

T.C.
İSTANBUL KULTUR UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE SYRIAN CRISIS: (2011-2021)

MA Thesis by
Mohammad Imad Kattan
1900006240

Department: International Relations
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Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bora BAYRAKTAR

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Members of Examining Committee:

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Çağla Gül Yesevi

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Şuay Nilhan Açıkalin

APRIL 2023

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Mohammad Kattan

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Enstitü : **Lisansüstü Eğitim Enstitüsü**
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ÖZET

İran, 2011’de patlak veren Suriye’deki iç savaşta Suriye rejiminin ilk destekçisi oldu ve tüm askeri, güvenlik, ekonomik, siyasi ve toplumsal ağırlığıyla Suriye krizine müdahale etti. Müdahalesinin derinliği, Suriye krizine dahil olan tüm ülkelerden farklıydı. Bunun nedeni Suriye’nin, İran’ın ulusal güvenliği, Şii jeopolitiği, kendisine uygulanmak istenen bölgesel izolasyonun kırılabilmesi ve ortak tehdit algıları açısından Tahran için kritik öneme sahip olmasıdır. İran-Suriye ilişkisi bir münhasırlık durumuyla karakterize ediliyor ve birlikte kazanan ya da kaybeden, kaçınılmaz, kaderi olan bir ilişki olarak şekillenir. İran etkisini güçlendirdi ve askeri, güvenlik, ekonomik ve sosyal olarak devlet kurumlarına nüfuz etmeye devam ediyor. (Sosyal mühendislik) Demografik değişim, İran’ı Suriye’ye müdahale eden ve Suriye’nin toprak bütünlüğünü ciddi şekilde etkileyen tüm yabancı güçlerden ayıran eşsiz bir durumdur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran Dış Politikası, Suriye Krizi, Şii jeopolitiği

University : **Istanbul Kultur University**
Institute : **Institute of Graduate Studies**
Department : **International Relations**
Programme : **International Relations**
Supervisor : **Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bora Bayraktar**
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ABSTRACT

Iran was the first supporter of the Syrian regime and interfered with the Syrian crisis with all its military, security, economic, political, and social weight in Syrian civil war which erupted in march 2011. The depth of its intervention differed from all the countries involved in the Syrian crisis. Syria is critical for Iran within Iranian national security, Shiite geopolitics, regional isolation, and shared threat perceptions. A state of singularity characterizes the Iranian-Syrian relationship and crystallizes as an inevitable fateful relationship, either winning or losing together. Iran consolidated its influence and continues to penetrate the state's institutions in terms of military, security, economic, and social. The (social engineering) and demographic change is a unique case that distinguished Iran from all foreign powers that intervened in Syria, and it severely impacted the unity of Syrian soil.

Keywords: Iranian Foreign Policy, Syrian Crisis, Shiite geopolitics

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in the thesis

SOHR	Syrian Observatory for Human Rights
SNHR	Syrian Network for Human Rights
ODNI	Office of the Director of National Intelligence
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
HHN	Iraqi Nujaba Movement
HLSCC	High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Introduction

Within the geostrategic map of the Middle East, Syria is distinguished by its exceptional strategic geographical location, which represents the cornerstone of the geopolitical formation in the region. Through its strategic location overlooking the most important seas, Syria is the meeting point and linking point, and it is in the heart of the region separating Asia, Europe, and Africa, and thus it is located at the intersection of the lines of exchange and trade between these continents. In addition to its position as an advanced front with Israel, which gave it great importance, its presence at the forefront of the Sunni-Shia struggle made it vulnerable to regional and international interests.¹

Since its start in 2011, the Syrian crisis has transformed from a crisis with internal reform dimensions to regional and international dimensions. Instead, Syria has become an arena of regional and international conflict over the region's future.

Iran was the first supporter of the Syrian regime and interfered with the Syrian crisis with all its military, security, economic, political, and social weight. The depth of its intervention differed from all the countries involved in the Syrian crisis. Within the regional and international changes we are witnessing today, the Iranian-Syrian relationship was characterized by a state of singularity and an inevitable fateful relationship, either winning or losing together.

By the seventies of the last century and the arrival of Hafez al-Assad to power in Syria, the Iranian-Syrian relations witnessed a remarkable transformation. Especially since the president belongs to the Alawite sect, and the ideological aspect emerged in the relations between Iran and Syria during this period, as Musa al-Sadr, the charismatic leader of the persecuted Shiites in southern Lebanon, recognized the Alawite sect and considered it to be a Twelver Shiite. Since he came to power in 1971, Hafez al-Assad worked to strengthen the relationship with the Lebanese Shiite leader Musa al-Sadr and to strengthen relations with the Shiites of Iran and Lebanon, thus laying the foundation for the alliance. Especially after Khomeini came to power in Iran in 1979,

¹ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System", (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 58.

the alliance became more formal and was directed against Saddam's Iraq and towards supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon.²

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, a radical change occurred in the relations between Syria and Iran, especially after the transformation that the Iranian regime knew by adopting the Islamic approach as an official principle of the state, in addition to the mutual hostility towards the United States and Israel. Strong relations began between Syria and the new leaders of Iran.

Iranian-Syrian relations have strengthened strategically after the Iranian Islamic revolution due to several factors that pushed the two countries towards a comprehensive alliance, pragmatic and close relations serving mutual vital goals and interests, and strengthening military capabilities in facing common challenges and risks. For Syria, the timing of the Iranian revolution was the most appropriate for it. Syria's sense of isolation and being increasingly exposed to strategic danger was exacerbated by Egypt's abandonment of the struggle against Israel and its signing of the Camp David Accords in 1979. In addition, to the failure of any real move towards a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement and the escalation of tension with Iraq after the Syrian-backed coup attempt in Iraq in July 1979.³

Syria has become concerned that Egypt has become, after the Camp David Accords, belonged to the pro-Western camp, fearing that it will drag in its wake other key Arab parties such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia, given the weight that Egypt represents in the Arab region, and this is what increases Syria's isolation and weakens its position vis-à-vis Israel.⁴

The stage of the Iraqi-Iranian war was important in the history of Iranian-Syrian relations. After Iraq and Iran severed their diplomatic relations in 1971, the hostility between the two countries remained until 1980, when the Iraqi forces penetrated Iranian territory, and the war broke out between them. The Arab response to this war was to stand with Iraq, while the Syrian regime

² Karmon, Eli. *Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition against Nature: Why Does It Work*, (5th ed., vol. 1, National Intelligence University, Washington, D.C., USA, 2008), p. 18

³ Kienle, Eberhard. *Ba'ath v. Ba'th: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989*, (Tauris, London, UK, 1990), p.20.

⁴ Goodarzi, Jubin M. *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, (Tauris, London, 2006), p. 17.

was with Iran from the first moment and supported it in its war with weapons, equipment, and supplies.⁵ That prompted Iraq to deploy some important military divisions on the Iraqi-Syrian border. In addition, Syria provided the rebellious Iraqi Kurds in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq with weapons and equipment. Moreover, Syria shut down Iraqi oil in Kirkuk-Baniyas, deprived Iraq of its water resources, and received cheap Iranian oil in return. That is what increased the Syrian strategic weight in relation to Iran. The Syrian decision-maker's realization of the global variables and the Iranian role it could play in the region pushed it to approach and strengthen its relations with Iran.⁶

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 had significant repercussions on Iranian-Syrian relations. Shortly after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hafez AL-Assad allowed hundreds of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to enter the Bekaa Valley to contribute to the establishment of Hezbollah.⁷ Western multinational forces, which deployed to Lebanon in the aftermath of the invasion, attempted to secure Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, which strengthened cooperation between the Assad regime and Iran. At the same time, the Israeli army was mainly active in southern Beirut and southern Lebanon. At that time, the first cells of Hezbollah began attacking the Israeli and Western forces, which allowed Hezbollah to expand its sphere of influence and spread. In 1985, the party became more organized and consistent, and the party issued a public document defining its political program, inaugurating a new era of Shiite revolutionary politics.⁸

In the second half of the eighties, the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon formed a political vacuum that led to tension and conflicting relations between Iran and Syria. While Iran sought to use Hezbollah as a tool to export the Islamic revolution, the Syrian regime sought to stabilize Lebanon and reassert its hegemony over the country.⁹ Hezbollah sought to lead the resistance

⁵ Sadjadpour, Karim, "An alliance of doubtful utility," *The Iran-Syria alliance*, (13th ed., vol. 3, Middle East Roundtable, 2005), p. 79

⁶ Karmon, Eli. *Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition against Nature: Why Does It Work*, Ibid, p. 19

⁷ Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, New York, USA, 1999, p. 155.

⁸ Filippo Dionigi, "Hezbollah, Islamist Politics, and International Society", (Palgrave, New York, USA, 2014), p. 161

⁹ Goodarzi, Jubin M. "Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East", (Tauris, London, 2006), p. 144.

against Israel, and Damascus was concerned it might lose its sway over Lebanon's Shiites. Therefore, the Syrians were wary of supporting an Iranian-backed group as the de facto representative of the Shiite community, while its first Shiite ally was the Amal movement. This escalating rivalry led to tensions and eventually to armed clashes between Amal and Hezbollah.

The scope of the fighting between Amal and Hezbollah expanded and extended until 1988. Finally, Iran and Syria reached a sponsorship of a settlement between Hezbollah and Amal, the "Damascus Agreement," in 1989. The Syrians deployed their forces in the southern suburbs with a Shiite majority to separate the belligerents. The importance of the Iranian-Syrian alliance emerged in their ability to overcome any dispute that could endanger their relations.¹⁰

In 1990, the outbreak of the Second Gulf War and Syria's involvement in the international coalition against Iraq gave Syria the possibility to play several roles, especially with regard to Iranian-Gulf relations, as it was the only country that could play the role of mediator between the two parties.¹¹

The issue of a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Madrid Conference in 1991 also accompanied this period. Syria was the main player in it and had all the main pressure cards. Despite Iran's rejection of the peace process with Israel, this did not prevent Syria from entering negotiations because both countries have a clear appreciation of the strategic priorities of each of them. Iran has been able to adapt to the ebb and flow of regional politics and appreciates the strategic factors that lie behind Syria's acceptance of peace with Israel and its determination to ensure the stability of Lebanon.¹²

In 1991, after the Madrid Conference, peace negotiations were held between Syria and Israel, especially after the United States confirmed the centrality of the Syrian role in these negotiations, which lasted for three years. However, no agreement was reached due to the dissatisfaction of

¹⁰ Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. *Syria and Iran Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2002), p. 134.

¹¹ Muhammad Al-Aidrous, "The Arab Islands and the Iranian occupation," (Dar Al Aidarous for Modern Books – Dubai, 2002), p. 363

¹² Muslih, Muhammad. "Dateline Damascus: Asad Is Ready." (*Foreign Policy*, no. 96, 1994), p. 158. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149222>

the two parties. Syria set its goal, which is the implementation of Resolution 242.¹³ Israel rejected this, and negotiations continued with the United States' attempts to settle the situation. However, it did not lead to any solution, especially with the increase in excessive Israeli demands, such as Syria disarming Hezbollah and severing its relations with Iran, which made the negotiations lose their importance. Since the stumbling of the Syrian-Israeli negotiations and the transformations the region has witnessed, Syrian-Iranian cultural relations have witnessed a remarkable development. During the visit of the Syrian Minister of Culture to Tehran, the two sides agreed to implement the cultural agreement of 1995, 1996, and 1997, and the extension of this agreement, which still forms the basis for cultural policies and assets between the two countries.¹⁴

The economic relations between Syria and Iran also witnessed a remarkable improvement, as a trade agreement was signed between the two countries on August 20, 1996, to grant the goods of the two countries non-discriminatory treatment at the level of customs duties in order to encourage trade exchange, and this also included facilitating payments in all ways. Furthermore, on February 5, 1998, an agreement was reached on mutual encouragement and protection of investments, which resulted in many private and joint investment projects.¹⁵

As for military relations, Iran contributed to supplying weapons to Syria in cooperation with Russia. Iran's role was to guarantee the financial loans incurred by Syria from the new armament deals in exchange for Russia's agreement to solve the problem of old loans. In addition, cooperation took place between the two countries in the oil field, where an agreement was signed in 1998 related to cooperation in transportation, communications, and housing. Syria received an Iranian oil subsidy amounting to about \$62 million in 1998.¹⁶

¹³ For more information about Resolution 242 "Security Council Resolution 242: The Situation in the Middle East | UN Peacemaker." United Nations, United Nations, <https://peacemaker.un.org/middle-east-resolution242>.

