



Iran Builds Up Syrian Proxies on the Western Banks of the Euphrates

OE Watch Commentary: According to local media reports, Iranian forces have over the past year carried out a relatively effective proxy-building campaign in areas between the towns of al-Mayadin and Abu Kamal, on the western banks of the Euphrates River in the Syrian province of Deir ez-Zor (see: “Iran: Winning Hearts and Minds in Deir Ezzor,” *OE Watch*, March 2018 and “Shia Symbolism: Iran-Backed Militias Resurgent in Syria,” *OE Watch*, October 2016). These former ISIS Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) strongholds, located near and along the border with Iraq’s Anbar Province, are home to a conservative and predominantly Sunni population that is traditionally considered skeptical, if not hostile, toward Iranian intentions. However, years of conflict have transformed parts of Deir ez-Zor into an inhospitable mix of fear, destruction, indigence and resentment, and in the absence of alternatives, the security provided by Iranian-backed factions may be gaining appeal with a growing number of local residents.

Iranian efforts, as described in the three accompanying passages, are multi-faceted. In the Russian-controlled city of Deir ez-Zor, the Iranian cultural center offers a variety of free activities and services, from seminars and lectures on religion and politics to Farsi classes, humanitarian work, and pay-per-view soccer games beamed on large screens in the center’s grounds. Near the town of al-Mayadin, a shrine has been built to draw Shi’i tourism from Iraq and Iran, while local residents report an uptick on public “Shi’i practices” such as the way the call to prayer is done. Iranian-sponsored facilities distribute food, clothing and other necessities to refugees and indigent families, while relatives of Iranian-backed foreign fighters have, according to one of the reports, recently been relocated to al-Mayadin and moved into homes previously occupied by ISIS fighters. Over 1,000 Syrian men have been recruited into Iranian-backed militias, presumably as the kernel of an envisioned “local army” which, according to one of the excerpts, would include 40,000 fighters and control the Syria-Iraq border. The primary lure for joining the pro-Iran militias is reportedly the promise of a steady income, with family perks and protection from the harassment of Syrian government agents an added bonus.

According to the second accompanying passage, Russia is Iran’s main competitor for control over the western banks of the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor. According to the article, Russia and its allies control key facilities in the provincial capital (Deir ez-Zor), while Iranian influence is strongest further downstream. The article discusses how in January 2019, Iranian proxies expelled Syrian fighters in the Russian-affiliated 5th Legion from the towns of al-Mayadin and Abu Kamal, south of Deir ez-Zor along the border with Iraq. On the outskirts of al-Mayadin, the third source claims, is a base with “military forces who prevent the entry or exit of anyone that is not Iranian, whether civilian or fighter, amidst the presence of strong security and the constant flight of drones overhead.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...the continuation of Iranian forces’ recruitment and their warming relations with local residents...”



Qalaat Rahbah on the outskirts of al-Mayadin.

Source: By Zoepkoe / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38810366>.

(continued)



Continued: Iran Builds Up Syrian Proxies on the Western Banks of the Euphrates

Source: فيلات البلدية .. معقل «فاغر» و «فاطميون» والحرس الثوري في دير الزور
 “Villat al-Baladiya... Wagner, Fatimiyoun and IRGC strongholds in Deir ez-Zor,” *Ayn al-Madina*, 1 January 2019. <https://goo.gl/ofjyyk>

Behind the al-Fateh mosque, in the “Villat” neighborhood, the Iranian cultural center operates since opening last March. It hosts a variety of events, including informational lectures on topics including Ashura and the “Corrective Movement,” Farsi language classes, humanitarian work such as distributing food items to the families of killed and injured regime fighters, and entertainment such as setting up large TV screens for the youth to watch pay-per-view soccer games for a symbolic cost.

