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Why Iranian Entrenchment in Southern Syria Worries Neighboring Countries

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Introduction

Southern Syria—corresponding to Quneitra, Daraa, and Suwayda Governorates—abuts Jordan, the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and Lebanon. Whoever controls this area enjoys considerable geopolitical leverage, particularly with regard to Jordan and Israel. Those parts of Quneitra that are not occupied by Israel have strategic value because they are on high ground near the disengagement line established after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War between the Syrian and Israeli armies. Their proximity to the Golan means that Israeli forces and towns there are vulnerable to attacks from Quneitra.

After losing parts of Daraa and Quneitra Governorates to opposition groups during the Syrian uprising in 2011, Syria's military recaptured them in 2018. However, it failed to fully reassert government authority. On the contrary, Damascus's administrative, economic, and security capabilities steadily deteriorated, as did its influence. For example, while President Bashar al-Assad's regime never lost control over the Druze-majority Suwayda Governorate, in recent years the regime's power has waned. The region is in turmoil,

with frequent kidnappings and assassinations, poor services and governance capabilities, scarce economic resources, and proliferating armed factions.

As in all Syrian borderlands, the south is susceptible to influence from local groups and regional powers vying for dominance. However, unlike northeastern Syria or Idlib Governorate, where the Kurds' People's Protection Units or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) dominate, respectively, no single local or foreign actor does so in southern Syria. Similarly, while Türkiye and the United States have considerable sway in the north, linkages between local groups and outside states remain fluid in the south, where multiple parties are endeavoring to determine outcomes.

Iran, through its ally Hezbollah, is a major contender in this regard. It has influence across the region, most importantly in Quneitra, but it does not enjoy outright control. Nevertheless, this situation has created a conducive environment for Tehran to maintain its dominance, and even expand it over time, provided there are no significant shifts in the current dynamics in southern Syria.



Southern Syria After 2018

In June–August 2018, the Syrian military recaptured much of the south, thanks primarily to deals brokered by Russia that removed U.S. and Israeli opposition to the military’s return. Since then, several homegrown actors and foreign countries have been active in the region. These include local militias and the Syrian regime as well as Iran, Israel, Jordan, and Russia. Russia’s involvement abated due to the Ukraine war, but it continues to be interested in the south, as it has resumed patrolling there and built two observation points in Quneitra. Iran has sought to expand its influence across the south, provoking strong opposition from Jordan and Israel. This competition has prevented the emergence of a leading local player with a foreign patron, while exacerbating instability.

The 2018 deals ended rebel rule without replacing it with a new system. The Russian-brokered agreements were conditional on the fact that Iran and its allies would not deploy to the south, in that way avoiding an Israeli military intervention. But the process was far from smooth or unified. In some places, Russia negotiated accords; in others, the regime concluded reconciliations of its own, while still others were retaken by force, leading to the expulsion of the population. Sometimes rebels switched sides, while at other times they continued resisting government forces.

Even in areas under the state’s authority, the situation has only gotten worse over the years. In Suwayda, for instance, anti-regime protests have occurred since August 2023, under the Druze religious leader Hikmat al-Hajari, who has openly defied Damascus. Israel does not have a presence on the ground, but its shadow looms large over the south. Since 2013, it has carried out numerous attacks in Syria, notably in Quneitra.

Jordan, too, has been more aggressive in responding to the chaos in southern Syria. From the outset, Jordan worked to prevent an Iranian and Hezbollah presence in the area and continues to oppose their role in heightening conflict with Israel and supporting cross-

border weapons and drug smuggling. Jordan tried to address such issues, in the context of the Arab opening to Damascus in summer 2023 and on a bilateral level, with minimal results. In a notable shift, Jordan recently began targeting smugglers inside Syria. It has also reportedly coordinated with local factions in the south to curb smuggling.

