

"Shiism" in Deir Ezzor

(The stages of Shi'ism from the beginning to the present time)



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Some of the most important events related to Shiism in Deir Ezzor

2017

A Husseiniyah is built in Ein Ali, near Al-Quriyah city

2017

Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir returns to Syria, declares his allegiance to Iran, and contributes to spreading Shiism

2012

Al-Baqir Brigade militia is established

1992

The Shiite Adhan is raised for the first time in Hatlah

1983

Al-Murtada Association is closed

1981

Yassin Al-Maayouf, Omar Hammadi's cousin, becomes president of the Al-Murtada Association branch in Deir Ezzor

1981

Al-Murtada Association which was established by Jamil Al-Assad opens a headquarter in Deir Ezzor

1979

Sergeant Omar Hammadi is the first one to convert to Shiism in Deir Ezzor

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- **Executive Summary**
- **Introduction**
- **The concept of Iran's "Export of Revolution/Shiism"**
- **The Movement of Shiism in Syria (the beginning)**
- **The map of new Shiism in Syria and Deir Ezzor in particular**
- **The map of Iranian influence in Deir Ezzor and its role in spreading Shiism**
- **How do the tribes see Shiism and its role in the tribal depth?**
- **How do the various actors in the region see the Shiism movement?**
- **Daesh's relationship with Shiism**
- **The most important challenges facing the expansion of Shiism in Deir Ezzor**
- **Conclusion / Recommendations and suggestions**

Executive Summary

This study is on "Shiism" which has become a dangerous movement since the beginning of the Iranian military intervention in Syria, as it will have its repercussions. Through this movement, Iran has been trying to change the religious structure in Deir Ezzor, and this change is as dangerous as the demographic change, as it is an attempt to make an extreme change. The study talks about the beginnings of Shiism in Syria, and the new Shiism, especially since the beginning of the 1980s, the year that saw the first seeds of Shiism in Deir Ezzor society, that knows nothing about it before.

This study also explains how the tribes dealt with this movement, the relationship of the various actors in Deir Ezzor with Shiism, and the role of Shiism in Iran policies. At the end the study provide a set of suggestions and recommendations to deal with this sensitive file, that may create a tribal community crisis in case its sensitivity was not taken seriously.

The study, in some of its parts, relied on field sources, as Deir Ezzor 24 network is active in all areas of Deir Ezzor, and has great access there, in terms of tracking and verifying the field information, in addition to interviewing people in Deir Ezzor and asking them questions related to the study.

Introduction

Today, the issue of Shiism in the Arab world, is on the table of discussion, especially after Iran's "blatant" intervention in a number of Arab countries, taking advantage of the wave of changes ravaging the Arab countries in what is known as the "Arab Spring", and the most prominent example of that intervention is its direct military intervention in Syria, in addition to its participation in a proxy war in Yemen, and its endless political and military interventions in Iraq.

Iran found it difficult to intervene in the Arab depth as it has always clashed with the barrier of sect. It wants to influence the Arab countries which most of them are from the Sunni sect, so it was necessary to create a suitable atmosphere for this intervention, so from the beginning it tried to play the national card through adopting the Palestinian cause in media, and then played the sectarian card, through the "minority" Shiite sect in the Arab countries, and went beyond that to promote Shiism in new countries such as Tunisia, Algeria and other African countries.

In our study, we will talk about Shiism in Syria, particularly Deir Ezzor, which is traditionally different from the other Syrian regions where Iran has been trying to spread Shiism, so this province, which is located on the Euphrates river, and has been known for its tribal depth, is now witnessing a movement towards Shiism. Several factors helped Iran in this movement, namely it has military forces and has been attracting sunni youth groups, through taking advantage of their poor economic conditions, and offering them benefits, in addition to playing the card of "Al al-Bayt", and exploiting the fact that Al-Bakara tribe, which is a

Sunni tribe, comes from the lineage of Al al-Bayt, so all of these things helped it to spread Shiism there.

The study addresses the Shiism movement in a general theoretical framework, on how Iran adopted the theory of (exporting the revolution /Shiism) that followed the victory of the Iranian revolution and the euphoria of victory that contributed to its suppression of the interior, and the export of that euphoria to the surrounding regions, but because it was so difficult to export the revolution, it exported Shiism as a soft tool instead to create ideological allies in the Arab region.

The study also talks about the beginnings of Shiism in Syria, the new Shiism particularly in Deir Ezzor, the new operations of Shiism and the extent of its spread, how the tribes and the different actors see Shiism movement, the relationship of the different powers with Iran the state, the most prominent challenges facing Shiism, and at the end there are recommendations and suggestions to deal with this file.

The study, in some of its parts, relied on field sources, as Deir Ezzor 24 network is active in all areas of Deir Ezzor, and has great access there, in terms of tracking and verifying the field information, in addition to interviewing people in Deir Ezzor and asking them questions related to the study.

