Rural Damascus.

Source: (Wikipedia, 2018)

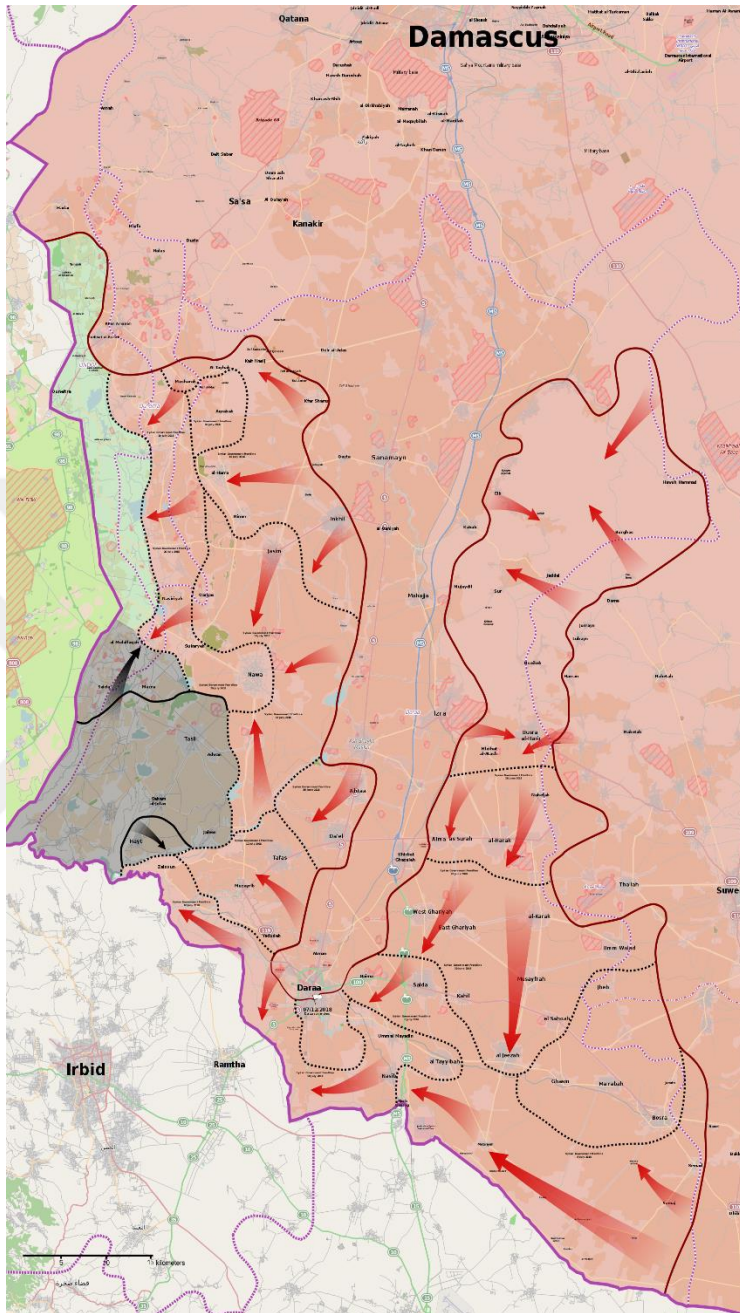
The victory in rural Damascus gave the Syrian regime the momentum to carry on in its plan to liberate every inch of Syria from the hands of the "Islamist groups" exploiting the Russian and Iranian unlimited support (Özkizilcik, 2019).

After controlling Rural Damascus, the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias were redeployed to the administrative borders of Daraa in preparation to launch a new campaign against the last stronghold of the rebel and Islamist factions in southern Syria.

In June 2018, the Syrian army, supported by the Russian air support and the pro-Iranian militias on the ground as well as the Iranian supported divisions of the Syrian army, including and not limited to the 4th armoured division and the Republican guards, initiated an intensive aerial and ground shelling campaign against the towns and villages of Daraa and Al Quneitra which are under the rebel's control.

This intensive campaign aimed to achieve a quick victory in southern Syria to avoid additional manpower losses in the ranks of the pro-Iranian militias as the Syrian army was already stretched and weakened. Therefore, the rebel factions started to rapidly lose control over their villages and towns in the countryside of Dara and Al Quneitra. The situation was heading toward a significant victory for the Syrian army and the supporting militias before the Russians reached an agreement with the rebel factions in southern Syria. Through this agreement, the Russians allowed members of the rebel factions to stay in the areas they previously controlled to enable regime institutions to reopen in Dara and raise the Syrian flag over official buildings in Dara and Al Quneitra provinces.

While the Syrian regime did not regain complete physical control over southern Syria through this agreement, this scenario was a moral victory for the regime as it brought the area back under regime administration and the Syrian flag and ended the control by southern Syrian factions on the strategic border with Jordan, a country who had long supported such factions. The Syria Army regained complete control over the Nassib border crossing with Jordan in July 2018, soon opening the crossing and allowing for the first time in years to export Syrian goods to Jordan. This resumed export was an economic victory for the regime, providing new sources of money that could be used to fund the Syrian regime and its further plan for other areas of Syria.



Map 8 The phases of the military campaign on Southern Syria.

Source: (Wikipedia, 2018)

With Rural Damascus and southern Syria secured, all the rebel factions in these areas are expelled toward north-western Syria (Greater Idleb pocket)¹⁸. Assad's regime wanted to move forward with its plan of controlling all of Syria. However, with all the rebel factions from all over Syria are crowded in Idleb province and parts of Aleppo and Hama countryside, any future battle in this area will not be easy or like any campaign before with the vast manpower of the rebel factions concentrated in a relatively small area, which will make it so difficult for the Syrian army to achieve any breakthrough without the Russian and Iranian support.

As usual, Assad's Regime used the local and foreign pro-Iranian militias to support his army in his new military campaign against the rebel's last stronghold in north-western Syria.

In August 2018, after only one month of controlling Dar'a and Al Quneitra in southern Syria, the Syrian army supported by intensive Russian airstrikes and several pro-Iranian militias launched a wide-scale offensive against the Islamist rebel factions in greater Idleb. The attack started from three axes where the attacking forces wanted to reach Abu Ad Dhuhur's military airbase in the first attack.

The main pro-Iranian militias that supported the Syrian army in this offensive were Hezbollah¹⁹, The NDF²⁰, Liwa Al Quds²¹, and other militias. These militias constituted the striking force on the ground. Using these militias, the Syrian regime managed to regain control over wide areas in north-western Syria and managed to reach the M4 highway connecting Aleppo city with the coast after controlling Saraqab and Ma'arrat Al Nu'man cities in Idleb countryside.

This campaign ended in March 2019 when Russia and Turkey reached a ceasefire agreement to stop the conflict between the rebel and the regime forces and reopen the M4 highway for the joint

¹⁸Syrian rebels evacuated from Douma REACH northwest: Monitor. (2018, April 10). Retrieved May 21, 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syrian-rebels-evacuated-from-douma-reach-northwest-monitor-idUSKBN1HH19M>

¹⁹Ten fighters of Hezbollah killed in Saraqeb battles as military reinforcement arrives in the area • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. (2020, February 29). <https://www.syriahr.com/en/156006/>.

²⁰With preliminary aerial and ground firepower, the regime forces take control of Um Jalal village, and more than 45 casualties among the members of the regime forces and jihadi factions • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. (2019, December 20). <https://www.syriahr.com/en/150977/>.

²¹Backed by "Liwa al-Quds", regime forces take control of Al-Raffa, and 112 casualties of regime and factions are documented in 24 hours • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights. (2019, December 21). <https://www.syriahr.com/en/151054/>.

Russian and Turkish patrols. However, it is highly likely that this agreement will not hold for too long, similar to what happened in the previous agreement.

The participation of the pro-Iranian militia became more apparent after the ceasefire agreement, where these militias established several bases along the frontline between the regime and rebel forces in north-western Syria. However, this was not the first time Assad's Regime exploits the pro-Iranian militia in this part of Syria, where in 2016, during the battle of Aleppo city, the Syrian army was supported by several pro-Iranian militias, namely Hezbollah (Morris, 2013), NDF, and Liwa Assad Allah Al Ghalib (Al Tamimi, 2018, p. 2). These militias were heavily involved in the ground battles that took place in the city and ended by the regime forces and his allies controlling the city's eastern neighbourhoods from the rebel factions.

The Same Scenario happened in the southern countryside of Aleppo. The Iranian forces and the pro-Iranian militias were instrumental in regaining control of the southern countryside of Aleppo, especially during the battles of the strategic hill of Al Eis. After controlling Al Eis town and its hill, Qassim Soleimani appeared in a video record speaking in Arabic and Farsi to the militants who were in the city, indicating this time a direct involvement of the Iranian forces as well as the pro-Iranian militias in supporting the Syrian army to control the southern countryside of Aleppo. That was later confirmed in an interview with an Iranian officer of the IRGC who talked about the Iranian role in the battle of Al Eis.

5.2 The Battle Against the Islamic State

With the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in 2013 and controlling vast areas of Syria, the Syrian army could not stop this expansion, being evident with the enormous losses the Syrian army suffered. Especially in Ar Raqqa province, where the Islamic State managed to control the base of the 17th division to the north of Ar Raqqa city, and the Brigade 93 in the eastern countryside of the same province, as well as losing numerous other locations and military positions across Syria. In 2015 the Islamic State reached areas in Rural Damascus in the south and was a few kilometres far from Homs city near the Lebanese borders and considered the junction point between the Syrian coast in western Syria and the Capital of Damascus in the south.

These losses would not have been possible to stop without the support of the pro-Iranian militias and the Russian airstrikes, which launched several military operations against IS troops in Homs, Aleppo, and Damascus (Map 3&Map 4).

After the Russian Intervention in September 2015, the pro-Iranian militias played a vital role in the battle against the Islamic State; between September 2016 and June 2017, the Syrian army supported by the pro-Iranian militias started a military campaign in the eastern countryside of Aleppo to regain control over this area from the Islamic State.

During the battles of the Eastern countryside of Aleppo, several pro-Iranian militias played a vital role in the military offensive. Even though Iran does not see any strategic benefit from controlling the eastern countryside of Aleppo, the Syrian regime used its militias in supporting the Syrian army in these battles, where Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian militias helped the Syrian army and the Tiger forces in these battles, which ended by defeating the Islamic State in the eastern countryside of Aleppo.

In 2018 the Syrian army launched two operations in the Syrian Desert, including areas in Homs and Deir Ez Zor provinces. This operation aimed to break the siege on Deir Ez Zor City in the east and control the natural resources in central Syria. However, the main reason behind the Iranian participation in these battles was the Iranian desire to secure the area between the Iraqi borders and Damascus. With the Iranian and the Syrian interests meet in this battle, the participation of the pro-Iranian militias and the Iranian personals in this battle was significant.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database, the pro-Regime militias and the Iranian forces participated in over 80% of the total armed clashes events that took place in Homs and Deir Ez Zor between the Syrian army and the Islamic State, in the period between January 2018 and June 2019, which is a very high percentage of the militias participation in the armed clashes events signifying how the Assad's regime used these militias as well as the Russian and Iranian forces to achieve his plans in central and eastern Syria.

The participation of the pro-Iranian militias in all of the battles against the Islamic State was interpreted to a regime control over broad areas in Syria, even though these militias were participating according to the Iranian schemes in Syria. Still, at the same time, they were being used at the same time by the Assad's regime to achieve its goals in regaining control over Syria and consolidating its power in these areas.

The pro-Iranian support to the Syrian army did not end after the Islamic State defeat in Syria. The Islamic State militants showed a high capacity to adopt the guerrilla tactic after losing all their areas.

A few months after its defeat in Syria in March 2019, the Islamic State started to increase its attacks on both banks of the Euphrates rivers against SDF and the regime forces. The Islamic State militants managed to break through the regime's defences and almost control its positions in Deir Ez Zor and Hama. Recently the Islamic State managed to control two villages in the eastern countryside of Hama from the Syrian army before the pro-Iranian militias supported by the Russian air forces expelled the Islamic State fighters from these villages and regain control over them.

The Islamic State infiltrations across Central Syria illustrate that the Syrian army is no more effective or capable of securing its controlled areas without the Russian and Iranian support.

