



IRAN SOFT-TOOLS IN DEIR EZZOR: REAL ESTATE AS AN EXAMPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2018, Iran has been able to launch its expansion project on the eastern fronts in Syria, especially in Deir Ezzor, the main border provinces with Iraq, through its direct participation in the fight against ISIS in eastern Syria. Iran's participation in these battles has helped to strengthen its military authority by:

- Securing its presence in the city of al-Bukamal on the Syria-Iraq border, which is considered a key border crossing connecting Iran to the Mediterranean Sea via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and which Iran has worked on in the past to secure its land routes in these countries.
- Securing its control over the main land routes connecting Deir Ezzor province with Homs and Raqqqa provinces.

- Expanding its influence and security/military presence in the main cities and towns of Deir Ezzor and working on infiltrating societies using different tools and methods beyond its known security and military methods.

ASSESSING IRAN'S MILITIA INFLUENCE IN THE POST-ISIS ERA

In early June 2018, Iranian and foreign militias, with the participation of regime forces and Russian forces, managed to take control of the city of al-Bukamal and its border crossing after months of ongoing battles with ISIS. The Russians then relied on Iran to attack three main attack axes:

- The first point was the T-2 station in the southern desert of al-Bukamal, which was under the command of Hezbollah and regime forces.
- The second point was in the Iraqi territories, on the borderline between Syria and Iraq near the town of al-Bukamal, and was under the responsibility of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces PMF/PMU and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC).
- The third point was the attack and advance from the highway of al-Mayadin, al-Bukamal, and Pakistani and Afghan militias (Fatemiyoun and Zaynibion) and other Syrian Local Defense Forces led the spearhead of this attack¹

The period following the battle of al-Bukamal was marked by Iran's desire to orga-

nize its military and tighten its control over these areas in order to control the security and avoid problems that had occurred previously in Aleppo city, such as the tension between its foreign and local militias that amounted to clashes. Iran intends to intensify its security and military supervision and to assign various security tasks among its militias on the ground in a way that ensures the preservation of their gains and the achievement of their goals. The following classification shows the militia map of Iran in Deir Ezzor Governorate, noting that the map is characterized by its ability to change its shape and distribution due to the geographical location of Deir Ezzor bordering Iraq, which facilitates the movement of Iranian militias between Syria and Iraq.²

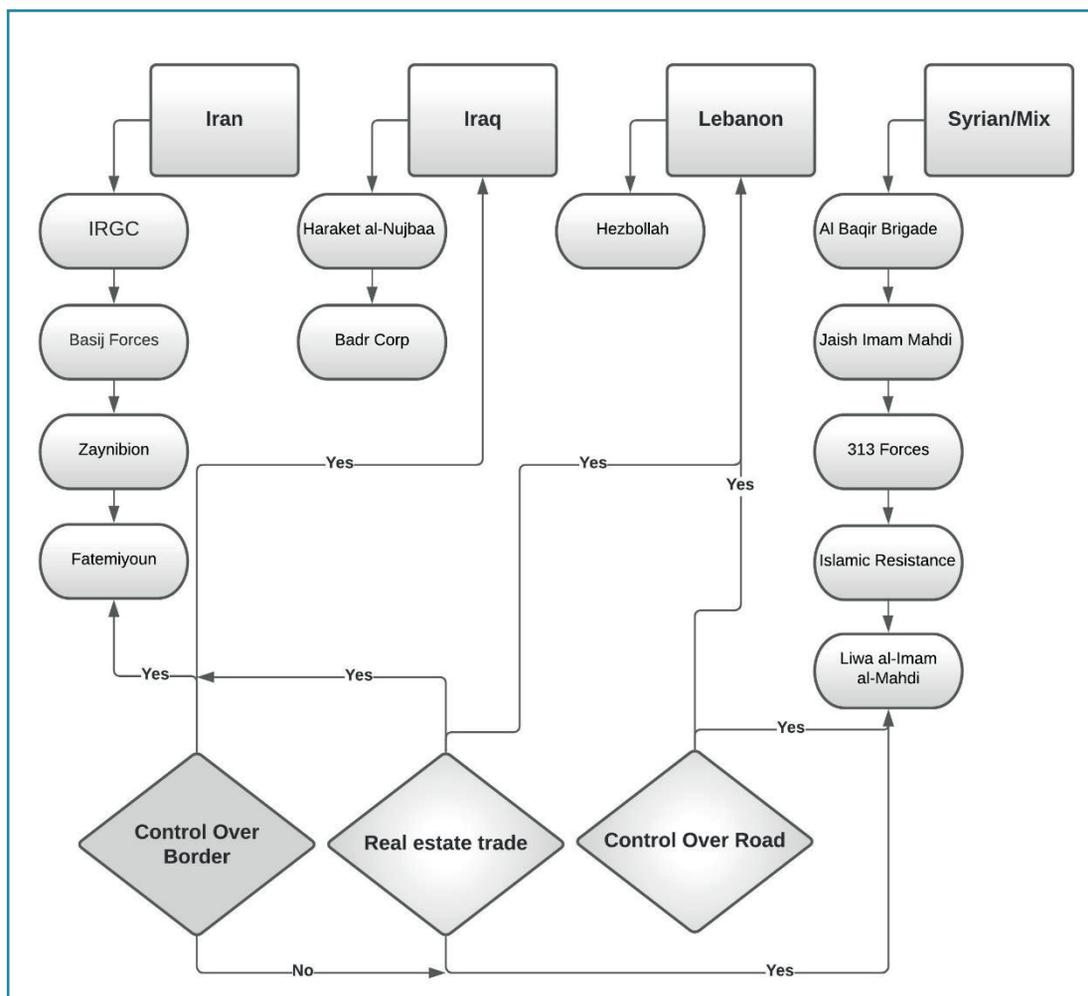
HOW DID IRAN CONTROL THE REAL ESTATE MARKET IN DEIR EZZOR?

