



Deepening Russian Cultural Influence in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpted passages detail how Russia is using education as a “soft power” tool to deepen its influence in Syria. The first two, from the Arabic-language website of *RT*, report on a group of eight Syrian boys who have begun studying at the Institute of Railway Forces and Military Communications, part of the Khroulyv Military Academy of Logistics and Transportation (KMALT) in St. Petersburg. The program was established under a “permanent agreement” signed by Russia and Syria, whereby “a new batch of Syrian students will be enrolled at the beginning of each new academic year.” According to Olga Kovitidi, a Crimean representative in the Russian parliament who sits on the Committee on Defense and Security, within ten to fifteen years the Syrian army will have a core of Russian-trained officers “who have undergone the same military education as their Russian counterparts.” These officers, she predicts, “will become the future elite of the Syrian Arab Army.”

The bilateral agreement allows Syrians to study in Russian military academies free of charge “provided they have a good level of Russian,” which a growing number of Syrians do. The third passage, from *al-Jazeera*, notes that the demand for learning Russian continues to grow in Syria. Russian fluency has become a highly marketable skill, and many Syrians are embracing Russia’s “cultural invasion” given the associated employment and educational opportunities it brings. The first-ever Russian-curriculum school in the Middle East is set to open in Damascus this year (though classes will be taught in Arabic).

Russia’s deepening influence in Syria is often in competition with Iranian efforts to gain leverage (see: “Iran and Russia Compete for Influence in Syria,” *OE Watch*, May 2018; “Russia and Iran Compete for Syria’s Phosphates,” *OE Watch*, June 2018). As noted in the fourth accompanying passage, published in the Syrian opposition news site *Sada al-Sham* and translated into English by *The Syrian Observer*, friction between the Syrian government’s two allies “sometimes manifests as a military clash or an assassination or the securing of an economic investment from the Assad regime.” Far from the headlines, though, “There is an attempt by each party to penetrate Syrian society religiously or culturally.” How this competition plays out will have important consequences for Syria and the region as a whole. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...They will become the future elite of the Syrian Arab Army...”

Source:

التحاق أول دفعة من التلاميذ السوريين بالمدارس العسكرية الروسية

“First Batch of Syrian Students Joins Russian Military Institutes,” *RT*, 16 August 2018. <https://goo.gl/H7aRN4>

Eight Syrian students arrived in the Russian city of St. Petersburg and began preparing to enroll in various Russian military schools. A Syrian government source confirmed the news, pointing out that there is a permanent agreement, under which a new batch of Syrian students will be enrolled at the beginning of each new academic year. “The development of highly professional military officers in Russia is a good investment for the future and security of Syria,” said Olga Kovitidi, a member of the Federation Council and chair of the International Military Technical Subcommittee. “They will become the future elite of the Syrian Arab Army.” The senator also expects the Syrian border, within 10 to 15 years, to be protected by highly trained and prepared Syrian officers who have undergone the same military education as their Russian counterparts. Syrian students are expected to start their first lessons in Russia at the beginning of September, as part of a recent agreement between Syria and Russia, allowing Syrian children to study free of charge in military schools, provided they have a good level of Russian.

Source:

أول دفعة من الأطفال السوريين تلتحق بالأكاديمية العسكرية في سان بطرسبورغ

“First Batch of Syrian Youths Join Military Academy in Saint Petersburg,” *RT*, 1 September August 2018. <https://goo.gl/4KTMwa>

The first group of Syrian children began the new school year at the Institute of Railway Forces and Military Communications of the Military Academy of Logistics and Transportation in St. Petersburg.

Deputy Defense Minister Dmitry Bulgakov said during his visit to the Institute today that this is the first experiment of its kind and is the implementation of the decision of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to start teaching Syrian students in all Russian military educational institutions, including those that specialize in the preparation of officers.

Source:

القوة الناعمة للحليف الأول... سوريا تتحدث الروسية

Sulafa Jabbour. “Soft Power for the Top Ally... Syria Speaks Russian,” *al-Jazeera*, 18 August 2018. <https://goo.gl/Ci5vuk>

An option to study Russian was established in the literature department of Damascus University four years ago, which was neither the first nor the last chapter of the Russian “cultural invasion” of Syria. Not only did Russia intervene militarily on behalf of the Syrian regime three years ago, but it has also directed its attention toward that which might give it a more long-lasting influence in Syrian society...

According to statements by ministry officials to Syrian media, there are 170 schools offering Russian, distributed across most Syrian cities, using about 100 teachers from Syria who have mastered the language. The number is expected to rise in the coming school year, which begins at the start of September...

Ahmed Meftah, 45, who teaches Russian at a private academy in Damascus... does not think that Russia has intervened directly to impose its language in Syria, but that Syrians generally have started to love the language of their country’s ally, and have independently decided to learn it, especially with the growing opportunities and university scholarships in Russia.

Source:

مرصد الإفتاء في دراسة جديدة الضربات والملاحقة الأمنية تدفع التنظيمات التكفيرية إلى اللجوء إلى الإرهاب العائلي كتنكيك للتجنيد والانتشار

“The Cultural Frontlines for Russia and Iran in Syria,” *Sada al Sham* via *The Syrian Observer*, 9 August 2018. http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/34604/The_Cultural_Frontlines_Russia_Iran_Syria

Some believe there is a struggle for influence between Iran and Russia, which sometimes manifests as a military clash or an assassination or the securing of an economic investment from the Assad regime. However, another feature of this competition has become clear. There is an attempt by each party to penetrate Syrian society religiously or culturally. This has been illustrated by the opening of schools connected with Husseinayahs or a church or a French or Russian language institute.