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Beyond The Iranian Economic Interventionism in Syria: The Sectarian Implications of the Iranian Investments in The Syrian Real Estate Sector After 2015

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Citation

Barazy, Y. (2023). *Beyond The Iranian Economic Interventionism in Syria: The Sectarian Implications of the Iranian Investments in The Syrian Real Estate Sector After 2015*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Beyond The Iranian Economic Interventionism in Syria

The Sectarian Implications of the Iranian Investments in The Syrian Real Estate Sector After 2015

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Master of Arts in Middle Eastern Studies

Master Thesis

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15-06-2023

17197 words excluding the front sheet, the content table, and the bibliography

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1 Chapter One: Introduction

During the recent decades, Iran has embarked on a comprehensive foreign policy endeavour. Arguably, one of its fundamental key goals is achieving its hegemonial expansionism in regions with particular interest. This strategy is attributed by academics to Iran's rejection of the United States' intervention in certain locations in the Levant, Iran's deterrence policy against Israel, and/or Iran's containment strategy towards Saudi Arabia. In due course, Iran has intervened in many ways in the Levant, mixing political and military support with economic aid, strengthening therefore the commercial ties with the countries of the fertile crescent. Primarily, Iran has maximized the bilateral relations with Syria after 2011, which manifested heavily in the military and the political dimensions. However, the objective evidence suggests that the Iranian economic interventionism in Syria has witnessed a dynamic increase after 2015, contrasting immensely with the size of the Iranian investments in Syria before that date. Consistently, a thorough look at the recent Iranian projects in Syria demonstrates that Iran has been investing heavily in the Syrian real estate sector, which affected the Syrian sectarian map.

Before the Syrian civil war, Syria inhabited over fifteen ethnoreligious groups aside from the Sunni majority, where the numbers of the Shiite component of the Syrian population were limited to 2-3 per cent.¹ Recently, Arabic press reports denoted a surge of these numbers at the expense of the Sunni Majority which dropped drastically as some numbers alleged. This thesis discusses this phenomenon with a focus on southern Damascus.

The economic aspect of the Iranian intervention in Syria has fluctuated through the recent decades. Recognizably, Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000), the former president of Syria, has maintained close relations with Iran, but the Iranian investments in the Assad father's reign were not as large as they are currently. Through the years of his son, and the latest years of the civil war, Iran managed to increase its projects in Syria. However, is the outcome of these investments limited to financial gains? This research shall investigate the demographic consequence of the Iranian investments in one dynamic sector, i.e., the Syrian real estate sector, because it helps us consolidate our knowledge of Iran's offensive economic policy in Syria and compare it to the other manifestations of Iran doctrine in the region.

¹ Albert Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, 1982. P: 76

Since the 1980s, Syria became an essential player in the “axes of resistance” that incorporated Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. For this goal, Syria’s geopolitical importance for Tehran maximised, which dictated an Iranian intervention in Syria to keep Bashar Assad in office. The enduring relationship between both regimes, which encompasses geopolitical dynamics and common threat perceptions, is largely to blame for this persistence. By opposing the US-led regional security order, Iran and Syria became allies. This alliance reflects the determination of both regimes to protect their autonomy against the western infiltration of the Middle East. In addition, these common concerns help to explain how Syria and Iran became capable of putting aside their ideological differences and cooperate to further their mutual goals in diminishing the Western influence in the Middle East.²

However, this was not the case before 2000. In that time, Assad father was in office since 1971. As his reign was marked by major regional differences with other Middle Eastern countries, particularly with Iraq,³ his position and perception of Iran’s regional strategy was extensively different from his son/successor, Bashar. A former Syrian diplomat who was close to both presidents, Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad, describes in his memoir the different mindsets as well as the dissimilar political awareness of each one of them.⁴ This memoir motivated my research and urged me to investigate the Iranian infiltration of Syria through the decades and to examine the sectarian results of the Iranian policy towards Syria in terms of hegemony and expansionism. Some excerpts of this memoir shall be indicated in the coming chapters.

1.1 Literature review

Much scholarly work has been conducted on Iran’s policies in the Middle East, acknowledging Iranian expansionism methods such as political as well as military. To begin with, Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni conducted extensive research on the motivations of Iran’s foreign policy after 1979. They argue that Iran attempted to confront the American hostile policies of regional isolation by a

² Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, “Iran’s Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence,” in *NL ARMS*, 2020, 231–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_13.

³ William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Westview Press, 2016). P: 424-433

⁴ Mr Saker Elmelhem is a former Syrian diplomat born in 1961 in Swayda southern Syria. He is the author of the political memoir: “I know them Closely”. This memoir is being edited by a publisher in London at the time of writing this thesis. The memoir will be translated in English and published in 2024. Mr Elmelhem provided this thesis with excerpts from his book and approved on publishing these quotes in this thesis during an interview. The interview was conducted on Friday 05 May 2023. This interview was recorded professionally for the purpose of this thesis only.

“counter-containment strategy”⁵, that would enable the Iranian policymakers of stretching the country’s influence throughout the Middle East. Consistently, this policy could not be applied without creating new alliances with the active players in the region. In this regard, Iran allied with Palestinian opposition fronts, different armed groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Ahmadian and Mohseni’s research distinguishes between two different approaches undertaken by Iran; the first approach is the “deterrence strategy” directed against Israel, while the second approach is the “counter-containment” against Saudi Arabia’s influence in the Arabian sphere. The authors argue that the most important motivation of the unconditional Iranian support of the Syrian regime is the deterrence strategy against Israel. Because of the geographical location of Syria, Iran could benefit from a “vital strategic depth” in the Levant which allows a direct connection with Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁶ Furthermore, they contend that Iran’s policy in the Levant is also directed towards the regional threat Saudi Arabia poses. The authors demonstrate that the long détente period after 1979 between Iran and Saudi Arabia had ended in 2003, turning into a containment strategy after the American withdrawal from Iraq. Afterwards, Saudi Arabia converted into a “proactive risk-taking player” and intervened with Iran’s security concerns.⁷ However, Ahmadian and Mohseni’s extended research on the Iran’s armed policies in the fertile crescent suggests that these policies are resultant of the US/Israel/ KSA policies or urged by these attacks, ignoring therefore Iran’s hegemonial aspires and imperial history.

Other scholarly approaches have established a new trend in the Iranian long-term strategy, suggesting that Iran is incorporating Sunni fighters in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps to substitute the Iranian fighters in north-eastern Syria. Ziad Awad argues that this strategy would insure original and complete integrated forces instead of sending unfamiliar Iranian troops to Syria, where language, traditions, customs and culture could hamper the Iranian efforts of increasing its influence sphere.⁸ However, the Syrian regime resilience is not only attributed to the Iranian support, but it also relied on other allies like the Russia who invested heavily in the Syrian struggle.

⁵ Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, “From Detente to Containment: The Emergence of Iran’s New Saudi Strategy,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 3 (May 2021): 779–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab014>. P. 350-355

⁶ Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, “Iran’s Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence,” in *NL ARMS*, 2020, 231–60, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-419-8_13. P: 355

⁷ Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, “From Detente to Containment: The Emergence of Iran’s New Saudi Strategy,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 3 (May 2021): 779–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab014>.

⁸ Ziad T. Awad, “Iran in Deir Ezzor : Strategy, Expansion, and Opportunities,” *European University Institute*, January 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.2870/724874>. P: 7

Moreover, some scholarly research has classified Iran's transgressive policy in Syria as one of offensive nature. Amr Youssef argues that Iran's strategy in the Levant in general is an offensive 'forward defence', where Iran applies a pre-emptive strategy to prevent other regional powers from expanding in the area. Youssef agrees therefore with Ahmadian and Mohseni's notion that Iran's most important catalyst is deterrence against Israel. However, Youssef's approach draws mainly on the military aspect of Iran's tactics, ignoring the other tools Iran utilizes to consolidate its stance in Syria.⁹

Contrastingly to Ahmadian, Mohseni, Awad, and Youssef, Joseph Daher argues that the former scholarly works did not analyse the Syrian conflict economically, nor socially. Daher argues that understanding the Syrian armed conflict can never be attained without an integral study that involves history, as well as contemporary social studies.¹⁰ In addition, Daher, among other scholars, claims that the Iranian economic intervention in Syria had a drastic turn since 2013. This shift manifested in mega-level loans, land and properties appropriation, real estate investments, religious and cultural projects, education, local communities support, medical centres, infrastructure establishments, public transport, and fossil fuel trade. Furthermore, the Syrian Shiites were incorporated in one body that has a supporting stance towards Khomeini's policies. As a result, the Iranian and/or Shiite influence on the social fabric of the Syrian society, claims Daher, mounted immensely in comparison with the Russian influence as well as with Iran's intervention in Syria before 2011.¹¹

Although Ahmadian, Mohseni, Awad, and Youssef's analysis have encapsulated the military and the political aspects of Iran's approach in Syria, they did not discuss the economic aspects of Iran's strategy and the implications of such process. Daher's analysis, on the other side of the spectrum, has studied the economics of Iran's presence, shedding some light on the Syrian social fabric. However, the sectarian consequences of Iran's investments -as an integral part of Iran's economic intervention in Syria- were never discussed academically before. Therefore, this research attempts to fill this gap, shedding light on the new sectarian facts in key-areas in Syria that resulted directly from Iran's mega acquisitions of properties and real estate sector. This research does not contradict with the Mohseni, Ahmadian, Awad, and Youssef; nor does it contradict with Daher. However, it recognises an area of

⁹ Amr Youssef, "Upgrading Iran's Military Doctrine: An Offensive 'Forward Defence,'" *Middle East Institute*, n.d., <https://www.mei.edu/publications/upgrading-irans-military-doctrine-offensive-forward-defense>.

¹⁰ Joseph Daher, *Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience* (Pluto Press (UK), 2019). P: 44

¹¹ Fatima Masjidi and Babek Mina: Interview with Joseph Daher. The socio-economic role of Iran in Syria. *Deirezzor 24 Net*. [interviewJosephDaher](#) (in Arabic)

study that has never been examined before academically, because this phenomenon, I argue, is not less important than the military and the political aspects of the Iranian offensive policies in Syria, as the economic intervention in the Syrian real estate market could have much more long-lasting and resilient consequences than the other methods Iran uses in the region.

1.2 Relevance

It is mentioned earlier in this thesis that Iran's intervention in Syria is not new. This would mean that this phenomenon has endured different phases. In addition, this also means that Iran's prolonged strategy in Syria has developed and manifested lately in a clear sectarian alteration on the ground while it was limited during the reign of Assad father and did not have sectarian implications before 2015. So how did the Iranian economic interventionism in Syria develop since the 1980s and in which sectors? How did Iran's infiltration of the Syrian real estate market affect the Syrian sectarian map? By means of a case study, this research aims to explore new sectarian facts in southern Damascus, highlighting therefore an alarming demographic issue that might have irreversible ramifications on the Syrian sectarian map. The study of this thesis focuses on southern Damascus because of the geo-political importance of this city for the resilience of the Syrian regime, and for the tremendous importance of Damascus location near the Lebanese and the Israeli borders. In addition, Damascus has many Shiite sacred shrines where Iranian's used to visit annually. However, these areas did not have Shiite majority inhabitants before 2015, as this thesis shall illustrate. So, the current debate on Iran's approach in Syria does address the sectarian implications of this intervention, as well as being underdeveloped when it comes to the economic aspect, which creates a space to address this issue in this thesis.

