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Analytical Mapping

December 2021





An independent institution specialized in information management and preparing studies along with researches related to political, social, economic and legal situation in Middle East generally and in Syria especially in order to build bridges towards authorities and decision makers in all sectors of the state moreover, development sectors to help them in making balanced decisions concerning the region issues through providing data along with delicate, professional and realistic reports

Introduction:

As a matter of fact, Iran's influence outside its borders is linked to its own policy known as "exporting the Islamic Revolution", from which Iran takes a project and doctrine that has deep roots in the stage of the stability of the Iranian government, which is known as the Islamic Revolution in Iran (Khomeini's revolution) in 1979 Accordingly, Iran can impose its ideology and exert influences as a transnational project that crosses its borders and extends towards unstable regimes or countries in the region as a fertile ground for ideological, geopolitical and economic expansion, and this is obviously applied today in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, as Iran is working to extend more in the relatively stable countries of the region such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Jordan.

Specifically, in focusing on Iran's influence in Syria, since the transfer of power to Bashar al-Assad was made in 2000, Iran has found an opportunity to transform the decades-old political partnership with the Syrian regime into an area of ideological and cultural extension, especially after the July, 2006 war in which the regime was a real partner cooperates with the Iranian-affiliated Lebanese Hezbollah, politically and morally.

Thereafter, with the regime's need to seek assistance from Iran through security and military advisors after 2011, the opportunity was greater for Iran to have directly a new type of security, military and then economic presence in Syria, and to strengthen the societal presence on the Syrian map with its various types of institutions either religious, cultural, educational or relief ones.

Indeed, all of these types of Iranian tools were intertwined to serve the general project of exporting the revolution, which is mainly sponsored by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Iran, of course, uses all military and non-

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military tactics jointly to enable its project in Syria, in a way that can support its own political project, with its great care in establishing local arms linked to the Iranian project, whether military groups or civilian institutions. In fact, Iran does all that as it realizes the necessity of avoiding the major regional and international pressures that directly target the non-military presence, especially with the relative state of stability that Syria may witness later on.

First. The Study Methodology:

It is extremely difficult to accurately and fully consider all aspects and areas of Iranian non-military project activities in Syria, because it is widespread and so diverse. It was, therefore, quite important to work on listing the most major non-military centers of influence for the Iranian project, by studying and classifying the points of this project and the spread of its main centers, from which a broader activity that includes the entire regime-controlled areas in Syria and part of the Syrian Democratic Forces-held areas

Definitely, in analyzing the Iranian influence points, this study takes into account the general trends of the Iranian project in Syria and the objectives of this project, in addition to the overlaps and intersections between these goals and the overall developments on the various local, regional and international arenas.

When classifying these points, it was relied on the study and analysis of the influence factors created by the centers that were studied, in addition to their time period of activity and their support by the various parties and forces operating under the umbrella of the Iranian project.

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The number of points that were looked at reached more than one hundred ones, as they have been analyzed and the most prominent types of their activities and impact determined and ultimately have been classified into four main categories:

- 1. Centers of economic influence.
- 2. Centers of educational and cultural influence.
- 3. Centers of religious influence.
- 4. Centers of relief influence.

Consequently, the centers of economic influence are considered key points in terms of exerting leverage over the economic and financial structure in the areas of existence or in neighboring regions, while the centers of educational and cultural influence are concerned with spreading and framing the cultural and educational concepts of the Iranian project in Syria by influencing various segments of society, including students of schools and educational complexes targeted by the Iranian project. As for the centers of religious influence, they are mainly hawzas and hussainiyas that are used to spread the Shiite sect in the surrounding areas through various means, while charitable and relief societies are included in the classification of relief centers of influence, which are used by Iranian militias and groups to attract more affiliates or their families.

Actually, determining the activity of these centers and points, as most of these points play more than one role and practice more than one activity, was - in addition to evaluating the importance of the various points - one of the biggest challenges during the preparation of this study. We also uncovered during the study that some military points have civilian activities either by providing support for the families of the dead who were affiliated with the militias, or to use these military points as a springboard for spreading the Shiite doctrine in the nearby areas.

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Therefore, it was necessary to analyze the impact of these points and their orientation within the specific classifications, in order to determine the nature and tasks of these points, given that these military points are not included in these 111 centers monitored by the map. Besides, the main classification of these points is that they are security and military points, carrying out tasks and activities within civil society or in the economic sector, especially informally.

The mechanism of collecting and matching information was also concerned with the most important and largest influential centers, which are considered the starting point for extensive activities that are not defined spatially on the map.