Figure 6 below shows that most of the interactions of the pro-Iranian militias between 2017 and 2020 were with the Islamic State if we exclude the interaction between these militias and civilians, which indicates the considerable role that these militias have played against the Islamic State in this period.

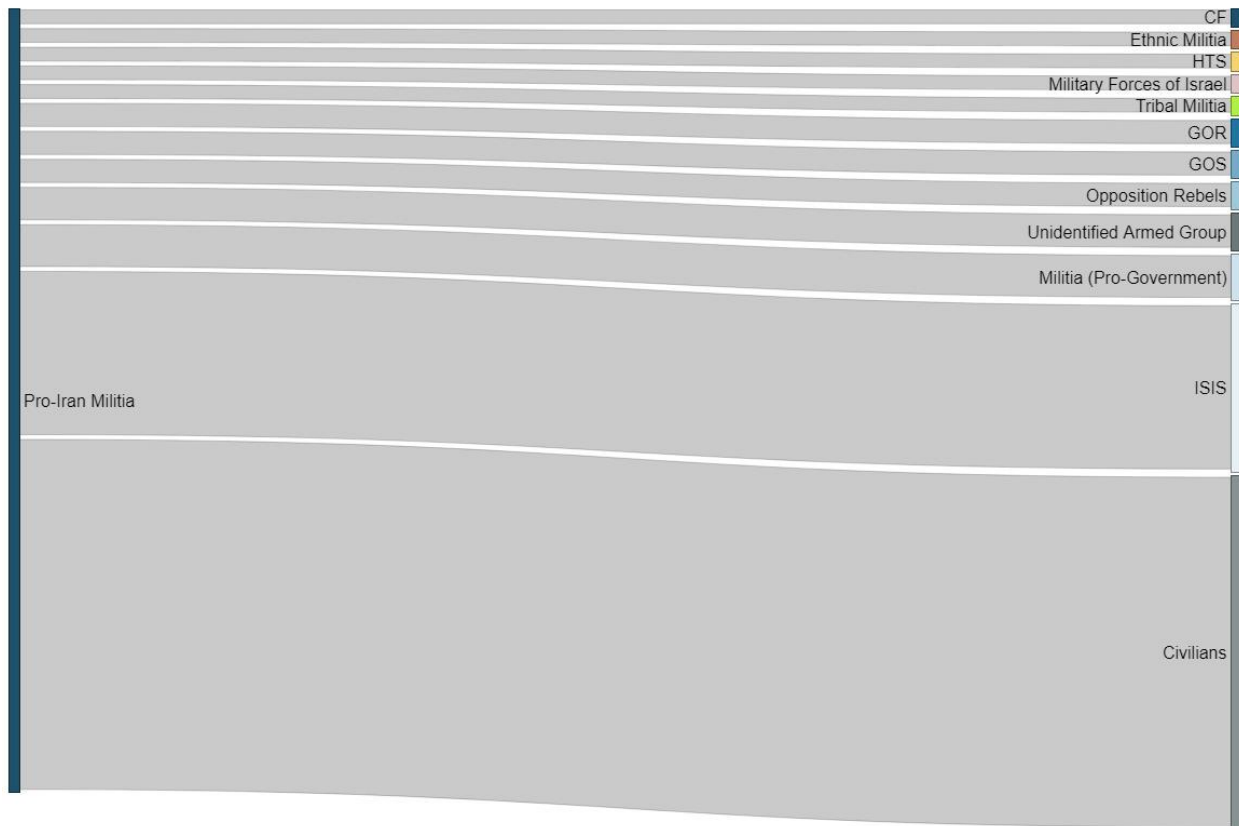


Figure 6 The interaction of the pro-Iranian militias with different actors in Syria.

Source: (ACLED, 2021)

After the reconciliation agreement in Dar'a, several reports indicated that the Syrian regime had given the IRGC control over the reconciled members of the rebel factions in Dar'a, who were transported to Al Jalaa camp in Deir Ez Zor, and the fate of those fighters is still unknown.

5.3 Economic Support:

Syria is a relatively small oil producer, but the petroleum industry was a significant part of its economy before the civil war. According to the IMF, oil sales for 2010 constituted 25 percent of the state's revenue, bringing in an estimated \$3.2 billion a year²². Despite a significant de-escalation of violence in Syria following Bashar al-recent Assad's successes, the country's political and economic restoration is far from certain. Millions of Syrians have fled their homes, hundreds

²²International Monetary Fund (2010), 'Syrian Arab Republic: 2009 Article IV Consultation', IMF Country Report No. 10/86 (March 2010), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2010/cr1086.pdf> (accessed the 21st of January 2019).

of thousands of civilians have been killed or imprisoned, and national infrastructure was devastated to the point where it cannot be repaired without international assistance.

As a result of the prolonged Syrian conflict, Iran found itself deeply involved in Syria. Its interests, which cost Iran many casualties this far, will be jeopardized if the Assad's regime collapse. Therefore, Iran found itself forced to continue supporting the Assad's regime with weapons, militias, money, and oil.

The Syrian regime has undoubtedly overcome the rebel's threat with the help of Iran and Russia. However, international actors like the United States and the European Union are now seeking to apply economic pressure to induce behavioural changes in the regime. It seems that the international powers will not participate in the reconstruction process in Syria as long as the same regime and way of running the country are not changed.

Russia and Iran are the main international actors that are willing to participate in the reconstruction process.

"ISIS or the PYD controlled the oil fields, but production was only a portion of what it had been in 2010 when it produced 385,000 barrels per day.

Damascus has a variety of obstacles in its efforts to revive the oil sector.

First, the United States and the European Union have imposed severe restrictions on the sector, prohibiting sales and foreign investment in infrastructure and maintenance.

Second, multinational coalition bombings targeted and significantly destroyed the majority of oil fields formerly under ISIS control in an attempt to stifle their production capabilities, and in order to restore them, significant investments are required. The regime lacks the requisite money to do so on its own; third, even after the US decision to withdraw from northeast Syria, sales and distribution of oil produced in the prolific fields of Rmeilan, Souedie, Shadadi, and Omar, which are under PYD control, have proven difficult. Negotiations over their ownership remain uncertain (Hatahet, 2019, p. 12).

With the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlling approximately all the oil wells in Deir Ez Zor province in eastern Syria near the Iraqi borders and in Al Hasakeh province in north eastern

Syria, the Syrian regime faced a new problem in providing the necessary oil not only for its military forces but also for the civilians living in the regime-controlled areas.

In November 2019, the United States president, Donald Trump, said that the United States forces would stay in north-eastern Syria to benefit by millions of dollars per month from Syria's oil revenues while US troops remain in the country.

The Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has responded by accusing the US of "stealing oil" from his country, and Russia²³, a significant supporter of Assad, has called it "international state banditry."

The oil problem is not new in Syria, as the rebel factions managed since the early year of the Syrian war to control the oil-rich region in north-eastern Syria. However, this problem was not a source of concern for the Syrian regime back then. The rebel factions near Damascus imposed a more significant threat to the Syrian regime; additionally, the regime-controlled areas were limited only to the city centres that remained under its control. In the first years of the Syrian war, the oil was being transported from the rebel and then the Islamic State-controlled areas to the regime through the old pipelines that were still operational even after the rebel control of these areas. However, with the Syrian Democratic Forces controlling the whole of north-astern Syria and seize all of the oil facilities in the area, the oil transportation between the SDF and the regime-controlled area sharply decreased.

This problem became more serious when the United States administration imposed the Caesar sanctions against the Assad's regime in June 2020, which meant that SDF militias would not be able to sell oil to the Syrian regime anymore.

According to CEIC data²⁴, by 2019, the oil production in Syria dropped to 15.581 Barrels per day compared to 386.011 Barrels per day in 2010, representing a more than 95% decrease in the oil production in Syria.

As the oil problem has become more prominent and more effective, Iran started to send oil shipments to Syria through different lines but mainly through the sea (Hatahet, 2019, p. 3).

²³Reality Check team, (2019, the 21st of November). Syria war: Who benefits from its oil production? BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/50464561>

²⁴<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/syria/crude-oil-production>

Since the beginning of the Syrian war, the Syrian regime relied on Iran to secure its oil needs, for an average of 70,000 Barrels per day shipped from Iran to Syria. However, the Iranian oil supplies dropped as a result of the United States sanctions on Iran²⁵.

In May 2021, Iran shipped more than 3 million barrels of oil to address the oil crisis in Syria. The naval tracking firm Tanker Trackers, which tracks oil shipments, reported that "Arman 114", "Sam 121", "Daran" and "Romina" are the tankers that are making these oil shipments to Banyas oil refinery near the Syrian coast.

Despite the European and US sanctions on exporting oil to Syria, Iran has continued its support and kept oxygenating the Syrian economy and power.

The Iranian's oil shipments to Syria will likely continue for the coming few years as the United States new administration is keeping a blind eye on these shipments, which indicate a US desire to go back to the old nuclear agreement with Iran and cancel the sanctions, which the former president administration imposed²⁶.

In order to circumvent the US sanction on Assad's regime, Iran started to utilize private companies to transport the oil products from the SDF-controlled areas to the regime-controlled areas.

The main company was Arfada for petroleum products which is owned by parliament member Hussam Al Qaterji and his brothers. Hussam Al Qaterji is considered to be close to Iran and its militias in Syria.

Al Qaterji company was established by mid-2018, where Al Qaterji was involved in transporting the oil production for the Syrian regime even before 2018. However, these oil shipments were hard to be tracked because of the sensitive nature of the relation between the Syrian Democratic Forces (US ally) and the Syrian regime.

The attacks on the oil trucks of Al Qaterji company can illustrate the Iranian-sponsored relationship between SDF and the Syrian regime. The number of attacks on the Qaterji oil trucks increased in the third quarter of 2020, which is right after implementing Caesar sanctions on the

²⁵Sanz, A. (2021, the 16th of April). Iran provides three million barrels of oil to Syria. Atalayar. <https://atalayar.com/en/content/iran-provides-three-million-barrels-oil-syria>.

²⁶Erkul, N. (2021, the 6th of May). Iran controls Syria's strategic assets in return for oil support. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/oil/iran-controls-syrias-strategic-assets-in-return-for-oil-support/32645>.

Syrian regime, which could mean an increase in the oil shipments from SDF to the regime (Figure 7).

The security of the oil shipments while passing through the desert area in central Syria, which has a heavy presence of the Islamic State militants, seems to be ensured by a concealed agreement between the Qaterji company and the Islamic State.

In March 2021, Russian officers met with Hussam Al Qaterji in Deir Ez Zor military airbase to discuss the possibility of a future collaboration between the Russian forces and the Qaterji company. Both sides agreed to work together in different sectors, including the economic and military sectors, which meant losing another Iranian ally to the Russians in Syria, which we will explain more in the next chapter.

In November 2018, the United States imposed targeted financial sanctions on Hussam Al Qaterji and seven other vital persons that were part of the regime's illicit network of importing and exporting oil products²⁷.

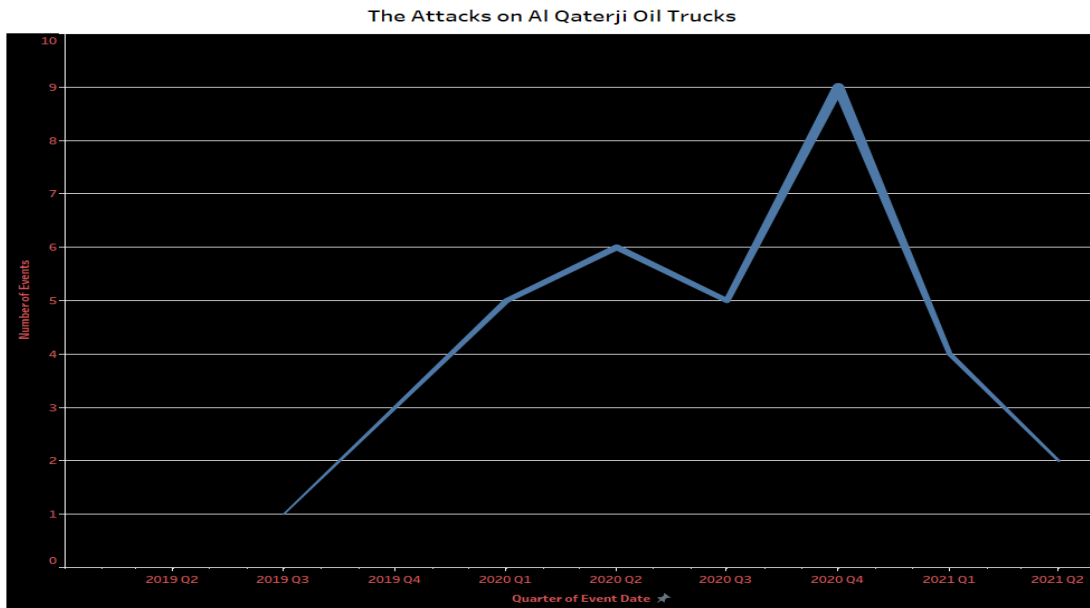


Figure 7 The attacks on Al Qaterji oil shipments

Source: (ACLED, 2021)

²⁷Adesnik, D. (2018, the 24th of October). Treasury Imposes Sanctions on Assad's Oil Traders. FDD. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/09/07/treasury-imposes-sanctions-on-assads-oil-traders/>

The Syrian regime used the Iranian oil shipments to keep its institutions operational and as a tool to consolidate its power in its controlled areas.