1.3 Research question

Much scholarly work has been conducted on Iran's policies in the Middle East, acknowledging Iranian expansionism methods such as political as well as military. However, little research has been conducted on the Iranian economic intervention in Syria before and after 2000, let alone after the Syrian uprising. Although the military and the political types of interventionism are effective and vital for accomplishing the regional interests of Iran in Syria, the Iranian economic intervention might not be less important; as a matter of fact, it might have far-sighted and deeper vision of the future of the region as Iran sees it, as well as being more vital on the micro level than the military intervention. This thesis hence examines whether Iran's economic policies in Syria are part of Tehran hegemonial project

by surveying the depth and amount of Iran's investments in Syria during the Assad father's reign on the one hand and through his son's reign on the other, and whether Iran's investments in the Syrian real estate market has tangible consequences on the Syrian sectarian map. This scanning shall also look into the possible new sectarian reality that was not desirable by the Assad father, if not feared. Consistently, this research would assist us to see if there is actually a connection between the Iranian regional hegemonial aspires and the investments Iran has been establishing in the Syrian real estate market. This is researched first by means of listing the Iranian investments in Syria between 1980-2000. Next, the increase of these investments in al-Assad son's time shall be researched. Finally, a case study which will analyse the Iranian investments in the Syrian real estate market shall be demonstrated. The case study will be focusing on one major area, southern Damascus. Ultimately, defining the amount and nature of the Iranian investments in Syria through the decades are used in this thesis to analyse Iran's economic involvement in Syria, paving the way for putting Iran's economic strategy in Syria in a realistic perspective.

In order to formulate an answer to the main research question, the thesis is approached by addressing three sub-questions. These are respectively: How vast were the Iranian investments in Syria during al-Assad Father's reign? If and how did these investments develop in Bashar al-Assad's reign? In which ways did Iran invest in the Syrian real estate market, in Damascus particularly, and what sectarian implications could be detected? The methodology which shall be conducted to answer these questions is indicated in the next section.

1.4 Methodology

This thesis concentrates on defining the size of Iran's economic interventionism in Syria since the 70s to 2022 roughly. In my case study, I will be focusing on the real estate sector in southern Damascus. This will be connected with the new sectarian fact that resulted from Iran's acquisition policy in the area.

In order to conduct my research, the academic publications that were illuminated in the literature review are further supported by other secondary as well as Arabic primary sources. However, the case study chapter concentrates primarily on Arabic press reports because the sectarian transformation in the researched area is radically novel. As to the date of writing this thesis, the topic of replacing the original Sunni locals of some areas in Syria with not-Syrian Shiites, from Iraq, Iran, or Lebanon has

never been researched academically. Therefore, it was not possible to use academic sources for this type of research.

The research method that is used for the analysis of the case study is further explained in chapter four of the thesis. The choice to conduct quantitative research consequently means that this thesis cannot cover every Iranian investment in Syria and connect it with the sectarian alterations that occurred in Syria during the civil war. The case study provides just a glimpse on the systematic replacement and resettling of new residents in imperative locations. However, the data which shall be presented help us conclude whether Iran's method in properties acquisition is to fulfil a long-lasting strategic goal in Syria. This point shall be extensively discussed in the upcoming chapters.

The thesis incorporates four chapters. The first chapter builds a theoretical framework that elaborates on relevant themes and concepts in relation to the topic: Iran's offensive realism in Syria. First, it researches the concept of realism: how is it defined and how far does it apply to Iran's strategy in Syria? The theoretical framework aims at connecting Iran's offensiveness with realism theory. The second chapter examines the Iranian investments in Syria in Hafez al-Assad's time. The third chapter moves to Bashar al-Assad reign and displays the quantitative and the qualitative surge of the Iranian investments that took place since his ascending to power. The final chapter will be discussing the case study – it provides a detailed framework for the qualitative content analysis and consequently examines the material that is used for the study, namely the Iranian investments in the real estate market in southern Damascus and the sectarian outcomes of these investments. By means of these chapters, the thesis aims at delivering extensive research to economic hegemony that could be much more effective and long-lasting than armed interventionism.

2 Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

Analysing Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East has frequently been conducted via the prism of religion, which is regarded as an integral part of the Iranian state's identity. Nehme argues that the other Middle Eastern nations that have Shia minority frequently view Iran's regional foreign policy endeavours as suspicious and as posing an ideological and sectarian danger.¹² When considering the factors influencing Iran's offensive foreign policy in the Middle East, the Syrian war serves as a pertinent example. Therefore, Iran's foreign policy in Syria could be analysed according to offensive realism theory. This analysis contends that Iran's foreign policy in Syria must be understood in light of factors other than the idea of a proxy conflict; instead, it seeks to protect Iran's position as a major regional player. In addition, it might be targeting projecting the Iranian dominance to Syria and across the region.

For this goal, the sections of this chapter shall define realism, explain the subdivisions of the theory into offensive and defensive realism, then it will demonstrate the four assumptions of offensive realism. Finally, it is going to illustrate how Iran could be seen as a status quo states according to Mearsheimer's offensive realism and connect this with the Iranian peripheral policy in Syria.

2.1 Realism in definition

In the wider frame of international relations, Antunes and Camisão define *Realism* as “a school of thought that emphasises the competitive and conflictual side of international relations”.¹³ According to Nehme, realism is based on four notions; first, “the nation-state is the principle actor in international relations”.¹⁴ Second, “the state functions as a unifying actor”.¹⁵ Third, “the decision makers are rational

¹² Esther Nehme, “Iran's Intervening Power in Syria's Civil War: A Realist Perspective,” Research Gate, April 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351082849_Iran's_Intervening_Power_in_Syria's_Civil_War_A_Realist_Perspective.

¹³ Sandrina Antunes And Isabel Camisão, “Introducing Realism in International Relations Theory,” E-International Relations, August 6, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

¹⁴ Esther Nehme, “Iran's Intervening Power in Syria's Civil War: A Realist Perspective,” Research Gate, April 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351082849_Iran's_Intervening_Power_in_Syria's_Civil_War_A_Realist_Perspective.

¹⁵ Ibid.

leaders, and their lead achieve the national interests of the state”.¹⁶ Finally, “the state is thriving amongst a context of anarchy.”¹⁷

John Mearsheimer later separated the Realism school of thought into Offensive and Defensive Realism. In terms of offensive realism, Mearsheimer emphasizes that the state's aggressive behaviour in the context of international politics is caused by the international system's chaos, while Kenneth Waltz extended defensive realism, showing how it arises when superpowers try to control the international system and maximize their power using two strategies: the first is the balance of power, and the second is abdicating responsibility.¹⁸ Although the idea of offensive realism significantly advances the study of international relations, it is nevertheless criticized.

Additionally, the Realism theory has a number of sub-trends that are distinguished by differing points of view from academics including Robert Gilpin, Randall Schuyler, Eric J. Labs, and Fareed Zakaria. However, John Joseph Mearsheimer's fully developed a version of offensive realism, which can be found in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. However, Some academics claim that Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory departs entirely from this branch by using positivism as a scientific philosophy and adding a system-cantered approach to the study of state behaviour in international politics, based on the international system's fundamental nexus.

2.2 The basic assumptions of offensive realism

Similar to Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism theory, the fundamental hypotheses of offensive realism theory are founded on five core tenets. Specifically, all nations have offensive military capabilities, countries cannot know the covert intentions of other nations, great powers are the primary players in world politics, the international system is chaotic and encourages states to maximize their strength in order to survive, all nations possess offensive military capabilities, and states are logical actors who are capable of developing sound strategies that maximize their power to survive.¹⁹ Offensive realism, like defensive neorealism, argues Mearsheimer, assumes a lawless international system where rational major powers that are able to use force to defend themselves are uncertain of the intentions of other

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979.

¹⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, “The False Promise of International Institutions,” *International Security* 19, no. 3 (January 1, 1994): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>. P: 5-49

nations.²⁰ Despite the fact that Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism was initially based on ideas that were somewhat similar to those of defensive neorealism, it makes very different assumptions about how a great power will act in international affairs—in my case: Iran's approach in Syria. Snyder argues it fundamentally varies from defensive neorealism in terms of gathering the power required for a state to secure its security and establishing the methods used by nations to reach this adequate degree of security. In the end, Snyder also claims that Mearsheimer's aggressive neo-realism paints a more dismal image of international politics marked by risky security competition between nations that could result in conflict and war.²¹ As to this thesis, This study shall focus on the Iranian economic strategy in Syria to investigate whether it is a hybrid policy that targets an Iranian/Shiite ambition in the Levant, establishing therefore a transborder competing demographic component against the Saudi/ Sunni influence in the region.

2.3 Status quo states compared to power maximizing states

Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism's "status quo bias" is intended to be changed by John Mearsheimer's aggressive realism. Although both neorealists contend that states' primary aim is maximizing security, they disagree on the level of force necessary to achieve this goal.²² According to Rynning and Ringsmose, Offensive neorealism contends that states are actually based on maximizing the power of revisionists who have aggressive intentions, in contrast to defensive realism, which holds that states are status quo forces that only seek to preserve their positions within the international system by upholding the existing balance of power.²³ In fact, Snyder argues that offensive neorealism offers the great powers compelling incentives to use offensive action in order to strengthen their security and ensure their survival.²⁴ Mearsheimer argues that states constantly fear one another and turn to self-help mechanisms for survival in a system of international relations marked by anarchy and doubt of the

²⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Updated Edition) (W. W. Norton & Company, 2003). P. 32–33.

²¹ Glenn Herald Snyder, "Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay," *International Security* 27, no. 1 (July 1, 2002): 149–73, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802320231253>.

²² Sten Rynning and Jens Ringsmose, "Why Are Revisionist States Revisionist? Reviving Classical Realism as an Approach to Understanding International Change," *International Politics* 45, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 19–39, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800217>.

²³ Snyder, "Mearsheimer's World—Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay," 157–58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

state's intentions and its offensive military abilities.²⁵ In this perspective, argue Mearsheimer, Snyder, Nehme, Ahmadian, Mohseni, Rynning and Ringsmose that Iran's "deterrence strategy" against Israel may be the product of an existential dread that led to an intervention in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen as a self-defence mechanism. Mearsheimer states that countries always aim to maximize their resources in order to reduce this fear of violence that both sides are anticipating from each other.²⁶ As Mearsheimer claims, the states are looking for "opportunities to change the balance of power by obtaining additional gains in power at the expense of potential competitors," because "the greater the military advantage of one country at the expense of other countries, the safer it will be."²⁷ In other words, states attempt to impose hegemony—being the only superpower in the state system—as necessary to achieve their desired goal in order to expand their military power at the expense of other states. I argue that it would be easier to comprehend Iran's massive influence in Syria, its military engagement, and its policy of acquiring land and other assets in this context.

Consistently, John Mearsheimer own words were: "The great powers realize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve dominance now, thus eliminating any possibility of confrontation from another great power. Only the misguided state will miss the opportunity to be the dominant one in the system because it believed that it already had enough power to survive."²⁸ Therefore, offensive realists like Mearsheimer think that relying on offensive strategies is the ideal plan for a state to pursue to increase its relative power to the point of gaining hegemony. Mearsheimer also contends that the major powers are likely to pursue expansionary strategies that will move them closer to extending their hegemony, provided that it makes sense for them to act forcefully.²⁹ Meaning that once regional hegemony is attained, the great powers transform into status quo governments, fulfilling the initial expansionist desire they had.

My thesis tends to focus on the second assumption of Mearsheimer's approach: *survival is the primary priority of great powers*, which leads naturally to furthering offensive policies, granting therefore the survival of the regime. Using the Iranian 'property acquisition' policy in certain places

²⁵ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (Updated Edition)*, p.20.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (April 1, 2006): p.160–62, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.690.160>.

²⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (January 1, 1994): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539078>.

in Syria as a case study attempts to measure if this Iranian strategy aims at survival in Syria even if the Syrian regime falls down, granting Iran a legal footstep in Syria by acquiring large amounts of land and personal properties, establishing therefore a micro level of Status quo states and dominance over certain areas in Syria.

3 Chapter Three: The Iranian-Syrian Economic Relations Before 2011

Since the Iraqi-Iranian war in 1981, Syria became Iran's most prominent ally in the region. At the time, Hafez al-Assad was Syria's autocratic leader who sided with quasi-Arab Iran against the Arabian states. As a result, Syria was isolated regionally while Iran maintained a close relation with Syria. This relation was not affected negatively by the death of Hafez al-Assad and his son's ascending to power. On the contrary, Iran's relation with Syria have witnessed a significant development afterwards.³⁰ In due course, the bilateral relations between these two countries manifested economically as well as military and ideologically. In order to understand the nature of the complex coordination between these countries aside from the military aspect, this chapter will answer to the question: How vast were the Iranian investments in Syria during al-Assad Father's reign and how did they develop after his death up till the eve of the Syrian civil war in 2011? This chapter will investigate the amount of the collaboration on the economic level which will help us compare the situations with that after 2011 in the upcoming chapter. But first, it might be vital for this chapter to shed light on Hafez al-Assad's personal views on the matter. For this goal, I have conducted an interview with a former Syrian diplomat who was part of the Assad father entourage as well as being deployed to Iran before 2000. The related outcome of this interview will be indicated first in this chapter, then the Syrian Iranian relations in terms of trade, financial investments, and economic agreements until 2011 shall be demonstrated.