The concept of Iran's "Export of Revolution/Shiism"

The rise of the Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's accession to power, after a popular revolution, played a role in reviving Iran's imperial dreams, but this time the dream was with new tools and concept, which is "exporting the revolution" that was adopted by Ayatollah Khomeini, after the euphoria of victory in Iran and the success in making Iran a theocratic Shiite Jaafari state. Then Khomeini started to think of exporting "the revolution," but exporting this Shiite revolution often clashed with the Sunni Arab community. The Islamic Arab community is exactly what Khomeini wanted to influence and to achieve this goal, he had to play the "Shiite grievance" in Arab countries, where there are Shiite minorities in the Levant and the Arabian Gulf, and that was also one of the indirect reasons for the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. Iran also supported Shiite militias in Lebanon during the civil war, and contributed to the founding of The Lebanese Hezbollah, and supporting the Shiites in the Arab countries through the channel of "Exporting the Revolution" by supporting the Shiite minority and reviving the concepts of the Shiite grievance and the Revolution of Hussein, as well as the channel of "Exporting Shiism", which was the most important step later in gaining a popular support in the Arab Sunni world, as the sectarian change can lead to a change in the political loyalties, so Iran wanted to gain more support through spreading Shiism.¹

Thus was the movement between the two "exports", where (the project of "exporting revolution" failed, so Iran moved to the alternative project,

¹ In this regard, Ahmed Yahya Jaafar wrote: "This creed specifically was the main point in fueling the conflict and moving it outside Iran, where the swarms of Persia began to cross the Gulf into the neighboring lands, and many young people and opinion leaders were influenced by them in different countries, but the most dangerous axis in that was the sectarian aspect that the Iranian revolution revived and covered with a pure Shiite cloak. The Arab Shiites saw the spirit of their awaited Mahdi and promised savior in the Imam of Persia, so from between the "Khomeini's ambition" and the public desire for change, the spirit of the Iranian revolution emerged with a new generation that decided to make change). Iran and the Doctrine of Exporting Revolution: The Goods in the Arab Markets, Ahmed Yahya Jaafar, Jeel Website (Arab Youth), Last visit 2/3/2020, the full article can be read on the [link](#)

entitled "Exporting Shiism", which has had successes that were not expected by the decision makers in the Arab region).²

"Exporting Shiism" is a reality experienced in the Arab region, and other regions where Shia had no presence before, so we find those who wonder about the reality of the Shiite project, "are we in front of a Shiite Project, or let's say "exporting Shiism" to the Arab, African and European countries, or what? And Is the phenomenon not that big as the media usually shows?"³

The events of the "Arab Spring", which brought the winds of change to some countries, and were accompanied with bloody conflicts in others, played a role in reviving Iran's concepts of "exporting the revolution/Shiism," where Iran has participated in the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, using the military force, along with spreading "Shiism", which has not succeeded so far, if compared to the support and money provided for it, but this is the reality, and the "movement of Shiism" may be a growing soft force, that may achieve leaps if provided with the right conditions.

On the Syrian map, Shiism has witnessed a revival at the level of preaching, where many areas such as Deir Ezzor, that had no Shiite presence before, are now witnessing a growing - albeit slowly - progress in the "Shiite movement", in parallel with a change in the military control, where the spread of Shiism is related to the Iranian/Shiite military control, but Shiism will certainly continue if these forces receded, but with major changes as it will not be easy in the end to continue with the Shiite movement in the absence of the military cover of "the militias/Assad's army," and the

² The Arab dilemma in interacting with the strategies of "exporting Shiism", Montaser Hamada, from a file on "Shiism in the Arab World", Thawat magazine, edition 60, 2020. P. 15. A direct link to the electronic version.

³ Saida Sharif, Thawat magazine, from a file on "Shiism in The Arab World", Thawat magazine, edition 60, 2020. P 5. A direct link to the electronic version.

political cover of "Assad's government," which is very close to the Shiite Iranian perspective.

The Movement of Shiism in Syria (the beginning)

It is no secret that when Baath party rose to power in Syria, it banned the discussion about religious and ethnic diversity in public. The 1980s and the massacres committed by the Assad army at that time against the Muslim Brotherhood is one of the sensitive historical periods that were followed by a state of fear from participating in religious discussions, so no one could talk about Salafism, al-Sunna wal Jama'a or other sects such as Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, or even the Shiites.

Religious Khutbahs were limited to specific unproblematic topics in religion such as (pillars of Islam- the sweetness of faith - righteousness and piety) and, at best, on everyday matters.

So no one was allowed to talk about the religious minorities such as the Shiites, not to insult or even praise them, except for some elements who were allowed by the regime.

Historically, the roots of the Shiism in Syria date back to (the 1st century AH, but it began to spread in the 4th century AH, when the Shiite State of Hamdani took control of Aleppo, and it continued during the Fatimid period, but it receded with the beginning of the Ayyubid and Ottoman states because of their fight against it, and in the 20th century the twelver Shiites became a very small minority in Syria).⁴

Although the beginning of the 20th century, specifically in 1925, witnessed a movement to spread Shiism by a religious scholar called Abdul Rahman

⁴ Encyclopaedia Of Iran and Political Shiism / Ibrahim Al-Meqdadi, supervised by Dr. Salem Hamid, T1 Dubai: Al-Mizma Center for Studies and Research: 2018. Quotes can be viewed online at this [link](#), and the printed version at p. 101

al-Khayyer, but his movement had no impact until Hafez al-Assad became a president after turning on his Baathist comrades who rose to power in the beginning of the 1960s, especially after (the visit of Musa al-Sadr in 1974, to the elders of the Alawite sect in the coastal region of the country. Al-Sadr visit was preceded by another visit of Ayatollah Shirazi, who issued the famous fatwa that the people of that region belong to the twelver Shiites).⁵

Although the Alawites do not consider themselves to be twelver Shiites, but they belong to one of the Shiite internal sects, and the Shahrastani, the writer of "al-Melal wa al-Nihal,"⁶ mentioned them as al-Nusiriyah, a name then was used by the Muslim scholars, but they are known only as "Alawites" and are classified by Shahrastani among the radical Shiites, however, the Alawites refuse to be classified among the Twelver Shiites.

