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Iran's Ebbing Influence in Syria

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Beirut — Iranian influence has been in steady decline in Syria since Russian war jets entered Syrian airspace last September. If the Russians get their way, with the backing of Ankara and Washington, it would mean hopes dashed for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both wanted a clean-cut victory and neither got it and seem to have been left out of Syria's future.

When the Iranians, via Hezbollah, entered the Syrian battlefield four years ago, many in the Syria opposition cried foul play. They accused Tehran of paying money to convert Sunnis into Shias and of "occupying Syria". Stories went viral on social media networks saying that Iranian businessmen were buying entire neighbourhoods in Old Damascus and Hezbollah was arming militias to guard Shia shrines behind the Umayyad Mosque.

A closer look, however, shows that in 2012-15, Iran did almost nothing in terms of public diplomacy to polish its image before ordinary Syrians. This was a Shia theocracy, after all, aspiring to rule a country whose majority (no less than 75%) were Sunnis. Surely it had to endear itself to them in order to rule.

On the contrary, Iran seemed to have abandoned entire Syrian cities and towns, which fell to the Syrian armed Islamic opposition, and did not lift a finger to protect them. During this period, the Islamic State (ISIS) occupied more than half of oil-rich Deir ez-Zor on the Euphrates river and neighbouring Al-Bukamal, in addition to the ancient city of Palmyra in the Syrian desert and Raqqa, the self-proclaimed capital of the terror group.

Half of Aleppo was overrun by the armed opposition and so was Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour in north-western Syria, which fell to al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda branch in Syria. In sectarian terms, these were “Sunni cities”.

Iran was seemingly not interested in protecting them, given that a bulk of its military advisers and Hezbollah proxies were locked down with the battles ranging around Damascus. Contrary to expectations, Iran did not complain when Russia entered the Syria war last September, seemingly satisfied with what it has already secured so far on the Syrian battlefield. This includes:

- The Shia shrines of Damascus, namely Sayyida Zeinab and Sayyida Ruqayya. The first, in the southern suburb of Damascus, belongs to the daughter of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammad, while the second contains the remains of the infant daughter of Imam Ali's son, Hasan. Both are currently beyond danger, manned and administered by a collection of Iranian and Hezbollah officials and military personnel.
- The mountain range that forms the majority of the Syrian-Lebanese border, along with the entire Kalamoon district (western Damascus), and all border towns that are used by Islamic rebels to infiltrate the Lebanese town of Arsal, approximately 150km long, are fully under the control of Hezbollah.
- The Damascus-Beirut Highway, which is essential for the commotion and communication lines of Hezbollah. It is firmly under the control of the Syrian Army and Hezbollah.

This is where Iranian ambitions stop in Syria, for one simple reason: Lack of substantial Syrian Shias through whom it can infiltrate society and rule. The mullahs of Iran have an ambitious project in Lebanon and Iraq because both countries have a Shia majority that is willing to carry arms, pay money and fight to support the cause of the Iranian Islamic revolution, which includes exporting an Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini-style theocracy and empowers Shias worldwide. More importantly, they are willing to die for Iran, something that is completely lacking among Syrian Shias.

Without such a power base to lean on, Iran needs credible alternatives, and neither the country's Sunnis nor the Alawites would be willing to play along. Contrary to what is portrayed in the Western media, Alawites and Shias, currently allied in Syria, do not get along and are very different when it comes to

history, ideology and ambitions.

On the other hand, Shias are a tiny minority in Syria that does not exceed 1-2% of the population. Despite their small numbers, they have always been treated as A-class citizens and have always considered themselves more Syrian than Shia. The rise of Khomeinism after 1979 and the current conflict have not changed this feeling, especially in urban centres such as Damascus.

Because of this often overlooked reality, Iran realises there are limits to its political ambitions in Syria — a very low ceiling in fact, that as of now, is firm and secure.