For this chapter, a large number of Arabic primary and secondary sources were examined and used for the analysis. Using these sources provided this research with a direct access to articles and economic analysis of experts with first hand knowledge. Hence, I have researched a large number of Arabic sources and translated them myself. Furthermore, the economic factors which shall be discussed are defined by Baylis, Smith, and Owens as the instrumental factors that indicate the economic bilateral cooperation between nations. For this reason, the research shall encompass an analysis of each factor separately.

³⁰ Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Mediterranean Politics* 25, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 26–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1479362>.

3.1 Interview with Mr Saqr Elmelhem

Mr Saker Elmelhem is a former Syrian diplomat born in 1961 in Swayda south of Syria. He is the author of the political memoir: "I know them Closely".³¹ As highlighted earlier, Mr Elmelhem was deployed to Iran before 2000 as part of the Syrian diplomatic mission to Tehran. After Assad father death, he was deployed to several diplomatic missions all over the globe until 2012. With the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, Mr Elmelhem fled Syria and left his position on grounds of political opposition. Lately, Mr Elmelhem produced a memoir narrating his life story in office. In this memoir he talks about Hafiz al-Assad's only visit to Iran as Elmelhem was a member of the Syrian diplomatic mission to Iran at that time.

During the interview, Mr Elmelhem read an excerpt of his memoir describing al-Assad father's fear of the Iranians: "Hafiz al-Assad was not feeling safe in Tehran. He was surrounded by dozens of personal guards even when he was eating or sleeping. Furthermore, he brought his own cooking staff, as well as the technological security team. All these precautions made us all feel that he was not feeling safe in Tehran contrary to what the world thought. On al-Assad's last day in Tehran, he invited us to a meeting. During this gathering, he warned us of the Iranians as he said: Befriend the Iranians but do not believe them, because they have enormous political ambitions and strategic aims that would not be viable unless they get their hands on our country." In other words, Assad father was aware of the Iranian hegemonial project in the region. At the same time, Assad father did not agree with the Iranian's expansionist plans and might have feared them.

Furthermore, Mr Elmelhem describes how prominent figures of the Iranian policy-makers felt towards Assad-Father when he passed away. At that time, Mr Elmelhem was in Syria to host the Iranian delegation arriving in al-Qerdaha to express Iran's condolences. Among this delegation, Mr Elmelhem narrates, Qasim Suleimani was present. However, all the communications were held in English as al-Assad's strict instructions forbid them of speaking Farsi even if they were fluent speakers. This way, al-Assad guaranteed that the Iranians would slip confidential information or make mistakes revealing key-details unknown to Assad. For this reason, none of the Iranian delegation members was

³¹ This memoir is being edited by a publisher in London at the time of writing this thesis. The memoir will be translated in English and published in 2024. Mr Elmelhem provided this thesis with excerpts and quotes from his book and approved on publishing these quotes in this thesis during an interview. The interview was conducted on Friday 05 May 2023. This interview was recorded professionally for this thesis only.

aware that Mr Elmelhem speaks Farsi fluently. On their approach of the coffin, Mr Elmelhem reads from his memoire: “They were ahead of us and I was standing behind Qasim Suleimani by one row. While the whole Iranian delegation started reciting the *Fathia* from the *Quran*, Suleimani pretended that he is reciting the same verse; however, he was saying audibly: Only today the mountain has been demolished. Today, you, Zainab shall rise of your grave and step over these nasty Umayyads. Today we have reached the sea and no one will ever be capable of stopping us”. In short, Mr Elmelhem’s confirmed that Soleimani was happy by the death of Assad father. If true, this allegation would add to the assumption that Tehran’s ambitions in Syria were hampered by Assad father.

Mr Elmelhem says that he reported the exact words of Soleimani to the major command at the presidential office as they used to do when any Iranian slips by mistake. However, Mr Elmelhem did not get any response. He commented: “I expected that the command will send new instructions or be more careful in handling the Iranians. However, I was later deployed to Chili and my experience of dealing with the Iranians was neglected. Moreover, I had clear instructions from our ambassador in Chili not to mention any detail related to the Iranians again if I want to stay in office.” The interview with Mr Elmelhem illustrates that the father and son Assads had contrasting ideologies towards Syria and Iran’s bilateral relations. As much as Assad father seems to have feared the Iranian expansionist strategy, as little his son has invested in similar views. In the upcoming sections of this chapter, a clear idea on the difference between the father and the son dealing with the Iranian investments will be demonstrated.

3.2 Iranian-Syrian economic relations before 2011

All aspects of state-to-state bilateral relations are significantly influenced by the economic ties between nations. As a result, this factor has emerged as a significant driver in international relations, and the economic ties between nations are now a result of widely held political beliefs and ideological currents.³² We can infer the general characteristics of these relations by examining the history of trade and investments between Iran and the Assad regime, as well as the economic agreements that established each of these relationships. These three factors are what distinguish the nations economic

³² John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, “Global Trade and Global Finance,” in *The Globalization of World Politics*, 9th ed. (Oxford, 2023), 442–54.

ties over time argues Baylis, Smith, and Owens.³³ In the upcoming subsections, these factors shall be discussed respectfully.

3.2.1 Iranian Syrian relations in terms of trade exchange

The first manifestations of the economic relations between Iran and Syria began during the Shah's rule when these two countries signed an economic agreement in 1969. This understanding was followed by other agreements in the 1970s that resulted in Iranian loans to Syria worth over \$500 million. The trade exchange was inaugurated by exporting Syrian phosphates and agricultural crops as well as importing Iranian transport vehicles.³⁴

This economic cooperation developed after the fall of the Shah's regime in Iran in 1979 and was clearly established in light of the Iraqi-Iranian war. As the Assad regime allied with Iran against Iraq politically and militarily,³⁵ the economic relations were at this stage a second factor auxiliary to the security and military side, which emerged through a series of commercial and oil agreements in 1982. The most important of which was the agreement to exchange Iranian oil for Syrian phosphates. Presumably, Syria obtained the Iranian-subsidized oil in return for closing the Iraqi oil pipeline that passes through Syria.³⁶

This situation was continued until the features of the institutionalization of economic relations between the two countries began in 1996, with the establishment of the first Joint Economic Committee in Damascus, aiming at developing the economic relations and increasing the volume of trade exchange.³⁷

During the rule of Bashar al-Assad, the economic policy in Syria have witnessed a genuine shift through implementing economic liberalization policies and increasing the Syrian trade exchange with the Middle East region. In 2003, Iraq as a land barrier between Iran and Syria was removed by the American occupation. Since then, the volume of trade exchange between the two countries has

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Aljazeera Studies Centre. "العلاقات الاقتصادية بين إيران والنظام السوري", [The economic relations between the Syrian regime and Iran], July 20, 2015, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2015/07/2015729430141735.html>.

³⁵ Alireza Nader, "Iran's Goals in Syria," RAND, n.d., <https://www.rand.org/blog/2015/01/irans-goals-in-syria.html>.

³⁶ Kristina Kausch, "State and Non-State Alliances in the Middle East," *International Spectator* 52, no. 3 (July 16, 2017): 36–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2017.1347250>.

³⁷ Nura Ibold, "Post-Conflict Syria: From Destruction to Reconstruction – Who's Involved and to Which Extent," *Open House International* 44, no. 2 (June 1, 2019): 8–19, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ohi-02-2019-b0002>.

increased nearly significantly but it remained a limited exchange for Syria.³⁸ For example: the European Union imported 25% of the total imports to Syria that worth over \$17 billion in total, while Iran accounted for only \$300 million, or about 1.8% of the Syrian imports.³⁹

This overview of the trade exchange between Syria and Iran demonstrates that it was limited before 2000, when Bashar al-Assad ascended to power. After that date, the amount of the trade exchange has increased but it remained limited in comparison with trading with other Arabian countries or with the European Union.

3.2.2 Iranian Syrian relations in terms of investments

The reports of the Syrian Investment Commission indicate that Iran had eleven investment projects in Syria between 1991-2010.⁴⁰ The approximate cost of these projects was estimated at 500 million dollars. However, it is notable that these projects were targeting expanding cultural influence and achieving economic feasibility more than seeking profit.⁴¹

Part of these investments are related to religious tourism. It is reported that large numbers of Iranian “pilgrims” and tourists make annual visits to Syria. The numbers of whom, that exceeded hundreds of thousands according to some sources, motivated a number of Iranian companies to invest heavily in this sector.⁴² However, the most prominent Iranian investments after 2000 were power generation projects. Iran has established Tishreen and Jandar power stations with an estimated value of about \$500 million. These power plants generate over the fifth of Syria’s electrical feed.⁴³ In

³⁸ Aljazeera Studies Centre. “العلاقات الاقتصادية بين إيران والنظام السوري,” [The economic relations between the Syrian regime and Iran], July 20, 2015, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2015/07/2015729430141735.html>.

³⁹ “Implications of the Syrian Crisis on the Iranian Economy,” Wwww.Syrianef.Org (Syrian Economic Forum, 2015), accessed April 8, 2023, https://www.syrianef.org/assets/estimate_position/english/implications_of_the_syrian_crisis_on_the_iranian_economy.pdf.

⁴⁰ Syrian Investment Commission, *Fifth Annual Investment Report*, 2010, p. 65 (in Arabic) “هيئة الاستثمار السورية,” n.d., <http://sia.gov.sy/>.

⁴¹ For example: A senior advisor to the Syrian government expressed his opinion, saying: “It is no coincidence that Iran is investing in strategic industries such as concrete production and power generation... These industries are vital and can give the Iranians great influence... These projects are not about profit. They are about power and influence”. For more information, see:

Hew Taylor, “Iranian Investments Are Flowing into Syria, and Its Goals Are Economic and Political,” Aawsat.Com, 2007, accessed April 9, 2023, <https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=10261&article=439981#.ZDpcu3ZBy5f>.

⁴² Nader, “Iran’s Goals in Syria.”

⁴³ Alwifaq. “قصة شركة إيرانية اختطفت كلينتون صفتها شخصيا – الوفاق,” [A story of an Iranian company hijacked by Clinton] n.d. ClintonHijacksDealOfAnIranianCompany.

addition, an Iranian Syrian company was created to produce cars. The estimated value of this project was about 60 million dollars.⁴⁴

Compared to other foreign investments in Syria after 2000, such as Turkey, which was investing in 40 projects at an estimated cost of approximately \$600 million, and Saudi Arabia, which invested in 22 projects at an estimated cost of \$1,300 million, the Iranian investments were not as significant.⁴⁵ At the same time, the Iranian investments in this period constituted a small number compared to the total amount of \$ 13 billion that was invested by international foreign capital.⁴⁶

In short, the Iranian investments in Syria before 2000 were extremely limited, but they have witnessed a rise after 2000. However, compared to other regional investments in Syria, the amount of the Turkish and Saudi Arabian investments exceeded the Iranian ones largely.

3.2.3 Iranian Syrian relations in terms of economic agreements

The Assad regime concluded a set of economic agreements with Iran after 2000. The most important of which are: the Preferential Trade Agreement in 2006,⁴⁷ the agreements of the Syrian-Iranian Joint Economic Committee in 2008, and an agreement to establish a joint Syrian-Iranian bank that did not take place eventually, despite being licensed as a Syrian joint stock company under the name “Aman

⁴⁴ Hamidreza Azizi and Leonid Issaev, “Russian and Iranian Economic Interests In Syria (Pre-2010 and Intra-War Period),” *Geneva Centre for Security Policy* (The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), February 2019), accessed April 10, 2023, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10nIGNueBJ3zh4kU5wS7N66uuFm35TYDmJjO9jyzKVQYbDoO7vybkfq>.