¹⁴ Hassan al-Shafi'i, "Cultural Communication in Iran during the Era of Sayf al-Dawla," Islamic Culture (Damascus: Iranian Cultural Chancellery, no. 100, 2006), p. 102

¹⁵ Akram Al-Hourani, "The Development of Iranian-Syrian Economic Relation" Islamic Culture (Damascus: Iranian Cultural Chancellery, no. 98, 2004), p. 115

¹⁶ Akram Al-Hourani, "The Development of Iranian-Syrian Economic Relation", Ibid., p.125

Bashar Al-Assad took power in Syria in July 2000, after his father's death, Hafez Al-Assad, as the relationship with Iran during the era of Bashar Al-Assad became deeper than it was during the era of his late father. After September 11, 2001, Syria and Iran supported the operations of the United States to combat terrorism. In Afghanistan, Tehran cooperated with the US forces militarily and logistically to fight the Taliban.¹⁷ Similarly, Syria has emerged as one of the most effective intelligence allies of the CIA in the war against al-Qaeda. The September 11, 2001 events confirmed the necessity of strengthening and closer relations, especially after the USA included both Syria and Iran among the countries of the axis of evil and sponsors of terrorism as a pretext to enter the Middle East region.¹⁸

The occupation of Iraq in April 2003 turned the regional balances upside down. The US forces occupied Iraq militarily. Iran, through its allies in Baghdad, controlled the dimensions of Iraqi politics for the first time in modern history. In addition to its traditional foreign policy tools, such as the alliance with the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has worked to maintain close relations with all major Iraqi Shiite political parties and militias,¹⁹ to impose unprecedented regional influence extending from its western borders through Iraq, Syria, and southern Lebanon to reach the Upper Galilee.²⁰

The Iranian-Syrian alliance deepened further, with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assuming the presidency in Iran in 2005. Bashar al-Assad went to Tehran in 2005 after the election of Iranian President Ahmadinejad to congratulate him and hold meetings with Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad leaders. Bashar al-Assad described Syrian-Iranian relations as "steady and constantly evolving. It is a strategic relationship and has proven its effectiveness and importance in all issues that passed through our region." Regarding what is said about the improvement of Arab-Arab relations dependent on a separation between Syria and Iran, Al-Assad said, "It is more obvious to say that Arab-Arab relations depend on stopping relations with Israel, not with Iran."

¹⁷ Barzegar, Kayhan. "Iran's Foreign Policy Strategy after Saddam." (*The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2010), p. 177

¹⁸ Jamela Ahmed, "New World Order and its impact on the Syrian Iranian relations 1991 - 2008", 2016, p. 51

¹⁹ Goodarzi, Jubin M., "Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment" (*Ortadoğu Etütleri*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013), p. 48

²⁰ Naji Awad, "Iraq and the dialectic relationship between regional tensions, and sectarian polarizations" (*Arab affairs*, no. 129, 2007), p. 154

On the military level, the two sides signed a joint defense treaty in June 2006, the terms of which were kept secret, followed by a joint military cooperation agreement in March 2007, and then followed cooperation to re-supply Hezbollah with weapons and missiles after the Israeli aggression on Lebanon in July 2006, and also supplying the Syrian army with missiles, military equipment, and military training, in addition to intelligence cooperation.²¹

On the cultural level, Iran operated inside Syria more freely than possible under the previous restrictions during the era of Hafez al-Assad. President Bashar seemed more open to allowing Iran to work inside Syria culturally and doctrinally.²² In 2007, Iran had at least two cultural centers in Damascus and Latakia, and it spent millions of dollars to revive Shiite shrines and shrines throughout Syria. As a result, the number of Iranian visitors to these shrines has increased since Ahmadinejad came to power, as their number ranged annually between five hundred thousand to one million Iranian visitors, in addition to the Iranian funds allocated to finance the construction and operation of Shiite seminaries in Syria, which was accompanied by an advocacy effort to convert a number of Syrians to Shiism.²³

On the economic level, the Iranian-Syrian economic relations witnessed significant development. The rates of direct Iranian investment and the volume of trade exchange between Iran and Syria increased rapidly since Ahmadinejad came to power and included many fields such as agriculture, communications, and oil, and were estimated at three billion dollars in 2008. In addition to the joint ventures, the most prominent is the production of Iranian cars in Syria at a value of \$60 million to meet the needs of 40% of the Syrian car market.²⁴

With the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Iranian regime intervened with all its weight politically, militarily, economically, and socially on the side of the Syrian regime. The strength of the Iranian-Syrian alliance relations was evident in the negative Iranian position on the Syrian revolution, in contrast to its general position on the Arab Spring revolutions. Iran supported Bashar al-Assad and considered the Syrian revolution a Western foreign plot against

²¹ Mona Yacoubian, *"Syria's Alliance with Iran,"* (United States Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 2.

²² For more information, *"The Shiite Baath in Syria from 1919-2007,"* (International Institute for Syrian Studies, 2009)

²³ Mona Yacoubian, *"Syria's Alliance with Iran,"*, Ibid

²⁴ Jonathan Gelbart, *"The Iran-Syria Axis: A Critical Investigation,"* (Stanford Journal of International Relations, vol. 7, no. 1, 2010), p. 40

the axis of resistance led by Iran, intending to confront Western hegemony projects over the Arab region.²⁵

The Syrian crisis posed a serious, complex, and interrelated security challenge for Iranian political decision-makers, and this comes within the framework of the close historical relationship between Syria and Iran and the political, security, and strategic dimensions between the two countries, in addition to the ideological dimensions, as the Iranian-Syrian relations represent one of the close strategic international relations, based on to pragmatic political, security and ideological imperatives.²⁶

In this thesis, the researcher seeks to analyze and study Iranian foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis (2011-2021) from several different factors that frame and crystallize this policy. The researcher will first address the foundations of Iranian foreign policy in general, how Iran moves and why?, and then analyze Iranian foreign policy towards Syria in terms of the following points: the premises/goals, the importance of Syria in the Iranian project, and the Iranian strategy. In the third chapter of the thesis, the researcher analyses in detail the seriousness of the project and the Iranian foreign policy in Syria in terms of the tools of influence used for Iranian penetration in all the joints of the Syrian state. In the fourth and final chapter, the researcher will address the impact of the Syrian crisis on Iranian-Russian relations.

The researcher relied mainly on geopolitics theory in the thesis because its various dimensions' geographical and geostrategic nature profoundly impacts the political phenomenon. The researcher explained throughout the thesis (Shiite crescent, Shiite geopolitics, Land corridor, Eurasia). The descriptive-analytical method was mainly used in chapter three by collecting information and data on many practical examples of reports, facts, and statistics demonstrating the Iranian policies since the first year of the Syrian crisis in 2011 to 2021. These examples give an insight into how Iran penetrated and continues to penetrate the state's institutions in terms of military, security, and economics. In addition, the historical approach was used mainly in the introduction to explain the history of the Iranian Syrian relationship since 1979.

²⁵ Rabie Nasr, et. al. *"The Syrian Crisis: Roots and Effects,"* (Damascus, Syrian Center for Research and Policy, 2013), p. 22

²⁶ Muhammad Al-Saeed, *"The Alliance of Necessity between Iran and Syria,"* (Gulf Center for Studies, 2015.), p.

Secondary data was used in this thesis. The sources and the analysis of the thesis writing relied on articles, books, research papers, academic thesis, lectures, scientific journals, speeches, and statements of some political figures.

Literature Review

In the literature review, I studied some books and academic thesis in English and Arabic that give me an insight to understand the roots of the Iranian-Syrian relationship and the reasons for its strength. In addition, some academic thesis on Iranian foreign policy towards the Arab revolutions or the Arab Spring.

The study²⁷ dealt with the alliance between Syria and Iran. Goodarzi explains that many do not realize the extent of the deep interdependence between the Syrian-Iranian strategic interests, so guaranteeing stability for their regimes has become dependent on the other despite their ideological differences. He touched on related issues, such as the Syrian presence in Lebanon, the Iraqi war, peace negotiations, and support for Hezbollah. Iran benefits from its alliance with Syria as its main transit route to the Levant and Lebanon to support its allies. Goodarzi argues that the Iranian-Syrian alliance is defensive in its essence, as the two sides cooperated to thwart Iraqi and Israeli plans in the region and thwart American moves that support Tel Aviv and Baghdad.

The study focused on the important issues in the Syrian-Iranian alliance and the factors affecting them, such as the US intervention. Goodarzi believes that the US policy in the region has only led to "revitalizing Syrian-Iranian cooperation in the post-Cold War period." Since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the Syrian-Iranian alliance has continued to be strengthened rather than weakened. This does not mean that the Syrian-Iranian axis succeeds and that others fail. However, it does reveal that the Syrian-Iranian axis can still overcome the difficulties it faces and undermine the chances of real peace and stability in the region. As a result, many of those who bet on the existence of a real axis opposed to the Syrian-Iranian axis are now facing disappointment.

²⁷ Goodarzi, Jubin M. *"Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East"*, Tauris, London, 2006

Hinnebusch and Ehteshami's study²⁸ presents a view that differs from what is prevalent, which is that both Syria and Iran have played the role of rogue states in the Middle East, thus threatening to destabilize the Arab region in general and the Gulf region in particular. Instead, Hinnebusch and Ehteshami stated that the two countries are trying to act rationally in their quest to contain Western influence.

Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, argue that the Syrian-Iranian alliance may be more durable due to the presence of multiple and overlapping common geopolitical interests. From a geopolitical point of view, a geographically determined balance of power shapes alliances: neighboring states tend to be rivals, and balance dictates alliances. The Syrian-Iranian alliance has a common interest in removing American hegemony in the region. In addition, the common threat is from neighboring Iraq and Turkey. They are, furthermore, balancing pro-Western regimes in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

The relationship between Iran and Syria is a defensive one. Hinnebusch and Ehteshami Stated that the alliance was a natural response to the military imbalance after the Gulf War. Hafez Al-Assad stressed that "the alliance with Iran is part of ensuring the balance of power in the region." For Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, the continuity of the alliance is fundamentally rooted in geopolitical and strategic considerations, balancing threats from common enemies.

Regarding the Iranian foreign policy towards the Arab Spring, Abu Hilal's study²⁹ reviewed the official Iranian position of the conservative and reformist currents towards the popular revolutionary movement in the Arab Spring. The conservative current supported the Arab revolutions and considered them an inspiration from the Iranian revolution and an extension of it. While the reformists criticized the official Iranian position opposing the Syrian revolution, in contrast to the rest of the Arab revolutionary movements, considering that it is hypocrisy and double standards, and it negatively impacted Iran's credibility and image in front of the Arab people and the world. This study clarifies the official Iranian position in support of the Arab Spring revolutions in general and the opposition to the Syrian revolution in particular.

²⁸ Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. *Syria and Iran Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2002

²⁹ Firas Abu Hilal, *"Iran and the Arab Revolutions: The Position and Repercussions,"* Doha, Arab Center for Research and Studies, 2011.

This study³⁰ discussed the principles and determinants of Iranian foreign policy, based on Khomeini's revolutionary thought, and the criteria for profit and loss. The importance of this study appears in its attempt to explain the justifications for the Iranian position in support of the Syrian regime in a way that contradicts the Iranian tendencies of the Arab revolutions in general. This study focused on economic criteria in interpreting the general Iranian position towards the Arab revolutions, whether in Syria or elsewhere. However, the Iranian strategic security motives, alliance, and sectarian relations were neglected, especially concerning the Syrian situation. The study also neglected the influence of ideological thought that determines Iranian foreign policy towards the neighborhood of the Arab region and those based on the Khomeinist revolution principles and the jurist's guardianship, which is decided by the Supreme Leader of the Republic of Iran, who is the higher effective authority in the country.

This study³¹ dealt with Iran's regional and international interactions, Iranian policies towards the neighboring Arab countries, and the impact of these policies on Arab national security and stability in the region, as Iran seeks to be an influential and effective regional power capable of implementing its political, ideological agenda, through hegemony over the Arab region, which it collides with Western interests in the geographical vicinity of Iran, and causes permanent security instability in an important and sensitive vital area. The study describes Iran's general strategy towards the Arab world as a cause of international conflict with the global powers that influence the Arab region and its capabilities.

Fulton, et.al study³² focused on the justifications for the Iranian position in support of the Syrian regime, which is represented by Iran's keenness to defend its interests and the power of its influence and power in the Arab region as Iran sees the fall of the Syrian regime as a direct threat to its power of influence in Iraq and Lebanon, and its confrontation with Israel and its allies. The Iranian strategy towards the Syrian uprising was based on the principle of the strategic alliance with the regime, ensuring the protection of its interests and areas of influence and supporting its allies in confronting its opponents.

³⁰ Mahjoub Al-Zwairi, "Revolutionary Iran and the Arab Revolutions: Notes on Iranian Foreign Policy and its Money," Doha, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2012.

³¹ Nevin Massad, *"Iran's International and Regional Relations and Their Effects on Arab National Security"*, Beirut, Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2011

³² Will Fulton, et.al, *"Iranian strategy in Syria "*, Institute for the study of War (ISW), 2013

Chapter 1

The Foundation of Iranian foreign policy

In this chapter, the researcher seeks to analyze the basics/goals of Iranian foreign policy from several perceptions pursued by Iran in its policy and strategy to explain how Iran is moving and why?

In the eighties of the last century, after the revolution in 1979, Iran put forward the Umm al-Qura theory project, "Quotes in the National Strategy," by Dr. Muhammad Javad Larijani; the book is a course in the Department of Political Science at Tehran University. This strategy emphasizes several vital points in drawing Iranian foreign policy³³, including the Iranian Republic being the headquarters country for the Islamic world (as it is the mother of villages, the duty to defend it overrides any other interest). Second: The Iranian Republic's banner will be forcibly raised in the Sunni capitals. The Iranian strategy dictates that it is the only one capable of leading the Islamic world; to achieve that, regional expansion and hegemony must be imposed (regional expansion is a fundamental pillar of Iranian foreign policy and national security).