Since the early years of the Syrian conflict, Iran has been lending the Assad's regime through a credit line to cover the Syrian war's economic deficit, and this means that Iran will lend the Assad's regime money and the Syrian regime will pay in another time. However, by looking at the Syrian government budget between 2010 and 2020, we will see a considerable decrease in the funding that will not be recovered soon as the Assad's government has been struggling to cover its own expenses, especially with the massive drop in the Syrian currency value against the dollar. Since 2011 there has been no report about the annual budget of the Assad's governments that do not mention the Iranian vital Iranian contribution to the Syrian economy.

Despite the inability to pay its debt, Iran continued to support the Syrian regime with hard currency, but it seems that there is a limit to this. In January 2019, Reuters reported that the credit line's limit is around 4.5 billion dollars²⁸. However, other estimations said that it reached 7.5 billion dollars.

Besides the incredible cash flow from Tehran to the Syrian regime, Iran was also committed to cover the expenses of its militias in Syria, who are fighting on behalf of Bashar Al Assad against the rebel factions. The Iranian spending on its militias, including the salaries and the military equipment, exceeded 30 billion dollars in the first seven years (Daragahi, 2018). Other estimations said that these expenses were more than 105 billion dollars, which is way higher than the credit line.

Iran and Russia were also involved in the reconstruction of several Syrian vital facilities in the regime-controlled area. The Syrian's electricity infrastructures were heavily damaged due to the Syrian conflict, and rebuilding these infrastructures was one of the Assad's regime main priorities. Of course, this is because of the importance of electricity for the Syrian institutions to remain operational. Still, the main reason is that the Syrian regime can collect immediate revenue from the electricity sector once it is working again.

²⁸Thomson Reuters. (2019, the 29th of January). Eyeing reconstruction, Syria and Iran strike deal to allow bank transfers. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/eyeing-reconstruction-syria-and-iran-strike-deal-to-allow-bank-transfers-idUSKCN1PN1WX>.

In 2021, an Iranian company acquired an investment contract to rehabilitate the thermal plant in Aleppo. It is expected that the Iranian company will have the thermal plant operational and ready for use in 6 months, starting from March 2021.

The regime government has also signed several MoUs with Iran and Russia to rehabilitate other power plants in different areas of Syria. However, these MoUs were cancelled later on because of the Syrian regime inability to pay the restoration's costs to Iran and Russia, as these countries seem to prefer receiving the costs of the restoration instead of adding more debts on the Syrian regime, which it appears to reach its credit line's limit (Hatahet, 2019, p. 14).

Additionally, Iran was involved in the reconstruction process in Syria on a limited scale, especially in Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir Ez Zor.

In September 2019, the Syrian regime held the fifth annual reconstruction exhibition in the capital of Damascus, where the Iranian ambassador in Damascus Javad Turkabadi, was the primary guest in this exhibition. He even sat next to the Syrian minister of trade and economy in the opening ceremony, implying Iran's significant role in the reconstruction process in Syria.

The exhibition was held in the vicinity of Damascus city near the Sayyeda Zaynab area, where the Iranian reconstructed the holy Shiite shrines and the surrounding area during the past few years.

Rehabilitating the Sayyeda Zaynab shrines was not the only location that Iran has rehabilitated, where in Deir Ez Zor province in eastern Syria, Iran was involved in the rehabilitation of several Shiite shrines in the regime-controlled area. The restoration in Deir Ez Zor was not limited to the holy shrines but also extended to include building several culture centres in Deir Ez Zor as well as repairing several schools and institutions in the countryside of Deir Ez Zor.

The Iranian activities in Deir Ez Zor province started in late 2017 after defeating the Islamic State, which destroyed most of the Shiite shrines not only in Deir Ez Zor but all over Syria. Deir Ez Zor represented an essential province for Iran because of its location near the Iraqi border, and Al Bukamal in the southern countryside considered the junction point for the pro-Iranian militias' movement between Iraq and Syria.

In Deir Ez Zor province, The Shiite Endowment, with the help of the pro-Iranian militias and the IRGC controlled several religious locations in Deir Ez Zor city and the southern countryside near

the Iraqi borders. The Shiite Endowment was the coordinator of the Iranian activities in eastern Syria.

After 2018, The Shiite Endowment rehabilitated two mosques in Deir Ez Zor city and established several other Shiite shrines in Al Bukamal city as well as other towns and villages along the western bank of the Euphrates River in the countryside. The Iranian shite shrines became a popular destination for the Shiite pilgrims from Iraq and Iran who visit these locations every year.

The most important shrine is the Ain Ali shrine near Al Bukamal city, and the area around it is a military base for the Iranian militias and the IRGC forces. Therefore, this location was targeted several times by the Islamic State militants in the past few years.

Besides the Shiite Shrines, The Shiite Endowment in Deir Ez Zor has rehabilitated two schools in Al Mayadeen and Al Bukamal cities in the southern countryside of Deir Ez Zor, where this step was seen as an attempt by Iran to control the education process in the countryside of the province.

"Since ISIS was successfully removed from the region in late 2017, Iran appears to be spending significant sums of money in the governate. They have done so through the militias they back, which have manned the old positions of the Syrian military, and by providing the local inhabitants with medical and economic aid, such as food and household items (Abdulrahim, & Faucon, 2019; al-Ahmed, 2019)."

The Iranian reconstruction activities in Deir Ez Zor and Ar-Raqqa provinces were vital. These activities and rebuilding the culture centres and schools in these areas softened the regime's institutions' return to north-eastern Syria after approximately five years of IS control over these areas.

Elsewhere in Syria, Iran has also been involved in the rehabilitation of Aleppo. In the eastern part of Aleppo city, the rebel-controlled areas were heavily damaged due to the Syrian war, where this part of the city was under heavy and repeated bombing by the Syrian army and its militias.

In December 2016, the Syrian army and the pro-government militias managed to control the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, ending four years of rebel control. In January 2017, the United Nations cultural organization stated that 60% of the old city was damaged, with 30% of the ancient city wholly destroyed.

Iran sought to increase its influence in the economic capital of Syria and started several projects to rehabilitate parts of the destroyed city. Hussam Al Qaterji and the Iranian militias were the essential tools for Iran to do this mission.

In 2017, several reports²⁹ indicated that Hussam Al Qaterji was buying many real estates in eastern Aleppo and then selling them to the Iranians to facilitate moving these areas to the Iranian control.

With the increasing rehabilitation activities in Aleppo, the Syrian regime approved the Iranian request to reopen its consulate in Aleppo city, which will facilitate the Iranian activities in the city and, at the same time, imply the regime's tacit consent to these activities.

Another Iranian rehabilitation tool was the joint project with Agha Khan foundation, which supported several projects in the regime-controlled areas. Iran has participated in several rehabilitation projects with the Agha Khan Foundation in Aleppo.

In 2020, The City Council of Aleppo announced the completion of the first phase of the restoration work of Khan al-Harir, one of the most essential historical markets of Aleppo; it contained shops and establishments for the trade and sale of fabric, silk, and various types of locally made textiles. It is part of the Majidiyeh market, which contains three khans, silk, jaki, and Venetian. The restoration was carried out in cooperation between the Syria Trust for Development and the Agha Khan Foundation and under the supervision of the Aleppo Governorate and the Aleppo City Council³⁰.

In 2019, The head of the "Iranian Trade Development Organization," Mohammad Reza Mawdudi, said that Iran "is proud to play a role in the reconstruction and modernization of Syria" during the activities of the Investment Forum in Syria, which is being held in the Iranian capital, Tehran.

"The organization, with the help of those responsible for the reconstruction, seeks to provide the best investment and commercial opportunities for investors, and aims to facilitate trade and even

²⁹Al Najar, M. A. (2020, April 8). كيف يحتل الإيرانيون مدينة حلب؟. المجلس الإسلامي السوري. <https://sy-sic.com/?p=8280>.

³⁰خالد. (2020, October 24). ترميم أسواق حلب التاريخية. تحت رحمة النظام ومليشياته. almodon.

<https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2020/10/24/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87>.

conclude a free trade memorandum with Damascus, in order to create a foundation conducive to commercial development with the least expenses," the Iranian Fars agency quoted Mawdudi as saying.

The Iranian "IRNA" agency also quoted the assistant of the Syrian Minister of Economy and Trade for Economic Development and International Economic Relations, Rania Khidhir Al-Ahmad, as saying that the priority of the Syrian regime's government is "to attract Iranian investments in the reconstruction phase."

The Iranian and the Russian economic support was an essential asset for the Syrian regime to prevent its collapse and keep Assad in power after more than ten years of conflict.

5.4 The battle against the United States:

While Iran was spreading its influence, other international powers like the United States was spreading their own influence in Syrian too. Now with the Syrian war winding down and Iran is nearly done helping the Syrian regime, it is time for Iran to focus on expelling what they called "the occupation forces of the United States." The Syrian found in the pro-Iranian militias the perfect tool to extend its area of control and try to regain control over north-eastern Syria, the gas and oil-rich region. Therefore, the Iranian schemes were the regime's goal.

The Iranian activities against the United States in Syria started to grow in 2018 when a pro-Iranian militia called Al Baqer Brigade released a joint statement with Al Bakkara tribe in Deir Ez Zor and Al Hasakeh calling for the jihad against the United States troops in north-eastern Syria.

Besides the Islamic State, this was one of the rare times when an armed group called for direct attacks against the United States.

Al Baqer Brigade led by Khaled Al Hassan, one of the close men to the former leader of the IRGC Qassim Soleimani, and his militia is operating in the north-eastern countryside of Aleppo near the frontlines with the US ally the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Because of the proximity of Al Baqer's operation areas, this militia was able to make these threats to the United States forces. These threats repeated several times after 2018, where AL Baqer Brigade published multiple footage of the US bases in Aleppo countryside, promising the United States and other western forces to be expelled from the Syrian soil.

These threats came into action when a group of Al Baqer Brigade along with members of the Syrian army and other pro-Iranian militias approached the US base in Al Tanaf near the Jordanian borders. Al Baqer's attempts prompted US airstrikes targeting the militants who tried to come close to the base.

The former US Defence secretary James N. Mattis stated that offensive movement by Iranian-directed forces necessitated the airstrikes.

Another instance when Al Baqer Brigade came into contact with the United States forces was in February 2018, when the US air forces launched multiple airstrikes at Marrat, Khasham, and Salhiyeh villages along the eastern banks of the Euphrates River opposite Deir ez-Zor. The strikes killed 45 regime and Al Baqer brigade fighters.

In light of the repeated Iranian's activities against the United States forces in Syria, the former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, made a statement in May 2018 at the heritage foundation explaining the US administration policy toward Iran where he said: "the United States will track down the Iranian operatives and their Hezbollah proxies operating around the world, and we will crush them³¹."

However, the pro-Iranian militias are not just on the frontlines. In May 2018, The New York Times released a report stating that these militias are recruiting deep in the US ally areas and have their own humanitarian operations as well (Aldassouky, Hatahet, 2020, p. 6–16), which means that these militias are imposing an external and internal threat to the US forces in Syria and trying to send an Iranian message to the US troops that they should leave Syria.