⁴⁵ I would like to point out that the abovementioned numbers may not give a clear indication of the weakness of the Iranian investment in Syria. There are other factors, including the volume of direct foreign investment for each country under comparison, and the ratio of its investment to the size of its overall economy. For example, the percentage of Iranian foreign investment in Syria may be in advanced ranks compared to its foreign investments, regardless of its comparison with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and the small number that contributes to Iranian investments in Syria may replace a large percentage of the total Iranian economy. However, the original numbers were presented in Syrian pounds, but I adopted the US dollar to clarify the real numbers in that period, based on an average exchange rate of 50 Syrian pounds against one US dollar in that period. For further information, see: Syrian Investment Association, *Fifth Annual Investment Report*, 2010.

⁴⁶ Syrian Investment Commission, *Fifth Annual Investment Report*, 2010, p. 65 (in Arabic) “هيئة الاستثمار السورية,” n.d., <http://sia.gov.sy/>.

⁴⁷ Special and differential treatment in the organization usually refers to a category of legal provisions in the current agreements of the organization that gives developing countries, on the one hand, great flexibility with regard to the implementation of obligations and the use of policy instruments, and on the other hand, gives developed countries the right to preferential treatment for developing countries.

“المعاملة الخاصة والتفضيلية (S&DT),” n.d., <https://tfig.unece.org/AR/contents/sdt.htm>.

Bank” in 2009.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Syrian-Iranian Free Trade Zone Agreement was signed in 2010, and the Free Trade Agreement was inaugurated in 2011.⁴⁹

In addition to these agreements, which focused on trading, the Assad regime concluded several strategic agreements with Iran, such as the “Islamic Gas Line” or “Friendship Line” agreement at the beginning of 2011. This pipeline was established to transport Iranian gas to Syria via Iraq, which was one of the economic expressions of the Assad regime's preference for Iran. It was an alternative to the gas pipeline that was suggested by Qatar,⁵⁰ but this agreement was not implemented at the time, as is the case of the agreement signed in 2009 related to the transportation of Iranian gas as well.⁵¹

However, despite signing all these agreements, the plans did not manifest on the Syrian ground due to many factors. Many Syria experts attributed this failure to cultural differences and geographical difficulties.⁵² In addition, some other objective reasons stand out like the US sanctions on Iran and Syria, the similarity of the agricultural and industrial production between the two countries, the failure to overcome the difference and conflict of legal and administrative systems related to business between the two countries, the lack of a direct sea line, besides the difficulties of transferring money through exchange companies or banks.⁵³ Above all, some of Syria experts have attributed this failure to the Iranian government companies inability to implement projects agreed upon in Syria.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Enab Baladi. *إيران تدفع باتفاقيات مصرفية مع النظام السوري.. ما الهدف*, [Iran builds banking agreements with the Syrian regime, what is the goal?] September 3, 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/325322>.

⁴⁹ Mehr Khabar Kazari. *امضای موافقتنامه تجارت آزاد کلید خورد/ تجارت 5*, [The signing of the free trade agreement was keyed / 5 billion dollar trade between Iran and Syria] Mehr News Agency, December 18, 2011, [FarsiLink](#).

⁵⁰ The Qatari project aims to transport gas to Europe through the Syrian ports, in addition to linking the line to the Arab gas network, and includes laying a pipeline with a diameter of about 56 inches, and transporting between 100 and 110 million cubic meters of gas per day, which provides large quantities of gas to cover the needs of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan And the countries participating in the Arab gas pipeline to export the surplus to European countries. For more details, See: Shafaaq News, *هل تبعث الحياة في "خط الصداقة" للغاز الإيراني عبر العراق إلى أوروبا؟*, [Can Friendship pipeline of Iranian gas through Iraq be revived?] February 20, 2021, [ShafaaqNews](#).

⁵¹ Al Jazeera, *اتفاق أولي لنقل الغاز الإيراني لسوريا*, [An initial agreement to transport the Iranian gas to Syria] January 20, 2011, [aljazeera](#).

⁵² Syria experts believe that the culture of the Syrian people in general as merchants and industrialists did not make them accept to import goods from Iran, and this is an indication of the lack of ties at the level of the Syrian and Iranian peoples, and this is due to factors such as sect, language, customs and traditions. See: *عن معركة إيران الاقتصادية في سوريا*. “الواقع و النتائج - روزنة”, [rozana.fm](#), June 15, 2019, [Rozana](#).

⁵³ Syria TV, *تلفزيون سوريا*, [The Iranian positioning in Syria] May 26, 2018, [SyriaLink](#).

⁵⁴ Among these failures: the fail of the “Edhasse Sanat” company to develop the Hama Cement Factory because of submitting failed design plans, which prompted Iran to abandon its role in this project that cost approximately \$200 million, and the “Azarab” company, which signed a contract worth \$70 million to renovate the Baniyas power station,

3.3 Interim conclusion

Tracing the Syrian Iranian relations before the Syrian uprising suggests results that are inconsistent with the texts of the various agreements that were signed between these two countries. The Assad regime and Iran have been associated with a strategic alliance since the eighties of the last century, and this alliance has practically manifested in the political, military and security fields in the region. However, this partnership was not reflected in a proportionate manner with its nature and depth before the Syrian uprisings. The economic relations were limited throughout the rule of al-Assad father who cooperated with the Iranians but felt apprehensive about an Iranian economic infiltration of Syria. Despite the growth after his death, the agreements which have been signed during his reign did not manifest solidly. In stead, they remained modest in general until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, if compared to the Syrian economic relations with other regional countries.

Based on the foregoing, it can be concluded that the history of the Syrian Iranian economic relations did not rise to the level of the strategic alliance between them and did not reflect Iran's view of Syria as representing the geopolitical backbone of Iranian influence in the Levant and the wider Arab world. However, things would have changed with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, and Iran's support of the Assad regime in various aspects, including the economic aspect, shall witness a significant transformation, and this is what will be discussed in the upcoming chapter.

which was marred by corruption. It was practically implemented by two contractors for foreign companies, and a contract to supply 1,200 internal transport buses to the "Amiran" company. One year after signing the contract (in 2007), "Amiran" brought only one bus to Syria. See: "ويكلبيكس: مشروعات إيران في سوريا. كثير من الوعود والاتفاقات، قليل من التنفيذ، " n.d., <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/37908/>.

4 Chapter Four: The Iranian Investments in Syria After 2011: The ill-fated and the triumphant attempts

The Syrian and the Iranian regimes have had a strategic alliance for decades. However, the political, military, and security alliance was not reflected in the economic dimension before the Syrian uprising in 2011, especially during the period of the late Assad father, as the former chapter has demonstrated. At the same time, the economic cooperation did not witness an increase proportional to the growth in other aspects of *the* alliance after Bashar Al Assad ascending to power, compared also to the amount of the cross-regional investments that took place in Syria by other countries such as Turkey and the Gulf states.

However, these measures changed completely when the Syrian uprising broke out, especially after 2015. Iran sought to consolidate its power in all the main sectors in Syria, and despite the efforts that has been made, its actual success and level of control varies from one sector to another. Despite the obstacles, Iran has been relatively successful in taking over several joints as tracking the Syrian economic map demonstrates. This map includes agriculture and livestock, industry, oil facilities, infrastructure, and real estate sectors. However, this type of intervention encapsulated pouring large sums of funds into the Syrian economy, which Iran generously provided despite its stumbling economic situation.⁵⁵

Iranian financial spending methods to lift the Assad regime from a free fall were manifested in two aspects; on the one hand, direct spending to cover the requirements of the military operations, which amounted to large numbers annually. According to some estimates, this spending is estimated by six billion dollars annually.⁵⁶ On the other hand, official Iranian loans were credited to Syria through what is known as (lines of credit)⁵⁷ to meet the needs of the Syrian regime's treasury, which was

⁵⁵ Between 2012 and 2020, the exchange rate of the Iranian Toman decreased by more than 600%, from 3,500 to 22,000 against the US dollar. See: "انهيارٌ قياسي للعملة الإيرانية. قاغ جديد لن يكون الأخير," المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية, n.d., [IranianCurrencyDrop](#).

⁵⁶ According to "Jesse Shaheen," the spokeswoman for the former United Nations international envoy to Syria: "The United Nations estimates about Iran's average spending in Syria is equivalent to \$6 billion annually," and a researcher on Syrian affairs, "Dr. Nadim Shehadeh," estimated that between 2012 and 2013, Iranian spending amounted to between \$14 and \$15 billion. See: Jane Doe, "How Much Is Iran Spending in Syria?," IranWire, March 18, 2022, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/66730/>.

⁵⁷ Line of credit in the financial markets is a contract between a financial institution and a customer that specifies a ceiling for a short-term or long-term loan. For example: a \$1 billion Iran line of credit for the Syrian government can buy goods from Iran up to \$1 billion or borrow cash according to the terms of the contract, and in return the interest on the money you borrow must be paid according to the contract or the loan must be paid in full on time.

exhausted for various reasons. Some researchers argue that the most notable reasons of the Syrian treasury fail were “the disappearance” of revenues and spending requirements for warfare from the Syrian treasury, beside migration of competent Syrian figures, experienced labour, and investments outside the country.⁵⁸

As the military conditions in Syria changed with time with the military operations decreased after 2015, the Assad regime regained control over a large part of the Syrian soil while the allies of the Assad regime, especially Iran, began seeking to recover the money that was spent. In addition, Iran looked forward to harvesting the exerted military efforts by preparing for reconstruction. As financial investing in other countries is a strategic tool for acquiring dominance, I argue that the Iranian economic strategy aims at ensuring a long-term presence in Syria by investing in key-sectors. In this chapter, I will be focusing on the Iranian financial intervention in Syria after 2011 in general in an attempt to answer the main question: How far did the economic Iranian interference in the main economic sectors in Syria increase after the Syrian uprising and did all plans meet their targets? This question will help the thesis to construct a clear analysis on the fluctuation of the Iranian economic intervention in Syria through the years up till 2022. Moreover, this question will be answered by reviewing three key-sectors in the Syrian economy, namely in agriculture, the productive sector, and the extractive services sector,⁵⁹ which includes the Iranian real estate investments in Syria. However, as real estate investments are the case study of this thesis, I will elaborate on this type of investing in the next chapter intensively. Finally, Iran has invested in over a dozen sectors in Syria, as in education, import and export, public transport, healthcare, and communications. However, reviewing all these sectors is not possible in this thesis. For this reason, I am only reviewing three main cases in this chapter to illustrate that there was a huge surge in the Iranian economic intervention in Syria after 2011. And even though this research is limited to some fields, I would like to mention that all the aforementioned fields need extra research and extensive examination because they demonstrate the depth of the Iranian offensive economic strategy in Syria and the region.

In order to acquire a fresh and an in-depth look, this chapter will rely mainly on various Arabic sources, primary and secondary. Most of these are going to be press reports because the Arabic press

⁵⁸ Some opinions consider that Western sanctions against the Assad regime are one of the reasons that led to the collapse of the Syrian economy, while United Nations statistics clearly confirm that the Assad regime's economic policies and its decision to wage war on the Syrian people are the direct reasons for this.

⁵⁹ This division of the economic sectors has been adopted based on the most common division in economic schools.

has been covering this topic heavily, assisted with background material and experts' analysis. However, I also depended on seven Arabic academic sources. Among which, two are Ph.D. dissertations published by UAE university, and five are funded research executed for international research institutes.