Moreover, this is synonymous with the concept of "the theory of exporting the Iranian revolution," as Khomeini defined it, that the authority of Wilayat al-Faqih imposes its influence on all countries. It does not submit itself to international law, and is not interested in a border treaty, so no sovereignty prevents the imposition of a fait accompli. No independence precludes the state from crossing into other countries.³⁴

In the Middle East, Iran represents a link between the continents of Asia and Europe, which has given it particular importance in international politics. It also has long sea coasts that overlook several important and strategic seaports and sites in its geographical vicinity, including the vital Strait of Hormuz, which enabled it to communicate Direct contact with the open world seas, in

³³ Muhammad Jawad Larijani, "Iran and the Shiite Umm Al-Qura Theory", Nabil Al-Atoum, (Jordan: Umayyah Center for Research and Strategic Studies, 2017), p. 5-6

³⁴ Firas Elias, "Shiite Geopolitics and the Iranian Geostrategic Imagination: Areas of Influence and Building Influence," (Al Jazeera Center for Studies, No. 1 2019), p. 7

addition to containing huge reserves of energy in the Arabian Gulf region and the Caspian Sea, and building a substantial strategic naval military force.³⁵

Due to Iran's significant geopolitical position, the Shiite geopolitical theory (the Shiite belt) that the first president of the Republic of Iran talked about after the revolution, Sayyid Abolhassan Banisadr, came in 2000. "Khomeini used to say that he wanted to establish a Shiite belt to control the Islamic world, and this belt consisted of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and when he became master of this belt, he would use the oil and the position of the Arab Gulf to control the rest of the Islamic world."³⁶ So, it has an expansive significance extending outside the Iranian borders. Iran's geopolitical location, which enjoys enormous resources of great importance, is the focal point for the Shiite heart that nourishes the limbs. It will be a connecting point for Shiite communities that Iran wants to exert influence over within the "Shiite belt framework."³⁷



Figure 1: The Shiite belt “Shiite Crescent” that Khomeini talked about.

Source: <http://www.brandonturbeville.com/2018/10/west-gcc-israel-fear-shiite-crescent.html>

³⁵ Muhammad Abd al-Mu'min, “Political Jurisprudence in Iran,” (Cairo, Hajar for Printing and Publishing, 1989), p. 10-16.

³⁶ Ali Bakeer, “The Geostrategic Dimensions of the Iranian and Turkish Policies towards Syria,” (Al-Arabi Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 11

³⁷ Elias, Ibid, p.6

Concerning the concept of Shiite geopolitics, we note that the French researcher François Thual was the first to use this concept when he published his book in French entitled "Shiite Geopolitics" in 1995. It was translated into Persian, as he indicated that the Shiite doctrine is a concept of a geopolitical nature, given that the fields of Geographical Shia influence power relations around the world. For example, the Shiites in the Persian Gulf enjoy geopolitical importance due to their location in the global energy geography, which is vital to the survival and economic growth of the world. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the geographical distribution of the Shiites and their locations, as well as the type of their beliefs. He concludes that the phenomenon of Shiism has become the focus of many regional and international conflicts. Most Shiites reside in sensitive geopolitical centers in the world, which allows them to play influential roles, using the Shiite historical background, their geographical distribution, and their centers of power from a geopolitical point of view.³⁸

The Iranian researcher, Farahnaz, provided another definition of Shiite geopolitics, pointing out that in the post-Cold War phase, new critical theories emerged, which began to critically study the science of geopolitics, "By presenting Samuel Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations, we have seen a process of politicization of cultural, ethnic, religious and geopolitical identities." Therefore, since Iran represents the basis of the Shiite identity, it can be considered the center of the Shiite world."³⁹

While the Iranian researcher, Mohammad Reza Hafeznia, talked about Shiite geopolitics by saying: It is a specific concept of the human structure and the religious community that has a Shiite religious identity in the world, in the sense of the Shiite human struggle, to rebuild identity and religious cohesion on a global scale and build Shiite centralism in the world inspired by the position of the Iranian leadership; This also led to the sensitivity of the competing regional structures and their sharp reactions to the Shiite structure. The Shiite formation seems to continue its political struggle to achieve its natural position in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. He adds: It seems that the concept of Shiite geopolitics, Catholic geopolitics, and Jewish geopolitics is a hybrid concept, as are other concepts such as Sunni geopolitics, Hindu

³⁸ Thual , François. "*Géopolitique Du Chiisme*". Translated by Katayun Baser, (Vistar Publications, 2003), p. 17

³⁹ Mayel Afshar Farahnaz, "*Shiite geo-politic*", The Politics of the Day publications, 2004

geopolitics, and Francophone geopolitics, given that all these concepts are based on “religious” human structures, Racial, ethnic, political, class and spatial.⁴⁰

In general, the concept of Shiite geopolitics indicates that Iran constitutes the main pillar of the Shiite world within the framework of Islamic geopolitics. The idea of Shiite centralism here comes in the same formulation put forward by the strategic thinker Halford John Mackinder when he formulated the theory Heartland⁴¹, which consists of a central point: Eurasia. to which the power that controls Central Asia - the Greater Axis - will eventually emerge as the most powerful state in international politics., which can be addressed within the framework of Shiite geopolitics through many geopolitical theories, foremost among which is the theory of the " Umm al-Qura theory project " put forward by Larijani, in which he considered that Iran constitutes the central pillar of the Shiite world. In this, he framed the same idea advocated by Mackinder when he spoke of the world's central region.

From a national security perspective, Iran looks at the world from an ideological standpoint, especially after the collapse of Saddam's regime due to the 2003 Iraq war. The collapse of the Iraqi regime indeed encouraged Iran to pursue the goal of expanding its regional powers. For Iran, the aftermath of the war shaped the world in two parts: the world of evil led by the United States and the world of benevolence led by Iran. This vision is based on the nature of the relationship with the global powers, the importance of the Shiite dimension in their politics, and their belief in the Persian Gulf. The said vision sees that there are four levels that threaten Iranian national security:

The first level is the international system's structure and characteristics reflecting globalization represented by World Trade Organization approaches and activities. The second level is the threats of global powers such as the United States and the European Union. Third level: regional threats, which constitute Israel, the Persian Gulf countries (mainly the GCC), the Caspian Sea

⁴⁰ Sayed Abbas Ahmadi, " *Conceptual Explanation of Shiite Geopolitics (A New Definition)* ", (International Quarterly of Geopolitics, vol. 14, no. 49, 2018,) p. 59- 65

⁴¹ Mackinder H. J, "*Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*", (Constable Publishers, London, 1942), p. 50

countries, and the neighboring Asian countries. Fourth level: internal threats, including national cohesion problems, separatist movements, economic challenges, political rifts, Etc.⁴²



Figure 2: Iranian Threat's Perception: From American Bases Around Iran.

Source: <https://brettwilkins.com/2019/06/20/common-dreams-the-exceptionally-american-historical-amnesia-behind-pompeos-claim-of-40-years-of-unprovoked-iranian-aggression/>

Looking at several perceptions that Iran has followed in its policy and strategy, we perceive that (imposing a fait accompli, cross-border revolution, imposing hegemony and expansion by force, and prominent ideology) are considered the pillars of Iranian national security and foreign policy. We recognize its impact clearly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and others.

⁴² Firas Elias, "Iran's National Security Policy," (ANKASAM, Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi, no. 2, 2018), p. 164

Chapter 2

Importance of Syria in Iranian foreign policy

In this chapter, the researcher will explain the importance of Syria in Iranian foreign policy; one should not consider or judge the Iranian Syrian relationships from one angle and one factor. Several factors give this Iranian Syrian relationship a state of singularity. This relationship's characteristics come within the framework of Iranian national security, the Shiite crescent and Shiite geopolitics, regional isolation, and shared threat perceptions.

2.1 Iranian National Security

Numerous Iranian officials and leaders' statements show how important Syria is to Iran and that their relationship is an inevitable fateful relationship, either winning together or losing together. At the beginning of the Syrian uprising in Syria in 2011, the former commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Mohsen Rezaei, stated Iran's position by declaring that "Syria is Iran's red line. We will not remain silent about what others are planning against Syria and the axis of resistance."⁴³ In 2012, Mohammad Ali Assoudi, the deputy for culture and propaganda of the (IRGC) stated, "If America were to attack Syria, Iran along with Syria's allies [that is, Hezbollah], which would amount to a fiasco for America... In the case of American stupidity and a military attack by this country on Syria, the joint military pact of Syria's allies would be implemented,"⁴⁴

In a significant statement that came at a critical time, which means a lot to the strength and privacy of the Syrian-Iranian relationship, in 2013, the head of the Ammar Strategic Base, Mehdi Taeb, told Basij trainees: "If the enemy attacks us and seeks to control Syria or Khuzestan [Iran], the priority lies in maintaining Syria because if we preserve Syria, we can take back Khuzestan"⁴⁵.

⁴³ Shahram Akbarzadeh, *"Iran's Syrian Foreign Policy Objectives"*, The Arab World and Iran: A Turbulent Region in Transition, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 132

⁴⁴ "Iran would take action if U.S. attacked Syria: official", Reuters, September 1, 2012, Available from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran/iran-would-take-action-if-u-s-attacked-syria-official-idUKBRE88007120120901>

⁴⁵ It is important to note that Khuzestan is Arabstan...the South Western part of Iran where Arabs are the majority.

However, if we lose Syria, we will not be able to control Tehran. "⁴⁶Another comment by Hussein Talib, deputy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, defines Syria as a "35th state."⁴⁷ of Iran. These statements, especially the last two, confirm that Syria is an internal matter and a red line for Iranian national security and the protection of Iran's regime.

2.2 Shiite Crescent and Shiite Geopolitics

Concerning the Shiite crescent and Shiite geopolitics, since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran has been trying to play the role of a regional leader in the Islamic world, especially against Israel, the imperial agent (in particular, Iran's full support for the Palestinian cause). After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the term "revival of the Shiites" emerged, "the consolidation of Shiite interests in national identities." As we talked about in the previous chapter, the geopolitical location of Iran, as the only Shiite state in the region which enjoys huge resources of great importance, is seen as a product and a contributor to Iran's influence, and a connection point for the Shiite communities that Iran wants to exert influence over them within the framework of "Shiite belt" which consists of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. ⁴⁸

This situation gives Iran an advantage within the Arab and Islamic worlds as well. On the one hand, it turns Damascus into a significant platform for exporting the Iranian revolution, especially since Iran was and still is looking for a successful model for which it believes Lebanon is fertile ground. On the other hand, since the 1980s, the Iranian embassy in Syria has become a main center for exporting the Iranian revolution. The Syrian regime has given all the necessary facilities for that, and the Iranian embassy in Syria enjoyed the highest financial budget for a long time compared to any similar embassy in any other country.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Shahram Akbarzadeh, Ibid

⁴⁷ Özüm Sezin UZUN, Muharrem EKŞİ, "Continuities and Changes in Iran's Foreign Policy: Analysis of Syrian Case.", (Bölgesel Araştırmalar Dergisi, no. 3, 2017), p.215

⁴⁸ Nasr Vali, *"The Shia Revival, How conflicts within Islam will shape the future"*. (New York: Norton publisher, 2007), p. 11

⁴⁹ Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. *Syria and Iran Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2002), p. 31-43

Due to Iran's Shiite identity and Persian nationalism, Iran needed to attract the Sunni Arab masses by using the Palestinian cause card for its specific knowledge of Jerusalem's importance and the Palestinian cause to the Arabs, thus allowing Iran to penetrate the Arab and regional popular base through it. Syria was the gate and the central pillar for Iran to secure its entry on the line of the Palestinian cause, whether through Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Palestinian factions, to implement its Shiite geopolitical project (the Shiite belt) in the heart of the Arab and Islamic world.⁵⁰

After the Arab Spring in the Middle East, transnational identities were exposed to danger, limiting the state's behavior. Today, the Shiite identity can change the regional order by spreading new sectarian identities in the Islamic world through the policies of Shiism.⁵¹ The Shiite crescent and Shiite geopolitics have become more necessary and paramount today for Iran's decision-makers. Syria is considered the heart of the Iranian project and the Shiite crescent. Because of its geopolitical advantages and the vital strategic depth in the Arab world and its being in direct contact with Israel on several fronts⁵², and its relationship with the Syrian regime allows Iran to reach the warm waters (the Mediterranean Sea) through a land corridor between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Moreover, it gives Iran a vital dimension in Lebanon, Palestine, and the Palestinian resistance.

As for the land corridor or (land bridge), gives Tehran distinct strategic advantages to consolidate its position as the dominant power in the Middle East and link it to the Shiite political geography. Many Iranian analysts use the term "land corridor of resistance." An unnamed IRGC official told the Wall Street Journal, "Establishing a land corridor through Iraq and Syria is a major goal for Iran to strengthen its defense against regional enemies.". In 2015, Brigadier General Yadallah Javani asserted that America knows that "with a land contact through Iraq and Syria, [Iran] has become a decisive force on the Mediterranean coast."⁵³

⁵⁰ Bakeer, Ibid, p.13

⁵¹ Elias 2019, Ibid, p.9

⁵² Ehteshami, Anoushiravan, and Raymond A. Hinnebusch. *Syria and Iran*, Ibid, p. 58

⁵³ David Adesnik , Behnam Ben Taleblu, LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster, "Burning Bridge The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean", (FDD Press :Foundation For Defense of Democracies, 2019), p.16-14

In August 2018, an Iranian official announced that Iran intended to build a railway linking the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean Sea from Basra in southern Iraq to AlbuKamal on the Iraqi-Syrian border, heading towards Deir Ezzor in northeastern Syria. The bridge consists of three northern and southern lanes (high and low paths). The importance of Syria in this bridge lies in the fact that without Syria, this land bridge would not have been achieved due to Syrian geostrategic location leverage at the border of Israel; it is considered a central hub for the axis of resistance in the Middle East. Furthermore, Jackson Diehl, editor-in-chief of the Washington Post, expressed: "The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad is Iran's closest ally and its link to the Arab Middle East. Syria has provided the land bridge to transport Iranian weapons.... without Syria, Iran's claims of regional hegemony, and its ability to challenge Israel, would be paralyzed."⁵⁴



Figure 3: The northern (red) and southern (green) routes of the land bridge. The southern route has upper and lower branches that pass, respectively, through al-Qaim/Albu Kamal and al-Tanf.