Second: Types of Irania non-military influence in Syria

IRGC-run efforts have been made by Iran in support of its political project with wide-scale activities in the civilian sectors parallel to the extensive security and military activities in Syria. The civilian activities linked to military ones are characterized by decentralization unlike the military activities, and the decentralization of non-military activities is due to two main reasons:

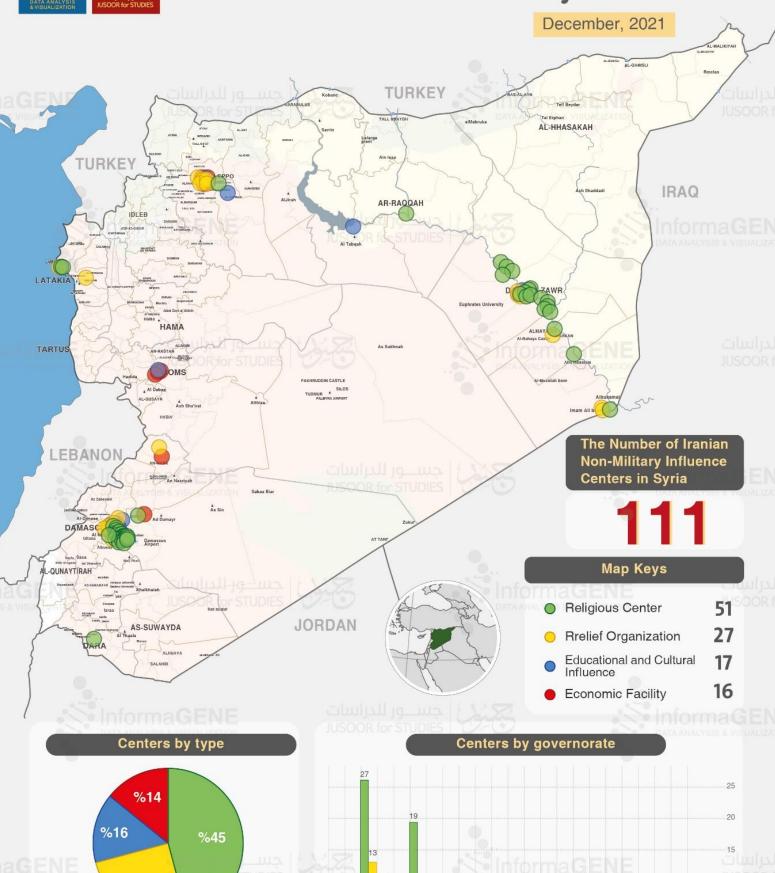
1. The organizational, administrative and financial dependency to these activities and the centers of influence, as there are institutions and bodies affiliated - albeit unofficially - to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and directly funded by it, and there are others affiliated and funded by the official Iranian government institutions or contracted with private companies in Iran linked to various institutions and religious leaders, but in the end, they work as a team on the general Iranian project in Syria.

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Key Positions of Iranian Non-Military Influence Centers across Syria



Damascus & Damascus Deir EzZor Countryside

28

58

Educational and Cultural Influence

Economic Facility 16

0

%25

Religious Center 51

Rrelief Organization 27

12

6

Ragga

Daraa

2. The Iranian leadership encourages multiple institutions to keep working as each of them is independent administratively and financially, and it works to decentralize work in various non-security and military sectors, and perhaps the main reason for this is the continuous threats of regional and international sanctions on institutions linked to the Iranian project.

Despite the complexities and overlaps in the sectors of Iranian non-military engagement in Syria and although they are varied, but in fact it can be divided into main sectors: economic, educational and cultural, religious-ideological and relief sector, with emphases on the great overlap between the work and goals of these sectors as they have overlapping activities, and all of them are eventually connected to Iran's security and military involvement in Syria. Accordingly, the economic sector funds and supports the IRGC and the rest of the educational projects, Shiism and relief associations, and the religious sector directs and benefits from educational and cultural institutions and the activities implemented by NGOs and relief associations in spreading Shiism in society.

1. Economic Centers of Influence:

Iranian commercial companies continued to operate in Syria despite the great weakness that the Syrian economy suffered after 2011. The major economic facilities and centers were widely diversified in various industrial and commercial investments, and they are almost entirely Iranian/ Iranian-Syrian or Iranian-Lebanese companies, such as Iranian Automobile Manufacturing Company "SIAMCO, the National Iranian Company specialized in the oil field, Khatt Al-Khashab Trading Company, which is a Syrian-Lebanese-Iranian company.

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Moreover, the Iranian companies began to turn more to the construction sector, especially after 2018, when a group of companies fully funded by the IRGC was formed, which began to receive and implement civil and military infrastructure projects. However, these companies played greater roles than the economic one, as they contribute to security and military work, the most important of which is the "Jihad" Al-Binaa Foundation, which is an Iranian-funded Lebanese Company, and the "Khatam al-Anbiya" Foundation, which is directly affiliated with the IRGC and is highly active in Damascus and Aleppo, which is similar to the "Birnan" company, in addition to local Syrian companies funded by the IRGC, such as the "United Castle" for construction, and "Al-Qana'a" construction company.