It seems that the fatwa of Shirazi and the orientation of Alawites, who have taken control of the Syrian state, played the most prominent role in the spread of Shiism, but (the numbers didn't rise until Jamil al-Assad, the religious brother of Hafez al-Assad, began practicing his intensive activities in the 1980s, where Jamil al-Assad encouraged the conversion to Shiism in the same region, especially for the members of the Alawite sect).⁷

Al-Murtada Association,⁸ which was founded by Jamil al-Assad, played an intensive role in spreading Shiism among the Alawite community to show that the Alawites belong to the larger Shiite community, so they are not a

⁵ Same source p. 104.

⁶ Abu al-Fatih al-Shahristani (548 AH) is one of the scholars of al-Ashaaera sect, who had some famous works in the Islamic heritage, the most famous of which is the book of "al-Milal wa al-Nihal", which talks about the different Islamic sects.

⁷ Encyclopaedia of Iran and Political Shiism, former source, p. 104.

⁸ Al-Murtada Association is a charitable association founded by Jamil al-Assad, who called himself Imam Al-Murtada. It started at 1981 and was dissolved at the end of 1983 after Jamil al-Assad stood with his brother Rifaat al-Assad, trying to claim power after the disease of Hafez al-Assad who ordered the dissolution of the association after his recovery.

minority any more. The association was also active in several other areas of Syria.

Following the Iraqi regime's repression of Shiites in the early 1990s, dozens of Shiite figures went to Damascus, where Assad gave them the green light to practice a semi-official activity in promoting Shiism, and Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah opened an office in the Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood in Damascus to spread Shiism, and more space was given on media for spreading Shiism, and a program for the Iraqi Shiite preacher "Abdul Hamid al-Muhajir" was broadcasted.

Shiism entered a new stage after the events of July in southern Lebanon, which showed Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of The Lebanese Hezbollah, as a hero and breaker of Israel in the Syrian media, which encouraged some people to convert to the Shiite faith.

However, Shiism had other dimensions following Iran's military intervention in the Syrian armed conflict, after the Government of Iran helped the Syrian regime in killing the peaceful protesters and suppressing their protests.

(In 2012, Shiism started to develop in Syria at the institutional level, through a series of steps, like the launch of the Khomeini scout movements in Homs and Damascus, and the establishment of a religious authority for the sect represented by the Supreme Jaafari Islamic Council in Syria, which was founded in 2012, in a step inspired by The Supreme Shiite Islamic Council in Lebanon. These institutions emerged at the same time as Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraq's Shiites began to intervene in the Syrian conflict).

The timing of the Jaafari Islamic Council's announcement seems to be closely related to Iran's military role in Syria, where (the establishment of

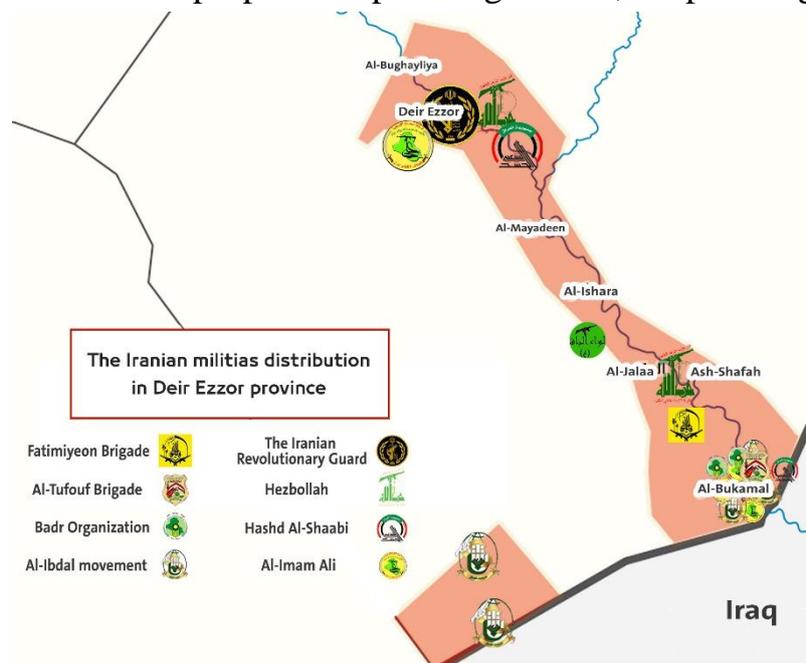
the Supreme Jaafari Islamic Council in Syria suggests that Iran, which played a key role in the establishment of the Council..... where the Council emerged from the Syrian conflict).⁹

The map of new Shiism in Syria and Deir Ezzor in particular

The adoption of the Twelver Shiite sect in Iran, after Khomeini rose to power, turned all the other Shiite sects into minorities, and the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the reputation it exported to the "Islamic" Arab countries against the backdrop of showing open hostility to Israel, even if on the level of statements, played a role in making this Shiite sect a leader one, in addition, Iran provided material support only to this sect for the purpose of spreading Shiism, so spreading Shiism was limited to the Twelver sect, with a parallel efforts to convert the Alawites into this sect.