Source: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>

⁵⁴ Jackson Diehl, "Obama's Iran and Syria muddle," The Washington Post, June 10, 2012. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/%20obamas-iran-and-syria-muddle/2012/06/10/gJQAr6nITV_story.html

2.3 Regional Isolation, and Shared Threat Perceptions

Regarding regional isolation and common threat perceptions, there is a so-called Iranian deterrence strategy known as "forward deterrence." It means spreading or possessing deterrent capacity outside the national borders of the individual adjacent to the opponent's borders. Researchers Ahmadian and Mohseni argue that the most prominent factor in Iran's relationship with Syria - from the Islamic revolution to the current Syrian conflict - has always been a deterrent strategy, and they argue that the basis of the relationship is first and foremost deterrence.

After the Islamic Revolution, Iranians felt regional isolation and were under threat from the United States, Tehran's primary opponent. Iran's adoption of a regional and anti-imperialist approach in defining its priorities in the Middle East and perceptions of threat overlapped with Hafez al-Assad's vision of rejecting external powers' interference in the region's internal affairs. The deepening of this relationship lies largely in the geopolitical factors and the common threat perceptions against the intensified Western penetration of the Middle East. Syria gives Iran vital strategic depth in the Arab world, allowing it to maneuver throughout the Levant.⁵⁵

Historically, Iran's forward deterrence strategy before the Arab Spring did not include a direct forward deployment of the armed forces, given that its deterrence capacity is provided mainly by partners and allies who are not under official Iranian control. After the Arab Spring, the two researchers divide the forward deterrence strategy in Syria into four basic stages: (1) The "Basij" strategy to establish local militias in Syria. (2) The regionalization strategy to integrate cross-border combatants and militias into the war effort; (3) An internationalization strategy to attract Russia and balance the United States; and (4) a post-ISIS deterrence strategy to balance against the United States, Türkiye and Israel.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Hassan Ahmadian, Payam Mohseni, "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence", (International Affairs 95: 2, 2019), p. 342

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.354

Ahmadian and Mohseni 2021 argue that regional isolation and shared threat perceptions have enabled Syria and Iran to transcend their ideological differences to work toward regional autonomy's shared goals and reduce foreign penetration in the Middle East.⁵⁷

However, it could be said based on the strong ideological relations between the two ruling regimes in Syria and Iran, which were mentioned earlier in the introduction⁵⁸. Shared goals and different strategies were developed according to regional and international circumstances, and without a solid ideological link between them, Syria's forward deterrence strategy would not have succeeded.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.343

⁵⁸ could be return to p. 1

Chapter 3

The Seriousness of Foreign Policy and Iranian Project in Syria

In this chapter, the researcher talks about many practical examples of reports, facts, and statistics that demonstrate the Iranian's policies since the first year of the Syrian crisis (2011 to 2021). These examples give an insight into how Iran penetrated and continues to penetrate the state's institutions in terms of military, security, and economics. In addition, these examples illustrate the social engineering that Iran is working on and the dangerous demographic change that Iran is playing in the long run. This penetration has been consolidated by the Syrian regime's legalization of these changes. The demographic change is a unique case that distinguished Iran from all foreign powers that intervened in Syria, and it has a severe impact on the unity of the Syrian soil.

3.1 Demographic change (Social penetration): The Southern Suburb of Damascus project "Damascus Belt"

Perhaps one of the most important strategic areas, and it can be said that it is the most critical province for Iran, is the Syrian capital, Damascus, due to its religious and political connotations. Iran is strengthening its influence in Damascus by pushing for the establishment of Husseinias and the glorification of Shiite manifestations in the city, whose countryside residents have been subjected to systematic displacements. Moreover, it appears that the Assad regime is helping the Iranian plan to change the demographics of the Damascene neighborhoods by selling real estate to the families of Iraqi and Lebanese Shiite fighters in substantial amounts that have reached many times their actual price.⁵⁹

Before starting to talk about the southern suburb of Damascus project, first of all, it must be noted that the main goal of the military campaign that the Syrian regime forces launched with Iranian militias in 2018 in the south of Damascus and several other areas as well; was the

⁵⁹ Khaled Al-Mutlaq, "Demographic change in Syria during the rule of the Assad family," Harmon Center for Contemporary Studies, 08/28/2020, <http://tinyurl.com/8a6vph>

complete and deliberate destruction of this area under the pretext of fighting "terrorism". Within broader plans to rehabilitate and regulate it urbanely and demographically. The regime is working on eliminating sectarian and class "overpopulation" in vital areas located only a few kilometers from the heart of the capital, Damascus. A plan that works has already begun and can include in the framework of Bashar al-Assad's theory of his interest in building a "homogeneous society," sectarian, economic, class, and social, as he once commented on the migration of millions of Syrians abroad.⁶⁰

The project is to establish a "Shiite" suburb in Damascus similar to Beirut, where it was revealed that the Iranian government had purchased large areas of land and buildings around the Syrian capital to implement a huge "Shiite" housing project that became known as the "Damascus Belt" in the south and southwest of Damascus. Which requires the establishment of a Belt that envelops the capital with the militias and the population that support them, ensuring their influence in one of the most important areas inside the Syrian territories.

The area located from Aqraba village on the airport road in the east to Al-Qadam highway in the west and Najha in the south, which is known as (south of Damascus) and includes the towns of Aqraba, Basateen, Bab Bila, Yalda, Set Zaynab reaching Sbeneh from the south; thus, Iran's militia will completely surround Damascus from its southern part.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Expulsion of the people of Damascus: class, demographic and social engineering", Sawt Al Asimah, April 29, 2018, <https://damascusv.com/archives/4118>

⁶¹ "Damascus Southern Suburb" Iran's settlement project south of the capital, Iran from the inside, November 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/5xedxb2d>



Figure 4: The cities that surround Damascus (south of Damascus).

Source: Researcher work

It includes 200 thousand housing units in the Syrian capital, Damascus, as Tehran seeks to expand its influence in the city in both economic and military terms to bring about the largest demographic change process in Syria at a value of two billion dollars, as Iran plans to settle the families of Afghan, Pakistani and Iraqi militia members who have naturalized thousands of them recently. Furthermore, companies and businessmen associated with the IRGC⁶², in addition to the "Jihad al-Binaa" organization owned by Hezbollah militias, began a few months ago to increase the momentum of their control over property (buildings and lands) in southern Damascus at relatively low prices, depending on the poor financial condition of many of the residents of those areas especially after the Coronavirus hit Syria.⁶³

It is worth noting that in 2016, companies and mediators working for Iranians were paying huge sums for homes in the south, especially the Sayeda Zeinab and Babbila area, as they were not subjected to major damage. Today, however, these companies, and as a result of the Syrians' financial distress, pay low prices for their homes. Iran aims to establish a population power center for it in that project, which is being built under the supervision of the "Syrian-Iranian Joint

⁶² Ammar al-Halabi, "Iran is building a southern suburb in Damascus that includes 200,000 housing units," The New Arab, February 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3cHhkX0>

⁶³ Ghadaf Rageh, "Iran clones the southern suburbs of Lebanon at the gates of Damascus... and sets a foot in the future of Syria," Baladi News, November 9, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3rOfgkE>

Committee." is a committee that met in Tehran in November of 2019 to strengthen bilateral cooperation and work to achieve a quantum leap in the field of construction, building suburbs and cities, and starting the practical implementation of these projects.⁶⁴

One of the main goals of this demographic change and Shi'ism's ongoing processes in full swing is to give Iran the tools of influence that it imposes on Damascus's decision-making and impose itself as a party that cannot be excluded from any development in the Syrian file's political aspect and drawing a picture of the final solution. The argument, of course, will be the protection of the shrines whose history is questioned and the protection of the "Syrian Shiites," who are the new inhabitants of southern Damascus.⁶⁵

In order to give the legal status of these projects and the systematic demographic change, the Assad regime has worked to codify laws since 2012. The Anti-Terrorism Law No. 19 of 2012, Article XI of which, gives the Attorney General the right to freeze the movable and immovable funds of the perpetrators of terrorist crimes, which is nothing but opposition to the regime. In addition, decree No. 66 of 2012 provides for creating two organizational zones in informal and violation settlements in the Damascus governorate.⁶⁶ In 2018, according to the official news agency (SANA), the member of the Executive Office for Planning and Budgetary Affairs in Damascus Governorate, Faisal Al-Sorour, Damascus Governorate, began preparing studies for organizational photographs of "random housing" areas, including Jobar, Barzeh, Al-Qaboun, Al-Tadamun, Daf Al-Shouk, and Al-Zuhour neighborhood⁶⁷.

On April 2, 2018, the Assad regime issued Law No. 10, which allows it to confiscate Syrians' property in areas whose residents have been displaced. On February 17, 2021, the so-called "People's Assembly" made an amendment, similar to a coup, to the articles of Law No. 11 For the year 2011. It abolishes the restrictions that prevent a foreigner from owning more than one residential apartment for a single family. The amendment mentioned above coincided with the Damascus governorate's announcement of the estimated value of the properties that were seized

⁶⁴ "The Syrian-Iranian Joint Committee in the Field of Public Works and Housing Begins Its Meetings in Tehran," SANA Agency, November 25, 2019, <http://sana.sy/?p=1060465>

⁶⁵ Rageh, Ibid

⁶⁶ Maher Sharaf El-Din, "Syria: The "laws" of demographic change... on the Israeli model," Asas Media, April 9, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3dszoU>

⁶⁷ "Damascus Governorate preparing studies for organizational images of "slums"," Enab Baladi, October 14, 2018, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/257470>

in the areas of al-Mazzeah, Khalaf al-Razi, Daraya Kafarsusa, al-Qadam, Yarmouk camp, southern Damascus and Ghouta. Sharqiya, Qaboun, and some old neighborhoods of Damascus, where the financial value was estimated in the areas mentioned above, at low prices that did not exceed ten dollars per meter, while its actual price ranges between 5000 and 8000 dollars.⁶⁸

The main purpose of Laws 10 and 11, One law robs the Syrians of their property, and the other allows the Iranians to steal them for cheap. Another goal of the demographic change that Iran is seeking with the Syrian regime's help is that the systematic displacement that took place by the force of arms is being perpetuated by the force of law today. The Pakistani "Zainabiyoun" militias, the Afghan "Fatemiyoun", the Lebanese "Hezbollah" and the Iraqi "Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas" militia. The war of arms they have waged since 2011 continues with the demographic change war linked to legal status through the settlement policy.⁶⁹

This demographic change is not only in Damascus and its countryside. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) considered in its report issued on Thursday, February 11, 2021, that the public auctions of forcibly displaced lands are an additional method of the Syrian regime's extensive and deliberate seizure of the property of its opponents. It is noting that no less than 440,000 Dunam is the agricultural land that the Syrian regime and Iranian militias seized in the southern and eastern suburbs of Hama and Idlib in 2019-2020. As (SNHR) estimates, the number of people displaced by the recent military campaign spanned between April 2019 and March 2020 has reached nearly one million people. Most of them fled to the northern countryside of Idlib.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Maher Sharaf El-Din, Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ "Public auctions of the lands of the forcibly displaced are an additional method of the Syrian regime for the widespread and deliberate appropriation of the properties of its opponents," Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), February 11, 2021, https://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/Public_Auctions_of_Forcibly_Displaced_Peoples_Lands_Are_Another_Syrian_Regime_Method.pdf

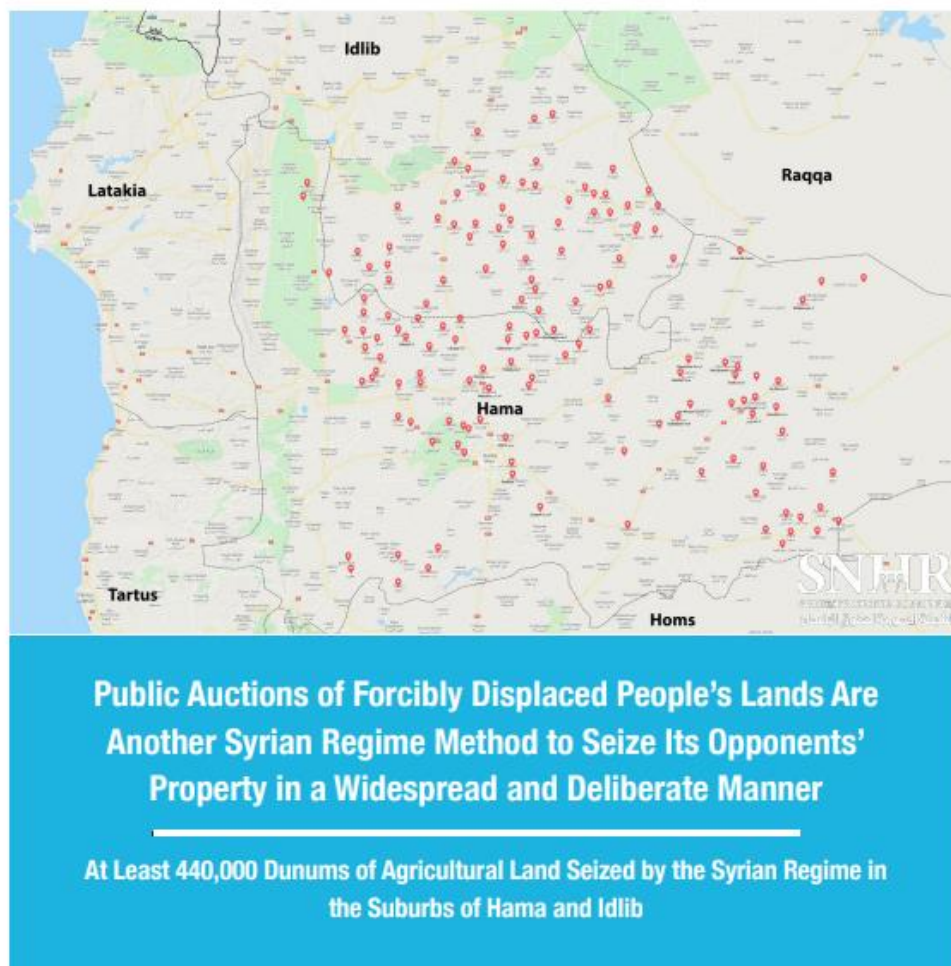


Figure 5: The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), 2021. public auctions of forcibly displaced lands.