Also, in 2017, a column consisting of several military vehicles approached the US base in Al Tanaf and tried to advance in the de-confliction zone. The convoy includes militants of the pro-Iranian militia Al-Imam Ali and other pro-regime militias. This attempt prompted US airstrikes against the advancing force. The US Central Command released a statement that the US air forces launched several airstrikes on the pro-Regime convoy, which advanced "well inside an established de-confliction zone near Al Tanaf."

³¹Phillips, J. (2018, the 6th of August). U.S. Iran Policy After the Demise of the Nuclear Deal. The Heritage Foundation. <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/report/us-iran-policy-after-the-demise-the-nuclear-deal>.

After one month of this shot by the pro-Iranian forces to advance toward the US base in Al Tanaf, another attempt took place in the same area. However, this time the pro-regime convoy included anti-aircraft weapons and a tank. The United States responded to this threat in a similar way and destroyed most of the advancing convoy.

The CENTCOM released another statement about what happened near the US base in Al Tanaf. "Despite previous warnings, pro-regime forces entered the agreed-upon de-confliction zone with a tank, artillery, anti-aircraft weapons, armed technical vehicles, and more than 60 soldiers posing a threat to Coalition and partner forces based at the At Tanf Garrison.

The Coalition issued several warnings via the de-confliction line prior to destroying two artillery pieces, an anti-aircraft weapon, and damaging a tank"³².

The US airstrikes are different in nature than the Israeli airstrikes. Israeli air forces usually attack the weapons shipments or high-rank leaders, suspicious movement of forces. However, given the pace of the US airstrikes in Syria, it seems that the United States targets the pro-Iranian troops only if they were preparing for an attack or if they attacked the US forces. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Database (ACLED) recorded only one US airstrike during 23019 against the pro-Iranian militia in Syria. In December, the US air forces conducted strikes against a base of Kataib Hezbollah in Abu Kamal city on the Iraqi borders. The airstrikes resulted in the killing of 10 members of Kataib Hezbollah. On the other hand, the US air forces launched more than 12 airstrikes against the pro-Iranian militias in 2020. The US airstrikes against these militias concentrated in the countryside of Ar Raqqa and Deir Ez Zor (Figure 8).

In February 2021, The US air forces struck several facilities used by the pro-Iranian militias in Syria. These airstrikes came only two months after the new administration of Joe Biden arrived at the White House, indicating the possibility of the continuation of the US airstrikes against these militias whenever needed.

The airstrikes in February 2021 came in response to the attacks by the pro-Iranian militias on the US military base in Iraq, which led to injuring several civilians, including one American

³²US Central Command. (2017, the 6th of June). Coalition statement on actions near At Tanf, Syria. Centcom. <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1204884/coalition-statement-on-actions-near-at-tanf-syria/>.

contractor, this indicates that the Iranian activities against the United States are not limited in only Syrian, but the Iranians are using Syria as well in their war against the US.

However, it is also possible that the US airstrikes are driven not only by the Iranian activities but also by the results of the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program.

The map below shows the US shelling and airstrikes events against the pro-Iranian militias in the period between January 2017 and May 2021. The events were recorded by the Armed Conflict Locations and Event Data (ACLED).

The repeated conflict involving the pro-Iranian militias against the US forces explains how the Syrian regime and Iran used these militias to test the limit of the US forces in Syria to avoid direct confrontation with the US army and to avoid any human losses in the ranks of the Syrian or Iranian armies.

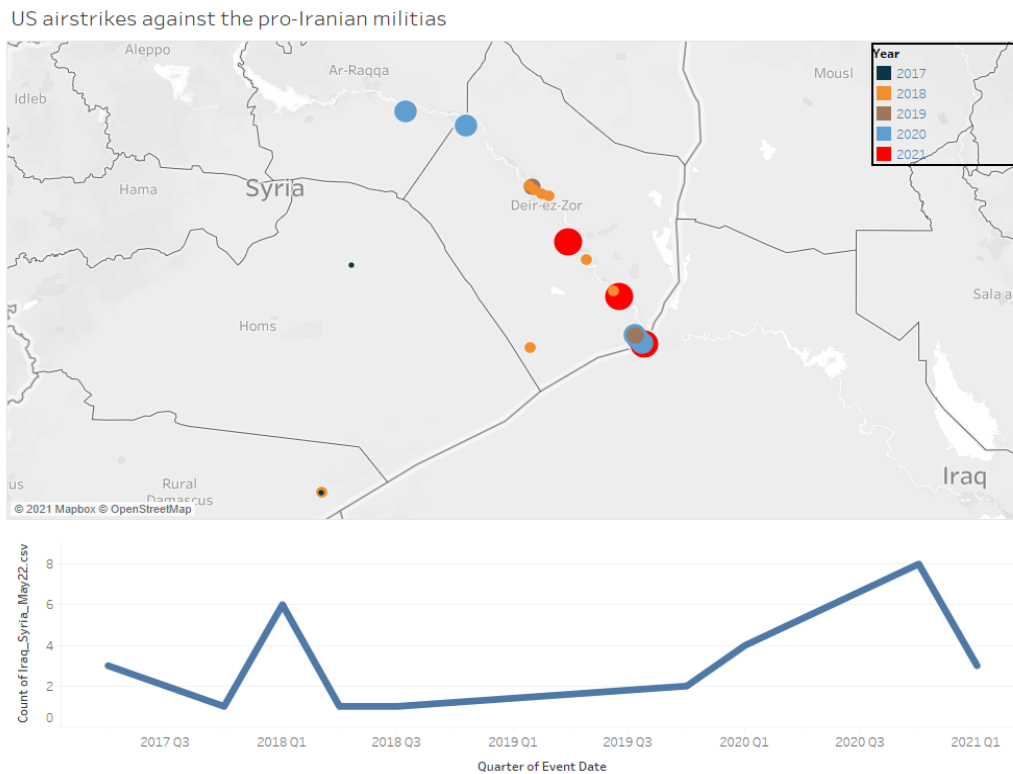


Figure 8 The location of the US airstrikes on the pro-Iranian militias and the frequency of these attacks between 2018 and the first quarter of 2021

Source: (ACLED, 2021)

5.5 Political Support:

After the eruption of the protests in Syria, the Syrian regime decided to suppress this peaceful movement using the firepower of its military and police apparatuses. As a result, several civilians were killed or arrested by the Assad's regime forces. With the increasing number of killed civilians by the regime forces, the Arab League council decided in November 2011 to suspend Syria's membership and called for the withdrawal of the Arab ambassadors from Damascus. Later in February 2012, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries announced that they had decided to ask the "Syrian regime" ambassadors to leave their territories immediately and withdraw all their ambassadors from Damascus, denouncing the "mass slaughter against the defenceless people."

Soon after that, several other Arab and International states decided to do the same and withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus. The Arabic and International movements against the Assad's regime ended up with the Syrian regime wholly isolated from the rest of the world except for its supporters like Iran, Iraq, Russia, Lebanon, and few other countries.

The International isolation necessitated that the countries were supporting Syria to act in order to end this situation. However, that was not possible at the time because of the deteriorating situation in Syria and the fact that the Syrian regime did not make any actual threat to end this situation in a peaceful way.

Even though the political support to the Syrian regime was not possible back then, Iran and Russia continued their military aid in an attempt to make Assad control the whole of Syria and subsequently impose a fait accompli on the other parties.

As the Iranian and Russian support started to increase, the Syrian regime began to regain its power and regain control over more territories.

Hezbollah managed between 2013 and 2014 to control Al Qusayr in Homs and Al Qalamoun mountains in Rural Damascus, ending the rebel control over these areas for more than a year. The Iranian-orchestrated military operations allowed the Syrian regime to restore control over most of the Syrian borders.

The support of the pro-Iranian militias also mitigated the rebel threat on the capital of Damascus and other strategic locations in Syria.

Despite the significant participation of the pro-Iranian militias in almost all of the Syrian army battles, these gains were interpreted as regime control over more parts of Syria, giving it not only a military power but also a political power.

As the numerous rebel and Islamist factions did not have a joint leadership or army, the Assad's regime supported by the pro-Iranian militias managed to gain more territories in Syria and consolidate its power in these areas. However, with the emergence of the Islamic State, a new and more organized enemy started to capture more territories and expand its influence over the Syria map.

The Russian intervention in Syria played a crucial role in stopping ISIS advances in the country and allowed the Syrian regime to control more areas in Central and eastern Syria.

The regime's victories on the ground were interpreted to a stronger position in any negotiation with the rebel factions or even the regional and international powers.

From Geneva and Vienna to Astana, rounds of negotiations to solve the Syrian issue began about a year after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution to topple Bashar al-Assad's regime, and the papers presented during them were in harmony with field or regional developments.

Until the tripartite Russian Iranian-Turkish summit, held in the Russian city of Sochi, in November 2017, it rang a bell, warning of a radical change in the rules of the "negotiation game" between the Syrian regime and its supporters on the one hand, and between the Syrian opposition and its supporters on the other hand.

After more than five years since the launch of the Geneva negotiation process, which began with American and Russian meetings and subsequently included several negotiation sessions between the regime and the Syrian opposition under the auspices of the United Nations, it seems that Russia desired to engineer a new negotiating path under the Russian umbrella in Sochi.

The Geneva negotiating process started with the Geneva 1 conference held at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva on the 30th of June 2012, attended by representatives of regional and international powers concerned with the Syrian case. The conference released a statement later known as the "Geneva One" statement, which called for an end to violence in Syria, the release of detainees, the guarantee of the right to demonstrate and expression for Syrians, and the country's

transition to a transitional phase, leading to free and pluralistic elections. However, this statement carried two interpretations, as the United States considered that the statement laid the ground for al-Assad's departure, while Russia believed that the conference did not address the fate of al-Assad.

The regime and Hezbollah victory in Al Qusayr town on the Lebanese borders gave the Syrian regime a new push to carry on in Geneva negotiations. On the 22nd of January 2014, the second round of Geneva negotiations was held, without leading to any new results, as the conference ultimately failed despite the presence of forty countries and organizations.

Back then, the international envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, apologized to the Syrian people for not achieving anything in the negotiations due to the Syrian regime's refusal to discuss the transitional governing body's clause. Where he said, "The delegation of the Syrian regime insisted on discussing terrorism, While the opposition insisted on discussing the transitional governing body." Indicating that the regime's delegation refused to discuss a third of what was mentioned in the negotiation agenda.

In January 2016, the third round of Geneva negotiations was held between the regime and the Syrian opposition. However, this round has soon stopped due to the heavy regime shelling on Aleppo while the negotiations were being held, indicating another attempt by the Syrian government and its allies to influence the meeting results by its advance on the ground.

After the Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015, the regime and the opposition delegations conducted Seven rounds of negotiations in Geneva. All of these rounds have ended without any results, as the regime delegation always refused to discuss the fate of Bashar Al Assad and insist on discussing other subjects like terrorism³³.

The intransigence that characterized the Assad's regime's handling of the Geneva track, and its representatives diluting the negotiations and buying time while its forces were nibbling with the support of Russia and Iran in the areas controlled by the Syrian opposition, led to a catastrophic failure of the entire Geneva process. The Syrian regime's categorical refusal to proceed with any

³³Al Jazeera, A. J. (2018, January 28). من جنيف 1 إلى 8.. ماذا تحقق؟ سوريا | الجزيرة نت. <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/events/2017/3/4/%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%81-1-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-4-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%82>.

solution that strips it of authority or even reduces its powers has transformed negotiations into mere futility.

These acts by the Syrian regime can be understood in the light of the regime advances on the ground, as in 2016, the regime was not the same as in 2012 when the Syrian army was controlling less than 30% of Syria. The pro-Iranian militias on the ground and the Russian air support allowed the Assad's regime to raise the stakes at the negotiation table.

5.6 Astana Talks:

In conjunction with the regime forces control over the city of Aleppo at the end of 2016, and parts of the Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus, Russia, Turkey, and Iran called for negotiation sessions in the Kazakh capital, Astana. Astana negotiations started in January 2017. By October of the same year, seven rounds of talks took place, which produced what was known as "de-escalation" agreements in the areas controlled by the opposition factions.

While Russia's weight was enough to disrupt the Geneva track completely, the Astana track was enough to reverse matters in favour of the Syrian regime and its first ally Iran. The latter turned into a "sponsor" party for the negotiations when it was not invited to the first Geneva rounds.