Iran began to spread Shiism in different areas of Syria, starting from the places where it could find a foothold, and found that

"Jamil al-Assad" could play a role among the members of his Alawite sect, in addition to making way for the Shiite imams to be active in Damascus



⁹ Shi'a Resurrection, Muhannad Haj Ali, Carnegie Middle East Center, Last Visit, 8/3/2020, the article can be found on the [link](#)

neighborhoods where there are Shiite people like in the neighborhoods of al-Amin and Sayyida Zainab, so it was able to spread Shiism, albeit on a small scale, in most parts of the Syrian provinces (where the Shiites live in most parts of the Syrian provinces, with the highest percentage in Tartus, 44% of Syria's Shiite population).¹⁰

Iran has spread Shiism through several methods, the first of which is the revival of Shiite shrines, which are the focal points for Shiism, as they represent the sanctity and legitimacy of Shiism, in addition to their spiritual value to the new Shiite believers, as they serve as pilgrimage areas, such as the Shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus. Most of the shrines do not have historical roots, but the Shiite imams invent stories about historical incidents of establishing shrines. They have also strengthened their presence in Syria through the establishment of scientific Hawazas, Husseiniyas and Shiite secondary and higher education institutions.

Some might be surprised when knowing that Shiism is spreading in Deir Ezzor, as the province is made up of tribes belonging to the Sunni sect, and their areas have no historical presence of the Shiites, but as a matter of fact, Shiism started to spread in Deir Ezzor, and there are a lot of attempts to spread it among the tribes.

The Shiites started spreading Shiism in Damascus at first by targeting the families who have Shiite origins, and really succeeded in spreading Shiism among them, and in other places such as Deir Ezzor, they took advantage from the fact that members of Al-Bakara tribes say that their lineage go back to Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (114 Hijri), and indeed Shiism started to spread from there, and there are information

¹⁰ Encyclopaedia of Iran and the Political Shiism, a source mentioned before, p. 103

confirming that the first appearance of Shiism in Deir Ezzor was in the early 1980s,

where al-Bakara tribe, one of the largest tribes in Deir Ezzor, particularly the branches of Al-Bubadran, al-Mashahoor, and al-Halamiya, were influenced by Shiism, and here we should mention the sergeant Omar al-Hammadi, who was influenced by the Alawite officers while serving in the army after receiving promises of attractive financial assistance. He is from Hatlah town, and when he returned to his home town in Deir Ezzor, he convinced one of his cousins and his brother-in-law Yassin al-Mayouf of the Shiite faith, where Yassin al-Mayouf joined "Al-Murtada Association", which began its activities in the early 1980s, and became the head of the association's branch in the town.

Al-Mayouf made many visits to the Iranian officials in the Syrian coast, where their activities emerged, and in the Hawza in al-Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus. At that time, other men started to appear, like Hussein al-Raja, his son, and others, who were receiving money for spreading Shiism.

In turn, They were paying monthly payments of about 5,000 to 7,000 Syrian pounds to those who convert to Shiism, which were twice the salary of a government employee, in addition to holding banquets and group weddings at their expense and providing dowries to those who want to marry. Another turning point in spreading Shiism in Deir Ezzor was when the Shiite Adhan was raised for the first time in the mosque of Hatlah town in 1992 following the return of Yassin al-Mayouf from Iran, then Husseiniyas were established in Al-Zaghir, Al-Kasrah and Asawa villages, which also belong to al-Bakara tribe.

Shiism also spread in Al-Shumeitiyah village, which is inhabited by Al-Busaraya tribe, whose members claim that their lineage belong to Al al-Bayt, although those who have knowledge in lineages say that they belong to Al-Akidat tribe or al-Aslam, which is a branch of Shammar. One of the most prominent Shiites there is Ahmed Touma, who holds a PHD from Karachi University in Pakistan.

Hussein al-Hadher, a Shiite from Al-Akidat tribe, tried to start activities in Khsham, Jedid Akidat, and Al-Bussairah but he did not succeed, where some men burned a tent he had set up in Jedid al-Bakara, to receive the Shiite preacher Abdul Hamid al-Muhajir.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Deir Ezzor witnessed a new method of spreading Shiism, through the distribution of brochures and leaflets, especially after the Shiites started to practice their activities more in public following the events of the Syrian revolution, and many promotional Shiite campaigns have been carried out in several areas controlled by the Iranian militias and Assad army. (al-Mayadeen city witnessed a number of new Shiites promoting Shiism in front of mosques and in public places).¹¹

It seems that the converting to Shiism in the early stages, from the beginning of the 1980s till the Syrian revolution, remained at very low rates, according to a study published in 2009 by researcher Khaled Sindawi, in which he said that (the rates of converting to Shiism in al-Quneitra, Deir Ezzor, and Raqqa provinces, are very low, contrary to what was rumored years ago about the expansion of Shiism in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa in particular!), and that (the proportion of all those

¹¹ The public support for Shiism is the guarantee for the Iranian influence in Syria after the military withdrawal, Al-Arab newspaper, last visit 6/3/2020, the full article can be found at the [link](#).

who converted from the Sunna to the Shiite faith across Syria does not exceed 2%, which is a very small percentage, especially if we know that about 7 percent of the Sunni Muslims who have converted to Shiism in Damascus belong to families of Shiite origins, but became Sunna over time, such as the families of Attar, Kassab Hasan, Lahham, Bakhtyar, and Ikhtyar, while in Aleppo, 88 percent of the Sunnis who converted to Shiism also belonged to families of Shiite origins).¹²

