



## Iran and Russia Compete for Influence in Syria

**OE Watch Commentary:** It should come as no surprise that a growing number of Syrians are studying the Russian and Farsi languages. Interest in learning Russian has proliferated in the coastal provinces of Lattakia and Tartous, where the Russian military presence is strongest. The expansion of Farsi, meanwhile, has been most notable in areas in and around Damascus. Ultimately, both countries seek to deepen their influence in Syria by soft-power means such as language education, as the following articles from Arabic-language media suggest.

According to the first accompanying article, from the Syrian government daily *Tishreen*, over 15,000 Syrians currently study Russian in 170 different schools. The push to learn Russian is directly connected to Russian military efforts in Syria and is in large part driven by the Syrian government, which has become largely dependent on its Russian benefactor. Private and non-governmental institutions are also increasingly offering Russian language classes. For example the second accompanying article, from the Arabic-language website for Russia's *Sputnik* news agency, cites a recent initiative by a Syrian charitable foundation to offer free Russian language classes in the city of Aleppo, in order to "strengthen friendship between the two peoples."

In contrast to the recent spike in Russian language instruction, the spread of Farsi learning in Syria precedes the current conflict and is woven into an Iranian regional policy aimed at spreading ideology through culture, religion and language. Syrian cultural and religious affinities are closer to Iran than to Russia, making it easier to wrap language into a broader cultural package. As noted in the third accompanying excerpt, from the Syrian opposition's *Orient News*, Farsi instruction is often attached to cultural and religious centers established with assistance from the Iranian Embassy in Damascus. The article further notes that the number of such centers is proliferating, including in coastal areas where Russian influence is strongest.

The expansion of Russian and Iranian language teaching and cultural exchange is part of a broader competition for influence in Syria. The competition has yet to produce any noteworthy friction, but according to the fourth accompanying article, from Qatar's *al-Jazeera*, the leadership of both countries expects a return on their investment in the Syrian arena. At the moment, the article's author claims, neither country is fully satisfied with their return, hence both will seek to benefit from the reconstruction period and in the meantime "will continue seeking to further deepen their presence in Syria in many fields." **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...As Iran seeks to expand the presence of Farsi on the coast, Russia is offering scholarship for study in Russia...”



TOP: Calligraphic Rendition of the word "Farsi" BOTTOM: "Russia" in Cyrillic Script.  
Source: TOP: By Jahongard (from Image:Farsi.jpg), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>), via Wikimedia Commons  
BOTTOM: By Peter J. Acklam - Own work, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4406519>

### Source:

١٥,٠٠٠ طالب يدرسون اللغة الروسية في ١٧٠ مدرسة  
“15,000 Students Study Russian in 170 Schools,” *Tishreen*, 21 March 2018. <http://tishreen.news.sy/?p=144536> (translation via: [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/33987/Students\\_Study\\_Russian\\_17\\_Schools/](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/33987/Students_Study_Russian_17_Schools/))

*The director of professional and technical education in the Education Ministry, Dr. Radwan Rahal, said that the number of students learning the Russian language in classes from seventh to 10th grades had reached about 15,000, in 170 schools across the areas in which the course has been adopted... The Russian language was entered by the Education Ministry into secondary education's academic curriculum in the 2014-2015 academic year, starting with the seventh grade as a test. In the following year, it was introduced for the eighth grade classes, which could choose between Russian, French and English, and take the subject further, studying its scientific and literary courses as well.*

### Source:

انطلاق دورات مجانية لتعليم اللغة الروسية في حلب السورية  
Tarek Basmaje. “Free Russian Language Courses in Aleppo,” *Sputnik*, 20 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/Rko2ob>

*Parting from deep-rooted friendship between Syria and Russia and a history of cooperation, the Wafa Charitable Foundation has launched a cultural initiative aimed at strengthening friendship between the two peoples... This initiative seeks to teach Russian language to all segments of Aleppo's population, as well as Russian culture... The initiative was launched by Emad Kawka, the Secretary General for the Wafa Foundation, who in a press statement said that this effort aims to strengthen friendship between the two peoples by facilitating direct communication without the need for a translator, as well as teaching about Russian culture...*

(continued)





## Continued: Iran and Russia Compete for Influence in Syria

“...Tehran and Moscow will continue seeking to further deepen their presence in Syria in many fields...”

**Source:** أورينت تفتح ملف الصراع الروسي الإيراني في الساحل السوري  
“Orient Looks at Russia-Iran Conflict on the Syrian Coast,” *Orient News*, 19 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/a2w6bT>

*At a time when Russia seeks to gain additional concessions in Syria, with a particular focus on the Syrian coast, Iran is expanding its influence in Damascus and Aleppo under a variety of guises, most notably to support “religious tourism.” The conflict is still present between these two countries in the aforementioned areas. On the Syrian coast, Shi’i schools are proliferating... as are Farsi language institutes.... The Russian-Iranian educational competition on the Syrian coast has affected educational institutions, and there are now courses in both languages. As Iran seeks to expand the presence of Farsi on the coast, Russia is offering scholarship for study in Russia... According to local reports, there are Farsi language centers in many provinces such as Lattakia and Damascus, with help from the Iranian Embassy’s Cultural Attache’s Office in Damascus.*

**Source:** سوريا.. يتقاسمها الروسي والإيراني  
“Syria... Divided between Russia and Iran,” *al-Jazeera*, 3 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/ik6K9e>

*In return [for its support of the Syrian government], Iran obtained economic contracts in Syrian agriculture, oil, industry, livestock and ports. Iran also has steady exports to Syria, especially after receiving tax exemption in 2012. Iran also worked to establish its cultural and religious presence in Syria over the past years, with the unprecedented expansion of Shi’i religious expressions, particularly in Damascus, in addition to work to establish a branch of the Iranian Islamic Azad University” and the expansion of Farsi language instruction in several Syrian cities... In parallel, Russia has until now obtained an agreement to explore for oil and gas in Syrian regional waters, as well as projects in the gas, grain mills, feed, electricity and wheat and agreements allowing Russian military bases in Syria to remain for the next 49 years.*

*These agreements do not appear to fully satisfy either side, hence Tehran and Moscow will continue seeking to further deepen their presence in Syria in many fields... According to economist Yunis al-Karim... both countries seek to put their hands on Syria’s energy sources in the Mediterranean, considering it a suitable pathway for transporting oil and gas. They also both seek to control the Qalamoun area on the Syria-Lebanon border. According to al-Karim, “currently controls the Syrian coast, while Iran has succeeded in controlling the Qalamoun, especially the town of Zabadani and Madaya”... Once the war has ended, Syrian reconstruction will represent an opportunity for both Russia and Iran to revive their economies and businesses in various related sectors.*

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