The de-escalation agreement (which we will explain in the next chapter) allowed Russia to freeze all the frontlines with the rebel factions all over Syria in order to re-direct its efforts toward the battle against the Islamic State.

After freezing the frontline with the rebel factions, the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militia were able to expel the Islamic State militants from the whole eastern countryside of Aleppo for the first time in more than three years and controlled all the frontlines between the Islamic State and the opposition factions.

Additionally, the Syrian army supported by pro-Iranian militia and the Russian air forces launched a widescale military offensive against the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria, which resulted in the regime control over the area between Homs eastern countryside and the western bank of the Euphrates River after the regime forces were only controlling the highway between Damascus and the Syrian coast.

The Battle Against the Islamic State gave the Syrian regime more legitimacy, as it was fighting a terrorist group that was controlling more than 45% of Syria and terrorizing the civilians in its areas of control.

The regime advance at the expense of the Islamic State was another result of the provided political support by Russia and Iran, who disabled the military operations of the rebel factions and gave the regime forces more time to defeat the Islamic State.

Like the Geneva negotiations scenario, the Syrian regime used the Iranian and Russian-sponsored Astana talks to achieve more gains on the ground with Iranian and Russian support.

After controlling Aleppo city and parts of the Eastern Ghouta, the second round of Astana talks was held on the 15th of February 2017. As the regime and the opposition delegations were discussing the future of Syria, the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias during the coming five rounds of Astana negotiations were advancing in the eastern countryside of Aleppo.

In the sixth round of Astana talks, the de-escalation agreement was officially announced after it was agreed on in May 2017. However, without clearly identifying the borders between the rebel and regime forces.

After less than two months of the de-escalation agreement, the Syrian army supported by the pro-Iranian militias and the Russian airstrikes launched a military campaign in the eastern countryside of Idleb, where they managed to control most of the eastern countryside of Idleb, and this battle was known as the battle east of the railway. During this battle, two rounds of Astana talks were held on the 30th of October and the 21st of December.

During the coming sessions of Astana, the Syrian regime, with the support of Iran and Russia, will follow the same strategy to influence the results of the meetings by its advance on the ground.

The below table lists the dates of the fifteen rounds of Astana talks and the regime's territorial gains in the period between each meeting.

Table 2: The date of each round of Astana talks with the accompanied military operation.

Round of Astana talks	Date	Regime military operations
1st Round	23/Jan/2017	One month after controlling Aleppo city
2nd Round	15/Feb/2017	The Battle Against ISIS in the Eastern countryside of Aleppo
3rd Round	14/Mar/2017	The Battle Against ISIS in the Eastern countryside of Aleppo
4th Round	4/May/2017	The Battle Against ISIS in the Eastern countryside of Aleppo
5th Round	4/July/2017	The Battle Against ISIS in Homs and Deir Ez Zor
6th Round	14/Sep/2017	The Battle Against ISIS in Homs and Deir Ez Zor
7th Round	30/Oct/2017	The regime offensive against the eastern countryside of Idleb
8th Round	21/Dec/2017	The regime offensive against the eastern countryside of Idleb
9th Round	14/May/2018	In the third day of the meeting, the Syrian regime announced that its forces controlled the northern countryside of Homs after controlling the Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus in March 2018.
10th Round	30/July/2018	On the 19th of July, the regime started the military offensive on Dara'a
11th Round	28/Nov/2018	Regime offensive on the southern countryside of Idleb and the northern countryside of Hama
12th Round	25/Apr/2019	This meeting took place after the regime and pro-Iranian forces controlled the northern countryside of Hama and parts of the southern Countryside of Idleb
13th Round	1/Aug/2019	Delegations from Iraq and Lebanon attended the meeting for the first time.
14th Round	10/Dec/2019	After the start of the third military campaign on Idleb countryside.
15th Round	16/Feb/2021	By the end of February, the regime forces supported by Hezbollah and Wagner militia managed to control Saraqab and Ma'arat Al Nu'man cities in the eastern countryside of

		Idleb and secure the M5 highway linking Aleppo with Damascus.
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Table 2 above illustrates how the Syrian regime, with the support of its sponsors Iran and Russia, managed to control more territories in Syria by exploiting their political support in the various meetings and negotiations with the Syrian opposition.

The negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition were complicated, and in most cases, without any practical results. However, with every advance on the ground that would not be possible without the support of the pro-Iranian militia and Russian air forces, the Syrian regime was becoming more assertive. Therefore, making its conditions harder and eventually changing the main subject of the negotiations from the political transformation in Syria into a pointless discussion about the war against terrorism without any compromises.

With most of Syria under regime control, the Arab countries started to re-establish the communication channels with Bashar Al Assad's regime. In December 2018, the United Arab Emirates reopened its embassy in Damascus after it was closed since 2012³⁴. The UAE move was followed by a call between the Emirati crown prince Mohamed Bin Zayed and the head of the Syrian regime. According to Emirati officials, the call discussed the repercussions of the spread of Coronavirus and the Emirati support to the Syrian people in these exceptional circumstances.

In May 2021, the head of Saudi Arabia's intelligence visited Damascus and discussed with his Syrian counterpart Security issues for the two countries. After this visit, several reports indicated the Saudi's willingness to reopen its Embassy in Damascus as well³⁵.

³⁴Britton, B., & Faraj, C. (2018, December 27). UAE to reopen embassy in in Syrian capital. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/27/middleeast/uae-embassy-damascus-intl/index.html>.

³⁵Chulov, M. (2021, May 4). Meeting between Saudi and Syrian intelligence chiefs hints at detente. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/04/meeting-between-saudi-and-syrian-intelligence-chiefs-hints-at-detente>.

5.7 Conclusion:

The Syrian regime managed to exploit the various forms of Iranian support in its own favour and overcome all of the challenges during ten years of war. Bashar Al Assad regained most of his power in Syria and was recently elected as a president for the coming seven years, this means that the Iranian and Russian support will continue for the foreseen future, and we might see more countries considered Al Assad's bitter enemies starting to normalize their relations with his regime.



CHAPTER SIX: THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

Soleimani defied a United Nations travel ban by visiting Russia in the summer of 2015 to discuss Moscow's military involvement in Syria. According to Reuters, Soleimani and his Russian counterparts reached an arrangement in which a Russian airstrike campaign will join Iranian, Syrian, and Hezbollah soldiers in ground operations³⁶.

This chapter will explore the Russian role in Syria and the steps that Russia took to maximize its benefits from the situation in Syria. Additionally, we will illustrate the tactics used by Russia and how it used the pro-Iranian militias and the Syrian army in the fight against the rebel factions, the Russian gains from its interventions, and how the Russian interests went against the Iranian ones.

The contribution of Syria in a broader Russian effort to define its position as a global player and co-equal of the United States, as well as Russia's foreign policy towards Syria in the broader societal context of the world system, has been highlighted in a variety of scholarly articles (Averre and Charap, 2013, p. 35-41); (Stent, 2016, p. 106); (Tsygankov, 2015); (Davies, 2015, p. 813-834); (Pieper, 2019, p. 365-387); (Trenin, 2013, p. 9-16).

6.1 Military Interventions:

On the 30th of September 2015, the Russian air forces started to support the military operations of the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias, namely Hezbollah, to retake previously held opposition areas at a time when Assad's forces were on the defensive (Oweis, 2016, p. 3). Even before the military intervention in Syria, Russia has provided diplomatic support to Assad's regime in the United Nations Security Council (Allison, 2013, p. 795-823).

However, with the emergence of the Islamic State and the increased support provided to the rebel factions, the Syrian regime, with the support of the pro-Iranian militia, could not stop the advancing of these groups on the ground, and the collapse of the Syrian regime was imminent (Charap; Treyger; Geist, 2019, p. 7).

The Russian intervention was crucial for the victory of the Syrian regime, as the significant military capability of the Russian air forces allowed the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias to take the lead in all of the battles after September 2015.

³⁶Thomson Reuters. (2015, August 7). Iran Quds chief visited Russia despite U.N. travel ban: Iran official. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-soleimani-idUSKCN0QC1KM20150807>

6.2 Political Solution:

Russia was a member of all the negotiations concerning the Syrian war, and through these negotiations, Russia attempted to gain more time to complete its plans on the ground.

From the Geneva meeting to Astana and lastly Sochi negotiations, Russia has always sided with the Syrian regime and supported its forces on the ground while it was negotiating with the Syrian opposition about the political transition.

With the increase of the civilian fatalities in Syria, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) could not make any decision against the Syrian regime for committing these crimes; this was not possible as Russia was always against these decisions and used the VETO to disrupt any decisions that condemned the Syrian regime (Thongin, 2017, p. 49). On the other hand, the Syrian regime used the Russian disruption in the UNSC as a tool to continue its war against its own people and to avoid any international prosecution.

As we explored in the previous chapter, Russia managed through the political negotiations to freeze the frontlines between the regime and the rebel forces, where in the 6th round of Astana talks in May 2017³⁷, the negotiating parties agreed on the De-Escalation agreement.

The Russians' De-Escalation efforts were initially viewed as a first step in reducing the fighting's severity. A closer examination of the scenario, however, reveals that this is not the case. It's important noting that neither the regime nor any of the opposition groupings were present or signed on to the document, as the three signatory parties will be the guarantors of this agreement, where Turkey will act as a guarantor for the rebels and the Russians and Iranians will do so for the regime.

The agreement covered four fundamental aspects and addressed numerous facets of the fighting. The military actions were the first aspect. All military actions and combat in the following four zones have been agreed to be suspended by the rebel and regime forces immediately.

Zone 1: Idlib province and countryside of Latakia province, north western countryside of Aleppo province, and northern countryside of Hama province.

Zone 2: Northern countryside of Homs province, including Rastan, Hawleh, and Talbiseh.

³⁷ Al Jazeera (2017) 'Syria's 'de-escalation zones' explained.' Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/syria-de-escalation-zones-explained-170506050208636.html>

Zone 3: Eastern Ghouta in the northern Damascus countryside.

Zone 4: Deraa and Quneitra provinces.

Another part of the agreement was the humanitarian aspect; this included ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid, rehabilitation of infrastructure, ensuring the availability of essential services, allowing the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and finally allow safe passage for civilians between the different areas.

The De-Escalation resulted in a relative decrease in the conflict between the rebel factions and the regime forces. However, this agreement was a war management tool, so the Russian and the regime forces can concentrate their efforts on the frontline with the Islamic State (Shamieh and Szenes, 2015).

When examining the post-agreement discourse on the conflict, it becomes clear that the deal was more of a war management tool than a move toward a more complete ceasefire.

