



Iran Cements its Presence in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: Russian-Iranian competition for influence and resources in Syria has been reported extensively in Arabic-language media (see: “Russia and Iran Compete for Syria’s Phosphates” *OE Watch*, June 2018 and “Is Russia Getting Entangled in Southwest Syria?” *OE Watch*, April 2019). The emerging consensus is that while Russia has won the scramble for Syrian resources, Iran continues to expand its influence in ways that often irritate Russian authorities. The latest such example is a purported concession granting Iran administrative control over Syria’s largest commercial port, located in the city of Lattakia. According to the first accompanying excerpt, this move has angered Moscow due to the port’s proximity to Russian military assets in the Syrian coastal provinces of Lattakia and Tartous, in particular Moscow’s main airbase which is located about 30 kilometers south of the port. Although the agreement is purely for commercial activities, the article’s author claims that once Iranian entities are “in control of the premises, nothing prevents them from transforming it into a military facility.”

According to the author, in late 2018 Iranian leaders began “exerting pressure on Damascus over its slow execution of strategic agreements, which was caused by internal reservations and Russian objections.” The resulting compromise, he claims, is for Damascus to grant Iran profitable concessions of limited political and military value. Strategic value, however, usually lurks beneath the economic surface of these concessions. A case in point, detailed in the two excerpted articles from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, is a contract for Iranian companies to build 200,000 housing units in Damascus, including at least 30,000 in the suburb of Darayya.

Darayya is considered a new focal point for Iranian influence in the capital. A key rebel bastion, it was under siege for much of the Syrian war; by the time the government recaptured it in late 2016, a small fraction of its more than 250,000 residents remained. Much of Darayya is destroyed and numerous obstacles are being placed on returnees. A recent property law aimed at facilitating reconstruction (Decree 66) opens up the possibility for the expropriation (and subsequent doling out) of land in Darayya. As a result, news outlets opposed to the Syrian government have intimated that Iran aims to replicate in Darayya what it helped establish in the Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs of Beirut (al-Dhahiya al-Janoubiya). One of the excerpted passages claims that the building plan includes housing for Iranian officers and a security sector. Areas of Iranian influence in Damascus, including the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood and the Mezzeh Military Airbase, are located nearby, with the latter a stone’s throw away. A shrine that will likely draw Shi’i “religious tourism” to the neighborhood has nearly been completed, giving fighters who are in Syria to “protect the shrines” a good excuse to settle in Darayya. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...Since late 2018, Iran has been exerting pressure on Damascus over its slow execution of strategic agreements...”

Source:

Ibrahim Hamidi. “Russia ‘Angry’ with Iran’s Arrival Next Door on the Mediterranean Coast,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 April 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yxavnok5> (translated via *The Syrian Observer*: <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/49557/irans-presence-on-syrian-coast-angers-russia.html>)

روسيا «غاضبة» من وصول إيران إلى جوارها في مياه المتوسط

Russia has expressed its anger over Damascus’ granting of Iran the right to operate the western Latakia port on the Mediterranean. This marks the first time that Tehran is given a foothold on the Mediterranean near Russia’s bases in Tartous and Lattakia...

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Iran gave the Syrians a line of credit totaling \$6.6 billion since 2011, and that was topped up with an additional \$1 billion in 2017. However, over the past three months, relations between the two countries have become even warmer, especially after President Bashar al-Assad landed in Tehran in February to meet with President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

The two governments agreed to establish a joint chamber of commerce, a joint bank, and a power station in Latakia. Iranian developers were also given the rights to construct a 200,000-apartment housing development near the Syrian capital...

The Latakia port agreement gives the Islamic Republic the right to use a Syrian harbor with 23 warehouses for economic purposes only, but once in control of the premises, nothing prevents them from transforming it into a military facility.



Continued: Iran Cements its Presence in Syria

Source:

إيران تبني ضاحية جنوبية في دمشق تشمل 200 ألف وحدة سكنية
 Ammar Halabi. "Iran Builds 200,000-Housing Unit Southern Suburbs in Damascus," al-Araby al-Jadid. 25 February 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/y4ko23gc>

Iran has obtained a contract from the Syrian regime to build 200,000 housing units in Syria, according to an Iranian official. Observers warned that the new project aims to build a southern suburb in Damascus similar to the suburb of Beirut, as Tehran hopes to build popular loyalty in Syria just as it did in Iraq...

"The Iranians did not get any strategic or important contracts in light of Russia's presence, as Russia controlled most vital reconstruction sectors. Therefore, they turned toward housing units," said [Syrian economic expert Younis] Karim. He pointed to Iran's failure to obtain sovereign contracts because of Russian dominance, which has turned Iran's domestic population against the Syrian regime, given the magnitude of Iranian sacrifices for the sake of the regime and the lack of gratitude for them, which has become evident in Iranian media.

He added that due to Russian strength and Iran's unwillingness to clash with it, Iran has shifted its strategy from one of obtaining sovereign contracts towards obtaining non-sovereign privileges. He pointed out that the regime benefited in terms of securing housing units, which is currently hard for Syrians to obtain given elevated prices.

According to Karim, this project clearly shows that the Assad regime has taken a decision to completely exclude Iran from the sovereign files, because today there are two options, either falling, which is currently ruled out, or a coup against the Iranians and their expulsion and a change in their presence from political and military to economic, only granting them simple projects without any sovereign dimension, such as the establishment of residential units.

Source:

داريا الممنوعة على أهلها... ساحة لإيران ومليشياتها
 Adnan Ahmed. "Darayya, Forbidden to its People... The Domain of Iran and its Militias," al-Araby al-Jadid, 3 April 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/yyjdtajm>

In the face of these restrictions on the people and conditions placed on their return, as well as the scarcity of available services, the city of Darayya has experienced active movement by Iran and its followers in the city, with an abundance of capabilities and equipment. A source following this issue said that Darayya falls within the sphere of Iranian influence. Iranian officials signed a contract with the regime to build 30,000 housing units, including housing for Iranian officers in the security square of Darayya, given its proximity to key sites of Iranian influence. Darayya is less than 5 kilometers south of the Iranian embassy; it is also a few hundred meters from the Mezzeh Military Airport. Tehran attributes its interest in the city to the presence of the shrine of Sayyida Sakina. Darayya is also close to sensitive command centers of the 4th Division led by Maher al-Assad, the brother of Syrian regime president, and Air Force Intelligence, both of which have strong ties with the Iranians. According to the "Sawt al-Asima" website, the 4th Division is deployed at the city entrances and in its interior; residents are forbidden from leaving the populated areas, which represent no more than 8% of the city. Entrance to Darayya's other neighborhoods are forbidden even to owners of homes located there. The authorities were also close finishing the restoration of the Sayyida Sakina shrine, which is being sponsored by Iran.