Overall, looking closer at the map of the Major Centers of Non-Military Influence can make it clear that the major economic centers are limited in comparison to other types of influence such as religious, cultural and educational, and this, actually, largely due to a set of reasons, namely:

- 1. Syria, especially after 2011, was not an attractive arena for economic investments after the regional and international political closure, instability, and the burdensome international sanctions on the economic sector.
- 2. The Russian constant pressure, especially after 2020, and a race to monopolize resources, wealth, and submitting commercial and investment contracts in Syria.
- 3. Iranian mainly concerns the security, military and religious aspects, and always turns the economic sector to serve the others. Therefore, the IRGC focuses more on the easiest and fastest financing dynamics, basically the

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black market of drugs and antiquities, thenafter money remittance and exchange field.

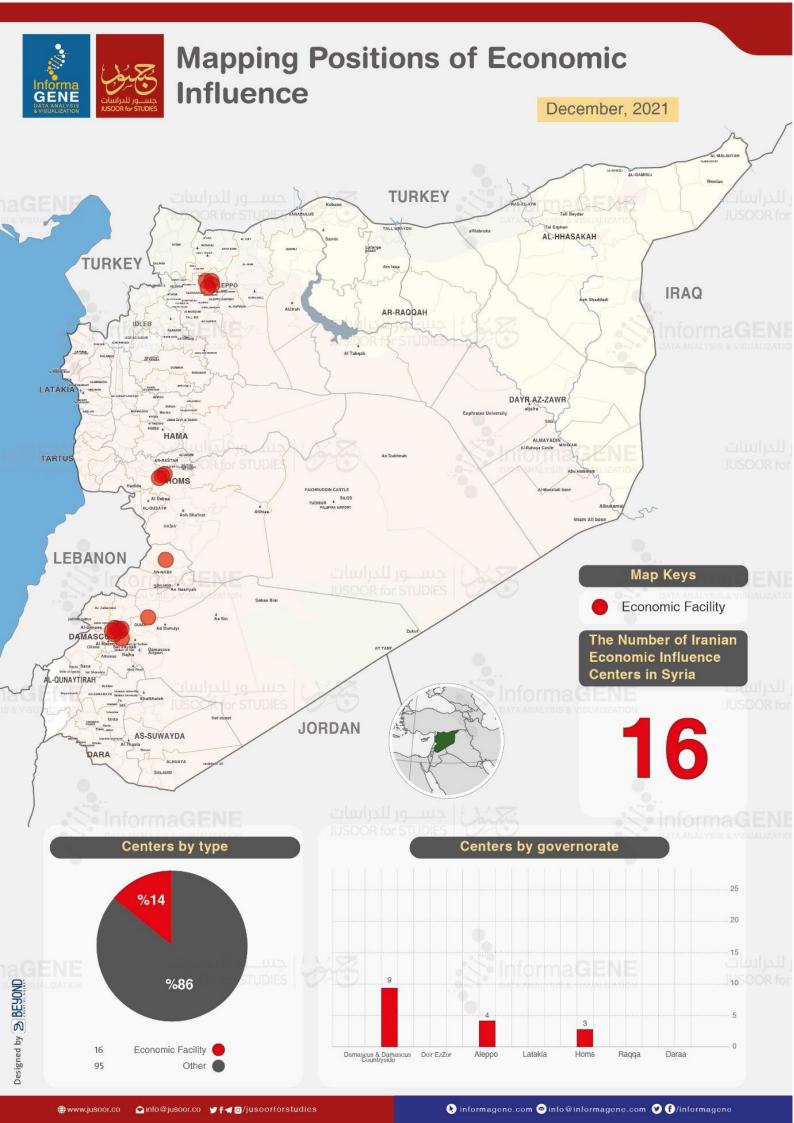
Up to the beginning of 2020, many Iranian officials were engaged in business activities as it would constitute a financial resource that would help offset the cost that Iran had determined to provide support the Syrian regime during the years of the revolution

However, after political stability signals loomed beside hints about reconstruction projects, Iranian statements returned to talk about the importance of having a role for Iran and its economic centers in Syria during the reconstruction process, in isolation from military and political statements, which shows the shift in the Iranian approach to creating new economic influence opportunities and strengthening their presence after the growing soft threat coming from the Russia had been felt, which was evident in the volume of Russian contracts and economic activities compared to the Iranian ones, especially in the fields of oil and underground wealth.

4. Educational and Cultural Centers of influence:

Afterall, it is quite difficult to make distinction between the educational and cultural influence on one hand and the religious influence and the broad Shiism project that Iran started on the other hand during the period of Hafez al-Assad's rule. Subsequently Iran took the opportunity to expand its cultural and educational influence significantly after Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000. It is noted from the statements issued by the Educational Centers, those are linked to the Iranian project, focus on sharia education or are related to religious and cultural intellectual activities.