The Syrian regime’s two main allies, Russia and Iran, have had markedly different trajectories in the south. Russia deployed military police there and even tried to turn the Eighth Brigade—primarily consisting of members from the formerly oppositional group known as Shabab al-Sunna, stationed in Busra al-Sham—into a proxy force. The results were mixed. Russia’s main advantage was political, however, based on the fact that it was the only actor with open lines of communication to all the conflicting parties. Moscow lost that leverage after the start of the Ukraine war. Israel has given little consideration to Russian opposition to its airstrikes in Syria, and Iran has also managed to increase its influence in the south, despite the fact that the agreements negotiated by Russia in 2018 were aimed at keeping Tehran and its allies away from the border area.

The south personifies the regime’s inability to govern. The sharp deterioration in Syria’s economy, especially after the Lebanese banking crisis in 2019–2020 and U.S. passage of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act in 2019, has left the country bankrupt. Today, it is common to see private individuals raising money to restore and operate services in the region, such as water wells, telephone lines, and street lights.

But the governance crisis goes far deeper than a lack of funds. Insecurity in the south has become widespread. This has been reflected in the high rate of assassinations, which noticeably rose after the return of regime forces and shows no signs of decreasing. According to a local opposition source that documents these events, assassinations took the lives of 235 people in 2020, 226 in 2021, 313 in 2022, and 278 in 2023. Kidnapping for ransom is another common practice. In 2023 alone, there were over 126 kidnappings in Daraa Governorate.

Similarly, in Suwayda some fifty people were kidnapped or incarcerated by nonstate actors. In less-populated Quneitra, such events have been rarer, but assassinations, kidnappings, and attacks against regime representatives do occur.

From an economic perspective, the south's traditional reliance on agriculture, cross-border trade, and state employment has been radically transformed. The local economy has shifted to a shadow, criminal economy that is characterized by inadequate resources and a reliance on foreign remittances. The decline in formal and informal trade is an indicator of this. Despite the hope of expanded exchanges between Syria and Jordan after their border was fully reopened in 2021, the volume of bilateral trade remains low, according to Jordan's bureau of statistics. In 2023, Jordan's imports from Syria amounted to 45 million Jordanian dinars (\$63 million). The country's exports to Syria were valued at 60 million Jordanian dinars (\$84 million), with reexports contributing another 25 million Jordanian dinars (\$35 million). Taken together, these figures show a decrease of some 70 percent from 2010, when Jordan's trade balance with Syria was 450 million Jordanian dinars (\$630 million). Indeed, year-on-year trade in 2023 was 15 percent lower than in 2022. Informal (but not illicit) trade has also declined due to the regression of Syria's economy and Jordan's tighter border security measures.

This situation has made the local economy in the south heavily dependent on foreign remittances and illicit exchanges, especially drug trafficking. The owner of a leading *hawala*, or money transfer, office in Suwayda claimed that since 2018 the amount of foreign remittances to the governorate has more than doubled. He estimated that the four biggest informal *hawalas* together transfer no less than \$120,000 a day.¹

Drugs have also altered economic realities. In 2016, international organizations flagged Syria's increased import of precursor chemicals used in manufacturing drugs, notably Captagon, an amphetamine-like drug. Gradually, the market has boomed in southern Syria, the main gateway for exporting the drug to the large

Gulf market. Some estimates show that Captagon's market value rose from nearly \$1.8 billion in 2017 to \$5.7 billion in 2021, reflecting the lawlessness in the south and the growing impact of drug trafficking.

A Fertile Ground for Iranian Advances

While the south remains unstable, there have been significant changes there in terms of Russian and Iranian influence. Russian and government forces have retained a presence on the ground, but their role has receded in recent years. While Iran has not been able to fill the void, it has preserved its leverage in the area. Given the limited economic resources allowing the Syrian state to consolidate its authority, the erosion of the regime's and Russia's positions, and the ambient volatility in the south, conditions are in place that favor an expansion of Iran's reach, despite obstacles.

Iran's aim is to exploit southern Syria's geostrategic importance. The region, particularly Suwayda and Daraa, are gateways to shaping developments in Jordan, a key U.S. ally; the West Bank; and, beyond that, the Persian Gulf. That is why the Syrian-Jordanian border is not merely a border between countries; political actors can affect regional developments from the area. The border region is especially important for being close to Israel. The highlands of Quneitra, overseeing the occupied Golan and bordering Lebanon, give Iran a pressure point against Israel, a main rival of Tehran whose security priorities have greatly defined the region's security framework.