4.1 The Iranian investments in agriculture: Weak efforts in a vital field

The first Iranian moves in this direction began by linking the Syrian agricultural sector with the Iranian production system, seeking to flood the Syrian market with various Iranian goods. Since 2015, Iran began promoting its vaccines for animals, domestic poultry, composts, and agricultural required machines in the Syrian markets.⁶⁰ However, these Iranian efforts in Syria have suffered severe setbacks since 2016, due in part to the failure to agree on the terms of a new line of credit, in addition to the increasing percentage of Russian agricultural trade with Syria, which constituted an obstacle to the expansion of Iran's commercial goals in this sector.⁶¹ At the beginning of 2018, the Syrian Farmers Union and the Syrian Federation of Chambers of Agriculture contracted with an Iranian tractor manufacturer company to import more than three thousand agricultural tractors.⁶² This deal was sealed because the main Syrian manufacture of tractors was suspended which resulted in a great tractors shortage.⁶³

The Iranian investments continued to expand in the agricultural trade through two new methods: the first is through its control over the marketing of Syrian crops abroad. In this regard, a number of Iranian businessmen and merchants reached an agreement with the Syrian Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection in 2018 that included exporting Potato material from Syria to several countries through Iranian merchants, and the negotiations included an agreement to study establishing

⁶⁰ Sinan Hatahet, "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria," *The Royal Institute of International Affairs Chatham House* (Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019), accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Al-Hall Net. "صفقة بين طهران وحكومة النظام لاستيراد آلاف الجرارات الزراعية من إيران," *الحل نت*, [Thousands of Iran's tractors to Syria] June 2, 2018, [alhallNet](http://alhall.net).

⁶³ Zeina Saqer, "هاشتاغ، هاشتاغ | هاشتاغ، الحكومة تستورد جرارات زراعية مستعملة. والسوريون يتساءلون: بتشتغل عالطاقة الشمسية؟" *هاشتاغ*, [The government imports second hand tractors. Syrians ask: do they work on solar energy?] August 30, 2021, [hashtagSyria](https://www.instagram.com/hashtagSyria).

4.2 Iranian steps in terms of the extractive industries

Syria does not have a grand underground wealth. However, it possesses a good and diverse underground wealth, including oil, gas and phosphates. In terms of oil, commercial production in Syria began in 1968 and reached its peak in 2002 at a rate of 625,000 barrels per day.⁶⁹ As for the gas field, several gas investment projects have been established, namely: Al-Hasaka, Gibsa fields, Omar gas project, and The village project, in addition to the gas plant in central Syria, which was established in 2006.⁷⁰ As for phosphates, Syria ranked fifth in the world on the list of phosphate-exporting countries in 2011, and phosphate ore in Syria ranks second in terms of economic and strategic importance after oil ores and natural gas in relation to the mineral and semi-metallic underground resources.⁷¹

The Iranian policy in this domain aimed at investing in the underground wealth in Syria, focusing on different axes, which we can categorize into three main fields. First, attempting to control phosphate wealth. Second, attempting to control the remaining oil and gas wells. Third, investing in facilities related to natural underground resources. In the upcoming part, I will demonstrate the fate of these Iranian endeavours in this domain showing also their success or failure reasons.

4.2.1 Iranian steps to control Syrian phosphates

Iran has imported Syrian phosphate since the seventies of the twentieth century, and therefore it is not surprising that the largest phosphate mines in Syria (the Palmyrene chain) were part of the largest economic agreement concluded at the beginning of 2017 in Tehran, which included establishing a joint company for this purpose to oversee extraction and export production to Tehran.⁷² However, the Assad regime - in April 2017, a month before it regained control of the phosphate mines (*Khunifis* and

⁶⁹ The most important oil fields in Syria are located in five areas: (Qarachouk- Rmeilan), (Al-Hasakah- Al-Shadada), (Euphrates Basin), (Al-Rusafa-Al-Jabal Al-Bishri) and (the central region Palmyra- Al-Balaas). Syria also has two oil refineries, Homs and Baniyas which handles more than half of the Syrian oil production, and there are three ports in Syria for exporting and importing oil on the Mediterranean: Baniyas, Tartous, and the port of Latakia. See: Abdulraoof Ruhban, "A geographical assessment of Syria's underground wealth", in Damascus University Magazine, Vo 25, 2009 (1+2). For more information see: <http://www.damascusuniversity.edu.sy/mag/human/images/stories/000259.pdf>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The Syrian Phosphate ore is located in the Palmyra chain - Khunafis, Al Sharqiya and Al-Rakhim, Al-Hammad region and the coastal region. Among the aspects of the military uses of Syrian phosphate is utilising it in manufacturing nerve gases (sarin, tabun, soman), and the separation and purification of radioactive elements such as uranium, thorium, molybdenum, and others. See: "الصراع على الثروة السورية بين إيران وروسيا: الفوسفات نموذجا" | Al Jazeera Centre for Studies," Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, n.d., <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/4336#e11>.

⁷² Ibid.

Sharqiya) - signed a contract with the Russian “STNGLOGESTIC” of the “Stroytransgaz” group, which aimed at carrying out the necessary maintenance work for these mines and providing services, protection, production, and transportation.⁷³ This Russian company began work in June 2017, days after the Assad regime regained control of the mines.⁷⁴ Thus, Iran’s efforts to control the Syrian phosphate failed because of the Assad regime’s preference for Russia, giving the Russians the higher hand on phosphate investments for the upcoming 50 years.

After the Iranian failure to control the phosphate extraction process in the Syrian fields or to control the manufacturing company, it seems to have turned towards making itself the main importer of Syrian phosphate as an important secondary source for obtaining the uranium that Iran needs for the nuclear program.⁷⁵ From the foregoing: Iran’s continuous attempt to obtain a large share of Syrian phosphates and its refusal to succumb to the almost absolute Russian control over the sector, which meets the needs of the Iranian market, whether agricultural or the requirements for uranium extraction, clearly shows the existence of financial gains that it recovers from Syria in payment of Iranian debts or the sums spent on keeping the Assad regime alive. The figures that Iran talked about - whether one thousand million tons or 200 million tons - also suggested the existence of Iranian plans to control the Syrian production of phosphates for at least 50 years, because of the current average production rate that amounted to 2 million tons per year.⁷⁶ However, the Russian companies did actually dominate the sector instead of the Iranian ones.

⁷³ Azzam Al-Allaf, “Russian Investment in Syrian Phosphate: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Cadmus EUI*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2870/42382>.

⁷⁴ Mark Hibbs, “Iran and Secondary Uranium Sources,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 23, 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/23/iran-and-secondary-uranium-sources-pub-52768>.

⁷⁵ In addition, there are reports that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard has transported tens of tons of Syrian phosphate overland through Iraq to Iran, and then there is talk in Iranian agencies about the arrival of large shipments through a sea transport line for Syrian phosphate to Iran, ranging from (4 to 5) thousand tons. Last July, Rostam Qassemi, the former Iranian Minister of Oil, stated in April that Iran will obtain (one thousand billion tons) of Syrian phosphate soil, stressing that he personally supervised the signing of this agreement between the two governments, then he corrected the figure to 1000 million tons, but Another statement from a member of the Agricultural and Natural Resources Committee in the Iranian Parliament, Ali Reza, on December 14, 2020, referred to obtaining a license to purchase 200 million tons of phosphate soil from Syria, which is an inaccurate number; The total average of phosphate production in Syria between 2017 and 2020 is 2 million tons annually, while the figure in 2011 was 3.3 million tons annually. See: Al-Allaf, “Russian Investment in Syrian Phosphate: Opportunities and Challenges,” 2021.

<https://medirections.com/images/dox/17.11.2020.Phosphates.and.Russian.Rooting.in.Syria.pdf>

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

4.2.2 Iranian steps to control the oil and gas fields in Syria

After 2015, the Iranian militias targeted controlling the rest of the oil and gas fields in the Syrian desert. In the beginning, militias affiliated with Iran, including the Lebanese “Hezbollah” and the Iraqi “Fatemiyoun”, controlled oil and gas fields in the countryside of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa northeast of Syria, but the intervention of the Russian “Wagner” and the “Fifth Corps” ended the Iranian dominance on these fields.⁷⁷

As for the underground resources in the Syrian waters, Iran has also left the race. Moscow acquired oil and gas investment contracts in Syria’s exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean, through a contract with East Med Amrit Company in 2013, and another contract with Capital Company in 2021.⁷⁸ These contracts left Iran out of the race to the oil and gas fields in Syria.

4.2.3 Iranian steps in terms of petroleum refining facilities and natural underground resources

Iran began planning to establish the third oil refinery plant in Syria since 2006, in partnership with Venezuelan-Malaysian capitals, this project was to be established in *Furqlus* in Homs governorate. However, this project did not see light due to the outbreak of the Syrian uprising.

In 2017, one of the provisions of the economic agreements signed by the Assad regime with Iran included establishing a major oil refinery in Homs and developing the old Syrian refineries. However, this plan was not executed, as is the case with the rest of the articles of the agreement.⁷⁹

This quick review of the Iranian efforts in the Syrian underground resources sector illustrates that Iran made diverse and continuous plans to dominate this sector similar to the agricultural sector. However, the efforts made in the underground wealth sector exceeded those of the agricultural sector. Furthermore, it is noticeable in this context that the Russian competition with the Iranian plans is fierce in contrast to the agricultural sector, where the Russians are barely interested. Therefore, it seems that the Iranian gains are merely consolation prizes which do not rise up to the Iranian ambitions.

⁷⁷ Aawsat. “بقايا» النفط السوري، الشرق الأوسط». [A Russian Iranian conflict on the remains of the Syrian oil] [aawsat](https://www.aawsat.com).

⁷⁸ The first company obtained a contract that includes a marine block extending from the north of Tartous to the south of the Syrian Baniyas, an area of 2190 square kilometers, and extends over a period of 25 years, while the second company obtained a contract that includes a marine block off the coast of Tartous up to the southern Lebanese maritime border for a period of 29 years with an area of 2250 square kilometers. square kilometres. See: محرر، “عقد” روسي للتقيب عن النفط في المياه الإقليمية السورية،” *March 17, 2021*, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/466778>.

⁷⁹ Reuters Staff, “وكالة: إيران ستبني مصفاة نفطية في سوريا،” [Iran is building an oil refinery in Syria] *U.S. September 26, 2017*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-oil-syria-ia4-idARAKCN1C122I>.

4.3 Interim conclusion

As illuminated in this chapter, Tehran proliferated the financial relations with Damascus after 2011. This development included almost every sector in Syria. Consistently, several agreements were consolidated along the years since 2011. However, not all plans met reality and not all of them were executed because of a variety of reasons. It is mostly noted that the Iranian economic planning in Syria was also hindered by Syrian economic plans with Russia, who took over some sectors even after Syrian officials signed agreements with Iran. In short, this chapter has established that the increase in agricultural, services, and the productive sectors aimed at consolidating Iran's grip over the Syrian given market, laying the grounds for an actual Iranian footstep in the Levant that could be more efficient than the armed discourse. In this sense, Iran's plans in the Syrian real estate sector are the missing part that would complete the picture, which shall be examined in the next chapter.

5 Chapter Five: Case Study: The Iranian Investments in the Syrian real estate market and the demographic consequences

“Iran devoured the Syrian real estate market”⁸⁰

Tammam Abo Elkher

Noon Post

16 September 2021

5.1 Introduction

After Khomeini came to power with the Islamic revolution against the Shah’s regime in 1979, he began to export his revolutionary dogma regionally, which escalated the peripheral influence of Iran. While Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000) -the former president of Syria- did not facilitate the Iranian expansionism in Syria, his heir Bashar al-Assad welcomed the Guardian Jurist project -*al-waly al-Faqih*. With the increase of the Shiite presence in Syria after 2000 and the start of rehabilitating Shiite facilities around the Shiites shrines in Syria, the Shiite Iranians started settling in the buildings surrounding these shrines. Later on, the Shiite visitors started to expropriate the surrounding houses and properties. For example, this strategy was applied in al-*Amarah* neighbourhood in Damascus, where the Shiite investors seized the buildings adjacent to the shrine of *Sayyida Ruqayyah*,⁸¹ turning the area into a Shiite semi-ghetto. Moreover, a systematic removal of ancient Damascene houses began in the neighbourhood of the Sharifian Dynasty to establish a huge building for the shrine of *Sayyida Ruqayyah*, as happened around the tomb of *Hajar bin Uday* in the Adra region east of Damascus.⁸²

⁸⁰ Noon Post. إيران تلتهم سوق العقارات في سوريا. n.d., [Iran is devouring the Syrian real estate market] <https://www.noonpost.com/content/41828>.