Despite the lack of accurate statistics, an estimated information indicates that the numbers of Shiite people in Deir Ezzor province is (1710 men and young men from different ages. Shiism can be traced in several cities of the western Euphrates in Deir Ezzor countryside, such as Al-Mayadeen city and its countryside, al-Bukamal and its countryside, and the villages of Hatlah, Marrat and Al-Masrab).¹³ but the real number is certainly greater because this number doesn't include the militia members and those who are close to the Iranian militias, who are either Shiites, or may become Shiites, as the militias were not forcing them to convert to the Shiite faith, but they were offering advantages for those who convert.

¹² ¹² According to a statistical study published in 2009 by researcher Khaled Sindawi, which indicates that the percentage of all those who converted from the Sunna to the Shiite faith across Syria does not exceed 2%, which is a very small percentage, especially if we know that about 7 percent of the Sunni Muslims who have converted to Shiism in Damascus belong to families of Shiite origins, but became Sunna over time, such as the families of Attar, Kassab Hasan, Lahham, Bakhtyar, and Ikhtyar, while in Aleppo, 88 percent of the Sunnis who converted to Shiism also belonged to families of Shiite origins. "Shiism in Syria".. a file shows how the religious conversion started and its impact on the Alawites and Sunnis, Zaman al-Wasl, last visit 6/3/2020, the file can be found on the [link](#).

¹³ From the military support to culture and economy.. Iran controls the key areas of life in Syria entirely, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, last visit 5/3/2020, it can be found on the [link](#).

The map of Iranian influence in Deir Ezzor and its role in spreading Shiism

Deir Ezzor is of great importance to Iran for many reasons, the most important of which is that it makes a passage to its areas of influence, where it has strategic files. This passage starts from Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, to Beirut, "the Shiite Crescent." It has also intensified its presence in Deir Ezzor, where many of its militias are active there.

These militias include: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah, Hashd Al-Shaabi, al-Imam Ali, Fatimiyeon Brigade, Al-Tufouf Brigade, Badr Organization, Al-Ibdal movement, and Sayyid al-Shuhadaa Brigade.¹⁴

The Iranian militias are deployed on the left bank of the Euphrates River as the following: The Iranian Revolutionary Guard and al-Quds force are deployed in Al-Bukamal. Zainabiyon and Fatimiyeon Brigades, and the Revolutionary Guard in Al-Ishara and Al-Quraiya, while the National Defense and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are deployed in Al-Mayadeen.¹⁵

Although forces change their positions continuously, but the positions of these militias can be traced as the following:

First: Fatimiyeon militias: they are based in al-Mayadeen and Al-Ishara cities, and the banks of the Euphrates in Al-Mayadeen. Second: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard: it is based in Deir Ezzor and Muhassan cities, Mahkan village in al-Mayadeen city, Deir Ezzor airport, and the road between al-Bukamal

¹⁴ The project to map the locations of the Shiite militias, Philip Smith, The Washington Institute, last visit 6/3/2020, the article can be read on this [link](#).

¹⁵ Iran and its militias in Deir Ezzor.... their areas of deployment and military points, videographic, Deir Ezzor 24 Network, you can see the videographic on this [link](#).

city and "Al-Kam" oil plant east of Deir Ezzor. Third: The 47th Brigade is based in Deir Ezzor in al-Bukamal city. Al-Quds force is deployed between Al-Mayadeen and al-Badiyah, most of them Iranians, Afghans, Iraqis, with Syrian minorities. Al-Nujabaa movement and The Lebanese Hezbollah have headquarters in Deir Ezzor, and are deployed at checkpoints between Deir Ezzor and Al-Mayadeen. al-Baqir Brigade is also deployed in Al-Mayadeen.¹⁶

But Iran is not seeking a military victory just in order to stabilize the pillars of Assad regime in Syria, but it is also seeking to establish a foothold in Syria in the long run, and it has already adopted a set of methods to stabilize this presence in Syria and Deir Ezzor, which Iran has been depending on to ensure the implementation of the Shiite crescent plan, as it now has increasing religious loyalties there, especially after the events of the Syrian revolution.

The Iranian militias have tried to attract dozens of the tribes members, and although they did not require them to convert to Shiism, but they indirectly moved towards this direction, as the Shiite elements have more incentives and advantages than other elements in the militias, and their leaders trust them more than the others. There are also information indicating that paid religious Shiite courses have been held for the elements of the militias, in addition to intensive campaigns of distributing brochures that encourage the conversion into Shiism.¹⁷

The opening of the Husseinayahs and the Sharia schools, and the reviving or even the establishment of some shrines, as in Ain Ali, also played a role in spreading Shiism, in addition to raising the Shiite Adhan, all of which make the indirect tools of the Iranian cultural dominance, that would ensure strategic, economic and military dominance.

¹⁶ The military presence of Iran and its militias in Deir Ezzor (the leaders, militias, and sites), Dhiyaa Kaddour, Turan Center, the study can be found on the [link](#).

¹⁷ Iran begins publishing brochures bearing the ideas of the Shiite faith in Deir Ezzor, Madar daily website, that can be found on the [link](#)

How do the tribes see Shiism and its role in the tribal depth?