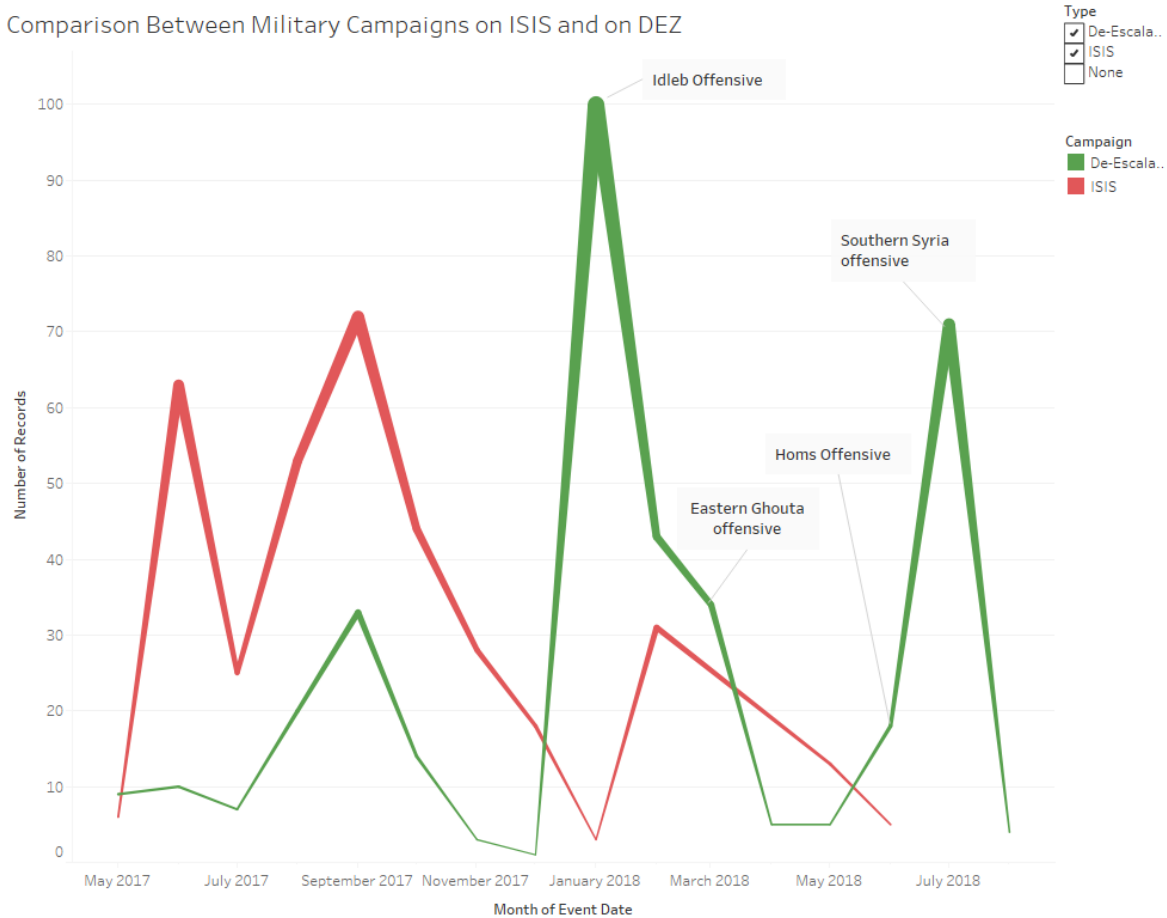


Figure 9 Comparing the Russian airstrikes on the Islamic State and the DEZ in Syria.

Source: (Dawoud, 2019, p. 21)

The data chosen for Figure 9 above put the military offensives on the Islamic State and the rebel factions in the De-Escalation Zones (DEZ) against a timeline that begins after signing the de-escalation agreement in May 2017 and ends in August 2018. It shows that the first offensive on Idleb pocket, which was one of the De-Escalation zones, was coincided with a significant drop in the number of battle events in IS areas. Furthermore, looking at a map of the pockets of ISIS territorial control (see Map 3) at the time of signing the agreement and comparing that to their control around the start of the military campaign against the opposition (see Map 4) further proves that the regime and its allies had no intention of honouring the agreement and withholding combat (The Carter Centre, 2019). This comparison clearly indicates that the De-Escalation agreement was just a tool for the Russian and the regime forces to control more areas in Syria and eliminate one of the strongest enemies in central and eastern Syria.

6.3 The Battle with the Islamic State

As the Russian forces did not have any troops on the ground, the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias (namely Hezbollah) spearheaded the military campaign against the Islamic State. With the Russian Air cover, the regime forces managed to achieve consecutive victories on the ground against the enemy, which they were unable to stop its offensives.

During the battles against the Islamic State, Russia was the sponsor of all of the military operations led by the regime forces, with substantial aerial support provided for the forces on the ground (Wasser, Pettyjohn, Martini, Evans, Mueller, Edenfield, N., ... & Zeman, 2021).

Between May and December of 2017, ACLED recorded more than 300 events of Russian airstrikes against IS positions in Deir Ez Zor and Homs; around 65% of these events included the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias as the associate actor. This percentage illustrates the Russian support of these militias (ACLED, 2020).

Besides the battle against the Islamic State in central Syria, the cooperation between Russian military forces and the pro-Iranian militias, namely Hezbollah, continued on several levels (Ali, 2019).

In the battle of the Martyr Abu Omar Saraqab, a failed rebel offensive in October 2016 to break the siege of east Aleppo, Russian forces maintained close cooperation with Hezbollah militants, the main forces that stopped the rebel attack, when the Syrian army proved unreliable in this battle.

The Close relationship between Russia and Hezbollah highlighted the Russian need for its own militia on the ground, given that Hezbollah could be considered a trustworthy partner in the battles. Still, Hezbollah is an Iranian proxy, after all.

Therefore, Russia started to support and create its own loyal militias on the ground. Where in 2016, Russia started to concentrate its aerial support for a specific military division, The Tiger Forces. Even though the Tiger Forces led by Suhail Al Hassan was not an official division of the Syrian army, the Russians favoured this division because of their role in the battles against the Islamic State in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, where this division proved reliable and managed to expel the Islamic State militants from the whole eastern countryside of Aleppo for the first time since 2014 (Lavrov, 2018, p. 5–6).

The Tiger Forces was initially a pro-Regime militia created by the air force intelligence branch. This militia consisted of trained members of the air force intelligence and remnants of the Syrian army armoured divisions as well as members of Alwite militias mainly from Hama (Waters, 2018, p. 2).

Suheil Al Hassan, the commander of the Tiger Forces, was accused of committing war crimes against the protesters in Rural Damascus. He was also accused of ordering the massacre that killed more than 100 civilians in Saida town in Dara'a countryside.

The Tiger Forces maintained close cooperation with the Iranian-supported 4th armoured division led by Maher Al Assad. Several reports indicated that members of the 4th division were redeployed from southern Syria to operate under the Tiger Forces (Waters, 2018, p. 3).

In his research paper (THE TIGER FORCES PRO-ASSAD FIGHTERS BACKED BY RUSSIA), Gregory Waters said that "Russian air, artillery, and special forces immediately supported the Air Intelligence-backed militia, a partnership that only grew deeper in the subsequent years. Russian generals, officers, and special forces soldiers have been pictured in the field alongside Tiger Forces fighters from Suheil to subgroup field commanders, indicating an intimate integration of Russian assets alongside their chosen partner force." (Waters, 2018, p. 3)

Russian dependence on the Tiger forces started to increase after the battles in Aleppo in 2016, as the Tiger Forces were one of the main militias alongside Hezbollah, who led the Russian military efforts to defeat the Islamic State in Central Syria.

During the military offensive on the Eastern Ghouta in 2018, Alexander Ivanov, the spokesman for Russian forces headquartered at the Khmeimim airbase, wrote: "We will provide the necessary air support to the forces of Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan....We have real confidence in their ability to accomplish the mission.

The Tiger Forces were later annexed to the Syrian Army and became part of the Syrian army's 5th Assault corps, giving Russia direct control over the Syrian Army.

Russia has also supported other militias in Syria like the NDF and Al Quds Forces.

In May 2019, Al Quds Forces, alongside several other pro-Russian militias like the tiger forces and 5th Assault corps supported by the Russian airstrikes, launched a wide-scale offensive against

the rebel-controlled areas in the northern countryside of Hama, in a new breach to the De-Escalation agreement signed in 2017 (Özkizilcik. Ö,2019).

Al Quds militia has also participated in the defensive and offensive operations against the remnants of the Islamic State in the Syrian desert. This militia has operated in several cases as an independent military unit without any supervision or support by the Syrian army. An Example of this behaviour was when Al Quds forces, alongside members of NDF and tribal militias, launched their own military operation against the Islamic State members who attacked Musarib village and killed between 15 to 30 members of NDF in the village (Waters, 2021).

6.4 One Enemy at a time:

After Defeating the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria, Russia has moved its focus on the rebels-controlled areas. Exploiting the De-Escalation agreement signed in the previous year, Russia and the regime forces launched a new military operation against the rebels' pocket in north western Syria.

As shown in the graph above, the Russian airstrikes on the first zone of the De-Escalation in Idleb increased dramatically by the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018.

During this operation, the regime forces supported by Russian airstrikes managed to regain control over several villages and towns in the southern countryside of Aleppo and the eastern countryside of Idleb.

This offensive seems to be part of a Russian plan to freeze the frontlines with the rebel factions in the remaining De-Escalation zones in order to concentrate its military operations on these pockets one by one. This tactic proved efficient for the Russian based on the course of events that followed the offensive on the first DEZ in Idleb.

During the attack on the first DEZ, the number of recorded events in the rest of the DMZ areas stayed relatively low, which meant that the Russian plan did not succeed only in regaining territorial control in Idleb but also meant that the rebel factions are not anymore connected to each other which will make the future regime and Russian offensive easier.

After almost three months of military operations in Idleb, the regime forces supported by Russian airstrikes started a new offensive against the rebel factions in the second DEZ in the Eastern

Ghouta in Rural Damascus. The attacking forces managed to break through the rebel defenses in the central sector quickly, with a relatively calmer situation on the rest of the frontlines of the Eastern Ghouta, which reflects the level of disputing among the rebel factions in the same DEZ.

The Clashes in the Eastern Ghouta pocket ended in March 2018. However, this time with a reconciliation agreement between the rebel factions, namely Jaysh Al Islam and the regime forces.

While bombing the Eastern Ghouta, Russia was discussing a reconciliation agreement with the rebel factions in Homs pocket. However, the negotiations did not end entirely as the Russians wanted to. Therefore, in April 2018, Russia and the regime forces launched an intensive shelling campaign accompanied by a military offensive against the rebel factions in the third pocket in Homs province. This attack ended as the previous one in Eastern Ghouta, with a reconciliation agreement with the rebel factions.

With Dar'a pocket remained as the last rebel's stronghold in Southern Syria, Russian and the Syrian regime wanted to seize control of the rebels' pocket in the fourth DEZ. As expected, the Syrian army, supported by the pro-Iranian militias and the Russian airstrikes, launched a new military campaign on the rebels' positions in southern Syria.

The regime campaign started with intensive Russian airstrikes and a vast military offensive. The military campaign in Dar'a ended when the rebel factions agreed on a reconciliation agreement that allows them to stay in their areas in southern Syria in exchange for the Syrian institutions to continue their activities in the province under the Syrian flag.

Offensives On De-Escalation Zones

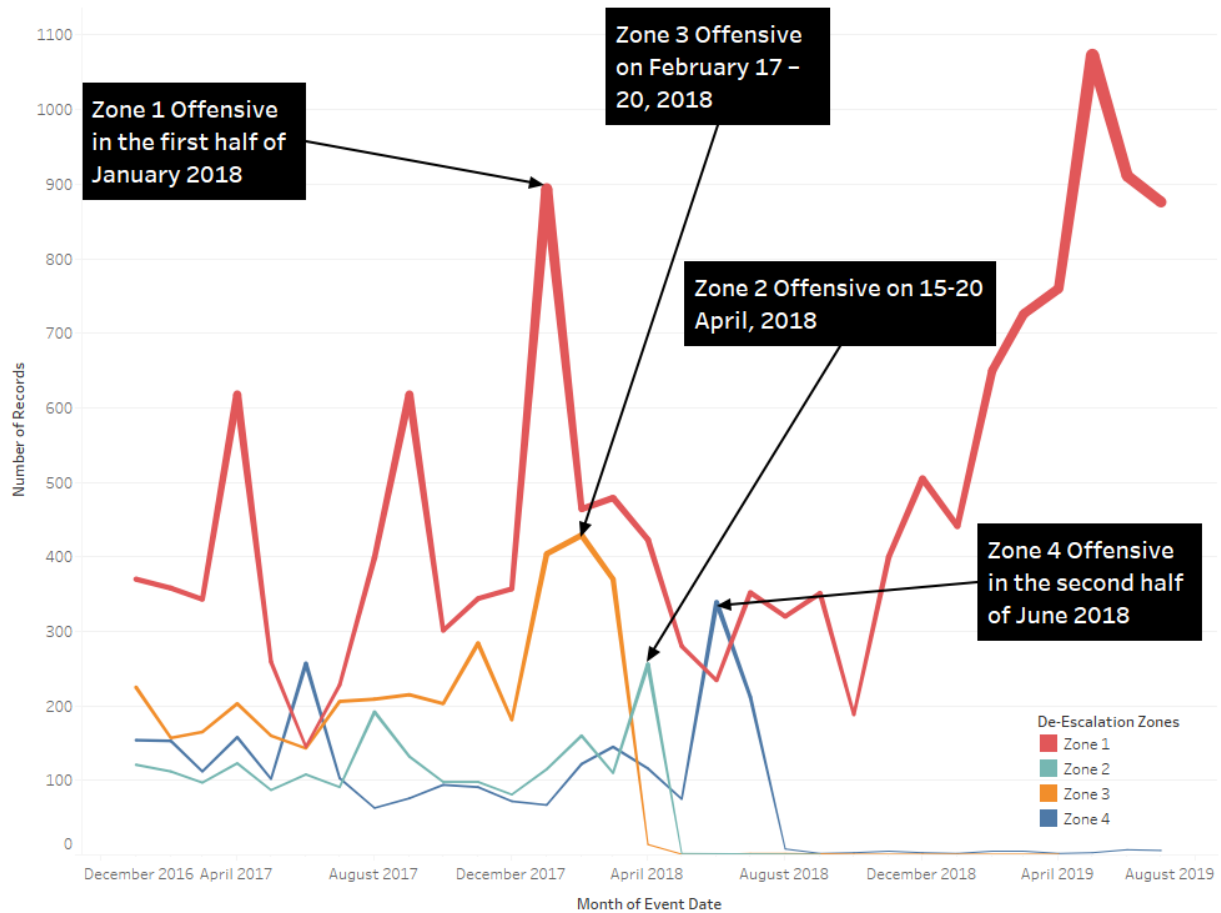


Figure 10 Comparing the number of Armed clashes and airstrikes on the DEZ between 2017 and 2019.