Due to the covert nature of Iran's activities, it is hard to assess Tehran's actual degree of influence along the border. However, it is possible to discern the difficulties it faces and the progress it has achieved with its affiliates. On the macro level, there is the demographic challenge. The Druze majority in Suwayda and the Sunni majority in Daraa make it harder for Iran to anchor itself among the inhabitants, many of whom view Tehran as an enemy. In Quneitra, the mosaic is different. The smaller population has historical grievances against Israel



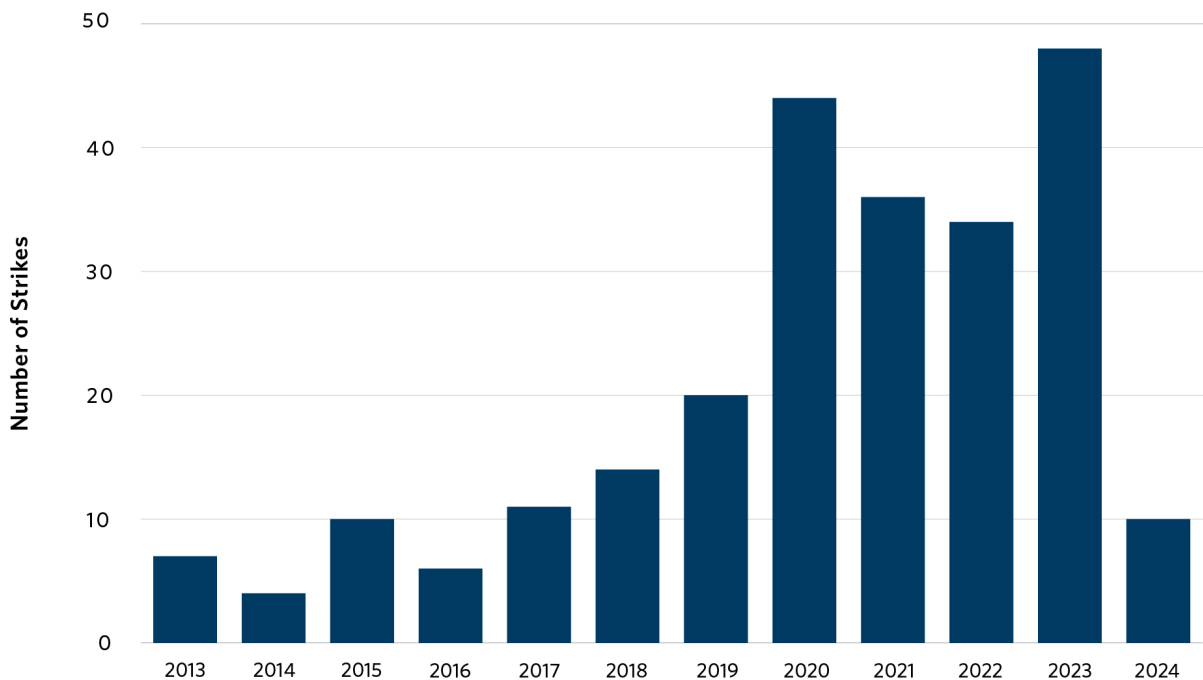
for occupying the land, and the presence of sectarian minorities—[Druze](#) and [Christian](#)—that have had a tense relationship with the Sunni majority strongly opposing the regime has created openings for Iran.

Another major difficulty for Iran is Israel’s opposition to its presence in the south. Israeli measures against Iran’s entrenchment in Syria has gone through phases, starting in 2013 with the “[campaign between wars](#)” when Israel began targeting Iranian, Hezbollah, and allied forces. Then came Russia’s intervention in Syria in 2015 and its [creation of deescalation zones](#) that included the south, provoking a discussion among Russia, the United States, Israel, and Jordan about Iran’s presence there. Though Israeli-Russian coordination grew, Israel did not stop hitting Iran and its allies inside Syria, augmenting its attacks over time. As figure 1 shows, Israeli strikes gradually grew after 2017.