In mid-2020, the activity of IRGC-backed militias in acquiring real estate increased. According to an interview with sources in Deir Ezzor, Iran began large-scale acquisition of properties and land in the neighborhoods of al-Jubaila, Harabash, al-Humaidah in the city of Deir Ezzor, al-Mayadin, and al-Bukamal in particular, through its local arms in Deir Ezzor in early 2020.

For example, in the city of al-Mayadin, IRGC commanders entrusted a local leader, "Riyad Jamil al-Duwaihi," who heads the regime's reconciliation committee and is considered the most important local pro-Iranian

¹ Chatham House, Feb 2019, Iran Is Winning Deir Ez-Zor by Default, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/iran-is-winning-deir-ez-zor-by-default> and Washington Institute, Oct 2019, What Is Iran Up To in Deir al-Zour?, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-iran-deir-al-zour>

² Atlantic Council, Navvar Saban, May 2021, Factbox: Iranian presence in Syria's Deir ez-Zor province, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-presence-in-syrias-deir-ez-zor-province/>



element in eastern Syria, to purchase properties for their benefit. Al-Duwaihi oversaw the purchase of dozens of properties near a prefabricated factory and near al-Rahba Castle, in the city of al-Mayadin.³

All sales and purchases of real estate in all the regime's areas require security approval, but the Iranian militias, according to local sources on the ground, are exempt

from these procedures in Deir Ezzor and other provinces, as the regime's military and air intelligence services had previously notified the real estate offices in the city of al-Bukamal, to sell lands and real estate to a list of certain pro-Iran names without the need for any security permission.⁴

According to an interview conducted with a real estate broker in the city of Al-Bukamal,

³ SyriaHR, Nov 2020, At Iran's orders | Local militias from Deir Ezzor purchase nearly 300 real estates in eastern Ghouta, triggering popular concern, <https://www.syriaHR.com/en/192901/>

⁴ Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with 3 fighters in al-Sharqia SNA factions who are originally from Deir Ezzor and have relatives in different towns in the province, 5 Jan 2021.



