



## Iran: Winning Hearts and Minds in Deir Ezzor

**OE Watch Commentary:** Deir Ezzor is a tribal Sunni province of Syria located on the Euphrates River, along the border with Iraq. Its physical and socio-cultural environments resemble those of Iraq's Anbar Province, and it was an ISIS stronghold for several years. Late last year, the provincial capital and surrounding areas were retaken by loyalist forces, with Iranian-backed militias leading the charge. Although it is not a natural social environment for deep-rooted Iranian influence to take hold, some of the Iran-backed militias may be there to stay. The foundations for Iran's ability to assert control over this traditionally Sunni area are partially explained in the accompanying passage, published last November in the Syrian opposition news website *alsouria.net*.

According to the article, soft-power measures from as early as 1988 have paved the way for Iran's new foothold in Deir Ezzor. That year, the article claims, Iranian envoys began enticing poor villagers from the Baqqara (Baggara) tribe to adopt religious practices associated with Shi'i Iran. Through mechanisms such as the Imam al-Murtaza Foundation, Iran extended its influence by providing these neglected areas with material assistance and a new ideological edifice, based on Iranian Revolutionary ideals and centered around newly built Shi'i houses of worship (Husseiniyat). Iran's close relations with the Assad government also allowed its envoys and allies to provide government functions in some areas, according to the article.

The loyalist retaking of Deir Ezzor in late 2017 received crucial support from Nawaf al-Bashir, a prominent member of the Baqqara in Syria. Al-Bashir had been an early defector to the side of the opposition in 2011, but last summer he publicly declared his renewed support for the Syrian government on Iran's Arabic-language news channel al-Alam. The article explains how Iran has leveraged ancestral lineage between al-Bashir's clan and Muhammad al-Baqir, the fifth Imam for mainstream Shi'i Islam but a relatively inconsequential figure for Sunni history, in order to draw him and his followers in the Baqqara tribe back into the loyalist camp. The Baqqara militia, which also played a role in the Battle of Aleppo, is tellingly called the "Al-Baqir Brigade" in reference to Muhammad al-Baqir. According to the article, the militia received initial training from Iran but is now trained by Iraqi militias from the Popular Mobilization Forces (for more see: "Shia Symbolism: Iran-Backed Militias Resurgent in Syria," *OE Watch* October 2016 and "Chechen Military Police in East Aleppo," *OE Watch* March 2017).

Iran's persistent efforts in the "gray zone," at times conducted in conjunction with military operations, have yielded a diffuse yet strongly rooted presence in Syria. What is occurring in Deir Ezzor is not unique: gaining local allies, spreading ideology, providing material assistance, and helping set up local militias have all been part of Iran's modus operandi throughout the Syria conflict. These efforts have borne fruits in part due to measures begun decades ago, and their cumulative effects are likely to continue for many years. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**



Saida Zeinab mosque (Damascus).

Source: By Odilia (Own work), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saida\\_Zeinab\\_mosque%20SYRIE%2004.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saida_Zeinab_mosque%20SYRIE%2004.jpg), CC3.0.

(continued)



## Continued: Iran: Winning Hearts and Minds in Deir Ezzor

“...a history of Iranian Shi'i proselytism in Deir Ezzor which dates to 1988...”

### Source:

إيران تمضي بنشر التشيع في دير الزور.. وهذه وسائلها لتطبيق أهم مشاريعها بسوريا  
 “Iran Continues to Spread Shi'i Ideology in Deir Ezzor... These are the Tools it Uses to Conduct its Most Important Projects in Syria,”  
 alsouria.net, 29 November 2017. <https://goo.gl/xglaxM>

Through its militias and proxies in Syria, Iran continues its ongoing project of spreading Shi'ism in Deir Ezzor, after expelling ISIS from there recently. Ammar Shihab, a resident of Deir Ezzor who is well informed on the project of spreading Shi'i thought, pointed out while speaking to alsouria.net that part of Iran's operations consisted in spreading the Shi'i doctrine among Sunni tribal members, using a variety of methods, most notably providing material goods and managing the affairs of people officially through state agencies and authorities, taking advantage of the major influence of Iranian officials in state institutions under the rule of the Assad family.

Shihab explained that Iran relied on specific leaders and prominent personalities from Deir Ezzor's tribes to carry out its agenda, most notably Nawaf al-Bashir, a sheikh from the Baqqara (Bagara) tribe who announced his allegiance to Tehran. He claimed that al-Bashir plays a role in carrying out the Iranian agenda by exploiting the financial needs and influence of his tribes, given his role as one of the tribe's prominent personalities able to draw its members together. The Anatolia news agency recently reported that al-Bashir oversees an Arab tribal militia trained and financed by Iran, with the training continued by leaders from the Iranian-backed Iraqi PMF...

Shihab said that Iran took advantage of the siege placed by ISIS on the regime-held Deir Ezzor neighborhoods (al-Jura and al-Qusura) by using its allies to gain the allegiance of area residents and bring them into the Shi'a sect. The source alleges that Haydar al-Arifi, an official in the Iranian Chancellery, played a major role in influencing residents of these neighborhoods, particularly since a portion of them were considered regime loyalists, making things easier for the Iranian officials.

Fragments circulated by activists in Deir Ezzor show sectarian flags alongside Iranian flags and PMF flags in areas that were entered by Iranian militias in Albu Kamal and al-Mayadin, following the recent withdrawal by ISIS. The activists claim that militia members raised the flags on the mosques of Albu Kamal, playing sectarian hymns. Iran sent food assistance after its militias took a broad swath of Deir Ezzor to support the needs of the people, which activists from the province said was a means of gaining popular support, particularly given the deteriorated economic conditions there.

Shihab alluded to a history of Iranian Shi'i proselytism in Deir Ezzor which dates to 1988, when Tehran began implementing its plans by focusing on specific villages and geographical areas linked administratively to the city of Deir Ezzor, most notably the towns of Hatla and Marrat, where the Imam al-Murtaza Foundation, headed by Jamil al-Asad the brother of former regime head Hafez al-Assad, played a major role. The source added that the foundation focused on people's material needs in these villages and their fear of the security services and authorities, as many residents of Hatla and Marrat converted to Shi'ism and built Husseiniyat (Shi'a worship site) there.

Following the year 2000, the number of Shi'i adherents increased and three other Husseiniyat were built, two of them with support from Kuwaiti Shi'i and the other from the Iranian Chancellery in Damascus. The first was in the town of al-Saawa and the other in Hawayij Bumsaa, in the northeast countryside of Deir Ezzor, both of which are inhabited by members of the Baqqara tribe. The projects took advantage of the residents' poor economic conditions, given that these are among the poorest towns in Deir Ezzor...

They also played on ancestry in some cases, by focusing on the tribes themselves, such as the Baqqara, arguing that they were descendants of Mohammed al-Baqir (the fifth Imam for Imami Shi'i), in addition to being a tribe which extends to Iraq and many of whose members are Shi'i. Tehran has also worked to spread Shi'i ideas in parts of Homs and Hama, as well as Damascus and its countryside including Saida Zaynab neighborhood and parts of Darayya, using similar methods to those used in Deir Ezzor.

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