Source: (Dawoud, 2019, p. 26)

Figure 10 above shows the number of recorded events in each De-Escalation zone in Syria during each military offensive against these zones (Daoud, 2019, p. 26). The number of events in each zone includes the Russian airstrikes and the regime's battles and shelling events. The Russian tactics with the support of the pro-Iranian militias allowed the Syrian regime to regain control of most of Syria and achieve essential steps in its plan to control every inch of the Syrian ground.

By the end of 2018, the Syrian regime consolidated its power over most of Syria and mostly eliminated the rebels' threat, allowing the Syrian regime forces to concentrate their military efforts on the last rebel stronghold in Idleb.

The last breach of the De-Escalation agreement started in late 2019 when the regime forces supported by Russian airstrikes started a new military operation aiming to control the M5 highway linking Aleppo with Damascus. However, the Turkish presence in Idleb pocket made it harder for the regime forces to achieve a quick victory similar to the ones in southern Syria, where the Turkish forces launched a military operation to stop the regime offensive and control the areas which the regime-controlled in the first few weeks of the offensive. Still, this military campaign ended when the Russian and Turkish presidents agreed on a ceasefire agreement to take place on the 5th of March 2020. However, when the ceasefire agreement was signed, the regime forces could already control the entire area along the M5 highway.

It is worth mentioning that all of the reconciliation agreements accompanied with displacement to anyone who refused these agreements, which lead to a humanitarian disaster in the rebels-controlled areas in northern Syria.

6.5 The Russian Iranian-Competition:

Through its military intervention, Russia wanted to maximize its benefits in Syria, leading to an indirect conflict with the Iranian interests. We cannot describe the benefit of Iran and Russia in Syria as one to one ratio. The Russian interests ultimately will impact the Iranian ones.

Therefore, Russia followed several mechanisms to maximize its interests at the expense of the Iranian ones. That was clear during the military operations against the rebel factions in southern Syria, as Russia wanted to follow a new method to end the battles in this area. Several reconciliation agreements took place in southern Syria (Sosnowski, 2018); (Hinnebusch and Imady, 2018, p. 4-6); (Adleh and Favier, 2017p. 5-7); (MazenEzzi, 2017; Haid, 2018). These agreements allowed the former rebel factions to stay in their previous control areas in Dar'a, which created the core of the pro-Russian 5th Assault corps.

The 5th Assault corps was a Russian tool to control Southern Syria and protect its interests in a critical area on the borders with Israel.

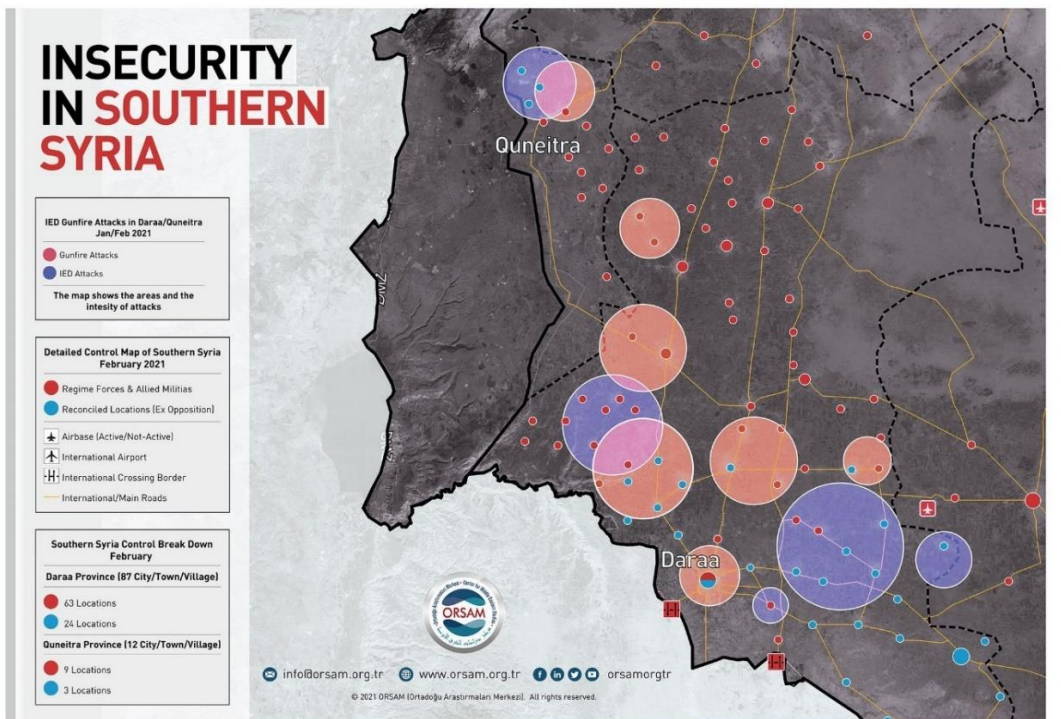
Similarly, the 5th assault corps gave Russia a new force on the ground that can replace the Iranian militia after exploiting them in almost all of the battles across Syria. We saw the participation of the 5th Assault corps members in the recent battles in Idleb. Additionally, Russia

used the 5th corps militants in the battles against the remnant of the Islamic state in As Sweida and the Syrian desert.

Besides using the 5th corps as a pro-Russian militia on the ground, the reconciliation agreement prevented Iran from spreading its militants in southern Syria, similar to what happened in Deir Ez Zor and the Eastern Ghouta.

The results of the reconciliation agreement started to appear in late 2019 when several clashes took place between the 5th Assault corps and the pro-Iranian forces, including members of the military intelligence and the 4th armored division when the latter attempted to establish military checkpoints in the villages under the 5th corps. These clashes usually ended with a Russian military police intervention that sided at the 5th corps in all of these conflicts.

Map 9 below shows the locations of the armed clashes and the assassinations against members from both sides.



Map 9 The armed confrontations in southern Syria after the regime forces had taken control of southern Syria.

Source: (ORSAM, 2021)

(Middle East Studies Centre) ORSAM³⁸ is an open-source website specialized in providing analysis about the Middle East and North Africa Region.

The indirect confrontations between Russia and Iran speeded over several areas in Syria beside the south, where similar confrontations were reported in Hama countryside and Aleppo city.

Between 2017 and 2019, ACLED recorded several events of clashes between the pro-Iranian militias and the Russian affiliated militias in Hama countryside. The SAA was involved in several of these clashes, which indicate the level of Iranian influence over the Syrian army. In other cases, the Russian forces were involved in the armed clashes, where in January 2019, the pro-Iranian militias clashed with Russian forces and pro-Russian militias in the countryside of Hama.

In Aleppo, the clashes between the affiliated Iranian militias and the regime forces were recorded at a higher pace. The clashes between the pro-Iranian militias and the regime forces were another indication of the escalating competition between Russia, which wants the Syrian regime to control all the militias in the city, and Iran who seeks more influence.

The clashes in Aleppo concentrated in the eastern part of the city, where the pro-Iranian militias control Al Nayrab airbase and the neighbourhoods around it and aiming to expand its influence in the adjacent neighbourhoods of the city against the Russian attempts to contain this influence in the economic capital of Syria.

As the level of competition is escalating between Iran and Russia, Bashar Al Assad's regime will likely align with Russia to decrease the level of the Iranian influence in Syria (Ali, 2019, p. 1–2)

As part of the Iranian-Russian competition, Russia tried to change the loyalty of key figures in Syria, including those who are in command of the pro-regime militias.

Since the first year of its intervention, Russia managed to attract several militias to its side. By doing so, Russia wanted to weaken the Iranian influence on the ground, as Russia perceives Iran as a future competitor in Syria, where Russia wants to compensate for its military intervention in Syria by granting the major Russian companies' future rehabilitation and investment contracts.

³⁸<https://orsam.org.tr/tr>

Additionally, Russia tried to convert the allegiance of the Syrian businessmen to its side, as what happened when the Russian officers met with Hussam Al Qaterji in Deir Ez Zor. Before this meeting, Al Qaterji considered being one of the foremost Iranian-influenced businessmen in Syria. However, after this meeting, Russia and Al Qaterji agreed on increasing the level of economic and military cooperation, which could indicate the end of the bonds of loyalty between Al Qaterji and Iran.

By building a solid economic network in Syria, Russia is seeking to be involved not only in the rehabilitation process but also aiming to increase its revenue from future projects in Syria (Hatahet, 2019, p. 1).

In his book *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria*, Sinan Hatahet stated: "In pursuit of maintaining their interests in Syria, Moscow and Tehran have adopted different strategies and tools to fulfil their respective objectives. Russia aims to institutionalize its influence in Syria by reinforcing the state's capacity to exercise its full sovereign functions. In a sense, Moscow believes its interests are best preserved by a friendly central autocratic regime, which requires minimal investment and risk on its part to ensure stability in the long run. This objective implies re-establishing state authority over all armed actors by either integrating them in the Syrian military and security apparatus or simply eliminating them. In addition, this strategy requires the restoration of the government monopoly over governance and public service provisions as well as control of the economy and revenues generated" (Hatahet, 2019, p. 2).