A new phase began after the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas against Israel. Since then, Israel has carried out twenty-six attacks in Syria, the equivalent of one every five days. The nature of the targets has also changed. Israel has gone after senior officials in Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), [even killing them in central Damascus](#). To what extent this tactic is effective is questionable. However, the IRGC was worried enough that it recently [announced the withdrawal of officers from Syria](#).

Iran has often worked through opportunistic local militias seeking power, economic gain, and security. These militias and their leaders are notorious for switching allegiances. For instance, one such figure from Inkhil, known as Jeddi (grandpa), began as a farmer, became an opposition leader, reconciled with the regime in 2018, then attempted to establish connections with

Figure 1. Number of Israeli Strikes Across Syria



Note: The dataset counts the number of strikes by date and location. For instance, multiple strikes by Israel in one air raid on several targets within the same location, like Rural Damascus, are recorded as a single strike. However, if strikes happen simultaneously in different locations, such as Aleppo, Homs, and Rural Damascus, they are counted separately, each as one strike.

Source: Data were compiled from open-source news and verified by the authors.

Hezbollah.² Another is Imad Abu Zureiq, formerly a high-ranking member of the opposition's Jaish al-Yarmouk, who escaped to Jordan in 2018. He then returned to become a regime ally in his native Nassib, on the Jordanian border.³

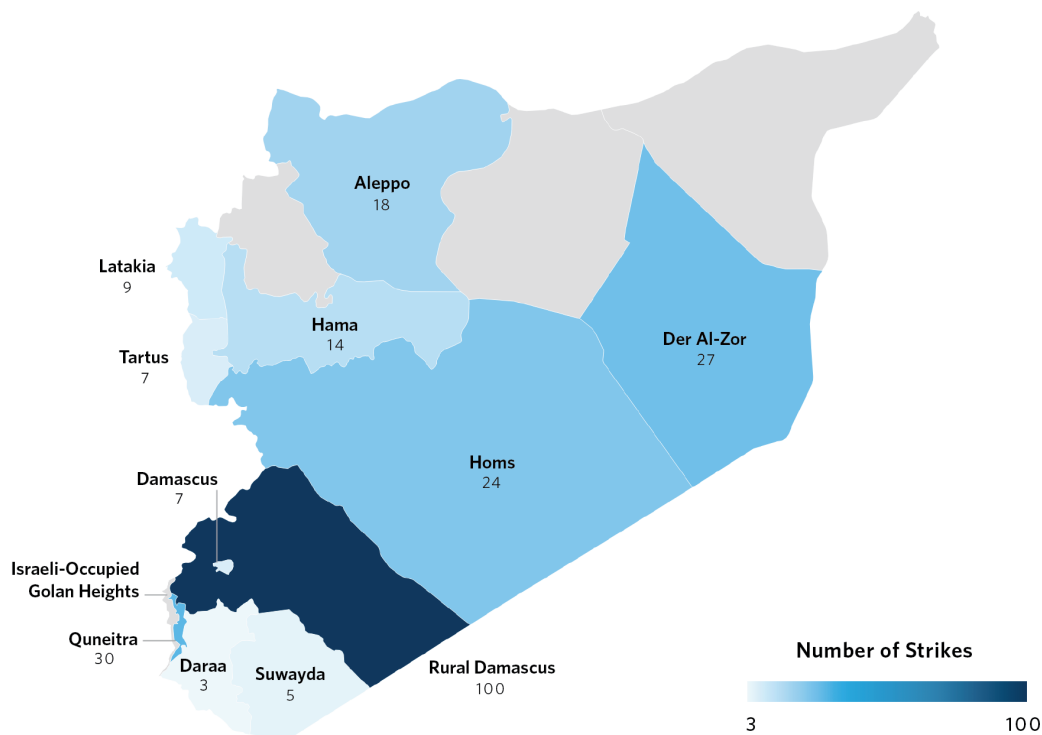
Despite the challenges, Iran enjoys definite advantages in southern Syria, especially along the axis between Rural Damascus Governorate and Quneitra. It has not only an extensive presence there but also a strong security infrastructure. Russia too has such an infrastructure but is much less established on the ground than Iran.