⁸¹ Orient net. التواجد الشيعي في دمشق ومحاولات تغيير ديموغرافيتها!، “أورينت نت” [The Shiite presence in Damascus and the attempt to change its demographics] March 31, 2022, https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/89121.

⁸² Ibid.

Furthermore, with the civil war expanding to the Shiite shrines' locations around Damascus, the appropriation of land and the purchase of real estate maximised, especially with the presence of the paramilitary forces which were estimated in thousands of fighters affiliated with Khamenei. News started to spread on the exuberant sales that were taking place in favour of Iran. In due course, properties acquisition witnessed remarkable Iranian activity over the past years all over Syria. A repertoire of Iranian investors bought complete neighbourhoods in western Syria near Homs, while others bought complete villages or areas whose residents were forcibly internally and/or externally displaced as in western Syria near Homs, the vital region along the Syrian borders with Lebanon.

Consistently, the Iranian government encouraged companies, merchants, and contractors to acquire various real estate properties in Syria, and recruited a huge network of institutions and brokers, with special facilitations granted by the Assad regime.⁸³ The objective evidence displays that these areas which have been bought by Iranian capital are completely inhabited by Shiite residents. This news was the core motivation of this research as they have significant indications on the unique case of the Iranian investments in the Syrian real estate market. For this goal, this chapter shall investigate the eminency of the Iranian penetration of the Syrian real estate market in southern Damascus, exploring also the fundamental demographic consequences of this penetration? The answer to this question shall put the Iranian policy in the real estate sector in certain places in Syria in the context of this thesis, helping us in assessing whether these investments are part of a hegemonic project related directly to the offensive strategy of Iran in the Levant or not. In terms of methodology, this chapter shall be divided in three parts. The first part shall focus on the Iranian investments in the Syrian real estate market in general. This will be followed by analysing these investments in Damascus. Finally, the last part of this chapter will shed light on the demographic change resultant of this policy showing the sectarian transformation that occurred in the given areas. A critical analysis of the results will be also indicated.

5.2 Syria proper

Despite the continuous competition between Russia and Iran for influence in Damascus after 2015, some observers believe that Tehran has been able to gain a real estate presence in many Syrian regions,

⁸³ Orient Net. "اورينت نت، "الاستثمارات الإيرانية في سورية وأهمية "الفلق الأميركي" [The Iranian investments in Syria and the importance of the American concerns] March 7, 2022, [orientnet](https://orientnet.net).

whether in the south or the northeast. All the way to the city of Aleppo by creating a social environment for the militia fighters that were brought from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Lebanon.⁸⁴

With the change of the military control map after the Russian intervention in Syria,⁸⁵ the Iranian militias expanded the scope of real estate purchases, including lands intended for construction in many locations in Syria. These locations indicated urban as well as rural sites. The focus of the Iranian properties acquisition ranged from the eastern Ghouta of Damascus to Homs city near the Lebanese borders and west of Syria, to Aleppo city in the north.⁸⁶

As for northeastern Syria, Iran was also expanding its purchase of real estate in the pro-Assad areas, as in some neighbourhoods of al-Hasaka and Raqqa cities. In this regard, 135 real estate purchases by Iranian citizens were monitored in 2021 alone.⁸⁷ Whereas the pro-Iran militia “Hezbollah” was acquiring lands and housing areas near the Syrian Lebanese borders.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Iran succeeded in obtaining many projects in the reconstruction sector; as contracts for implementing sixteen real estate development areas in six Syrian governorates. This step was consolidated by signing 11 memorandums since mid-2011 between the two countries. However, the most important of these projects are located in and around Damascus city. The first project of which is construction works for a city consisting of 200,000 housing units south of Damascus where the Palestinian camp “al-Yarmouk” is located.⁸⁹ The second mega project of which is the “Basilia City” or the “Damascus Bracelet” project which will encompass some portions of the outskirts of the city.⁹⁰

As for other parts of Syria, Iranian mega real estate purchases have taken place in *Wadi Al-Jouz* area in Hama governorate in central Syria, the *Hasya* area in the Homs governorate, the *Al-Haydariyah* area in the city of Aleppo, the city of Jable, the Baba Amr neighbourhood in Homs, and along the

⁸⁴ Ein al-Furat Net. “شبكة عين الفرات, شبكة عين الفرات | شراء العقارات | شبكة عين الفرات”, November 20, 2022, <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2022/11/20/6894>.

⁸⁵ Aljazeera Studies Centre. “الحرب الروسية في سوريا: الأسباب والمآلات | مركز الجزيرة للدراسات”, n.d., <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/569>.

⁸⁶ Almashareq. “فيلق القدس التابع للحرس الثوري الإيراني يعزز وجود إيران الاقتصادي في سوريا”, August 11, 2021, https://almashareq.com/ar/articles/cnmi_am/features/2021/08/11/feature-01.

⁸⁷ Annahar. “بالأرقام... التوسع الإيراني في سوريا عام 2021”, n.d., <https://www.annahar.com/arabic/news/arab-world/syria/29122021092902208>.

⁸⁸ Noon Post. “الخبر, عبر وسطاء محليين.. إيران تلتهم سوق العقارات في سوريا | نون بوست”, n.d.

⁸⁹ Syria TV. “تلفزيون سوريا, إيران تتفق مع النظام على بناء 200 ألف وحدة سكنية في دمشق | تلفزيون سوريا”, January 28, 2020, [iran200housing units](http://iran200housingunits).

⁹⁰ Athar Press. “إطلاق مشروع المدينة النموذجية “زيتون سيتي” في ريف دمشق”, January 26, 2019, [athar press](http://athar.press).

highway connecting Homs in mid Syria with Damascus. One of the mega projects on this highway is “Zeitoun City”,⁹¹ which extends over 15 square kilometres of agricultural lands that will be turned into urban spaces.⁹²

The Iranian tools of accommodating real estate acquisition vary extensively. On the one hand, Iran utilises international Iranian companies to fulfil these acquisitions. On the second hand, there are local Shiite agents who work directly to facilitate Iran’s interests in the Syrian real estate market. The Iranian international companies, which the Assad regime granted licenses to operate inside Syria, are active since 2015. The most prominent and largest of which is: Khatam al-Anbiya Company, which is directly affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard,⁹³. Whereas the localized agents are less numbered, the most prominent of whom is “Abdullah Nizam,” Khamenei’s agent in Syria since before the Syrian civil war.⁹⁴ On the third hand, Iran has over 44 charitable, religious, and cultural institutions that accommodate Shiite programs to penetrate the majority Sunni cultured society. This system is mainly managed by the Iranian Cultural Chancellery and the Iranian Embassy in Damascus.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Author سوريا بدا حرية, “October 6, 2019 – Emmerdeur-Du-Net’s Blog,” Emmerdeur-du-net’s Blog, October 6, 2019, <https://emmerdeurdunet.wordpress.com/2019/10/06/>.

⁹² Eqtsad Net. “اقتصاد مال و اعمال السوريين”, “اتفاقيات جانبية”, n.d., <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/32773/>.

See also: <https://www.emmarsyria.com/post/-30-..-26->

⁹³ Khatam Al-Anbiya Company deals with 5,000 Iranian contractors, and has about 650,000 employees inside Iran only. In addition to this company, other companies have been granted licenses by the Assad regime to operate, such as: “Neken” company, “Neroguster” company, “Bernan” company, and “Al-Baraka” company. For further detail, see: “اقتصاد مال و اعمال السوريين”, “اتفاقيات جانبية”, n.d., <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/32773/>.

⁹⁴ Abdullah Nizam: A Shiite businessman born in Damascus, completed his studies in engineering in Damascus university, and was appointed to the Military Housing Institution, where he progressed until he was handed the presidency of one of the major branches of his administration, then moved from engineering to the field of “religion.” He is the director of several religious synagogues and an advisor to the Minister of Islamic Facilities in Syria, and his role emerged during the years of the Syrian uprising, supported by Iranian funds, as the first Shiite responsible for the Shiite burial places, charitable, and cultural associations in Syria. For further detail, see: “عربي21- صالح الدهني”, “عربي21” ترصد: “عربي21 عمائم نفوذ إيران بسوريا ومؤسساتها (ملف)”, “عربي21” [arabi21](http://arabi21.net), March 20, 2019.

⁹⁵ The most prominent of these associations in Damascus and its countryside: The Social Charity Committee, Al-Zahraa Charitable Organization, Al-Ameen Foundation for Social Works, Al-Sirat Cultural Complex, Al-Rahma Charitable Association, the Imam Al-Sajed Foundation, and the Martyrs Foundation. In the governorates of southern Syria “Daraa – Quneitra” the following are active: Al-Zahraa Association, the Association of the Loved Ones of the Immortal Leader, and the Tammuz Association.” In the governorates of Homs, Hama, Tartous, and Lattakia, the following are operating: “Al-Ghadeer Association, Al-Mustafa Charitable Association, Al-Shuhada Foundation, Al-Hadi Charitable Association, and Al-Thaqlain Charitable Association.” In the province of Aleppo, the following are active: “Nour al-Huda Cultural Centre, the Ask for Knowledge Association, the Ihsan Charity Organization, the Martyrs Foundation, the Al-Thaqlain Charitable Organization, the Al-Misbah Educational Complex, the Al-Hujjah Complex, and the Al-Qalam Educational Institute.” In Deir Ezzor Governorate, the activity is focused on the “Al-Thaqlain Charitable Organization.”

Finally, Iran also has great influence within the official Syrian institutions related to the real estate sector, such as the “General Authority for Real Estate Development and Investment,” whose mission is to create real estate development areas. As well as Iran’s influence on the Syrian Ministry of Local Administration and Works, and the General Corporation for Housing.⁹⁶

The gathered evidence demonstrates that Iran is acquiring a wide housing base all around Syria. However, the most important of which is located in Damascus which will be discussed next.

5.3 In Damascus

With the Syrian debts accumulating, the Syrian regime granted Iranian semi-governmental investors rights to lands, facilities, and hotels in several locations in Syria. As many press reports and studies demonstrate, a large proportion of properties are officially bought by Iranian citizens in different regions throughout Syria, especially the capital, Damascus, and its countryside. This Iranian strategy in the Syrian real estate market was planned and executed by both regimes, as both governments either issued decrees to facilitate a quick acquisition of properties or encouraged the Iranian private funds to invest in Syria.⁹⁷

On the one hand, a closer look on the properties that were acquired by Iranian businessmen inside Damascus illustrates that a complete Iranian housing project has been established in *al-Mazze*h area, where the Iranian embassy in Damascus is located. This acquisition was facilitated by enacting new Syrian buying and selling laws, such as the presidential decree No. 25 of 2013 that facilitated Iranians ownership of Syrian properties.⁹⁸ This decree permitted a legitimate transferring of Syrian properties

As for the most prominent seminaries, they are represented by: “The Zainabiyah Hawza, the Imam Khomeini Hawza, the Al-Murtada Hawza, the Mustafa Hawza for Qur’anic Sciences, the Ahl al-Bayt Hawza, the Imam al-Sistani Hawza, the Mahdi Scholarly Hawza for Islamic Studies, the Imam Ali Hawza, the Imam Ali Hawza for the Jurisprudence of the Immaculate Imams, the Haidari Hawza, and the Hawza for Islamic Studies. Imam Jawad al-Tabrizi, the Hawza of Imam al-Sadiq, the Hawza of the Great Messenger, the Hawza of Imam al-Mujtaba, the Hawza of Imam al-Hussain, the Hawza of Imam al-Zaman Education, the Hawza of the Two Righteous Martyrs, the Hawza of Imam al-Mahdi Scientific for Islamic Studies, and the Hawza of the Great Imam. For more details, see: “زرع الأوتاد في محيط المقامات” n.d., <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/30235/>.

⁹⁶ Eqtsad Net. “مؤسسات رسمية وشبه رسمية.. تستغلها إيران لتحقيق أجداتها العقارية في سوريا”, *اقتصاد مال و اعمال السوريين*, n.d., <https://www.eqtsad.net/news/article/32579/>.