When we talk about the tribes in Deir Ezzor, we mean the society of Deir Ezzor as a whole, as the community structure there is a tribal one, whose members still advocate it, and although the nature of their relationship to the tribes has changed, but it still, in the general context at least, influential. Therefore, the tribes are known for their alliances, religion, sect and loyalties, which make their identity, and to be sunni tribes is something they have used to, and until the beginning of the 1980s, the other religious sects had no existence among them, not the Shiite or other sects, but the current of Shiism emerged in Syria with the support of Hafez al-Assad, who went on with it with great caution as the Majority of the Syrian people are sunni. He prayed in the sunni mosques, trying to show himself as a "Sunni" president in what is known in the internal sects as "taqiyya," and put the issue of spreading Shiism and the sectarian identity in the hand of "Jamil al-Assad," and then he used other channels, such as the Iraqi Shiite opposition, which fled the Iraqi regime.

So, it was not until the beginning of the 1980s that the Shiites started to appear, through some members of al-Bakara tribe, which had a background that could be used as an entry point for spreading Shiism, namely, linking the tribe historically to Al al-Bayt, and then the Shiite grievance in an attempt to link the tribe with the current victory of the "Shiite grievance revolution," represented by the Iranian revolution, which succeeded in creating a balance between the sect and the state.

Al-Bakara tribe and Shiism

It is known that al-Bakara is one of the largest tribes in Syria and the second largest in Deir Ezzor. Its members are Sunni even if their lineage goes back to Imam Muhammad al-Baqir according to the story promoted after Shiism started to spread among its members in the beginning of 1980s, also their way of practicing religion, even before the spread of Shiism, has nothing to do with

Shiism, so Al-Bakara is a Sunni tribe, and all the attempts to spread Shiism among it's members couldn't succeed in changing the fact that it is a Sunni tribe with some cases of those who converted to Shiism.

Nawaf al-Bashir, the sheikh of al-Bakara, played a role in promoting Shiism, especially after his submission to the Iranians and Assad at the beginning of 2017, where before that he was known as a political opponent since the beginning of the 1990s. He (participated in the "Damascus Spring" through "Sahnaya Forum", that was headed by the Syrian opponent Riad Seif... and a Syrian opposition conference, known as the "Declaration of Deir Ezzor" was held in Deir Ezzor province in late 2004 with the presence of more than 286 figures... in the guest hall of Nawaf al-Bashir near Deir Ezzor... Al-Bashir was chosen as a member of the Damascus Declaration General Secretariat and then a member of its presidential body).¹⁸

When Al-Bashir defected from the Syrian political opposition, after coordinating with Iran and Hezbollah, claiming that he was against the use of weapons in the revolution, Iran took advantage of this move to use him in spreading Shiism, as he is an important tribal figure.

Al-Bashir has publicly declared his allegiance to Iran since his defection, and has put himself at the service of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard leaders, who seems to have ordered him to recruit the young men and encourage them to embrace the Shiite faith. At this period, al-Bashir was jumping between Hezbollah headquarters in Dahieh in Lebanon and Tehran, to receive the directions and orders, then he returned to Syria to coordinate with the Imam Al-Baqir Brigade to form a militia similar to the (Shiite) Hashd Al-Shaabi in Iraq. Al-Bashir depended on two factors to attract the young people to Shiism, the first one was

¹⁸ Nawaf al-Bashir... The journey from the Syrian revolution to Tehran, Mohammad Hassan, Daraj site, last visit 10 March 2020, the article can be read at the [link](#).

poverty that surrounds most of the young tribes members due to war, so he tried to lure them with the Iranian money, and the second factor is the lineage of Al-Bakara tribe which goes back to Al al-Bayt, and the need to defend the holy places".¹⁹

Forming al-Baqir and Al-Hussein Brigades from the members of al-Bakara tribe played a role in spreading Shiism or let's say played a role in protecting the Shiites, and encouraging new people to join the Shiite faith, where a person from the region said that after Shiism started to spread in the region (the Sunni members of al-Bubadran tribe became in a difficult position and at risk of harassment... and the Shiites, who were hiding their belief, showed it publicly, and Shiism began to invade Al-Mayadeen, Al-Bukamal and Deir Ezzor cities along with the penetration of the Revolutionary Guard militias in Hatlah and Deir Ezzor countryside).²⁰

How do the various actors in the region see the Shiism movement?

We can't talk about how the various actors in Syria have dealt with Shiism without looking at how these actors see the Iranian role, where the various actors look at Shiism as an Iranian tool, so their dealings should be with the Iranian military forces, and they believe that reducing the military role of Iran would limit all other activities of Iran.

The Syrian regime look at Iran as a strategic ally and supporter, therefore turns a blind eye to all its economic and cultural activities, and even supports issues such

¹⁹ The project of Shiism in Deir Ezzor from the roots to the peak, a file written by Deir Ezzor 24 Network, the file can be read on the [link](#).

²⁰ A note taken by Deir Ezzor 24 from a person living in the area.

as the spreading of Shiism, but the Russian forces are a little concerned about Iran's growing influence in Syria including Deir Ezzor.

