



Special Report: The Iranian establishment in  
Sayyidah Zaynab (south Damascus), a geographic  
anchor in the Iranian corridor

September 2022

## Introduction:

The cultural advisor at the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Abul-Fadl Salehi Nia, wrote in the *Al-Watan* (a daily Syrian pro-regime newspaper) in November 2019 that "the implementation of the Iranian vision of a new Middle East includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This concept will affect the global balance of power and prevent the United States and its Western allies from controlling a Middle East comprised of small, divided countries..."

In the early morning of July 22, 2022, an airstrike was carried out against a weapons warehouse in the Hudzajra area of Sayyid Zaynab in southern Damascus. The attack took place near the community center named after the martyr "Haytham Suleiman" (also called the Shuhada al-Muqawamah sports center), which was established with Iranian funding in the year 2021 by the Iranian "Jihad al-Bana" organization." In our estimation, the attack was carried out against a shipment of electronic weapon components intended for Hezbollah's precision missile project and its self-production of UAVs. The attacked site was used as a temporary storage place in the civilian surroundings of Sayyidah Zaynab, thus serving as a human shield. The attack was carried out before it reached Hezbollah in Lebanon.



Similar to the al-Bukamal, Al-Mayadeen, Deir ez-Zor areas in Aleppo and Homs, and southern Syria, the area of Sayyidah Zaynab on the southern outskirts of Damascus is also an epicenter of a growing Shiite base with Iranian affinity. In fact, it is Syrian territory controlled by elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran.

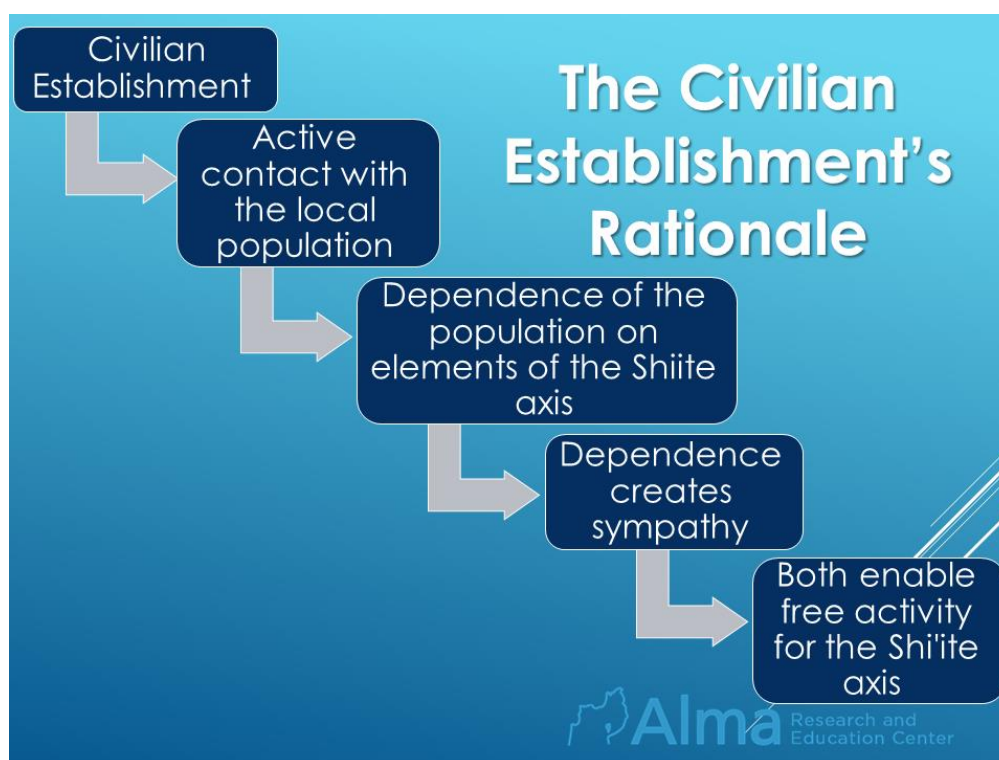
The civilian entrenchment in Sayyidah Zaynab is demonstrated through immigration and demography, the confiscation of land and real estate, the establishment of religious centers and social associations, and religious tourism, which also serves as a platform

**exploited for military purposes. The military entrenchment in Sayyidah Zaynab is a logistical anchor and a "transit station" for the transfer of weapons for Hezbollah in Lebanon.**

**The radical Shiite axis, led by Iran, acts to obtain a military and civilian foundation in all of Syria and the geographical anchors throughout the land corridor areas.** The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Qods Force received responsibility for securing the corridor routes in Syrian territory. This security mission was assigned to the foreign Shi'ite militias that were "imported" to Syria by the Iranians under the direction of Qasem Soleimani, former commander of the Qods Force. The security mission also included protecting local and foreign Shi'ite populations and Shi'ite holy sites throughout Syria.