Available evidence suggests that Iran has an operational hub south of Damascus, which is strategically located near the Damascus airport. The area is densely populated, includes Shia communities, and is only 20–30 kilometers from Lebanon and 30–40 kilometers from Quneitra. There are many reports of an Iranian

presence in the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood south of Damascus and west of the airport. The extensive Israeli airstrikes in Rural Damascus only reinforce this argument (see figure 2). Since 2013, 100 out of the 244 Israeli airstrikes have targeted the governorate, making it the most frequently hit area, followed by Quneitra with thirty strikes. In recent years there has been an uptick: while there were six airstrikes against Rural Damascus in 2018, by 2023 there were twenty-two (see figure 3).

Daraa and Suwayda, in turn, have been less frequently bombed by Israel, with each governorate hit only three times since 2013. This is considerably fewer than the number of airstrikes on Quneitra or on areas in Aleppo and Deir al-Zor with Iranian influence. The disparity may indicate there are not significant Iranian activities in the two governorates; or, if there are, they do not pose a major threat to Israel. Moreover, the disparity in airstrikes suggests Iranian influence in Quneitra is more substantial, which is likely for several reasons.

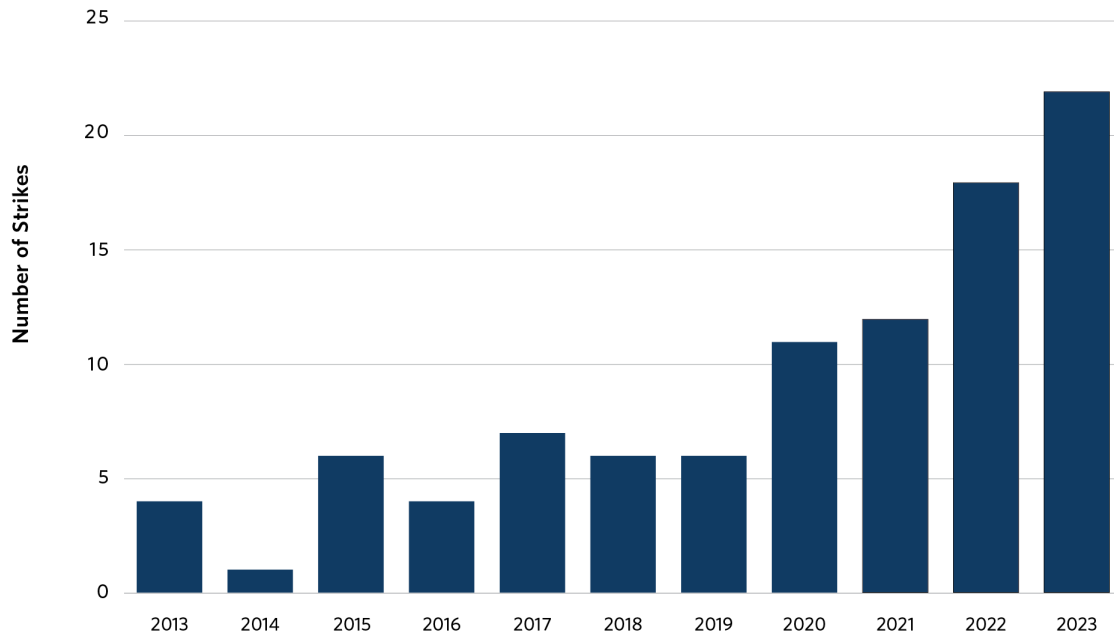
Figure 2. Number of Israeli Strikes per Governorate (2013-2024*)



Source: Data were compiled from open-source news and verified by the authors.



Figure 3. Israeli Airstrikes in Rural Damascus



Source: Data were compiled from open-source news and verified by the authors.