⁹⁷ Sasa Post. *فريق العمل*, “إيران تشتري سوريا.. وتستوطنها - سياسة بوست”, *سياسة بوست and فريق العمل* (blog), March 31, 2016, <https://www.sasapost.com/iran-and-syria-2/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

if the original Syrian owner was absent and did not react to courts notifications.⁹⁹ In addition, a second presidential decree allowed Iranian citizens to buy and sell Syrian properties on the basis of profit and sharing if they deal with liquid capital. This decree was enormously profitable for Iranians while it was devastating for Syrian businessmen who were affected direly by the civil war as well as the displaced Syrians who could not return to Syria to grant their rights in their properties.¹⁰⁰

Later on, a third presidential decree was issued to facilitate Iranian acquisition of public sector establishments to accommodate post-war construction plans. The decree in question, No. 19 of 2015 stipulated that the Syrian government can hand over public Syrian properties to Iran in terms of reconstruction, and the Iranians can buy the property of faltering Syrian businessmen and transfer their projects to Iranian holding companies in Syria.¹⁰¹

On the other hand, the Iranian government has also played a major role in encouraging Iranian companies, merchants, and contractors to buy various real estate properties in Syria. According to the Iranian “Beek Net” website, many Iranian investors bought “luxury homes, villas and apartments in the famous and prestigious areas of the Syrian capital”.¹⁰² According to the same source, most of the estates adjacent to *Sayyidah Zainab’s shrine* were purchased by figures close to the Syrian regime,¹⁰³ which caused a significant increase in real estate prices in this area.¹⁰⁴

Evidently, Iran recruited a huge network of institutions, real estate dealers, brokers, and owners of real estate offices in Syria, pumping millions of dollars to buy real estate and acquire large sums of properties in the ancient areas of Damascus city, and in the area extending from behind the Umayyad Mosque to the Bab Touma area, one of the most prestigious and tourist places in Damascus. In

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ The exact wording of this decree stipulated: “By a decision of the Minister of Local Administration and based on the proposal of more than one administrative unit council, a joint holding company may be created between more than one administrative unit in accordance with the provisions of this legislative decree. It takes into account the proportions of the capital participating in it from each administrative unit, and its board of directors is chaired by the head of the administrative unit with the largest participation rate in the capital.”

The full text of this decree is available on: 2015 لعام 19 رقم التشريعي رقم 19 لعام 2015، “المرسوم التشريعي رقم 19 لعام 2015، رئاسة مجلس الوزراء في الجمهورية العربية السورية،” حول جواز إحداث شركات سورية قابضة مساهمة مغلقة خاصة بناء على دراسات اجتماعية واقتصادية وتنظيمية بهدف إدارة واستثمار أملاك الوحدات الإدارية أو جزء منها (C) 2016, n.d., SyriaPM.com.

¹⁰² Sasa Post. العمل، “إيران تشتري سوريا.. وتستوطنها - ساسة بوست،” ساسة بوست and فريق العمل، (blog), March 31, 2016, <https://www.sasapost.com/iran-and-syria-2/>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

particular, it was reported that Iranian businessmen have bought the most important hotels in downtown Damascus and the city centre, as Calda, Iwan, Asia, Damascus International, Phenicia, and Petra hotels, in addition to shares in Semiramis Hotel belong now to Iranian businessmen.¹⁰⁵ A critical examination of these hotels show that constitute a large portion of the hotels in Damascus city centre.

Furthermore, Iran has been purchasing large amounts of rural lands around Damascus since 2018, when the Syrian regime was able to retrieve the surrounding areas of Damascus from the armed opposition factions. With the end of the military operations in those regions, Iran started gathering volunteers from the locals and implementing Shiite clerics to spread the Shiite culture. As well as purchasing a large number of houses, especially in areas close to Shiite shrines in the countryside. This plan was implemented in many regions around Damascus, as in *Moadamiyat al-Sham*, *Darayya*, *Babbila*, *Sidi Qaddad*, and *Yalda*.¹⁰⁶

In all these locations, one strategy was utilized. The local agent of Iran buys dozens of houses and agricultural lands, then he brings families from the eastern region of Syria as well as from Iraq to live in those houses as tenants. The number of families brought in to *Moadamiyat al-Sham* for example is estimated at 250 families, who have become a clear percentage of the remaining original residents of the region. These new inhabitants adopted a tribal way of life which differs enormously from the Syrian social lifestyle. An original Syrian local from *Moadamiya al-Sham* says in an interview that took place in November 2022: "The region is going through a clear demographic change, and it seems that this will soon extend to *Darayya*, the adjacent area." He added that the locals are dreading a silent Shiite invasion.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, a similar process was held for real estate purchases in *Darayya* where a Shiite shrine is located. The "Sakina shrine" in *Darayya*, adjacent to *Moadamiyat al-Sham*, was the centre of the Iranian housing investments in the region, creating a suburb similar to the one that was erected in "Sayyeda Zainab", taking advantage of the location of the shrine, which stands amidst hundreds of buildings whose owners were forcibly displaced during the Syrian civil war. The original owners who

¹⁰⁵ Al-Sharq "السفارة الإيرانية تمتلك عدة فنادق في دمشق باسمها", *The Iranian embassy buys several hotels in [الشرق]*, *Alsharq* [Damascus] June 18, 2014, [Alsharq](#)

¹⁰⁶ Ein al-Furat. "بين الترهيب والترغيب.. إيران تدخل معضمية الشام من باب شراء العقارات | شبكة عين الفرات", *شبكة عين الفرات*, November 20, 2022, <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2022/11/20/6894>.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

were externally/internally displaced were Sunni locals, while the new inhabitants are foreign Shiites in total.¹⁰⁸

Far from *Darayya*, the town of *Babbila* south of Damascus has witnessed purchases of dozens of real estate and agricultural lands through Syrian personalities and real estate dealers from the region. Many press reports demonstrated that these large purchases were administered and fulfilled for Iranian and pro-Assad Shiite militias who settled in the region during the civil war. This was followed by opening hotels and hotel apartments on the road leading to the shrine of "*Sayyeda Zainab*", expanding therefore the religious tourism industry of Iran around the shrine.¹⁰⁹

5.4 The impact of the Iranian real estate investments on the Syrian sectarian map

During the civil war, a large portion of the Syrian population was forcibly displaced. However, the local's displacement might not lead to a genuine transformation in the Syrian sectarian map if it was not followed by resettlement or naturalization of a different component. Although the displacement was not always followed by settling new residents, an evident and clear settlement was noted in certain cases. While the displacement operations in Syria have led to evicting over 13 million people from several regions in Syria -Sunni and other components excluding Alawites and Shiites-¹¹⁰ the real estate acquisition policy undertaken by Iran was followed by filling the empty spaces with Shiite residents, especially inside Damascus in the al-Mezze neighbourhood, around Damascus, and around Homs west of Syria.¹¹¹

As a result, the war brought in a clear change in the demographic composition of Assad's *Useful Syria*.¹¹² It was stated that the Syrian population in 2011 was estimated at 21.3 million, 59 percent of whom were Sunnis, 11 percent were Alawites, and only 4 percent were Shiites.¹¹³ In 2022, a groundbreaking report revealed that the Syrian population in the Assad-controlled regions -or *Useful Syria*-

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ The UN Refugee Agency, "بعد 11 عاماً، تزايد المصاعب يدفع بالعديد من السوريين إلى حافة الهاوية", [After 11 years, increasing suffering pushes the Syrians to the edge] January 29, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/ar/62308a534>.

¹¹¹ https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/89121

¹¹² Alarab News. "سوريا المفيدة... لتمكين الوجود الإيراني في المنطقة" "*Useful Syria*"... to enable the Iranian presence in the region", 24 September 2016, [alarab](http://alarab.net)

¹¹³ Al-Quds al-Araby. "كيف تهدد الديموغرافيا إسرائيل؟" [How Demographics Threaten Israel?], April 6, 2022, accessed May 4, 2023, [alquds](http://alquds.net).

dropped to about 10 million citizens only, where Shiites make up 10 per cent of the population, and Alawites make up 30 per cent. Compared to the statistics that were given previously, the Shiites and Alawites might be constituting about 15 percent of the population of Syria, but according to this study in 2022, they might be constituting about 40 percent of the population of Assad-controlled Syria.¹¹⁴

A second similar report demonstrated that the civil war in Syria has changed the nature of the country's demographics dramatically, revealing that the "Sunni Arabs" no longer represent the majority as they compose now "only half of the population".¹¹⁵ According to this report, the figures used are "just estimates prepared by experts and non-governmental organizations" because the last census was held before 2011. However, the experts agree that the most affected sects are "Sunni Arabs and Christians." The report depended on the French expert Pierre-Yves Baye opinions, who concluded that the demographic changes were ultimately in favour of the Syrian regime, because the decrease in the Sunni component of the population increases the percentages of minorities, with the exception of Christians and perhaps Circassians, strengthening therefore the position of the regime. Baye claims in the same report that the Sunnis represented about 74 percent of the population of Syria before 2011, including the Kurds and Turkmen while they are now cut to half.¹¹⁶

However, other estimates indicate that the last official statistics in 2013 have estimated the population at 22,850,000 people of all sects, and the Arab Sunnis alone were estimated at 14.3 million or 63 per cent of the total number, without counting the Kurds and Turkmen.¹¹⁷ A different source stated in 2018 that Syria's population constituted about 16 million Sunnis, and about 9 million citizens of various sects like Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druze, and other minorities. This source claims that the Sunni component of the population in 2022 only counted to 8 million Sunnis left in Syria after 2018, as the other half were forced to seek refuge in other countries in the Middle East and Europe.¹¹⁸

Consistently, the National Syrian Assembly states that the Syrian demography has sustained a dramatic alteration with the civil war where the internal and the external displaced Syrians are estimated at eight millions in 2023, while the Assembly main page states that over one million Syrians

¹¹⁴ "How Demographics Threaten Israel?," Al-Quds al-Araby, April 6, 2022, accessed May 4, 2023, [alquds](https://www.alquds.net).

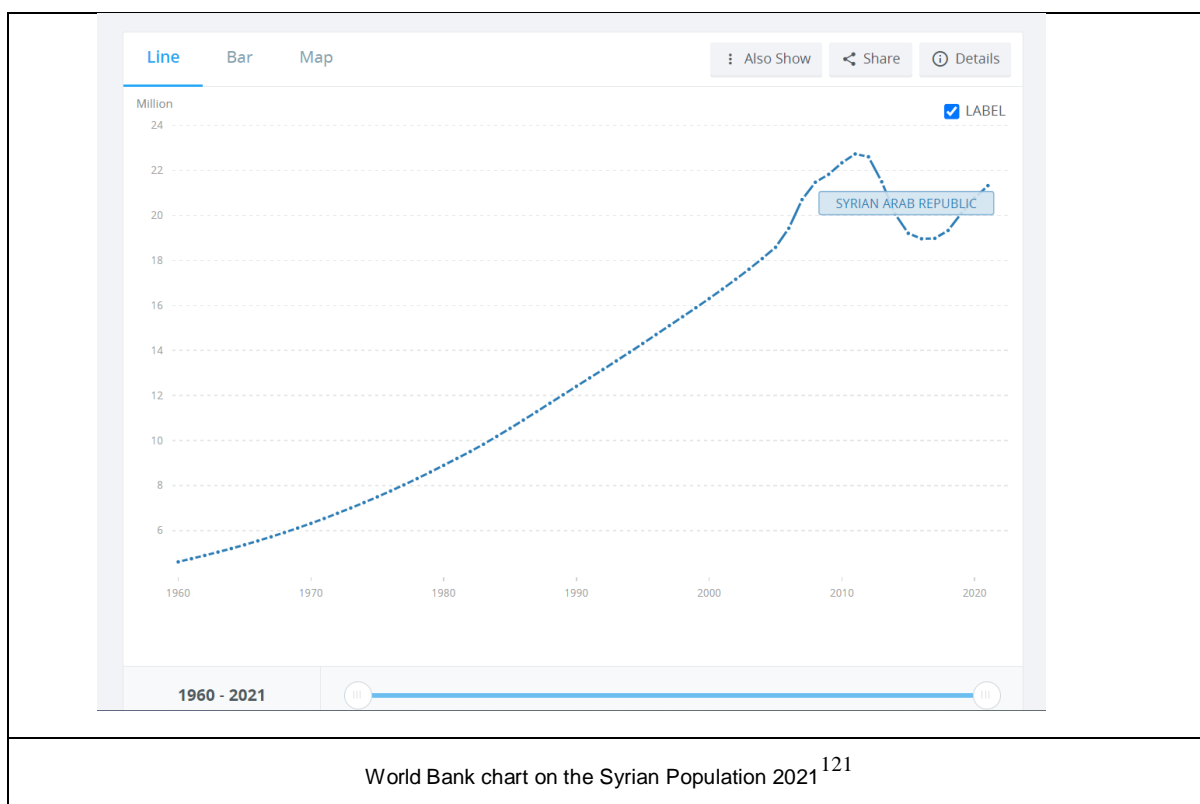
¹¹⁵ Es Cms, "صحيفة الاستقلال، صحيفة الاستقلال | كيف عمل الأسد على تغيير ديمغرافية سوريا؟" [How did Assad transform the Syrian demographics?] n.d., <https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/view/4412/dep-news-1586189392>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