Syrian citizens continue to leave Deir Ezzor.

he confirmed that the city has become a de facto capital of Iran's militia in Syria, and the Revolutionary Guard Command has entrusted the operations of buying real estate for its benefit in the city and its countryside to the local well-known figure in Al-Bukamal called is Farhan al-Marsoumi. He works with his partner called Abdullah Hajj Bakri on buying real estate for the Iranian militia in the city, using their deep knowledge of the people and houses of the city.⁵

The IRGC completed large-scale purchases of lands in the al-Bukamal desert on the Syrian-Iraqi border in October 2020, all of which are located in the al-Humaidah area, near the military crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border. At that time, Hajj Mortada, the com-

mander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, was supervising the purchase process, and the prices reached around 10 million SYP per dunum, according to local sources.⁶

It is clear that the wave of property purchases by allies close to Iran is linked to the rise in the poverty rate among the indigenous population in Syria and especially Deir Ezzor where the majority resort to selling their property or parts of it in order to survive or leave the region, especially since the region is affected by drought and a dire economic situation in addition to the fragile security situation with the increasing activity of ISIS sleeper cells in the east of the country. This buying process also runs parallel to the growing influence of pro-Iran militias, espe-

⁵ Skype interview the researcher conducted with a real estate broker in al Bukamal city, 25 May 2021.

⁶ Skype interview the researcher conducted with a real estate broker in al Bukamal city, 25 May 2021.

cially in Deir Ezzor west of the Euphrates, and the increasing harassment of the population by militiamen.

All these reasons caused a large part of the population of Deir Ezzor, especially west of the Euphrates, where regime control pushed them to sell and leave either to Turkey and then to Europe or to other governorates such as Damascus and its environs, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. According to several interviews with local sources on the subject of real estate purchase by Iran in Deir Ezzor, Iran does not rely on the method of direct purchase, but rather on brokers from the population of the province, who are distributed in many of its regions and are well versed in the details of each region.

The Iranian brokers focused on buying properties in 2021 and even destroyed houses and properties for the displaced people in the city of al-Maydeen to control them completely. Brokers working for Iran from Deir Ezzor were also able to acquire construction sites and agricultural land in al-Bukamal and some other villages. It was also noted that there is great interest in some border villages such as al-Hari, where the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF/PMU) and

the Revolutionary Guard are trying to buy civilian properties with low sums of money, taking advantage of the poor living situation that forces the owners to sell their properties to obtain money. It is also worth noting that financial gain has not been the Iranians' main goal in these purchases. Rather, it is their desire to expand their influence, to control and own as much of these areas as possible, and to bring their foreign militia families to these areas.

However, it is unlikely that the IRGC-backed militias will allow locals who previously lived in these areas to return, as the plan is to house the families of militia fighters in some properties purchased from the population as part of a comprehensive demographic change plan that Iran has sought since the first moments of the spread of its militias in the region.

On the other hand, Iran is also working to control real estate (seizing homes by force) as part of its policy of demographic change, and this is an easy task for Iran because of its security and military authority in most cities and towns in Deir Ezzor. In the first half of 2021, Iran-backed militias seized 73 homes in al-Buka-

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mal and al-Mayadin⁷, and their ownership was transferred to their fighters.⁸ These militias have converted some of these houses into military headquarters and have used others as residences for the families of fighters and commanders to protect themselves from U.S. Army air attacks on them. These seized houses belong to Syrian civilians living in the states of the Arab Gulf and European countries, or members of the Syrian National Army.⁹

While the IRCG-backed militias, particularly the Afghan "Fatemiyoun" brigade, in the first half of 2021 destroyed 23 houses in the town of al-Mayadin,¹⁰ the houses were not empty, but were inhabited by IDPs from other cities who were related to the owners of the houses. However, this did not stop Fatemiyoun from seizing the houses as they gave these families 15 days to produce a regular lease agreement between them and the owner or a power of attorney to

dispose of these properties before expelling them. However, the families were unable to secure this because the original homeowners were unable to return and execute the necessary contracts.

After the residents of these houses were evicted, the militia transferred ownership of the houses it seized to people loyal to it or to one of its local fighters, and then transferred them to foreign elements holding Syrian citizenship by decision of the regime.¹¹

In addition to these methods, Iran deliberately used loyal local organizations to expand in real estate ownership in 2021. Perhaps the most prominent pro-Iranian organization involved in real estate in Deir Ezzor is the Jihad al-Binna Organization, an organization established in Lebanon in 1988 under the direct supervision of Lebanese Hezbollah, which helped rebuild southern Beirut after the 2006 war before the

⁷ Skype Interview the researcher conducted with an ex bank employee in the regime area in Deir Ezzor, 17 Jan 2021, and Skype Interview the researcher conducted with a local who works in real state but living in Deir Ezzor in the SDF held areas, 10 Jan 2021.