All the areas mentioned above are geographical anchors that support the Iranian corridor from the east (Iran) to the west (Lebanon) in a civilian and military manner, within the framework of the Iranian strategic concept. The radical Shiite axis, headed by Iran, concentrates large efforts to "link" geographic anchor areas in Syria through civilian entrenchment similar to Hezbollah's model in Lebanon.

**Hezbollah's Lebanese model validates itself by assimilating the military infrastructures into the civilian infrastructures, which generates indoctrination and dependence.** A broad civilian infrastructure enables the military to operate in a "sympathetic and enabling civilian environment," thereby establishing the human shield tactic, which greatly complicates the enemy's position. The Iranians chose the area of Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus to serve as one of these anchors.



**Sayyidah Zaynab has added value since it is considered a Shiite holy site. The area of Sayyidah Zaynab is built around the tomb of Zaynab, the granddaughter of Muhammad and daughter of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph to Islam and the first Shi'ite imam** (there is debate as to whether the real tomb is in Damascus or Egypt, but this debate does not detract from the importance granted to the Damascus site by Shi'ite believers). According to Shi'ite tradition, Zaynab was present at the Battle of Karbala (680), and after her brother lost the battle, she was taken to Damascus and acted there to spread Shi'a. Her grave became a Shiite holy site thanks to her actions and family heritage.

**The added religious value constitutes a platform for the radical Shiite axis led by Iran in establishing a central geographic anchor in Damascus, the capital of Syria, as part of the strategic concept of the Iranian corridor to Syria and Lebanon and the spread of the Islamic revolution. throughout the Middle East.**

### **The civilian establishment – immigration and demography:**

The Damascus suburb of Sayyidah Zaynab was founded in the late 1940s. Its religious importance, which includes religious studies and pilgrimage, intensified in the 1970s and 1980s around events in Iraq and Iran, such as the war between the countries, Saddam Hussein's persecution of Shi'ites, and the closure of holy sites in Iraq to non-Iraqi Shi'ites. Another migration of Iraqi Shi'ites to the region resulted after the US invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s. As of 2012, Most of Sayyidah Zaynab's Shi'ite population was based on non-Syrian "foreigners."

Sayyidah Zaynab underwent a demographic transformation in recent years as Shi'ite-Syrian populations migrated to the region and tipped the scales in favor of Shi'ites. For example, Shi'ite Syrians emigrated from the Daraa province and from towns in the Idlib province after the opposition took over the area.

The relatively small number of Shi'ites in Syria, which stands at about one percent of the total population (not including the Alawite population), does not allow for a significant change in the overall demographic balance. Therefore, the Shiite axis seeks to strengthen the Shi'ite civilian surroundings in Sayyidah Zaynab and to increase the Shi'ite population by transferring Shi'ite Syrians or Shi'ite militia fighters' families from across Syria to the region or by converting Sunnis to Shi'ism.

We have identified a trend of IRGC activists and foreign Shiite militia operatives' families who have established their homes in Sayyidah Zaynab and the surrounding area. For example, in December 2021, it was reported that about 11 families associated with elements of the radical Shiite axis (Iranians, Iraqis, and Afghans from the IRGC and Shiite militias) were transferred by bus from the city of Palmyra in northeastern Syria to homes that they had taken over in the area of Hajira and Sabina, near Sayyidah Zaynab. In the past two years, the Shiite militias have transferred dozens of families from the towns of Kafriya and Al-Fu'ah on the outskirts of Idlib to Hajira.

On September 11, a memorial exhibition was opened in Sayyidah Zaynab, featuring the photos and personal stories of Iranian militia operatives whose bus was attacked in May 2022 on its way to the front to fight ISIS forces in northeastern Syria. The activists and their families apparently lived in Sayyidah Zaynab.



**The civilian establishment – taking over land and real estate:**

Besides emigration and "relocation," some of the processes of the civilian Shi'ite entrenchment in Sayyidah Zaynab are reflected in the purchase and takeover of land and real estate by elements of the radical Shi'ite axis. At the same time, Shi'ite images and symbols not there previously began appearing on its streets, such as street names that had been replaced and murals of Shi'ite figures. At an initial stage, symbols are a sign of domination, but over time they contribute to shaping a sought-after cultural perception.