were killed during the years of conflict.¹¹⁹ Contrastingly, the World Bank estimates of the Syrian population displays that the Syrian population suffered a dramatic decrease between 2011 and 2017, where the estimates states that the Syrian population was estimated at over 22.7 million people in 2011, dropping to 18.9 million people in 2016. Since then, the numbers presented by the World Bank suggest a quick surge of the population, where in 2020, the numbers rocketed to 21.3 million Syrians.¹²⁰ However, it must be noted that the number of the displaced Syrians did not drop proportionately or harmoniously with the population increase within Syria. This fact could indicate that the rise of the Syrian population might not be composed of original Syrians, but of other components who were granted the Syrian citizenship.



¹¹⁹ Syrian National Assembly - الهيئة الوطنية السورية، "الرئيسية - Syrian National Assembly - الهيئة الوطنية السورية," December 7, 2022, <https://sna-sy.org/>.

¹²⁰ "World Bank Open Data," *World Bank Open Data*, n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2021&locations=SY&start=1960&view=chart>.

¹²¹ "World Bank Open Data," *World Bank Open Data*, n.d., <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2021&locations=SY&start=1960&view=chart>.

Furthermore, media reports in 2019 have stated that the Syrian regime hosted thousands of Iranians and dozens of Iranian-backed militia members fighting on the Assad side. Most of these fighters were granted the Syrian citizenship while some Syrian sources reported that a portion of the naturalized fighters were originally Hezbollah members who were deployed to Syria.¹²² Consistently, it is stated by the prominent “Al-Mortada Foundation”, a prestigious Shiite foundation established in Syria by Iranian officials, that the current Shiite numbers in Syria has risen to three millions.¹²³ Similarly, a further report made by Al-Jazeera in 2020 have demonstrated that the most recent estimations show that the Sunni component of the Syrian population has decreased by half.¹²⁴

5.5 Interim Conclusion

Replacing the original Sunni Syrians with foreign Shiites who were granted the Syrian citizenship during the civil war is monitored in many areas in Syria, among which Damascus and the Lebanese border line hold the lion share. This replacement was facilitated by Syrian presidential decrees and mega Iranian purchases of real estates and multi-purpose properties. This research has illustrated that the Iranian policy in the Syrian real estate sector have had grand implications on many levels. First, these investments would assist in solidifying a legitimate long-lasting foot hold for Iran in Syria, which might facilitate Iran’s offensive and expansionist strategy, Second, granting Assad with loyal citizens in *Useful Syria*, citizens who share the same religious belief as his, Shi’ism.¹²⁵

The objective evidence has demonstrated that the population of Syria was enormously affected by the civil war. Enforced displacement have impacted the Sunni component of the population more than the other sects and ethnographic groups. Decreased by half as some estimates provide, a steady and enduring component was filling the empty space. The Alawites, who were among the minorities, have increased in proportion with the decrease of the Sunnis. The new Shiites who were settled in the Iranian-purchased properties add to the numbers of Alawites in the objective evidence, lifting the

¹²² Administrator, “تجنيس الايرانيين في سوريا”, [Naturalising Iranians in Syria] September 6, 2016, https://dr-khaled.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=716:2016-09-06-11-59-21&catid=35:the-cms&Itemid=59.

¹²³ Almortada. “الشيعة في سوريا”, [Shiites in Syria] n.d., http://www.almurtadha.org/pages/tex_new.php?tid=67.

¹²⁴ Al Jazeera, “مقال بأوريان 21: العرب السنة لم يعودوا يمثلون سوى نصف سكان سوريا”, أخبار سياسة | الجزيرة نت, [The Sunni Arabs only compose half of the Syrian population] April 2, 2020, aljazeera

¹²⁵ Independent Arabic.v “سوسن مهنا, “الأسد يستعين بالأصدقاء اللبنانيين”, انديبننت عربية.v [Assad asks Lebanese friends for help] January 20, 2021, independant Arabic.

numbers of Shiites and Alwites on the expense of the Sunnis. In the upcoming chapter, a conclusion of the thesis and a critical reflection on the findings of this research shall take place.

6 Chapter Six: Conclusion

This thesis aimed at investigating whether Iran's economic policies in Syria are part of Tehran hegemonial project by surveying the depth and amount of Iran's investments during the Hafez al-Assad reign and through his son's time, and whether Iran's investments in the Syrian real estate market has long-term consequences on the Syrian sectarian map. A qualitative as well as quantitative analysis was provided on some Iranian investments in Syria before and after 2000, showing the difference between the ages of the Assads terms of quantity and depth. In addition, a case study on the new sectarian reality that was imposed in southern Damascus as a result of the Iranian large scale properties purchasing policy was also included. The thesis was further approached by answering a number of sub-questions during the course of the research. These questions were formulated in the introduction as: How vast were the Iranian investments in Syria during al-Assad Father's reign? If and how did these investments develop in Bashar al-Assad's reign? In which ways did Iran invest in the Syrian real estate market, in Damascus particularly, and what sectarian implications could be detected?

In the second chapter, the theoretical framework of this thesis was illustrated. Because Iran's regional foreign policy is extremely discussed by some International Relations theorists, who classified Tehran's doctrine as an offensive realist approach, I mapped the definition of realism first then the offensive realism was emphasised, before providing the basic assumptions of the theory and how do they apply to the Iranian approach towards Syria. By means of those assumptions, I then connected the second assumption of offensive realism with Iran's economic interventionism in Syria, the major topic of this thesis.

The third chapter of this thesis provided a quantitative historical overview of the Iranian economic relations with Syria before 2011. The research included a review of the Iranian/Syrian trade exchange, investments, and agreements. It was established that Tehran's economic approach towards Syria in these three areas of investment was not effective. In comparison, Turkey and Saudi Arabia's amount of investments in Syria were more efficient and powerful. In terms of timeline, the research has revealed that many agreements were set during Hafez al-Assad reign, but they did not manifest in concrete projects. Above all, this chapter included an interview with a former Syrian diplomat who reflected on Hafez al-Assad's fear of the Iranian's although they constituted his most powerful allies. The interview also shed light on Hafez al-Assad's awareness of an expansionist Iranian ambition that

encompasses Syria, which he implicitly refused. His refusal was reflected in the limited amount of trade exchange, investments, and economic agreements with Iran because he believed that an Iranian economic infiltration of Syria is most dangerous.

The fourth chapter of this thesis went through the developments that occurred on the economic level after 2011. The results of this research have shown that the Iranian investments in the Syrian agricultural, services, and productive sectors had witnessed a remarkable elevation. However, a large amount of these investments was hindered by Syria's partnership with Russia. This research reflected that Bashar al-Assad has a different approach than his father's, as hinted in the third chapter by Mr Elmelhem, the Syrian diplomat. This chapter also revealed that Iran made remarkable efforts to invest in key economic sectors in Syria in comparison with the case before 2011. This indicates that Iran's perception of the situation in the Levant after the so called 'Arab spring' dictated a more powerful and effective approach to accelerate Iran's consolidation in the region.

The fifth chapter of this thesis has analysed the case study. The chapter discussed first the Iranian investing policy in the Syrian real estate market in Syria generally, then it concentrated on Damascus. In this research, the Iranian investments in the given area were reviewed quantitatively and qualitatively, concentrating also on the type of the purchased properties. This review illustrated that a large number of Damascus hotels are now owned by Iranian investors, as well as large areas of the city itself, in addition to the outskirts of the capital where the Shiite sacred shrines are located.

Furthermore, the objective evidence has revealed that a large amount of the properties acquired by Iran's agents are located within '*Useful Syria*', a zone defined by Bashar al-Assad and characterized by its 'loyal' citizens and its significant geographical location that includes Damascus and western Syria, most importantly, the western borders with Lebanon in Homs zone.

Moreover, an in-depth sectarian review has been conducted in the case study, revealing that a major sectarian shift took place consequent to the civil war, displacement of the original Sunni locals, and resettlement of new Shiite owners in the same properties whose original owners were displaced forcibly. A major sectarian alteration of the sectarian identity of these areas has been detected, turning the areas from Sunni to Shiite.

6.1 Critical reflection

This thesis was motivated initially by recent news headlines on Iranian businessmen who were buying Syrian properties vastly. Curiosity urged me to investigate this subject, and before I knew it, I was conducting academic research on the history, present, and the future of the Iranian investments in the Syrian real estate market. For the untrained eye, foreign funds that targets rehabilitation and reconstruction of a demolished and exhausted country like Syria seem legitimate and desirable. However, how can rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts make Syrians feel resentful and ill-fated while it targets recovering their country, I was wondering! Systematic research on grounds of offensive realism theory has revealed that the Iranian allegations of post-war reconstruction could be to a large extent mere politicised propaganda. The deeper I went, the larger the Iranian project seemed and the vaster the academic gap was.

For attaining the targets of my research, very few academic publications were found. The military interventionism of Iran is imperatively important; yes, but the economic interventionism policy is not less important as it is not less related to the Iranian expansionist ambitions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This research has revealed that economic hegemony is equally instrumental as the military and the political hegemony because it lays the grounds for effective and long-lasting penetration. However, it was not possible to include more economic fields in this thesis qua space limitations. Nevertheless, there are dozens of economic fields where Iranian investments were detected and they definitely require further investigation.

Furthermore, and aside from reflecting on the content of this research, this thesis has relied heavily on first-hand Arabic press reports because the analysed phenomenon is taking place in Syria, meaning that there were no western media reports on the topic because it is still unrecognised internationally. Sourcing the Arabic primary sources proved to be a separate challenge as many difficulties were encountered during this journey. First of all, almost all of the Arabic primary sources were not recognised by automatic citation generation tools -like Scribber. Second of all, editing and refining Arabic citations in the footnotes and in the bibliography required much effort and longer time than usual, besides being not to style completely. In addition, the Arabic hyperlinks are extremely long which needed more space, efforts in editing, and eventually shortening the hyperlinks. For this reason, I am not satisfied about the Arabic footnotes and the bibliography. This urges questions about studies

done on foreign issues and how similar difficulties -regarding citations in multiple languages- could be managed by academics.

My last and final word, this research could assist proving that large scale real estate purchases in a given country could be a form of neo-colonialism, avoiding armed confrontation and deepening the state's involvement in the targeted country. However, it also suggests that further research is needed to outline and analyse this phenomenon in terms of neo-colonialism and expansionism worldwide. As for this research, it was not possible to investigate more locations in Syria where mega Iranian properties acquisitions took place, as in Homs which is adjacent to the Lebanese borders and where a major sectarian shift has occurred, because they will need twice the amount of time and wordcount of this thesis, keeping in mind the importance of the topic and its consequent implications on the sectarian identity of such a key area in the Middle East. Baring also in mind the possible inclinations of similar sectarian transformation for Saudi Arabia who also seeks hegemony over Syria.

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