⁸ Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with a local who works in al-Bukamal crossing, 27 May 2021.

⁹ Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with a local who works in al-Bukamal crossing, 27 May 2021 and Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with a refugee from al-Maydeen city who are living in Jarablus.

¹⁰ Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with a refugee from al-Maydeen city who are living in Jarablus.

¹¹ Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with a local who works in al-Bukamal crossing, 27 May 2021. Whatsapp interview the researcher conducted with a refugee from al-Maydeen city who are living in Jarablus.

US classified it as a global terrorist organization.

The Syrian branch of the Jihad al-Binna organization was established in 2017 and was based in Sayeda Zeinab in the capital Damascus. The Syrian branch of the organization describes itself as a “developmental and independent service.” Its activities include building and rehabilitating hospitals and schools in Aleppo, Homs, and Deir Ezzor, as well as renovating the homes of families of slain opponents of the regime in Homs, providing food baskets to the local population, and cleaning up entire neighborhoods to facilitate the return of internally displaced persons, but all in a way that serves Iran’s long-term goal in the region.

Over time, the Organization appeared to show a clear interest in reconstruction and the acquisition of real estate in Deir Ezzor governorate, particularly in the city of al-Bukamal and the town of al-Mayadin, as well as in the villages and towns in between. During 2018, the Jihad al-Binna organization opened an office in al-Bukamal to undertake the purchase and reconstruction of civilian houses. During the period between 2018 and 2021, Jihad al-Binna focused on reconstruction projects for properties it had

forcibly seized or purchased at rock-bottom prices due to the absence of their owners.

Recently, and in the last quarter of 2021, the Iranian Jihad al-Binna Organization office in al-Bukamal city and its countryside received initial requests from residents to repair their homes, which were damaged by the Russian raids and Regime artillery during their military operation against ISIS. On October 10th, 2021, the leadership of the Jihad al-Binna Organization made visits to the applicants’ houses to determine the extent of the damage to be repaired; also, they visited the houses in the Tuiba district and next to al-Assad School on the outskirts of the city of al-Bukamal. The Jihad al-Binna Organization provides services and humanitarian aid to the residents of the Deir Ezzor Governorate from time to time in order to achieve one of the following two objectives:

1. Winning the friendship and the trust of a large part of the population with these services, and using these services as a trigger to influence families over there to push their sons into the ranks of the Iranian militias.
2. The recent activities of the Jihad al-Binna organization aim to absorb and process residents’ anger over the

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lack of medical care and relief services as a result of the Iranian militias' control of the city, especially after the Iranian militias ex-

pelled international organizations and did not allow them to open branches in the city of al-Bukamal.

CONCLUSION

Iran's intentions in eastern Syria, specifically Deir Ezzor and al-Bukamal, are clear and organized. The Iranian militias have been keen on fighting ISIS, which was controlling these areas, and then establishing the sustainable ground that allows Iran to stay in the region by arranging and defining the responsibilities of the militias, in addition to trying to win over the local population through relief while aiming to buy land and properties to change the demography of the area.

Moreover, these plans do not pose a threat to Russia that would cause it to confront them. Rather, the interests of Iranian-Russian interests in the region overlap

with the goal of destabilizing the areas under the control of the SDF and the international coalition, in addition to preventing the return of ISIS. However, the threat of ISIS remains in the presence of the Iranian militias, as ISIS exploits the anger and discontent of the locals over the militias' violations and Iranian plans for the region.

Iran's influence and expansion in Deir Ezzor also depends on political reality in the next phase. If Iran is accepted or even not as part of the political solution, it will certainly seek to preserve and expand its gains in that region by using soft power, a tool that Iran has been using in different regions in Syria since 2017, as a replacement or a back-up plan in case its military and security tools are eliminated by other international forces.

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Navvar Saban, received his MBA from the Australian University of Wollongong in Dubai – and his Bachelor's in Computer Science from the American University in Dubai, in addition to his Diploma in Military Studies from Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University in Istanbul. He currently works as a conflict analyst and expert at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies and as a visiting researcher at ORSAM. He prepares special military maps, reports, and articles about Syria and the broad region. He is specialized in the Iranian influence in Syria, focusing on the militias' activities from a military, economic and administration perspective.



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