Russia tried to intensify its presence after the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal at the end of 2019, then a "hidden" conflict started to escalate between Russia and Iran, where Russia played an increasing role to be the sponsor of agreements between the SDF, the regime and Turkey, while Iran resorted to attract Syrians through the "soft power" and (to achieve its goals, Iran relied on promoting "Shiism" and paying money to those who belong to its forces).²¹

Deir Ezzor also witnessed (a joint military patrol for the Russian and the regime forces for the first time in Al-Mayadeen city, which is under the control of the Iranian forces and its militias, in the eastern Deir Ezzor countryside).²²

The announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria at the end of 2019, and then reversing the decision, had a role in curbing the Iranian presence in Syria and reducing its dominance in Iraq, which is one of the American strategic objectives, so it kept small forces in Syria, and strengthened its forces in Iraq, where media reports indicated that two new bases have been built in Al-Rummana near al-Qaim area and one in al-Ruttbah, west of Anbar city.

Deir Ezzor appears to be one of the most important points that the United States is trying to limit the Iranian presence in to break its project that aims at facilitating arms transfer from Tehran to its militias in Beirut, in addition, Israel, and the United States hit the Iranian forces in Syria several times, and killed its most important commander Qassem Soleimani, the leader of al-Quds Force in Iraq.

²¹ Details of the "hidden conflict" between Russia and Iran in Syria, al-Hurra channel website, last visit 14/3/2020, the article can be found at the [link](#).

²² The Russian military police deployed near al-Mayadeen area in northeastern Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, last visit 14 March 2020, the story can be read on the [link](#).

Also there were tension between the Syrian democratic forces on the one hand and Iran and the Syrian regime on the other, especially after demonstrations took place in September 2019 against the presence of Iran and the regime in the region, where dozens of people accompanied by the Syrian democratic forces staged a sit-in in a tent in the area between the areas controlled by the regime and the Iranians on the one hand and the areas controlled by the Syrian democratic forces on the other, (which was part of a campaign stirred by the SDF to push people to stage demonstrations against the regime forces in order for the SDF and the international coalition to control the entire region of eastern Euphrates in Deir Ezzor countryside).²³

Saudi Arabia is one of the actors in Deir Ezzor, as it looks at the Iranian movement in the Sunni regions as a threat to it, and it is now more involved than ever in the regional issues.

A politician from Al-Mayadeen said: (Iran has gone a long way in its sectarian project in the west of the Euphrates, where it has spread Shiism there after it chose Al-Mayadeen city - and I am from the city - as a center for its project... taking advantage of the fact that more than 90% of the population are afraid to return to it, which will lead to a demographic change as the people can't return to their homes), and (there will be no solution in Syria away from the Arabian role led by Saudi Arabia, which stood with the aspirations of the Syrian people as part of its firm historical policy in defending Arab causes).²⁴

At the beginning of the revolution, Saudi Arabia was the main supporter of the Free Army, which controlled more than 80 percent of Deir Ezzor, but after

²³ The Iranian militias in Deir Ezzor incite people against the international coalition and the SDF east of the Euphrates, The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, last visit 14 March 2020, the full report can be read on the [link](#).

²⁴ The Iranian sectarian project seeks to change the demographics and spread Shiism, a discussion with the head of the independent Arab movement Dr. Mohammed Al-Shaker, Al-Riyadh newspaper, last visit 5/3/2020, the full discussion can be read on the [link](#).

Mohammed bin Salman ascended the throne, he left the Syrian file, and then Daesh emerged and was able to control all the areas formerly controlled by the Free Army.

Daesh's relationship with Shiism

Daesh classifies the Shiites as a misguided cult, who should be fought. It killed, displaced and abused them in Iraq, after it called them al-Rafida (rejectionists), a religious description of the twelver Shiites, that has been used by Daesh to refer to the Shiite Iranians. The organization also destroyed many of their shrines. The U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry declared in March 2016 that the violence perpetrated by the terrorist group of Daesh against the Shiite Muslims and other religious minorities in Syria and Iraq amounted to genocide. He said: "Daesh is responsible for perpetrating genocide against groups of Yazidis, Christians and Shiites, who were under its control."²⁵

As the Shiites are a religious minority in Syria, there has been no chance for Daesh to launch a widespread attack against them, so they just fought the Iranian militias and Assad's forces.

Although the group was hostile to the Shiites, but it played a negative role in spreading Shiism in Deir Ezzor through a range of actions, where during the period of its control between 2014 and 2019, it disarmed the people, making the

areas out of Assad's forces control free of weapons with strict laws against the possession of weapons of any kind, which helped the Iranian militias and Assad

²⁵ The U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's statement about Daesh and the genocide, the official website of the U.S. Embassy and consulates in Iraq, the full statement can be read on the [link](#).

army in controlling the areas after Daesh withdrew from them, knowing that the people of the region had no weapons to confront them, so with the help of the Iranian militias and Assad's Army's weapons, Shiism started to spread.

Daesh has also revived an Islamic rule that says "Al al-Bayt has the right to one fifth of the spoils," which means that those who can prove that their lineage goes back to Al al-Bayt have the right to one fifth of all the money seized by the group during the fighting, which prompted a number of tribes to hasten to submit proofs of their lineage to Daesh officials. Testimonies from the region confirmed that some tribes had submitted fake documents of their family trees, and the organization did not try to verify these documents, and this was a step forward towards Shiism, as it was the same card played by Iran and the shiite preachers, who were targeting the tribes who claim that they belong to Al al-Bayt, as happened with Al-Bakara tribe.