First, Quneitra’s geography and geographic location is different from other parts of the south. It is mountainous, making it easier to conceal military forces. Quneitra is not far from Iran’s nerve center in Rural Damascus. And it is close to Lebanon, whose border there is effectively controlled by Hezbollah. Those conditions are advantageous for Iran and do not exist in, for example, Daraa, which is mostly flat, further from Rural Damascus, and has less of a Hezbollah presence.

Another factor unique to Quneitra is that, early in the war, Iran and Hezbollah had physical access to the front line and even developed firing capabilities thanks to the regime’s continuous deployment in some pockets of the area. Quneitra was the site of a significant airstrike in 2015, when the Israeli military killed General Mohammed Ali Allahdadi of the IRGC’s Quds Force, along with six Hezbollah members, including prominent figures Jihad Mughniyeh and Mohammed Issa. In May 2018, the Golan was targeted by twenty rockets fired from Quneitra. Israel held Iran responsible for the attack and struck back hard, killing thirty-eight individuals, including eighteen foreign militants.

Another Iranian advantage in Quneitra has to do with the dynamics of the armed conflict in the region and its sociodemographic makeup, which have created opportunities for Iran. As Syria’s conflict intensified, sectarian divisions in Quneitra widened. Beit Jinn and surrounding Sunni-majority villages became centers of protest and armed opposition to the regime. In time, extremist Sunni factions led by Jabhat al-Nusra dominated and sought to eradicate government forces. In 2013, rebels displaced the inhabitants of an entirely Druze village, Mughr al-Mir, and tried to overrun regime strongholds several times, albeit without success.

As a consequence of this, the area’s Druze and Christian minorities sought refuge with the regime and its allies. Isolated and feeling threatened by Jabhat al-Nusra, these communities were prepared to “form alliances with the devil” to protect themselves, as one local lawyer put it.⁴ These minorities built ties with Iran, particularly through Hezbollah. Beginning in 2017, the situation began shifting in the regime’s favor. It imposed so-called reconciliation agreements on the rebels and by the end of 2017 had regained control over the area, including Beit Jinn and its environs.

Those communal divisions, as well as Hezbollah's presence, continue today, as shown by an Israeli drone strike that left three [Hezbollah members dead](#) in December 2023. Many local militias have turned to Hezbollah for funding and protection. As a local interlocutor explained, Hezbollah's backing not only provides protection in an unpredictable environment, but it also secures revenues, allowing participation in lucrative illicit activities such as smuggling with Lebanon or drug manufacturing and trafficking.⁵

Iran's comparative advantage in the south comes, to a significant extent, from its security network that allows access to the border and connects key areas of operation—Rural Damascus, Quneitra, and the Lebanese border area. Iran's method of building alliances through patronage, protection, and the allocation of local resources to allies, which involves including them in illicit trade, has also earned Tehran the backing of militias across Syria. Russia, in turn, has failed to implement such a model in Daraa with the Eighth Brigade, while the Assad regime lacks the means to do so. This has helped make Russia and the Syrian regime heavily dependent on Iran and its allies, giving Iran an edge in the south, especially in Quneitra.

Conclusion

Israel's ongoing war in Gaza since October 2023 has shown that competing Iranian and Israeli interests in southern Syria are becoming irreconcilable. If Iran's latitude to hit Israel from Gaza or Lebanon is reduced or neutralized once the conflict ends, Iran may be weakened, which will only reinforce its incentive to remain embedded in southern Syria. This is a cause of concern for Syria's neighbors—particularly Israel, which

dominates Syrian skies—and for international actors. That is why, without changes to the present situation, southern Syria is likely to see a gradual rise in tensions, which could conceivably lead to a major confrontation between Iran and Israel down the road.

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Notes

- 1 Interview conducted by the authors' research assistant in Suwayda, March 2024.
- 2 Author interview with a Syrian journalist from Inkhil (via WhatsApp), February 2024.
- 3 Author interview with a Syrian journalist from Inkhil.
- 4 Author interview with a lawyer from Mughr al-Mir (via WhatsApp), February 2024.
- 5 Author interview with a lawyer from Mughr al-Mir.



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