

Deir Ezzor Province, Iranian Bets and the War Ahead

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Since the expulsion of ISIS from vast areas of Syria and Iraq, the province of Deir Ezzor appears to be in a grim situation comparing to other Syrian towns and cities. The province is divided between two main powers: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) -backed by the US- which control the northern areas of the Euphrates River; and the Syrian government forces and its allies -specially the Iranian- which control the southern side of the river. In addition, there are two ISIS enclaves remaining, one in the north; in the town of al-Hajin and its surroundings up to the city of al-Bukamal, and the other in the Syrian Badia in southern Deir Ezzor province.

Deir Ezzor, in this situation, is prone to new battles in the future, according to the Iranian policy indicators on the ground.

Once the province was taken out of ISIS control, Iran began implementing its projects to consolidate its control within the province by the following steps:

- Spreading of Shiite congregations called “Hussainiat¹”, as well as the spread of the Shiite doctrine in the eastern rural areas of Deir Ezzor; especially the villages of Hatleh and Marrat, and the city of al-Bukamal and its surrounding areas on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The Hussainiat are controlled by Shi'a religious leaders linked to Iran.
Ahmed, 27-year old man from the town of Mayadin in eastern Syria, said that dozens of people in the area had converted to the Shiite sect and had joined pro-Iranian militias in the region over the past two months.
- In addition, special offices were established for people who want to join Iranian militias or local militias aligned to them.
- Iran has falsified facts and dates of archaeological sites in the province, linking them to the Shiite heritage, as in the town of al-Quriyah in Deir Ezzor eastern countryside, where the Iranian militia built a Hosseinia over the Ain Ali water spring, adjacent to the city, claiming it to be a "holy Shiite" place.
- Iran is working to attract some clans as well as individuals in Deir Ezzor, based on the conversion to Shi'a sectarianism or the need for money, where it relies on ensuring the loyalty of leading figures in the province as leaders of some clans as well as members of the People's Council of Syria².
- The Iranian Shi'a campaigns often exploit the dire economic situation of civilians, where each family embraces the Shiite sect receives monthly financial amount as well as food and in-kind assistance as means to lure those who suffer deteriorating economic situation.

Hosseinia (plural noun Hussainiat): A building in which Hussein ceremonies take place, and when Shiites mourn the death of the ¹ Third Imam, Husayn Ibn Ali, who was killed in Karbala, in central Iraq.

The People's Council is Syria's legislative authority. It has 250 members elected for a four-year term in 15 multi-seat constituencies. ² There are two main political fronts; the National Progressive Front and Popular Front for Change and Liberation

This Iranian policy pursued in Deir Ezzor is probably due to the province's geographical location adjacent to Iraq. Iran is trying to establish human bases in order to preserve the road which connect it with the Mediterranean Sea and Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.

This policy reveals Iran's intention to create an entity similar to those in neighboring countries, as in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. As evidence of this, the "Islamic Resistance" in Syria, represented by the "al-Bakara Hosseinia" tribe and "al-Baqir Brigade" -one of the allied forces of the Syrian army- has issued a statement announcing the start of military operations against the "American and Kurdish forces" north-east of Syria. According to the statement, the jihadist operations against the "US-led coalition and its allies" have begun. The statement also warned US bases as well as the Turkish forces in northern Syria that "they will be under attack" by the heroes of the al-Bakara Hosseinia Tribe and al-Baqir Brigade.

On the other hand, SDF has announced that all oil fields in Deir Ezzor are considered closed military zone, in conjunction with the arrival of huge US military arrays to the region to enhance the US military presence in the rural areas of Deir Ezzor. The US forces has announced the establishment of a permanent military base near Koniko gas factory.

Extrapolating from previous indicators, we find that the area may be on the verge of a new war, during which civilians will be victims again. No one can determine the magnitude of the losses that such a war will leave, and how many years it will last considering sectarianism is used as its engine.

Finally, it should be noted that the policies of recruitment and demographic change are no exception to Iran. All parties have sought to apply these policies in their areas of control in one way or another. Civilians have always had two options: either to displace or to cope with violations committed by the belligerent parties.