Source: ما أسباب الصراع الإيراني الروسي “الخفي” في دير الزور؟
 Musab al-Majbal. “What’s behind the “hidden” Iranian-Russian conflict in Deir ez-Zor,” *Orient News*, 13 February 2019, <https://goo.gl/5B4zAk>

Al-Nayif added that in early October 2018, Iranian militias pulled out of the city of al-Mayadin and the village of Mahkan and redeployed to Abu Kamal, taking the place of Russian occupation forces. This created an internal conflict about influence. In early January 2019, Iranian militias expelled a group from the 5th Legion from Abu Kamal on the border with Iraq and al-Mayadin in rural Deir ez-Zor, which are considered key strongholds for Iranian militias.

The Russian forces did not object to the expulsion of the 5th Legion militias under their control, but rather in order to save face in some way they deployed the 5th Legion militias to a remote area in the eastern desert of al-Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor Province, far from the Iranian militias.

According to local sources, Iranian militias are present in al-Mayadin, Abu Kamal, their surrounding areas, al-Sakria, and al-Hamdan, where Iran seeks to establish a “local army” of around 40,000 fighters with the goal of controlling the border triangle with Iraq and preventing any other militias from competing with them in the region, in particular the 5th Legion which includes fighters from the Free Syrian Army who entered into a truce and whom do not follow the vision of the Iranian militias...

The eastern parts of Deir ez-Zor, particularly al-Mayadin and Abu Kamal on the border with Iraq, are thought to be under the control of Iranian militias, while the Russians control the city of Deir ez-Zor, the surrounding countryside, the entries to the city, its military airport, and its key government institutions.

Source: روسيا وإيران.. حليفا النظام والمتحالفان مع عدوه يتصارعان على النفوذ في سوريا
 “Russia and Iran... Regime partners in alliance with its adversaries compete for influence in Syria,” *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 28 January 2019. <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=305431>

The SOHR monitored the continuation of Iranian forces’ recruitment and their warming relations with local residents, their carrying out of “Shi’ization” activities and bringing more residents into the Shi’i fold by paying money, providing assistance or helping resolve their problems. The SOHR recently confirmed an increase in the number of Iranian forces and militia members to around 1,200 Syrian men of different ages in the western Euphrates banks of rural Deir ez-Zor... Residents and volunteers are enticed with salaries that depend on whether one goes to the fronts or remains in the training center in the western Euphrates banks, as well as immunity from being arrested by regime forces...

They also distribute food, clothes, blankets, housing necessities and school materials (with books in Farsi). Iranian forces also expand by curbing the excesses of regime forces and giving residents what they are owed, with people turning to the Iranian forces to reclaim their possessions seized by fighters from Iranian militias, in order to win over residents and get them to join their ranks...

The SOHR had previously monitored Iranian concentrations in the al-Mayadin area, located west of Abu Kamal. This includes an Afghan charity restaurant in which Iranian-supported Afghan militias prepare and distribute food to residents and refugees, as well as the transformation of the secondary (Shari’a) school in al-Mayadin into a recruitment center for Iranian and Shi’i militias. It also includes lectures and talks about Shi’ism. Iranian and Asian Shi’i forces are also concentrated in the Hawi area of al-Mayadin. Iranians have also built a Hosseiniyya and shrine in Nabaa ‘Ain Ali, located between al-Mayadin and Mahkan, where the SOHR monitored the arrival of Iranian passenger buses carrying “Shi’i tourists” from Iran, Syria and Iraq, who chanted sectarian chants in the region. There is also a strong Iranian forces presence in the area between the Sheep Market and the Rahbah Castle (Qalaat Rahbah) in al-Mayadin. There are military forces who prevent the entry or exit of anyone that is not Iranian, whether civilian or fighter, amidst the presence of strong security and the constant flight of drones overhead...

In recent weeks the SOHR also published on Iranian forces doing the call to prayer in eastern rural Deir ez-Zor in accordance with Shi’i practice... Around 50 Iranian and Afghan families arrived to al-Mayadin, located on the west of the Euphrates. They are the families of fighters in the Iranian and Afghan militias.