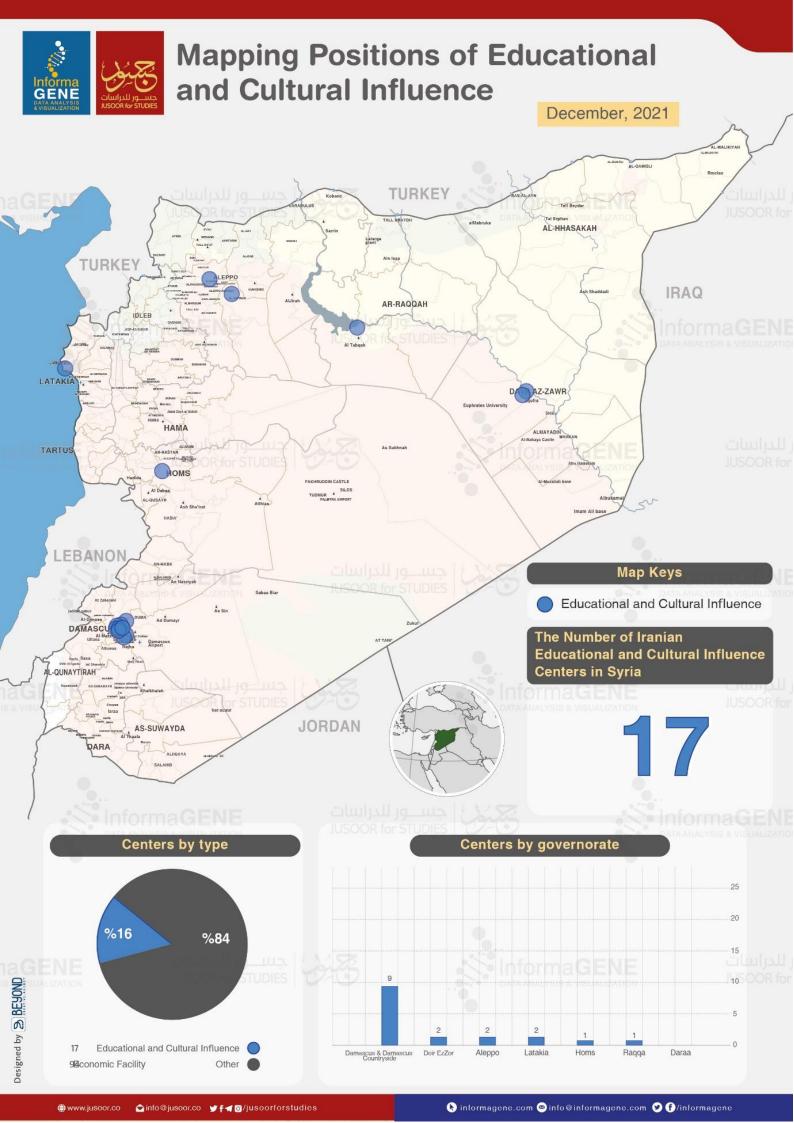
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For instance, the education file was linked to seminaries and shrines, such as the Zainabiya Seminary for Higher Religious Education, which was established by al-Shirazi in Damascus in 1976, and the Mahdi Academic Seminary for Islamic Studies, which was founded by the Indian Shiite Ali Baqir Qasour in 2002. Nonetheless, more Iranian attention is directed for education and cultural activities in Syria with the establishment of the Iranian Cultural Chancellery in Damascus in 2009, which had a major role in the great expansion of the educational and cultural influence centers across the Syrian governorates, such as the College of Religious and Linguistic Studies in Deir Ezzor,, which is fully funded by the Seminary of Qom. Not only that, but also there are the Iranian College of Da`wah and Ijtihad in Raqqa, the Great Prophet Complex in Lattakia, which is associated to a group of schools and libraries and training centers, such as Al-Huda Educational Foundation and Imam Jaafar Al-Sadiq School in Aleppo, and Al-Sibtin Educational Center in Homs, which is directly financed by the Office of the Representative of the Supreme Leader in Damascus are similar.

Generally speaking, it is noted in general that the Iranian project is not directed to support the science and technology sectors in its various fields. Besides, despite some Iranian universities have followed the open-door policy in granting scholarships for students coming from Syria, most of the beneficiaries are either linked to the great Iranian project, whether from a specific religious sect or they are absolutely loyal to the Syrian regime who consider Iran as an important and powerful ally.

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5. Religious Centers of Influence:

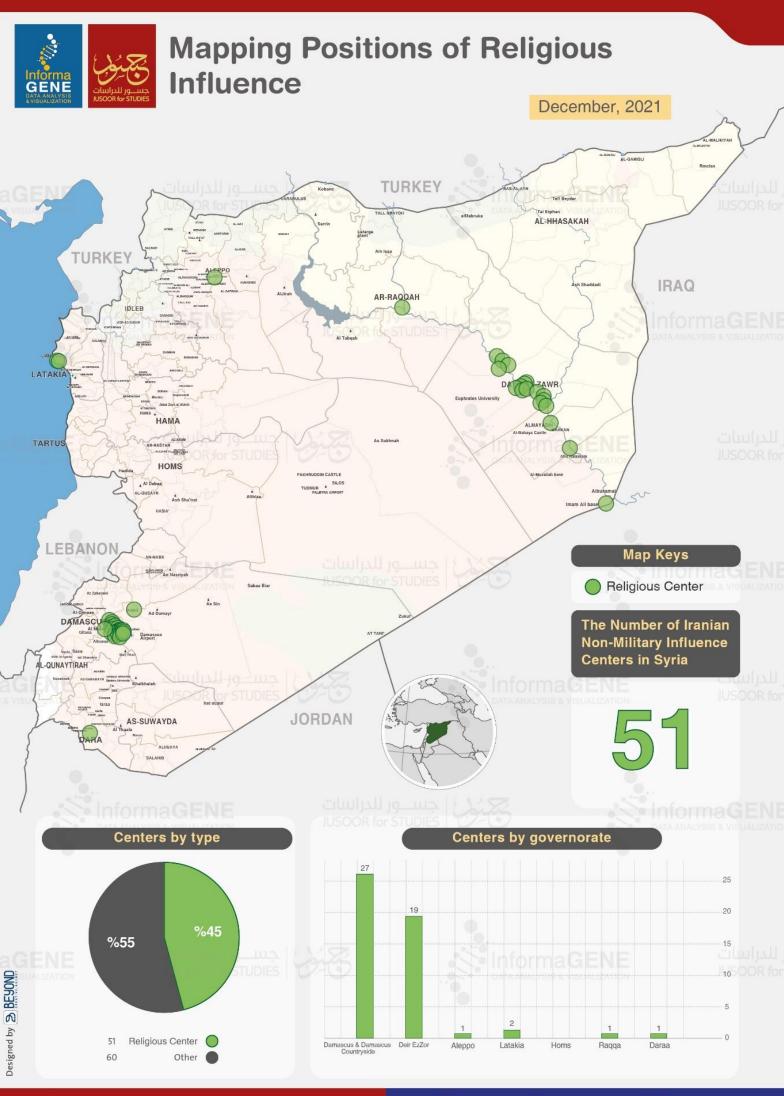
The religious influence by spreading the Twelver Shiite sect constituted the initial Iranian influence in Syria. The ideological expansion from Iran to Syria began in an active way after the Khomeini revolution took control of Iran and after it tightened its crip on power in 1979. In fact, this was preceded by the establishment of the shrine of Sayyida Zainab bint Ali bin Abi Talib in 1976 as well as the establishment of the affiliated seminaries, which are considered the most important Shiite shrines in Syria, which is surrounded with the key centers of Iranian influence of all kinds, such as the Imam Khomeini seminary, which was founded in 1981. Then, religious institutions aimed at Shiism have been increasingly launched in partnership with some officials from the regime, such as Jamil al-Assad, brother of Hafez al-Assad, who founded the Al-Murtaza Association in the city of "Qardaha" in Lattakia governorate in 1981, and although it was considered a relief association, its largest activity was supporting Shiism in Syria's eastern and northeastern governorates, given that the greater effort for spreading Shiism appeared clearly after the July 2006 war, and then with the widespread involvement of the IRGC in Syria in order to provide support for the regime after 2011.

This religious influence is the main bridge that carries the rest of the other types of influence, so we can find it strongly present in the security and military positions are used to exert influence by Iran, i.e., in the educational field, and in relief activities. Furthermore, many educational and relief activities have been designed to serve the religious influence and Shiism spreading. We note that the size of the spread of religious centers is almost as large as the spread of economic, educational, cultural and relief ones all together, in addition to the extensive religious

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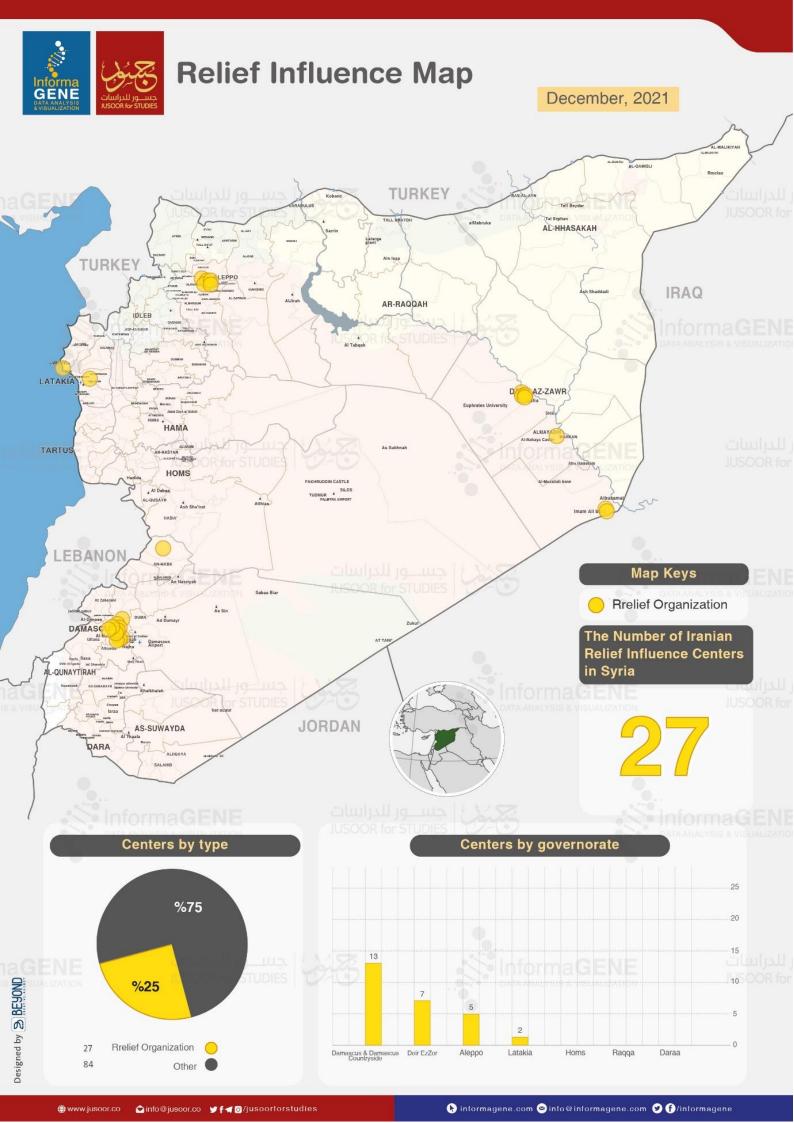
engagement within the rest of the institutions and sectors, and even to a large extent within the security and military leverage.