Source

https://sn4hr.org/wpcontent/pdf/english/Public_Auctions_of_Forcibly_Displaced_Peoples_Lands_Are_Another_Syrian_Regime_Method_en.pdf:

These areas are distributed to the Iranian militias (Iraqi - Lebanese - Afghani - Pakistani), and it is not ruled out that a large part of these lands will be transformed into drug farms, as Hezbollah did in Qusayr in Homs after it took control of it.

3.2 Economic penetration: Iran has worked since the beginning of the Syrian crisis to consolidate its influence in Syria through the economic gate. It is noticeable through the reports that penetration and consolidation of influence increased in the last years of the Syrian crisis, especially in 2020 and 2021.

According to what was published by the official Syrian News Agency (SANA) In 2013. The Assad regime met with the director of the Iranian company " Jafar Shevazi", aiming to "starting a project to establish five mills in the cities of Syria after the end of the Syrians crisis". It not achieved at that time, but in February 2020, the company director, "Jafar Shevazi" met with the Minister of Internal Trade of the regime, "Atef Al-Naddaf," announcing that he had reached an agreement with them to continue implementing the remaining mills. In addition to other projects in the same field; It would control the milling industry in Syria and technically supervise it completely.⁷¹

In 2017, Iran signed five memoranda of understanding between Damascus and Tehran in January, which included many sovereign investments in energy, telecommunications, industry, agriculture, and livestock. It was also agreed to cooperate in investing in electricity projects by establishing generating stations and gas groups. Besides, investments and concessions to extract phosphate from eastern Homs, which is considered one of the world's largest phosphate fields, as Syria's reserves of this vital resource, according to the figures of the General Company for Phosphates and Mines, amounted to 1.8 billion tons of ore in 2009. The company's profits during 2008 were estimated at two billion and two million Syrian pounds (about \$ 40 million at 50 pounds to the dollar), and the contract signed with Iran includes phosphate exploration, extraction and investment for 50 years. Damascus also granted Iran the right to invest in the Zahid field for raising livestock, five thousand hectares of agricultural land, and the same for the establishment of warehouses and oil terminals.⁷² Among the memorandums of understanding is the operation of an Iranian company supported by the IRGC, a third mobile phone operator. In

⁷¹ "Iran seeks to control the Syrians' food," MENA Research and Studies Center, August 5, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fEz1J0>

⁷² Maan Talaa, "The Iranian Role in the Syrian Crisis: Positioning, Alliances, and the Future," (Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 2019), p. 5

February 2019, the "Asharq Al-Awsat" newspaper said that an agreement to launch a third mobile phone operator between an Iranian company supported by the IRGC and the Syrian regime's government had entered into effect.⁷³

In 2019, in a process to enhance trade exchange with Syria through completing 18 bilateral cooperation agreements in progress in various commercial fields. Which includes the inclusion of 88 commodity groups on the list of trade exchange between Iran and the Syrian regime and the "zero trade tariff" between Syria and Iran, which amounts to Currently, 4% is provided with freight and joint land transportation facilities, as Iran recently established a transport company with the Syrian regime to transport Iranian goods by land via Iraq to Syria. It also signed a "long-term" economic cooperation agreement with the government in banking, finance, construction, and reconstruction.⁷⁴

In 2020, the economic penetration increased significantly with the Syrian regime, and the regime signed with Iran in May 2020, the first oil agreement under which Tehran was granted the right to explore oil in Block No. 12 in Deir Ezzor, justifying that as a means of repaying debts in favor of the Iranian credit line.⁷⁵ Moreover, the Iranian regime intervened directly to lift the reserve hold on funds of businessman Saeb Nahas because of the close relationship that binds him to Tehran, as a sudden decision was issued by the Central Bank in which called on all public and private banks to lift the seizure of the accounts belonging to Nahas and his two sons, Hadi and Muhammad, and the companies they own.

It is worth noting that Saeb Nahas is a member of the World Economic Forum and holds the position of honorary consul of Mexico and Kazakhstan in Syria. The most prominent companies he manages with his two sons, Muhammad and Hadi; "International Nahas" for travel, "Nahas for Tourist Transport and Travel," "Nahas for Machinery and Trade", "Nahas Computer Systems", "Nahas for Tourism and Travel", Etc.

⁷³ An Iranian telecom company linked to the IRGC as a third operator in Syria", Sawt Al-Asimah, September 7, 2019, <https://damascusv.com/archives/8202>

⁷⁴ "88 new commodities on the list of trade exchange between Iran and Syria," Enab Baladi, March 11, 2020, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/286589>

⁷⁵ ""Two Iranians.."Tehran inaugurates a commercial center in the heart of Damascus," Sawt Al-Asimah, October 19, 2020, <https://damascusv.com/archives/31341>

During the past nine years, Nahas also used his companies to strengthen Iranian influence, especially in the tourism, hotels and services sectors, as the “Safir” hotel in the Sayeda Zeinab area in Damascus became a gathering place for sectarian militia elements coming from Iraq, Lebanon and Iran, as well as transforming his farm on the Damascus International Road to a training camp for those militias under the supervision of the IRGC.⁷⁶

The "Joint Iranian-Syrian Chamber of Commerce" announced the inauguration of the "two Iranians" trade in Damascus, and that "the commercial center was equipped and inaugurated through the investments of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture of Minerals," according to Fars News Agency. The center, which covers an area of 4,000 square meters and consists of 12 floors, includes 24 Iranian companies carrying out their activities in the industrial and commercial sectors, especially with regard to reconstruction. The center is located in the free trade zone in Damascus's heart, and it is a site that allows it to expand through communication with the chambers of commerce, industry and agriculture in important Syrian cities such as Aleppo, Latakia and Homs.⁷⁷

In a move to extend control over the port of Latakia, which will form the outlet of the land road linking Iran and Syria via Iraq, companies linked to the IRGC began shipping goods through the port, including about 23 large warehouses. Iran shows a great interest in Latakia and its port on the Syrian coast, which it began working on seven years ago.⁷⁸ The two parties signed an agreement in July 2019, based on which Iran will build the Shalamchek-Basra railway line between Iran and Iraq, through which the Iranian port of Emam Khomeini will be linked to the port of Latakia in Syria.⁷⁹

In February 2021, the head of the Iranian-Syrian Joint Chamber of Commerce, Kiwan Kashefi, announced the establishment of a regular sea shipping line between Iran and Syria to transport goods, as part of the agreement concluded between Tehran and the Syrian regime. The shipment will take place within the agreement's framework concluded between Tehran and

⁷⁶ "Syrian Strategic Report", (Strategy Watch, no.82, 2020), p. 9-10

⁷⁷ Two Iranians, Ibid

⁷⁸ "Tehran: A new deployment plan in Syria", Strategy watch, <https://strategy-watch.com/news/tehran-deployment-plan-syria/>

⁷⁹ "Bandar Abbas-Latakia direct shipping line to be launched by early Mar.", Tehran Times, February 12, 2021, Available from <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/457984/Bandar-Abbas-Latakia-direct-shipping-line-to-be-launched-by-early>

Damascus, indicating that cargo ships will regularly transport goods from Iran to Syria once a month, up to once every 15 days if necessary. The Iranian official pointed out that the first shipment will leave the Iranian port of "Bandar Abbas" overlooking the Arabian Gulf on March 10, 2021. Kashefi considered that this step would increase the volume of Iran's exports, noting that any Iranian merchant can choose Syria as an export destination if he wants.⁸⁰

Also, in 2021, Iran established a "huge" entertainment complex in the town of Hejira in the countryside of Damascus, and this is an Iranian step within Tehran's effort to consolidate influence in Syria. As we mentioned previously, the town of Hejira is within Damascus's belt (south of Damascus). The entertainment complex is about 1 km north of Sayyida Zainab, the main stronghold of Iranian militias in the region, about 8 km from Damascus.⁸¹

As for the drug trade, the militias affiliated with Iran, led by Hezbollah militia and Afghan militias, have been distinguished by drugs' manufacture and trade over the past years. According to what three sources spoke to by the "Al-Hurra" website, Syria's drug industry has become highly regulated, and it has markets outside and inside and broad areas of influence.⁸²

It is no secret to any Syrians that drug smuggling and the mechanisms for promoting it are not new to their country. Instead, it goes back to the 1990s and before that as well. After 2011, Syria moved from a transit country to industrialization, and the manufacturing activity increased after 2016, as the organized industry of narcotic pills became based on a network of dispersed factories located in several Syrian governorates. Informed sources identified that the Al-Hurra website spoke to at the "Medico" factory in the Homs governorate, and "Al-Bassa" area factory in Latakia countryside, in addition to "Al-Tadamn" Laboratory run by the Fourth Division in the Assad forces that are affiliated with Iran. The sources refer to medium-sized factories belonging to the Lebanese Hezbollah. They are mainly distributed in the Qusayr area in the Homs countryside, which no one is allowed to enter until now, all the way to the Qalamoun areas.

As for the smuggling routes, they were confined in recent years to personalities from three sides: The Republican Guard, The Fourth Division, and Hezbollah, and all of them are under

⁸⁰ "To transport goods... Iran announces the establishment of a maritime shipping line with Syria," Sawt- Al Asimah, February 13, 2021, <https://damascusv.com/archives/34749>

⁸¹ "Iran is constructing a huge entertainment complex south of Damascus," Sawt -Al Asimah, February 25, 2021, <https://damascusv.com/archives/35042>

⁸² Diaa Odeh, "The Captagon of the al-Assad family and Hezbollah...Money exceeds Syria's budget," Al-Hurra, December 25, 2020, <https://arbne.ws/2R4FzGu>

Iranian influence, and later the drug product is transported by sea from the port of Lattakia, which Iran had entered with investment contracts in the past years. Alternatively, by road through the Nassib border crossing or Türkiye, which is considered a transit area. For the Assad regime and "Hezbollah", the drug trade represents quick sources of financing, and it comes at a time when the two parties are subjected to American and European sanctions, which have led to the loss of purchasing power and the collapse of the currency exchange rate.⁸³

3.3 Security and military penetration: To ensure its interests and hold the strings of the Syrian file, Iran has worked since the beginning of the crisis to consolidate its influence within Syria's military and security institutions.

In a crucial step; Amir Hatami, the Iranian defense minister, signed with his Syrian counterpart, Ali Ayoub, in August 2018 a military treaty, which included Iran's provision of all forms of support to rebuild the Syrian armed forces and military defense industries, including missiles, and a commitment to strengthening "the defense infrastructure in Syria, which is the guarantor of the continuation of the Iranian presence and participation in Syria. In the same context, the Iranian militias are present either in military bases belonging to the regime forces or through formations of their own known or new, and spread throughout Syria, especially near the border areas with Jordan and in Daraa, Al-Sukhnah and Qalamoun, in addition to its new base in Lajat. Not to mention that Tehran has strengthened its alliances with prominent military leaders such as the commander of the Fourth Division (Major General Maher al-Assad), the commander of the Republican Guard (Major General Talal Makhoul), Air Force Intelligence (Major General Jamil al-Hassan) and others.⁸⁴

There is a clear intensification of Iranian infiltration in the south and north of Syria, especially in 2020 and 2021. The security deterioration in Daraa escalated again in October of 2020, as five liquidations were recorded targeting members of the central committees in the province, most notably the Free Army Adham Al-Karad's former leader. Furthermore, the western countryside

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ "Syria: The Engines of the Internal Conflict in the Military Establishment and Its Expected Result," (Strategy Watch, 2019), p. 14-15

of Daraa witnessed an intense security mobilization for the regime forces, during which the Fourth Division elements, affiliated with Iran and the Republican Guard, carried out raids on homes and deployed checkpoints in many villages' towns.

Security reports in November of 2020 talked about King Abdullah II mandating the Director of the Jordanian General Intelligence Department to intervene in the raging conflict in southern Syria and mediate between the various parties in an effort to calm the flaming conditions on the Syrian-Jordanian borders. As it was discussed that the regime's barriers and militias loyal to it from the "Iranian Revolutionary Guard" and "Hezbollah" were removed from the southern region adjacent to the Jordanian border on the Syrian side. However, these mediations did not succeed in calming the situation. The pace of assassinations increased in November and December of 2020 in a big way.⁸⁵

Iran tried to take advantage of the tense situation in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor between the clans and the "SDF" against the recent assassinations' background that affected some Arab tribal sheikhs. Simultaneously, IRGC took control of whole the water smuggling crossings between its areas in Al-Mayadeen and the areas of influence of the "SDF" on the opposite side.