The fact that the organization turned a blind eye to the former Shiites was one of the reasons that they emerged again at the first opportunity, where it forced the former Shiites to attend Sharia courses, and was less strict with them than with matters such as smoking, insulting God or joining one of the armed factions.²⁶

²⁶ The project of Shiism in Deir Ezzor from roots to the peak, a file written by Deir Ezzor 24 Network. In this file, the network mentioned how Daesh policies contributed to the spread of Shiism, the file can be read on the [link](#).

The most important challenges facing the expansion of Shiism in Deir Ezzor

The social structure of the tribal community in Deir Ezzor makes it very difficult for any kind of religious conversion to take place among its members due to the tribal customs, that refuse to consider the conversion to Shiism as a personal freedom, and if someone converted to another sect, he might lose his place in the tribal community, and might be ostracized, therefore, we find that Shiism has spread among the members of the same clan, such as some branches of al-Bakara tribe, where many of them found no problem in converting to Shiism, but it is different for the other tribes, where we find that there have not been much cases of conversion among them, and if such thing happened, it was on a narrow scale, also some of them practiced "al-Takiyya to hide their conversion.

The tribes members in Deir Ezzor are Sunni Muslims, and although the majority of them are moderate, but if one asked them about their religious sect, they say it publicly. The expatriates of Deir Ezzor in the Gulf countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, also played a role in confronting the spread of Shiism since they were influenced by Salafism, and therefore had an anti-Shiite thought, while the main reason for the failure of Shiism in the tribal depth is that Shiism is something new, that has no existence before.

Some believe that Assad regime has fought Salafism members just as he has done to the Muslim brotherhood group, and was calling them Wahhabists, while in return it support Sufism and the Sufi branches, especially the Khaznawi (Naqshbandi) branch, where it entrusted them to administrate the islamic affairs and mosques, and to appoint the imams, because they don't reject the presence of Shiites or Shiism. The shiite preachers' method in luring people with money has

sometimes had negative consequences,²⁷ as it has not gained as strong believers as it should to defend the "Shiite beliefs", so the case was different from the situation in Iraq and Lebanon, where the Shiites are ready to fight for their beliefs.

The Syrian regime's survival with its head without a change in the structure of the political system and without the security structure to be dismantled, all this will promote Shiism, especially with the steps taken by Iran against the Syrian revolution, where in response to what Iran has done for the Syrian regime, the regime gave it economic gains, and left it free to practice its cultural and "sectarian" influence, so it has succeeded in opening Shiite Husseiniyas and Shiite twelver schools, in addition to spreading the Persian language, all of which fall within the "soft power" exerted by Iran after its military intervention.

Conclusion / Recommendations and Suggestions

In conclusion, through the topics discussed, the reader will realize that Shiism is a very important file, especially for the people of Deir Ezzor, who suffered from Daesh for several years, and by the time it ended, they found themselves against near-total hegemony over large sectors of their areas, in which Iran started to spread Shiism.

Although the number of those who converted to the Shiite faith is not large, but if Iran was left free to practice its activities, it would spread Shiism at a faster pace, taking advantage of the difficult economic situation and the widespread unemployment due to the lack of job opportunities, where it has been providing material and moral incentives such as allowing the Shiites to visit Iran for free. The people of Deir Ezzor find that this will lead to dangerous effects in the near

²⁷ From the answers provided by people from the region, whom Deir Ezzor 24 contacted, met and discussed some of the topics with.

and distant future, as Iran aims to change the structure of society, and cause a rift in the tribal community.

At the end of the study, we present a set of recommendations and suggestions to all actors in the Syrian issue in general, and Deir Ezzor in particular:

1. The community structure in Deir Ezzor is not a sectarian one, and there have never been a sectarian problem in it, but "spreading Shiism" will play a role in creating problems, as Iran has pushed members of some tribes into a sect they have never been in before, especially when Iran withdraws in case it did.
2. Unlike the "Shiites," "Shiism" is an alien concept, so to force it on the social structure of Deir Ezzor, this would lead to undesirable repercussions.
3. "Shiism" is a pure Iranian pretext for interference in the region, so standing up to Shiism with the possible peaceful means will cut off the future interferences of Iran.
4. The population of Deir Ezzor are moderate "Sunni" Muslims, and don't look to their "Sunni" sect as an opposing identity to the "Shiite" identity, because they live in an environment where Shiites have no existence.
5. The situation in Deir Ezzor is different from Iraq in the sectarian aspect although the tribal situations in them are the same.
6. Not to take "Shiism" as a pretext to stand up to Iran or its "shiites" in military ways, but rather to use peaceful ways, which is something possible after the withdrawal of Iran and its "sectarian" militias from the region.
7. Create job opportunities for young people in Deir Ezzor, which would prevent Iran from luring them with money to its "sectarian" militias.

8. Focusing on a national non-sectarian education, whose ideas are far from extremism and sectarianism.
9. Intensifying reconstruction with Arabian contribution, to prevent Iran's suspicious role in Syria in general and Deir Ezzor in particular.
10. Activating the Arab role to counter Iran's plans of interference in the region.
11. Activating the cultural role of the elite members of Deir Ezzor society, and creating a space for them to present ideas drawn from the culture of the region, away from the sectarian culture, which Iran is trying to spread.
12. "Confronting Shiism" should not be used as an excuse to deny the other, or create a space of hatred with the Shiites, because fighting Shiism does not mean disrespecting the Shiites wherever they are.

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