Mainly, the Shiite ideological expansion targets the Sunni popular bases in various regions of Syria, as it is they are conservative people and in turn closer to the Shiite sect, and because it is easier for normal people to change their sect withing the same religion, which is not applied in thinking about changing the religion totally. Totally, people in such countryside regions, rural and tribal environments are not affected by the Sunni religious awareness and education, so it is a fertile ground for exerting such an influence.



6. Relief centers of influence:

Obviously, most of the centers of religious influence have relief operations, but with the increase in Iranian influence in Syria, there was an Iranian need to establish associations, organizations, clinics and hospitals that provide community services in various forms, such as the Khadija Al-Kubra Center for Support and Rehabilitation, Al-Zahraa Medical Institution in Aleppo, and Al-Sirat Complex in the Al-Sayda Zainab area in the countryside of Damascus, the Imam Al-Kadhim Organization for Development and the Imam Al-Mukhtar Foundation in Deir Ezzor, as well as Iran has supported a very large number of local civil society relief organizations, such as the Al-Furat Organization for Peace and Social Peace in Damascus, headed by Hussein Al-Mathab and its General Secretary, Asiya Bint Diab Al-Mashi.



Third: Mapping the Iranian non-military influence in Syria

Initially, it is necessary to consider the geopolitical map of the Iranian activities and influence it is exerts inside Syria, as it is noticeable that the centers of non-military influence spread according to the interests of the Iranian project with the priorities of spread and control in Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, and the entire eastern region, and these three areas are the target of security and military deployment as they are the real target of any Iranian societal activities and expansion, while we find that the spread of non-military influence was very weak in the governorates of southern Syria and the coast, namely in As-Suwaida, Daraa, Quneitra, Tartous and Latakia, and of course we are not talking about al-Hasakah and Raqqa in northeastern Syria, because most of them are outside the regime's control, as both the "ISIS" organization the Syrian Democratic Forces "SDF" did not allow the Iranian influence -of all kinds- to exist in these areas.

Returning to the causes for the weakness of Iranian non-military influence, it is possible to consider the reasons as follows:

- In **As-Suwaida**: this governate is considered as the traditional home of the country's half-million Druze community and they maintain social cohesion because they belong to a religious minority, and they are very wary of Iranian influence of all kinds, not to mention the local influence that is loyal to the Iranian project.
- In **Daraa** and Quneitra: In 2011, demonstrations and protests against the regime erupted from Daraa to spread across the Syrian governates, and with this, large parts of the two governorates had been out of the regime's control until 2018, but eventually these two governates have signed on reconciliation settlements

sponsored by Russia without the occurrence of displacements and demographic changes. This, in fact, made the Iranian societal influence unacceptable in the region, in contrast to the very large security and military influence that Iran had deliberately wielded in the governorates of southern Syria. Despite the Russian and Israeli pressures, Iranian involvement in the regime's military formations and its security branches took place.

• In the **Syrian coastal area**: Despite the coastal governorates (Tartous and Latakia) house a mixture of Sunni Alawite population, in general there was – and still is – a warning about the spread of Shiism over there, and general resentment among the Alawite communities about Iranian non–military activities in the cities and towns of the coastal areas. This goes in line with Iran seeking to expand its engagement and presence there, the reason for resentment is that the Alawite societies in general are not conservative, and they find that the Russian presence is much more comfortable than the conservative Iranian one in major issues such as women's veiling, singing and dancing concerts, nightclubs and the great spread of alcohol.

Hence, the areas of greatest geographical spread of Iranian non-military influence appear in Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, and then the coastal area and the central region.