In March of 2020, IRGC established a huge operations room in the village of Kusnia in the southern countryside of Aleppo, which includes several Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi leaders, intending to enable Iran to manage all military operations in the southern and western countryside of Aleppo, and the eastern countryside of Idlib. The sources talked about establishing more than 17 new Iranian military headquarters south of Idlib. Iran brought in a large number of its militias to reinforce the contact lines in eastern Idlib, and the number of fighters reached about 2,000 members of Hezbollah and the IRGC and about 500 members of the Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Iraqi Nujaba Movement (HHN). Forces and war equipment were deployed on the "Kabanah" fronts and the mountain heights in the northern countryside of Latakia, and the Iranian observation post was strengthened in the northern countryside of

⁸⁵ "Syrian Strategic Report", (Strategy watch, no.84 2020), p. 9-10

Latakia. Also, Iranian movements were monitored to raise these forces' readiness throughout the contact line.⁸⁶

The US-Israeli deal directs Iran's behavior and enhances its penetration in Syria. Iran supports Maher al-Assad, who hides his opposition to the Russian role in Houran and assigns Yarab Zahreddin, the official in charge of the Fourth Division's security office in As-Suwayda. To intensify recruitment and security settlements favoring the Fourth Division in the governorate. Furthermore, Maher al-Assad worked to establish the nucleus of an independent security apparatus by granting the Fourth Division's security office-wide powers, as it now exercises its functions outside the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense, which is the official body responsible for the army units, while the Iranians, on their part, acquire an intelligence office in the Mezze region in Damascus.

The "Jusoor for Studies Center" documented 24 airstrikes carried out by Israel against sites belonging to the Syrian regime and Iran during the year 2020. The strikes appear to achieve the objectives associated with causing damage to military installations and personnel within the framework of Israel's strategy based on preventing Iran from turning Syria into an advanced base on the northern front and destroying the infrastructure of the military sector in Syria.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 12-14

⁸⁷ "Israeli strikes in Syria during 2020", Jusoor Center for Studies, November 19, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2PprDGF>



Figure 6: Dates of Israeli Strikes in Syria During 2020.

Source: <https://bit.ly/2PprDGF>



Figure 7: 24 Israeli Strikes in Syria During 2020.

Source: <https://bit.ly/2PprDGF>

Despite the Israeli strikes, Iran continues to recruit for the militias loyal to it in Syria, headed by the Lebanese Hezbollah, in an effort to establish its presence on the Syrian territories, according to what was confirmed by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which confirmed that about 18 thousand people have recently joined these militias. The recruitment comes despite the continuous attempts to weaken Iran's presence in Syria, either through Israeli targeting or the Russians' consolidation of their role. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights statistics, the number of "volunteers" among the Iranians and the militias loyal to them in southern Syria has risen to more than 9,600 people. The number of young Syrians and men of different ages who have been recruited into the ranks of the Iranian forces in the countryside of Deir Ezzor and the militias affiliated with them recently rose to about 8,350 in the area west the Euphrates River.⁸⁸

The redeployment operations carried out by the Iranian militias include emptying headquarters and military barracks harshly affected by the Israeli raids and transfer of heavy weapons and ammunition to new sites that were established in the second half of 2020, which are often underground sites and tunnels dug by the militias in the villages of Al-Bukamal and Al-Mayadin, and the vicinity of Deir Ezzor. In addition, ISIS dug tunnels and underground bunkers while controlling the area, and Iranian militias rehabilitated and used them.⁸⁹

Security sources have revealed that the "Unit 400" (Iranian) has intensified its activity in forming secret groups to infiltrate into Israel and gather intelligence information by recruiting local elements and training them in techniques: navigation, reading maps, fieldwork, changing appearance, and maintaining Personal secrecy safety, climbing, walking on rope, parachuting, riding motorbikes, swimming and diving, boating, and self-defense, in addition to special operations, armed attacks, protection of public figures and vehicles. Besides, The Iranian Shura Council is preparing a draft "Joint Security and Defense Treaty", which aims to establish a "Shiite NATO" that includes Iran's allies in the region. It is based on the principle of collective

⁸⁸ "Iran continues its recruitment operations in Syria. It includes 18,000 fighters," Al-Arabiya.net, February 3, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3udNob8>

⁸⁹ Khaled Al-Khatib, "Iranian militias carry out the largest redeployment operation in eastern Syria", Al-Modon, January 16, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3umVr5m>

response to any external attack and formalizing all informal relations that Tehran establishes with Agents in the region.⁹⁰

On January 5, 2021, the "Jusoor for Studies Center" released a map showing Iran and Hezbollah's distribution in the Syrian territories. Iran has 131 military sites in Syria between a base and a point of presence, and we note from the map below that there is a focus by Iran to strengthen its military presence in southern Syria as part of its strategy to transform the region into an advanced operations base against Israel, and access to the Mediterranean through a land corridor between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut.⁹¹

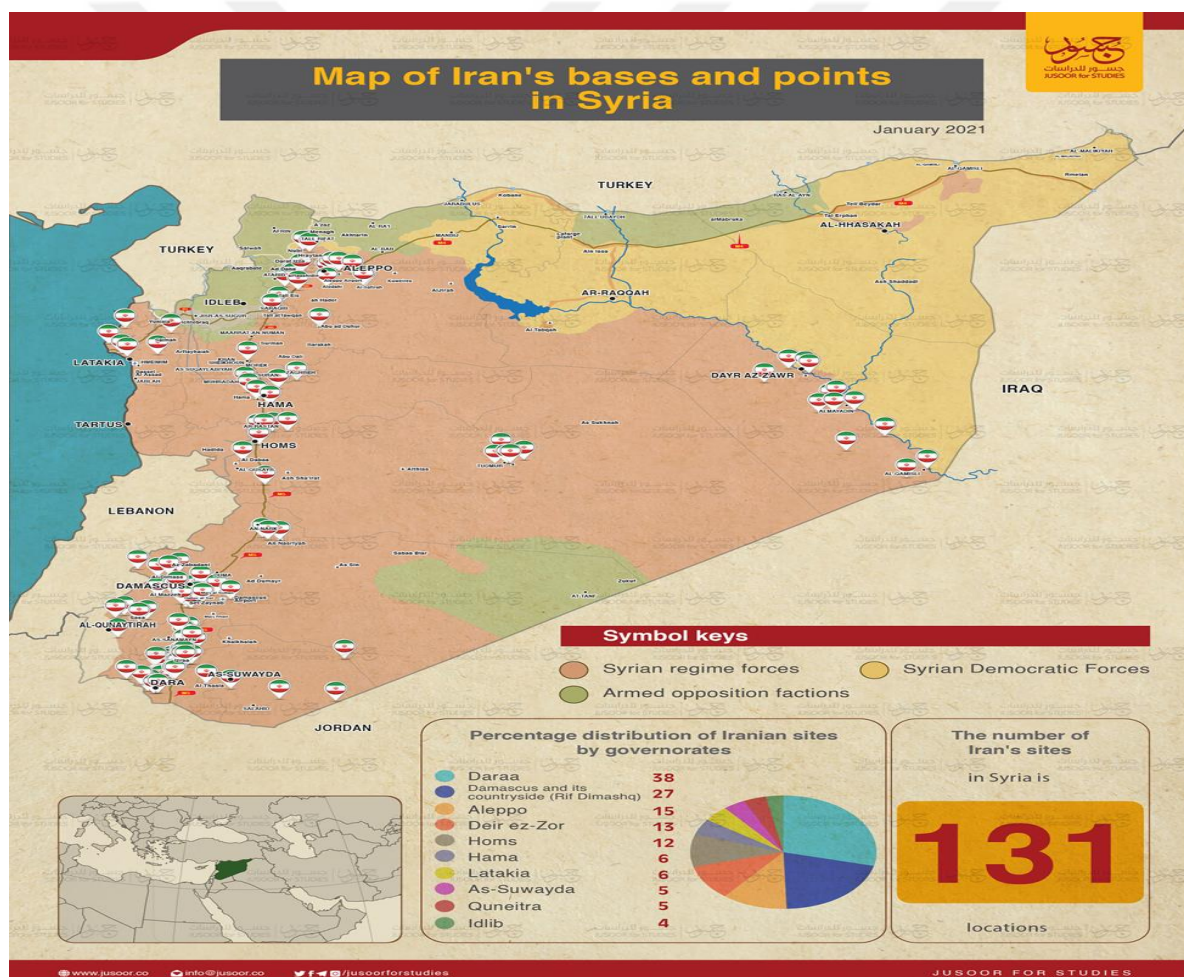


Figure 8: Map of Iran's Bases and points in Syria.

Source: <https://bit.ly/2PzBB8k>

⁹⁰ "Syrian Strategic Report", (Strategy watch, no.86 2020), p. 4

⁹¹ "Map of Bases and External Power Points in Syria", Jusoor Center for Studies, January 5, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2PzBB8k>

Hezbollah has 116 military sites in Syria as independent, joint, or semi-shared points with Iranian forces. Hezbollah's military deployment in Syria protects the overland supply routes that connect Iran and Lebanon and the construction of a security belt along the border strip between Syria and Lebanon that acts as an alternative supply corridor to mount and the Bekaa Lebanon regions, in addition to securing support for Iran and the Syrian regime policies.

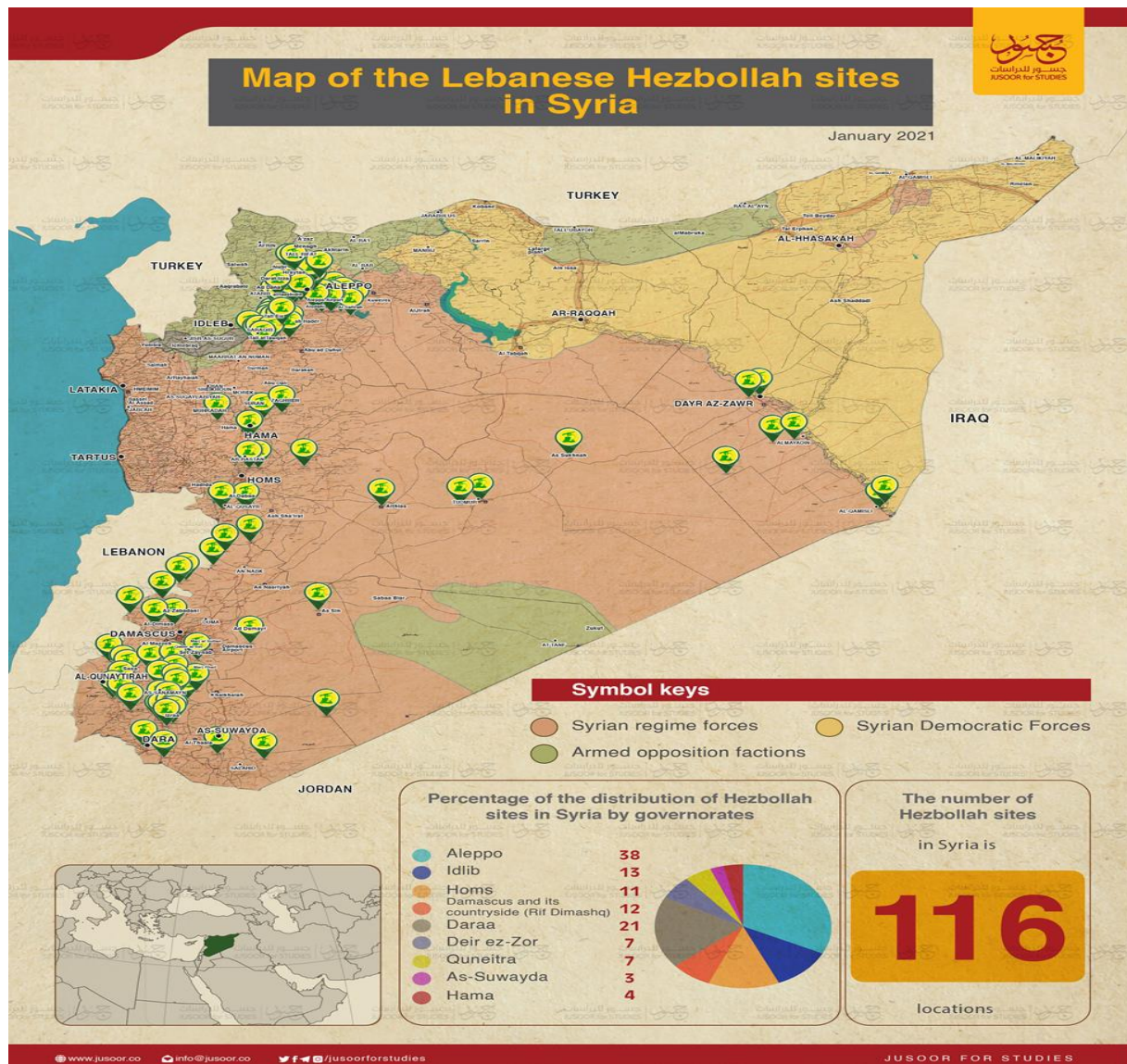


Figure 9: Map of The Lebanese Hezbollah Sites in Syria.

Source: <https://bit.ly/2PzBB8k>

Chapter 4

The impact of the Syrian crisis on the Iranian Russian relations

In this chapter, the researcher tries to assess the Iranian-Russian relationship towards the Syrian crisis. The Iranian-Russian relationship in Syria originated in an alliance with the Syrian regime. At first, the relationship was characterized by a solid strategic relationship to save the Syrian regime from falling, and to work together to weaken and bring down the Syrian opposition.