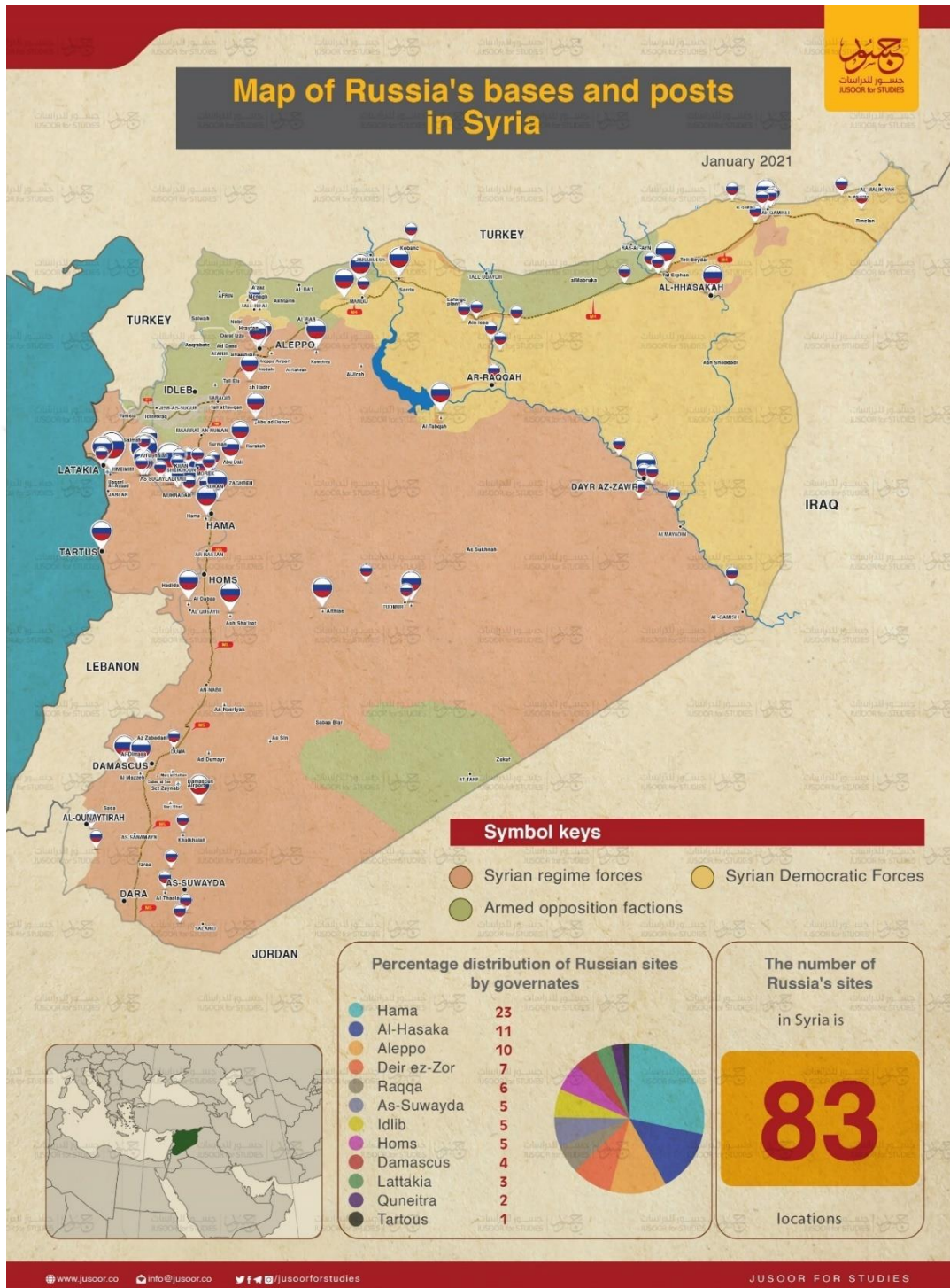
The Russian approach that involves practicing complete control by the Syrian government on all the militias in Syria is perceived as a threatening approach for the future Iranian interests in Syria. The Iranians consider its proxies in Syria as a helpful tool to preserve its interests, and the Russian approach aims to reduce its influence over the Syrian regime. At the same time, the Russian approach portrays the Russian forces as the only capable actor who could prevent the Iranian expansion in Syria, which is a source of concern for the regional and international powers. An example of that was allowing the Israeli air forces to attack Iranian targets in Syria to limit the capacity of its militias on the ground, the militias that Russia has used in the past few years to achieve its goals in Syria (Hatahet, 2019, p. 5).

6.6 The Russian-PKK relationship:

When the former US president, Donald Trump, announced that the United States Forces would withdraw from Syria in October 2019, The Syrian Democratic Forces became threatened, as this meant that the Turkish led military operation in Syria against the PKK-linked Syrian Democratic Forces is imminent where these operations aimed to expel the Syrian Democratic Forces from the whole northern Syria. Therefore, Russia rushed to fill the gap that the possible US withdrawal could create and met with the leaders of the PYD several times in Khmeimim airbase. These meetings allowed the Syrian army to enter the SDF-controlled areas in Ar Raqqa and Al Hasakeh provinces' northern countryside to participate against any Turkish military operation in the area. However, the factions of the Syrian National army supported by Turkish forces managed in October 2019 to control vast areas along the Turkish borders during the Peace spring operation and push the regime and the SDF forces to the M4 highway linking Al Hasakeh with Aleppo. With the presence of the regime forces alongside the Syrian Democratic forces on the frontline with the Turkish army, Russia gained a new tool to use in any future negotiation with Turkey. It prevented Iran at the same time from expanding its influence in northern Syria. The Syrian regime exploited the Russian intervention in northern Syria by spreading its forces in the areas beyond the Euphrates River. It also established a new negotiation channel with the Syrian Democratic forces, in which the regime and SDF are trying to reach an agreement to allow the regime forces to redeploy its forces in north-eastern Syria and start to benefit again from the oil and gas field in this area. The US decision of keeping part of their forces in Syria prevented the Syrian regime from achieving parts of its plans in this area, as its forces will not be able to reach the oil-rich areas anymore. On the other hand, the Syrian army managed to restore several vital locations, even if this is not a complete control but still a significant achievement.

Since the start of the SDF-Russian agreement, Russian military police have been patrolling the areas in northern and north-eastern Syria, mainly on the M4 highway between Aleppo and Al Hasakeh.

It is worth mentioning that several non-violent confrontations between the Russian and the US armies took place during the Russian patrols in northern Syria. However, these confrontations ended without any armed clashes.



Map 10 The Russian bases and posts in Syria as of January 2021.

Source: (ASI, Kilany, 2020, p.3)

Map 10 above shows the locations of the Russian bases in Syria as of January 2021. It is worth mentioning that the Russian bases in north-eastern Syria were established after the agreement between Russia and Turkey in late 2019.

6.7 Conclusion:

By Interfering in the Syrian War, Russia managed to restore its position as a significant power in the Middle East area and used Syria as a bargaining chip to influence its relationships with the United States and the west (Charap; Treyger; Geist, 2019, p. 7). In addition to the political gains, Russia managed to achieve geopolitical gains through its intervention in Syria. Keeping Assad in power allowed Russia to keep its port on the Mediterranean. Tartus base was the only resupply facility for the Russian naval forces outside Russia (Trenin, 2013, p. 8).

The Russian presence in Syria will guarantee Russia's future role in the Islamic gas pipeline (Maher & Pieper, 2020), especially with the Russian bases spread between AL Tayas (T4) airbase and Al Sha'er area in Homs eastern countryside.

Using the pro-Iranian proxies and the Syrian army in the battles of the Syrian desert, Russia managed to control the areas of the natural resources near Ar Raqqa city and phosphatic mines near Palmyra -Al-Sharqiyah and Khunayfis. The Russian private companies got long-term investment contracts in this area (Azizi, H., Issaev, L., & Petersburg, S., 2019). It is worth mentioning that the Russian gains in this area were in exchange for giving the Iranian proxies control over the route between Al Bukamal city on the Iraqi borders and Damascus in southern Syria, facilitating the Iranian project of controlling the road between Tehran and Damascus, through which, Iran can funnel aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Russia has built strong relationships with the terrorist group of PKK/PYD in Syria, which will give it the opportunity to control or invest in the oil and gas-rich areas west of the Euphrates River in case the United States decided to withdraw its forces from Syria. On the other hand, the relation with the PKK/PYD allowed Russia to create a check and balance system not only in Syria but in the entire region as well.

The Russian intervention in Syria prevented any possible spill over the radical groups if the radical Islamist took control of power in Syria, which would eventually support the network of extremist Islamist and insurgency in the North Caucasus (Allison, 2013, p. 795–823).

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

In light of the complicated relations between the Syrian regime and its supporters, we can notice that proxy warfare is now multi-pronged and includes more actors and facets than previously explained. The Syrian conflict proved that non-state militia could be proxies, but state actors can also play this role.

With the beginning of the Iranian Intervention in Syria, Iran started to create several militias and used them as proxies in the battles against the opposition factions across Syria. However, the Iranian proxy war wasn't limited to the usage of these militias as divisions of the Syrian army started to be involved in the Iranian planned battles as well, where the Syrian airforces started to provide aerial cover for the pro-Iranian militias in almost all of their battles and the Syrian artillery participated in this role as well.

As the battles intensified in Syria, the relations between the Syrian army and Iran started to grow stronger, in terms of mutual support and on other levels as well. As we saw in the first and the second chapters, the pro-Iranian militias started to provide training, logistical, resonances support for the Syrian army like what happened in the battles of Aleppo, where Hezbollah was supporting the members of the Syrian army and other pro-regime militias behind the frontlines, indicating a new feature in the relation between the non-state actors (Hezbollah militia) and the state actors (the Syrian army). Moreover, the Iranian exploitation of the Syrian army was systematically planned to eventually result in more Iranian gains in several strategic areas in Syria, and most notably in the Syrian desert, to secure an Iranian supply road for its militias in Syria and Lebanon through Syria. The Iranian militias are now controlling the whole area on the Iraqi borders to Damascus and Homs on the Lebanese borders securing the last piece of the Iranian arc of influence extending from Tehran to the Mediterranean.

Iran and its militias used the Syrian regime through the Iranian intervention and turned Syria into an advance base for Iran and Hezbollah in front of Israel, as the command centers and the military bases of these militias are now spreading along the borders with Israel, and not only that, but now these militias have also established training centers for its militants inside Syria, as the case of the training centers of Hezbollah on the Lebanese borders inside Syria, meaning that the coming war -whenever and in case it will happen- between Hezbollah and Israel will impact Syria and part of it might take place within the Syrian territories.

As we illustrated in this thesis, the Israeli airstrikes against the Iranian militias are increasing steadily in conjunction with the growing role of these militias in Syria.

The Mutual relationships between the Syrian regime and Iran, including its militias in Syria, illustrate the complexity of the proxy war, as it is now describing how state actors and the non-state actors are interchangeably using each other to achieve their gains in Syria.

On the other hand, the Syrian regime benefited from the Iranian intervention, where the pro-Iranian militias were used in the counter-insurgency campaign across Syria, at the time when the Syrian army was stretched thin and scattered across several frontlines in Syria, and trying to defend the Capital Damascus against the rebel factions who reached the vicinity of the city.

In addition to the participation in the offensive role, the pro-Iranian militias have a crucial defensive role in the areas they captured, where these militias are still operating till now on the frontlines with the rebel factions in north western Syria, as well as the frontlines in eastern Syria, as these militias are the main component of the forces that are still defending the villages and towns on the western bank of the Euphrates Rivers against the repeated attacks by the Islamic State militants who are still active in the several areas of the Syrian desert.

However, the Syrian regime exploited the Iranian intervention on several other levels, including economic support. As discussed in the second chapter, Iran is still supporting the Syrian regime with oil products through multiple channels to overcome the devastating disaster of the fuel shortages in the regime-controlled areas, where the Iranian oil shipments are still arriving to Syria via land and sea support the Syrian regime.

Moreover, Iran has sent a massive amount of cash to Syria to support the central bank of Syria in stopping the continuous deterioration of the Syrian pound value. In addition to sending cash, Iran has provided the Syrian regime with a credit line that allows the Syrian government to remain operational, especially with the international sanctions against Assad's regime.

Iran was also involved in the rehabilitation process of several vital facilities in the regime-controlled area, where the Syrian regime exploited the Iranian activities in Aleppo and Deir Ez Zor and facilitated the Iranian rehabilitation of several schools, hospitals, and other facilities in these provinces, which built a better environment for the regime's institutions to operate again in areas that were out of its control.

Additionally, the territorial control that was made with the support of the pro-Iranian militias granted the Syrian regime huge political gains, regionally and internationally, since the Syrian regime is now controlling the majority of the Syrian soil, which forced several states to be involved in negotiations with this regime in order to start a complete restoration and normalization of its relations with the Syrian regime. Therefore, while the Syrian army and the pro-Iranian militias played the role of Iranian proxies, Iran played the same role for the Syrian regime.

With the emergence of more dangerous enemies in the Syrian context like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Iran sought Russia's help not only to defeat the Islamic State but also to protect its gains in Syria. After the Russian intervention in Syria, Iran provided its militias to act as Russian proxies in the battles across Syria, indicating that patrons could become a proxy to preserve its interests and could also renounce part of its gains to protect the rest, and this is what happened after the Russian intervention.

The relation between Iran and Russia started to grow after 2015, and as the interests of these two states began to increase, the competition between Iran and Russia to maximize their gains was inevitable. Both states started to attract more actors in the Syrian scene to achieve more gains in Syria in terms of future rehabilitation contracts and also to achieve more strategic gains in the region like the nuclear program for Iran.

Plainly, Hezbollah, Iran, and Russia have exploited the weakness of the Syrian regime and consolidated their gains in the war-torn country. On the other hand, the Syrian regime achieved huge gains by exploiting the intervention of these actors, and most importantly, the Syrian regime managed to consolidate its role and stayed in power in Syria for at least seven years now.

This complicated cobweb of mutual benefits between State actors and state and non-state actors portrays a new phase of proxy warfare that is not limited to the state actors acting as patrons and non-state actors as proxies. Now it includes more complicated relations between all the involved actors on multiple levels.

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