1. In Damascus (the Capital) and Damascus Countryside (Rif Dimashq):

Not only because Damascus is the capital and consequently it mainly has a geopolitical importance, but also because of its heritage, historical and economic dimensions, as well as its relative mediation in the land extension from Tehran to Baghdad and Kufa and through it the land corridor can reach to Beirut, but the most important thing is that it is the country's capital and it is the center for decision-making and the center of institutions and powers in Syria, and one of the most important cities in the region.

We can estimate that the Iranian presence in Damascus and its countryside is equal to or greater than its positions and centers in the whole Syrian governorates. In Damascus and its countryside, various types of non-military influence overlapping with the security and military presence in a very large way, and this large and wide spread is due to the extension of many centers of religious influence. For example, the Muhsiniya Association in addition to its educational projects were previously established in the "Al-Amin" neighborhood in Damascus, which is known to be one of the neighborhoods inhabited by Damascene Shiite families, and like the Muhammadiyah "House of the Star" Association, which was established by Iran in the "Sayeda Zainab" area in the governorate of Damascus Countryside in 1995, as well as the Mustafa Hawza for Quranic Sciences, which was also founded in 1995 by the Secretary-General of the "Islamic Accord" movement, Jamal Al-Wakeel, who is from Iraq.





Map of influence in Damascus and Damascus Countryside

December, 2021

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AN-NABK

An Nasriyah

Az Zabadani

jadidat yabus

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Al-Dimass

Ad Dumayr

DAMASCU

Al Mazzeh Qitana

Mari al Sultan

Damascus Airport

Alkusua

Najha

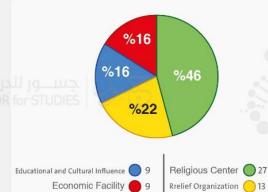
Harfa Sasa

Mari Rhail

Centers by type



Designed by BEYOND



The Number of Iranian Non-Military Influence Centers in Damascus and Damascus Countryside

Map Keys

- Religious Center
- 13 **Rrelief Organization**
- Educational and Cultural 9 Influence
- 9 **Economic Facility**

2. In Aleppo

Aleppo is the second-largest city in Syria after the capital Damascus, and it is likely the most important governorate in the industrial field, while historically and geopolitically it is the arena for linking not only Syria but also the Arab world with Turkey. Basically, Iranian concentration on Aleppo has become greater after the regime seized control over the governaate at the end of 2016 as Iran has been working hard to spread Shiisim in the governaate and in turn it might have greater influence in such a commercially vital area with a great economic history.

In general, Aleppo was the node over which the Iranian-backed regime struggled against the Turkish-backed opposition, and that made it easier for the IRGC and the Lebanese Hezbollah to expand and extend influence in Aleppo, starting from the towns of "Nubbul" and "Al-Zahra" located west of Aleppo, which are among the Syrian Shiite towns, as they were icons in the battles between the regime and the opposition in northern Syria.

The major centers of Iranian non-military influence are spread in the city of Aleppo, from which various social activities are launched, which expand in the surrounding cities and countryside areas of Aleppo. Also, according to interest and size, the types of Iran's engagement and centers of relief, economic, educational and religious influence are established over there, such as the "Imam Jaafar al-Sadiq" school in the old neighborhoods of Aleppo, and the Council of the Oppressed, affiliated with the Office of the Supreme Leader, that is an economic relief facility, and the Aleppo Heritage Organization, which is an Iranian relief organization headquartered in the "Al-Mashhad" neighborhood in the city of Aleppo.

It is also noted that most of the centers of non-military influence in Aleppo governorate were established after 2019, and before that there was greater interest

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Map of Influence in Aleppo

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%16

Educational and Cultural Influence

Economic Facility 6 4

%44

Religious Center 0 1

Rrelief Organization 0 5

2

Religious Center

Influence

Rrelief Organization

Economic Facility

Educational and Cultural

Designed by BEYOND

in the security and military influence that began after the regime completely regained control of the city.

3. In the Eastern Region:

In fact, Deir Ezzor, governorate is of great interest to Iran and its project outside its borders. The governorate is a geographical extension between the centers of Shiite-spread areas in Iraq and the Syrian lands, and the Iranian presence in it is very important for various reasons related to the oil wealth and also largely to the political and military weight of the Iranian presence in the vicinity of the American bases deployed in a number of areas in eastern Syria, which directly gives Iran the ability to play various roles on the regional arena, starting with posing a direct threat to the American forces in eastern Syria.