Moscow decided at a critical time in 2015 to intervene militarily in Syria to turn the tide of the war in favor of the Assad regime. On August 17, 2016, Russia used the Hamedan Air Base in Iran to bomb Syrian opposition sites in Aleppo and Idlib northwest of the country⁹². It was the first time that Russia used the territory of a country other than Syria itself to conduct similar strikes since its intervention began on December 30, 2015. Russian airpower, along with Iranian-backed militias on the ground, played a critical role in preventing the collapse of the Assad regime by neutralizing a large segment of the armed opposition and brutally reasserting Assad regime control over much of Syria.⁹³

From a geopolitical point of view, the two countries agreed to remove the United States from Syria and the region; we mentioned earlier in chapter 2 the importance of Syria in Iranian foreign policy, especially within the framework of the Shiite crescent and Shiite geopolitics.

For Russia, from a geopolitical point of view. Russia's geographical location has many strengths and strategic advantages, but Russia suffers from a crucial strategic goal for Russia: its lack of access to warm waters. For Dmitri Trenin, the existing gaps in Russian geography must be compensated by territorial expansion, the deployment of military forces, and clashes with enemies in neighboring and adjacent territories far from its center.⁹⁴ Nicholas Spykman believes that the center of Russian power is the Rimland, or the so-called inner crescent region, including

⁹² Abdulwahhab Assi , *"The Watchful Partnership between Russia and Iran in the Case of Syria"*.(*Jusoor for Studies*, 2022,) , p. 5

⁹³ Mona Yacoubian, *"Understanding Russia's Endgame in Syria: A View from the United States"*, (The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), 2021), p.7-10

⁹⁴ Asmaa bin al-Sheikh, " The Neo-Eurasianism in the Thought of Alexander Dugin and its Impact on the Doctrine of President Vladimir Putin ", Master's degree, (Kasdi Merbah University of Ouargla. 2018), p. 13

Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Türkiye, Syria, and others. He expressed this framework in the region in which land and sea forces clash, and whoever controls these lands controls Eurasia, and whoever controls Eurasia controls the world.⁹⁵

Brzezinski says that the revival of the Eurasian doctrine began by the Russians in the nineties of the twentieth century by influencing the non-Russian peoples to return to the Soviet Union, but with a new viewpoint. One of the first scholars in Russian geopolitics, Pyotr Savitsky, believes that Eurasia is a synthesis of world culture and history and It has a mediating feature, which means that it represents the central position within the framework of the continent as a whole; it is not part of Europe and is not an extension of Asia.⁹⁶

Eurasia has transcended a geographical concept into a central geopolitical concept and a region of competition for the major international power to dominate and govern the world. Alexander Dugin worked on developing a particular conception of the new Eurasian empire, which meant strengthening the geopolitical power of Russia and integration through the formation of its three land axes: the Moscow-Berlin axis, the Moscow-Tokyo axis, and the Moscow-Tehran axis, and seeking to change the world order from unipolar to one multipolar.

The Moscow-Tehran axis is considered one of the most important axes, as it enables Russia to open up to the warm seas so that Russia becomes complete from a geopolitical point of view. The exit to the warm waters has been a Russian strategic and geopolitical goal for hundreds of years, which Russia has been seeking for centuries and has been unable to achieve. Therefore, strengthening the relationship with Tehran is a must in order to penetrate the American spheres of influence based on its surroundings.⁹⁷

Dugin explains that the global conflict is not based on socialism or communism and capitalism, but rather a geopolitical conflict between the Anglo-American naval forces and the Eurasian land forces. This means that the Middle East will be a geopolitical battlefield with the United States,

⁹⁵ Hamid Al-Yasiri, Ahmed Al-Barki," The Russian Site in the Western Geopolitical Perspective ", Lark Journal of Philosophy, (Linguistics and Social Sciences, n. 14 2014), p. 16

⁹⁶ Alexander Dugin, "The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia," translated by Imad Hatem (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 2004), p. 128.

⁹⁷ Alexander Dugin, "The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia," Ibid, p.15

and the victory of Russia must be inevitable and necessary for its survival⁹⁸; this largely explains Putin's Russian foreign policy as a pragmatic policy far from ideological as it was in the Soviet Union.

Since Vladimir Putin's rise to power, he has adopted neo-Eurasian ideas in order to revive Russia's role. He has sought to deepen the Eurasian orientation in Russian foreign policy and change the world order from unipolar to multipolar, gradually restore Russia's role in Asia and the Middle East, and not allow the West to alienate the Russian role in international relations. The new Eurasian strategy was translated either through Putin's use of soft power in building alliances and Eurasian organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or through hard power in Georgia and the annexation of Crimea and the military campaign in Syria. Alexander Dugin says that "the war against Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the military campaign in Syria are measures dictated by geostrategic necessity that transcend all other considerations."⁹⁹

From the point of view of the Eurasians, Syria's location on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean makes it a coastal gateway to the Asian continent. The Atlantic axis representing the merchant sea forces (Thalassokratia: island), needs the location of Syria to besiege the opposite axis, which is the Eurasian axis representing the land forces (Tellurokratia: continental). They claim that the United States and some Western countries want to control Syria to extend energy lines from the Arabian Gulf to Europe through Syria to break Europe's need for Russian gas and weaken Russia.¹⁰⁰ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented at a press conference in 2012 that "the balance of power in the world, and what the world will be like in the future depends on the results of the Syrian crisis...."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Khaled Saeed, " Putin's Head in the Kremlin ", Al Jazeera, 24/10/2016, retrieved 6/5/2021, Available from <https://bit.ly/3iUrrtv>

⁹⁹ Kevork Almasyan, "The conflict over Syria and Ukraine from the perspective of Putin's brain", **katehon**, 06/21/2016, retrieved 6/6/2021, Available from <https://katehon.com/ar/article/lsr-l-swry-wwkrny-mn-mnzwr-dmg-bwtyn>

¹⁰⁰ **katehon**, " Syria is in the Heart of the World! Geopolitical and Economic Importance in the International Equation ", **Katehon**, 09/26/2016, Available from <https://katehon.com/ar/article/swry-fy-qlb-llm-hmy-jywsysy-wqtsdy-fy-lmdl-ldwly>

¹⁰¹ Qassem Obaid, Muhammad Fathi, "International crises and the future of global geostrategic balances (the Syrian and Ukrainian crises as a model)", (Iraqi Academic Scientific Journals: political issues, No. 44 2016), p. 21.

For Russia, Syria, especially the seaport in Tartus, is of great importance in maintaining the international balance of power in controlling the seas and the top global trade lines. Therefore, Alexander Dugin says that the conflict in Syria is over geopolitical power, as it has always been, between Russia's land power and the Atlantic's naval power. Syria is at the center of the battle between the representatives of the unipolar world order, and the multipolar one.¹⁰²

Therefore, Dugin calls for an alliance between Russia, China, and Iran to form an axis facing unipolar hegemony. On the other hand, Washington seeks to contain or prevent the alliance by possible means. This is precisely what makes Syria today - in Dugin's opinion - the center of the conflict between the two philosophies in managing the world order.

The war in Syria may be the final moment in unfolding the conflict with the West if Russia accepts the American role in Syria and betrays Bashar al-Assad. In that case, this will severely undermine Russia's political identity, and if the opposite happens, it will be the end of the United States as a single superpower. Alexander Dugin believes that Russia's defeat in Syria will be followed by the war in Iran and the Caucasus, which means that Putin must not abandon Assad; otherwise, it will be a geopolitical suicide for Russia. In Syria, war does not accept a compromise or understanding but is the only way to confirm the facts.¹⁰³ Dugin believes Russia should fight a real battle with the Atlantic, using force in Syria instead of diplomacy. "Syria is our external line of defense, and the next line after Syria is on the territory of the Eurasian Union and even inside the Russian Federation," says Dugin¹⁰⁴.

To sum up, from the viewpoint of the Eurasians, Syria is the cornerstone and the starting point for redrawing the map of the Middle East. Therefore, allowing the fall of the Syrian regime will lead to the loss of the entire Middle East region. This means that filling the void will be in the interest of the United States, and therefore Iran's steadfastness is a matter of time. In addition,

¹⁰² Mazen Ezzi, "Russian Intervention in Syria and Eurasian Geopolitics", Al-Jumhuriya, 23/5/2016, Available from <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/35028>, the original article Dugin published In November 2015, in German in the newspaper "Zuerst" titled "Why are we fighting in Syria?"

¹⁰³ Mazen Ezzi, Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Al Jazeera. "Alexander Dugin. Putin's Philosopher and Mind.", Al Jazeera, 23 Aug. 2022, <http://bitly.ws/xC5u>

Iran and Syria are geographical extensions to the southern borders of Russia, and the loss of the Moscow-Tehran axis means tightening the cord around Russia and the Eurasian space.

Over time, after ensuring the weakening of the opposition and the achievement of significant progress in the Syrian regime's control over most areas of Syria, the relationship began to be competitive and cautious, not allowing the other to control more. For example, Russia allowed Iran to maintain the "Shiite crescent" between Iran, Iraq, and Syria, reach its proxies, and coordinate among them. On the other hand, it allowed Israel to impose its red lines and strike Iranian military targets from time to time,¹⁰⁵ which could only be done after Moscow took control of the Syrian airspace, as Israel became dependent on Moscow to launch its air raids against Iranian targets.

Moscow has used its position in the UNSC to block more than a dozen resolutions to ensure no action against Assad. It also sought to achieve its goals in more subtle ways. In June 2012, the Geneva Communiqué outlined a UN roadmap to end the violence and establish a transitional governing body, but it used vague language at Moscow's insistence. On this basis, Moscow subsequently engaged in peace talks but with groups that did not call for Assad's departure as a precondition for the talks. In other words, Moscow has created a veneer of international legitimacy for its actions.¹⁰⁶ Between 2012 and 2017, eight conferences on the Syrian crisis were held in the Swiss city of Geneva, under varying internal and external circumstances. However, during the indirect negotiations that brought together the delegations of the Syrian opposition and the regime under the auspices of the United Nations, fundamental differences emerged between the two parties that prevented the resolution of the issues under negotiation.¹⁰⁷

The "Moscow Declaration" came in 2016, including Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, his Turkish counterparts Mevlut Cavusoglu, and Iranian Mohammad Javad Zarif. Lavrov said in a press conference that the Moscow statement provides for the launch of comprehensive political negotiations, adding that the negotiations must include all ethnic components in Syria. He added that the three countries agree that the priority in Syria is to combat terrorism, not to overthrow

¹⁰⁵ Mark N. Katz, *"Not Getting Any Easier: Putin's Middle East Balancing Act"*, (The Central Asia Program (CAP) at George Washington, no.212, 2019), p. 14

¹⁰⁶ Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Russian", Ibid, P.10

¹⁰⁷ " From Geneva 1 to 8. What has been achieved?", Al Jazeera, 3/4/2017, Available from <https://bit.ly/3j7bkZL>

the regime. He also said that the Russian-Turkish-Iranian tripartite framework is the most effective for resolving the Syrian crisis. In this context, he spoke of the "failure" of the United States and the international support group for Syria but stressed, on the other hand, the role of the United Nations in the solution.

Furthermore, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said that Lavrov briefed his US counterpart, John Kerry, on the results of the meetings of the foreign and defense ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran in Moscow and added that the Geneva talks on Syria, of which rounds were held last year, reached a dead end. The "Moscow Declaration" stated that the three countries agreed to affirm respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity as a secular, democratic, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious state. It also states that the three countries are convinced that there is no military solution to the crisis in Syria.¹⁰⁸

One of the fruitful outcomes of Russia's regionalization policy was establishing the Astana ceasefire/de-escalation process in 2017 and 2018, a key element in Russia's comprehensive push to create a "Post-West World" Syria. The Astana Process is a parallel alternative to the UN-led Geneva Process, in which the United States plays a leading role. It formally brings together Russia, Iran, and Türkiye in an alternative diplomatic structure.¹⁰⁹ Russia plays a leading role in it, in which the role of regional players (Türkiye and Iran) is strengthened, giving them more space to preserve their interests and limit external interference (the United States and the European Union). It challenges Geneva's primacy by exploiting the collective power of the three parties on the ground. Rising tensions between the United States and Türkiye over the Kurdish issue further facilitated Moscow's conduct of the Astana process. In addition to its role as a Russian-led diplomatic alternative to the Geneva process.

Through the so-called "de-escalation zones," negotiated through the Astana process, Russia, the Assad regime, and Iran took advantage of this diplomatic structure to reclaim most of the opposition-held territory in a series of brutal attacks. Moscow has acted as one of the guarantors

¹⁰⁸ Al Jazeera. "The Moscow Statement Sets the Principles for a Political Settlement in Syria." , Al Jazeera, 20 Dec. 2016, <https://t.ly/02ti> .

¹⁰⁹ Mona Yacoubian, "Understanding Russia's Endgame in Syria: A View from the United States", (The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), 2021), p.10-11

of the de-escalation zones, along with Tehran, in the framework of the Astana process, the aim of which was to promote Assad and give these efforts international legitimacy. Assad also used these de-escalation moments to regroup, gather strength, and retake major urban centers.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, in the recent period, there has been a clear marginalization of Iran and a Russian endeavor; To reduce Iranian influence in northern Syria through the development of Russian-Turkish relations since the start of Turkish military operations in Syria.