Besides, this region ensures a role for Iran in the oil regions whose fate is still unclear due to various political and economic reasons, and although the vast clan environment in the governorate is of the Sunnis, the Iranian project is still trying with all kinds of funding and regional temptations to woo the tribal sheikhs there. Moreover, after the regime seized control of the center of the governorate at the end of 2017, Iran strengthened its security and military centers, as well as non-military centers of influence in the governorate, especially in "Al-Bukamal", "Al-Mayadin" and the city of "Deir Ezzor"

Iran relies basically on the IRGC and on Shiite groups linked to Iraq in addition to the local forces that are fully financed by Iran, headed by the groups led by Nawaf al-Bashir, who is al-Bakkara clan's sheikh in Syria, who announced his conversion to the Shiite sect after he left the opposition groups and returned to the regime early in 2017. Accordingly, the Iranian expansion within the clans in the eastern region

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played a major role in Iran's attempts to penetrate the areas controlled by the SDF, although these attempts are still weak in effect and with limited results.

Ultimately, the religious influence and Shiism projects are of great importance in Deir Ezzor, and are linked to the educational and cultural aspects there, such as the large-scale activities have been conducting by the Iranian Cultural Center, which was established by the IRGC in the city of Deir Ezzor in 2018, and the mosques, seminaries and Husseiniyas that Iran established in "Sabkhan", "Baqrus" and "Al-Toub, Mohassan, Hatla, Al-Kasra, Al-Salihiya, Al-Suway'iya, Al-Sa'wa, Zghaira, Al-Shamita, Khasham, and Al-Ashara, which are centers for the Shiism spreading and recruiting guys from the villages and towns of the governorate.

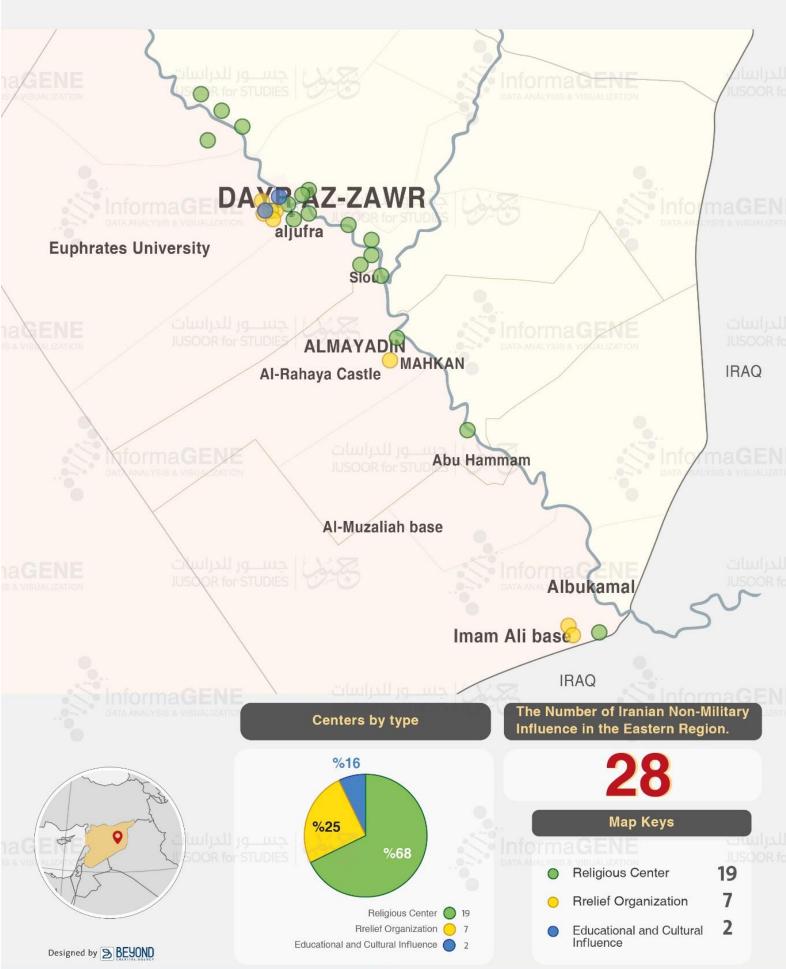
Then, to a lesser extent, there are centers of relief influence in the governate, such as the "Al-Atra" Foundation to support the families of the martyrs, which is located in the "Al-Jura" neighborhood of Deir Ezzor, and the Jaafar Al-Tayyar Youth Authority in Al-Bukamal.





Map of Influence in the **Eastern Region.**

December, 2021





Conclusion

The maps of Iranian non-military influence in Syria draw an important aspect of the Iranian project in the region, which is based mainly on the political extension of all security, military and civil tools, and through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's dynamics it uses to plant local proxies, establish, support and finance all kinds of influence within societies.

The religious, educational, cultural, relief, and economic centers of influence play major roles in cooperation with the most important points of security and military influence, and all of them carry out tasks and goals that redraw the Syrian map as one of the major export centers of the Khomeinist revolution in the Middle East, with what this requires of demographic change, security and military battles, and media and relief programs and development supports this trend according to the Twelver Shiite sect, which forms the basis of the political project of the Iranian regime, both internally and externally.

As part of the plan to transform Syria into one of the countries in the region affiliated with the Iranian project, the arms and tools of this influence extend in the main centers from Damascus to Aleppo to Deir Ezzor. It is connected and extends across Syria from Tehran to the Mediterranean.





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