In the military field, the Department of Officers Affairs of the regime forces is responsible for the periodic transfers and promotions every six months. Iran and Russia competing to tighten their grip on the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff so they can control the military decision. However, the competition is not limited to the level of the higher organizational and administrative structures in the military institution but includes all parts and salaries. In addition, Russia and Iran are trying to ensure continued control by appointing a non-Syrian liaison officer responsible for following up and communicating decisions to his Syrian counterpart.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Iran has sought to create centers of influence and leverage in the Syrian security, military and economic apparatus by first providing the regime with the surveillance and crowd control techniques necessary to contain protest movements and by offering it billions of dollars in loans, generous lines of credit and oil donations. In addition to its contribution to providing the necessary advice to the security services and conducting military training for the Syrian regular army and some militia forces supporting it to adapt to urban warfare and the war on terrorism. Furthermore, the formation of a group of local militias affiliated with the army, such as the National Defense Forces, whose number of members was estimated in 2012 and whose number was estimated at 40,000 fighters, in which all Syrian sectarian groups were included. In addition, it established a group of local Alawite Shiite militias close to the pattern of Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias in terms of formation and how Iran deals with them. These Shiite militias exceed 60,000 in 2017, which received ideological training in

¹¹⁰ Anna Borshchevskaya , “*The Russian Way of War in Syria: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism*”, (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), p. 9-10

Iranian camps, fought alongside the regular army, specifically the Fourth Division, which the Syrian media officially described as auxiliary or supplementary forces.¹¹¹

This clearly contradicted Russia's desire to reform the Syrian army and restore it as an integrated unit within the framework of strengthening the Syrian government and its security institutions. Russia views the armies as the main entity that guarantees the safety and stability of the country as a whole. Given that the Syrian army, in general, was worn out and unable to effectively achieve security and stability in Syria, dividing it into militias will contribute, according to Alexey Khlebnikov, to further weakening and dispersing it. That will reflect negatively on Russia's attempts to reform, rehabilitate and train the army as a unified regular army belonging to a unified and independent state. In addition, the presence of these militias poses a threat to the sovereignty of the state because they have clearly grown in terms of size, number, and influence, along with their desire for independence from the Syrian army and its competition, which will negatively affect Russia's future interest and influence in Syria.¹¹²

In order to avoid this, Russia worked to dissolve these militias and re-incorporate them into the regular army. After its military intervention in Syria in 2015, it supported the 5th and 25th divisions in the Syrian army, as it is a major tool of influence on the ground, against the Syrian opposition on the one hand and the Iranian militias on the other, which prompted Iran to penetrate the Syrian army and include its local Shiite militias. In order to obtain a legitimate and legal formula that protects them from possible Israeli and American raids, some analysts believe that Russia has not been able to restructure the Syrian army and influence it significantly, in contrast to Iran, which has shown its influence in it.¹¹³

At times, armed clashes erupted within the ranks of the Syrian regime between forces loyal to Russia and Iran. This was not just due to competition over sources of wealth and funding from crossings and others, but also to the struggle for influence and field control. For example, in

¹¹¹ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's costly intervention in Syria: A pyrrhic victory", (Mediterranean Politics, Vol. 25, no.1, 2020), p. 31-33

¹¹² Alexey Khlebnikov, "Russia and Syrian Military Reform: Challenges and Opportunities", Carnegie Middle East Centre, March 26, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/26/russia-and-syrian-military-reform-challenges-and-opportunities-pub-81154>

¹¹³ Navvar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria", Atlantic Council, November 5, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>

2019, violent confrontations occurred between forces affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Russian military police after Iran demanded that the Russian police withdraw from Aleppo International Airport.¹¹⁴

The competition between the two parties within the military sector also includes the work to recruit members of Arab tribes and clans. After it intervened in Syria, Russia supported some auxiliary forces with clan extension, such as the militia of fighters from tribes. Moreover, after signing the Sochi Memorandum 2019, which allowed it to enter the areas east of the Euphrates, Russia held Several meetings with representatives of clans and tribes, the first of which was in April 2020 in the village of Jarmiz Bariq Qamishli, north of Hasaka governorate. On the other hand, Iran¹¹⁵ tried to take advantage of the tense situation in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor between the clans and the "SDF" against the recent assassinations' background that affected some Arab tribal sheikhs. Simultaneously, IRGC took control of whole the water smuggling crossings between its areas in Al-Mayadeen and the areas of influence of the "SDF" on the opposite side.

Concerning the return of Syrian refugees, one of the files that Russia sought to regionalize and implement its vision is the issue of refugees. During the summer of 2018, Moscow put forward a plan to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees. This initiative appeared in the dual context of the stalled discussion in Geneva on the establishment of the Constitutional Committee and the Helsinki Summit between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. As a result, Moscow put forward a plan to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees in 2018 and announced the establishment of special centers in Syria to receive, distribute and shelter displaced Syrians and refugees. These centers can accommodate 336,000 refugees and are distributed over the governorates of Damascus countryside, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Deir Ez-Zor, and eastern Qalamoun. However, the Syrian regime's continued violations of the returnees' rights, including

¹¹⁴ Abdulwahhab Assi , *"The Watchful Partnership between Russia and Iran in the Case of Syria."* *Jusoor for Studies*, 2022,), p. 7–8.

¹¹⁵ Mentioned before in chapter 3 in p. 34

arbitrary arrest and killing under torture, made this vision not accompanied by any push for the political process or any measure to provide a safe and attractive environment for return.¹¹⁶

Driving this file is considered one of Moscow's priorities, as it is a key issue in its efforts to demonstrate the stability of the areas under Assad's control by showing that the only obstacle to the total return of refugees is the mere destruction of residential areas. Therefore, Moscow proposes in its plan that the financial assistance paves the way for the resettlement of the displaced Syrians and that the European Union finance the reconstruction process. Which, in theory, should eventually lead to the return of the remaining displaced Syrians and refugees and eventually lead to a comprehensive political solution. However, the reality is radically different from that, and all the international political initiatives launched so far have failed to lay a solid foundation for a process that responds to the concerns of the refugees about what constitutes minimum security and minimum conditions, as guaranteed by international law.¹¹⁷ On the other hand, the European Union demands political guarantees and a strong political roadmap for the political transition in Damascus before considering any investment in Syria.

Jordan showed a certain interest in the Moscow initiative. On October 15, 2018, it reopened the Nassib border crossing with Syria, which closed for three years. Furthermore, Amman indicated that it aims to revitalize its political relations with Damascus gradually. As for Lebanon, a Russian-Lebanese Committee for the Return of Refugees has been formed, and Russia is taking advantage of its growing relations with Beirut to help achieve a fait accompli on the refugee issue, thus creating a dynamism and precedent procedure.

On the other hand, Iran basically does not care about this issue and does not receive any refugees. Furthermore, the non-return of refugees reinforces and supports its project of demographic change and increases its influence and control over Syria.

¹¹⁶ Talaa, Maen. "A Safe Environment as an Objective Condition for the Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons." (Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 2020,) pp. 13

¹¹⁷ "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: the Motives and Experiences of Syrians Forced to Return to Areas under Assad's Control." SACD, 2019, https://syacd.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/07/SACD_Between_Hammer_and_Anvil_AR.pdf.

In the economic field, there is also competition between Russia and Iran. The researcher explained in detail Iran's economic penetration in Syria. As for Russia, it was interested in the oil, gas, and hydrocarbon sector and was keen to control this sector due to its strategic importance in the Mediterranean.

Russia's interest in oil fields in Syria has recently increased. In September 2019, the Syrian Ministry of Oil signed three contracts with two Russian companies: two contracts with "Mercury Company" and the third with "Velada Company" in the field of drilling and exploration within three blocks (they are 7, 19, and 23). In the areas of Damascus countryside, Deir Ez-Zor, and Al-Hasakah. On March 16, 2021, a contract was made with the Russian "Capital" company to explore gas and oil in the Mediterranean off the coast of Tartus to the southern Syrian-Lebanese maritime border with an area of 2,250 square kilometers. In addition, in February 2021, the Russian forces handed over all the oil fields under their control in Deir Ez-Zor, namely the "Al-Taym" and "Al-Ward" fields, and others in Raqqa, to Hussam al-Qaterji, the most prominent warlord affiliated with the Assad family, to invest them for five years.¹¹⁸

The recent increase in Russian interest in oil fields is due to the fact that Syria is expected to become one of the world's natural gas exporters, following recent discoveries off the coast of the Mediterranean and in the Syrian Badia as Russia seeks to control the energy market in the world, as well as its desire to preserve the contracts and privileges it obtained in Syria, to ensure the repayment of the increasing Syrian debt since the beginning of the crisis.¹¹⁹

Russia seeks to link oil fields to reconstruction. It sees Syria and the hydrocarbon industry as a way to maintain its influence as the country looks to rebuild after a decade of conflict. Because whoever owns oil in Syria has a solid card to negotiate the reconstruction file.¹²⁰

In conclusion, it can be said that the degree of cooperation between Russia and Iran was strong and well-established in the beginning to save the Syrian regime. However, after the regime was established in its rule, the competition began overall military, security, and economic

¹¹⁸- Elias El-Khoury, " The Reasons and Motives... Why did Russia intervene militarily in Syria?" Baladi News, May 10, 2021, Available from <https://bit.ly/3yj13kV>

¹¹⁹ - Ibid

¹²⁰- " What is Russia's goal from Wagner's control of Syrian oil?", Baladi News, May 18, 2021, Available from <https://bit.ly/3yiYloG>

sectors in Syria. Russia is distinguished from Iran by its more decisive political influence in Syria. Although they are united with the regime, they are entirely incompatible with the form and structure of the future government. Russia is interested in the existence of a regime that preserves its interests and gains in Syria. At the same time, Iran has all its interests and project linked to Assad, The researcher explained this in detail through Iran's pursuit within the framework of Shiite geopolitics, the Shiite crescent, and the demographic change that can only happen with the presence of Assad in power.



Thesis Conclusion

In concluding the thesis, the researcher explained at the outset the history of the Iranian-Syrian relationship since 1979 and the reasons for its strength. Iranian-Syrian relations were strategically strengthened after the Iranian Islamic Revolution due to several factors that pushed the two countries towards a comprehensive alliance and practical and close relations that serve common vital goals and interests and enhance military capabilities in facing common challenges and dangers. These factors include the Syrian presence in Lebanon, the Iraqi war, and the Gulf War. In 1990, the issue of a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict at the Madrid Conference in 1991, and support for Hezbollah. Iran benefits from its alliance with Syria as its main transit route to the Levant and Lebanon to support its allies. The relationship with Iran during the era of Bashar Al-Assad became deeper than it was during the era of his late father. On the military, cultural, and economic levels, the Iranian-Syrian alliance deepened further with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assuming the presidency in Iran in 2005.

With the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Iranian regime intervened with all its weight politically, militarily, economically, and socially on the side of the Syrian regime. The Syrian crisis posed a serious, complex, and interrelated security challenge for Iranian political decision-makers, and this comes within the framework of the close historical relationship between Syria and Iran and the political, security, and strategic dimensions between the two countries, in addition to the ideological dimensions, as the Iranian-Syrian relations represent one of the close strategic international relations, based on to pragmatic political, security and ideological imperatives.

Through a detailed and analytical study, the researcher tried to know and explain the strength of the Iranian-Syrian relationship from 2011 to 2021. By analyzing several perceptions of the decision-maker circles that Iran has pursued in its policy and strategy since the success of the Iranian revolution, we see that (imposing fait accompli, cross-border revolution, imposing hegemony, and expansion by force, the prominent ideology ...) considered the pillars of national security and Iranian foreign policy. Its impact is evident in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and others. In detail, the researcher explained that Syria (Assad regime) occupied critical importance for Iran that comes within the framework of Iranian national security, the Shiite crescent, Shiite

geopolitics, regional isolation, and shared threat perceptions; their relationship is a fateful one, inevitable. Either win together or lose together.

The researcher demonstrated in detail through many practical examples of reports, facts, and statistics that Iranian policy worked from the first year of the Syrian crisis in 2011, how Iran consolidated its influence and penetrated and continues to penetrate the state's institutions in terms of military, security, economic, and socially. The demographic change (social engineering) is a unique case that distinguished Iran from all foreign powers that intervened in Syria, severely impacting the unity of Syrian soil. This demographic change and Iranian policy reinforce the division and chaos in the Syrian geography. The consequences of this chaos will be reflected in all the actors in the Syrian file and the region as a whole.

The researcher indicated the impact of the Syrian crisis on the Iranian-Russian relationship. The degree of cooperation between Russia and Iran was strong and well-established at the beginning to save the Syrian regime. However, after establishing the regime of its rule, the competition began between Syria's overall military, security, and economic sectors. Russia is distinguished from Iran by its more decisive political influence in Syria. Although they are united with the regime, they are entirely incompatible with the form and structure of the future government. Russia is interested in the existence of a regime that preserves its interests and gains in Syria. At the same time, Iran has all its interests, and its project is linked to Assad. The researcher explained this in detail through Iran's pursuit within the framework of Shiite geopolitics, the Shiite crescent, and the demographic change that can only happen with the presence of Assad in power.

Based on all of the above, we cannot reach a political solution in Syria, and Iran continues its expansionist policy in Syria of demographic change, strengthening of division, and spreading chaos to the Syrian geography as Iran weakens state institutions and consolidates its influence within the Syrian military, security, and economic institutions. By supporting various factions and armed sectarian militias, such as the Pakistani "Zainabiyoun" militia, the Afghan "Fatemiyoun" militia, the Lebanese "Hezbollah" and the Iraqi "Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas" militia, among others. All this will lead to repercussions for all actors in the Syrian file and even the entire region

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