*Street names and squares in Sayyidah Zaynab have been changed from names inspired by Syrian geographical areas and national symbols to symbolic Shi'ite names.*



*Murals, including images of Qasem Soleimani, painted on the walls of the tomb of Sayyidah Zaynab.*

We can learn about the Shi'ite civil entrenchment and the takeover of real estate in and around Sayyidah Zaynab from testimonies of local residents. Samer Abu Mohammad, a former resident of Sayyidah Zaynab, was uprooted and exiled to the northern Idlib area. He was forced to sell his property on Ali al-Wahsh Street for \$2,000, while initially, he purchased it for \$8,000. Abu Mohammad notes that a real estate agent approached him on behalf of an Iranian militia leader intending to buy the property for \$1,500, but after negotiations, he sold it for \$2,000. According to Abu Mohammad, the Iranian militias purchase real estate cheaply and then sell it at a higher price to Iranian families desiring to settle in the area.

This way, elements of the radical Shiite axis earn money and, simultaneously, strengthen the Shi'ite demography in the region, preserving a sympathetic and identifying population.

Another resident, Khaled al-Amer, who owns several properties in Sayyidah Zaynab, testified that he transferred his assets into his wife's name to prevent the militias from taking them over or forcing him to sell them. Like Abu Mohammed, Al-Amer claims that the sums paid by the militias are low and even less than 20 percent of their original price. He added that the real estate in the area was being sold by the residents under pressure from the militias to populate it with Shiites.

Samer Abd al-Razaq, another property owner in the area, exiled to northern Syria, claimed that a realtor from Sayyidah Zaynab approached him and offered him to sell his apartment for no more than 15 percent of its original price. When he refused, Abd al-Razaq began receiving threats that his property would be demolished or populated by Shiite families affiliated with the Iranian militias as long as he continued refusing.



### **The civilian entrenchment – establishment of religious centers and Shiite societies:**

In the Sayyidah Zaynab area, religious centers and societies seek to strengthen the Shiite character of the area. These institutions aim to strengthen the status of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran in Sayyidah Zaynab and to establish themselves among the region's population.

The radical Shiite axis, headed by Iran, is concentrating very large efforts to "link" geographic anchor areas in Syria through civilian entrenchment similar to the Hezbollah model in Lebanon. Hezbollah's Lebanese model has proven itself by successfully assimilating the military infrastructure into the civilian infrastructure. A broad civilian infrastructure enables the military to operate in a "sympathetic and enabling civilian environment," initiating the human shield tactic, which greatly problematizes the enemy's position.

An efficient civic infrastructure creates active contact with citizens through institutions, associations, societies, and organizations that provide citizens with health, religious, economic, welfare and education services, etc. The purpose of the active connection is to create indoctrination and dependence of the civilian population on the Shiite axis. This dependence generates the population's sympathy.

Another significant tool for strengthening the Shiite axis and spreading the Shiite school of thought is by establishing *Hussainiyas* (Shi'ite religious gathering places) and taking over mosques. The aim is to provide infrastructures for the Shi'ization of the local population and for the needs of the Shi'ite communities that already exist in the region (members of the Shiite militias supported by Iran or local Shi'ites).

For example, **the Al-Zainabiyah Scientific Seminary** (الحوزة العلمية الزينبية), run by Sheikh Abbas al-Nuri, is located near the tomb compound of Sayyidah Zaynab. The seminary is engaged in training the next Shi'ite religious leadership and has developed a five-year curriculum to train and qualify clerics.

The seminary's website:

[https://www.alhawzaonline.com/?page\\_id=67](https://www.alhawzaonline.com/?page_id=67)

email:

[Info@alhawzaonline.com](mailto:Info@alhawzaonline.com)

WhatsApp: +963937728094



Above: Al-Zainabiyah Scientific Seminary located near the tomb compound of Sayyidah Zaynab.

**The Ahl al-Bayt Cultural Center in Syria** (مركز أهل البيت (عليهم السلام) الثقافي في سوريا) under the direction of Abd al-Sahab al-Mousavi, holds weekly Shi'ite lectures and religious classes and assists in social and philanthropic activities, such as holding religious holiday ceremonies and activities aiming to bring the population closer together. (Note: Ahl al-Bayt is a nickname for people who were close to the Prophet Muhammad but refers to Shiites).

Website:

[aleatrah-altahira.com](http://aleatrah-altahira.com)

Email:

[info@aleatrah-altahira.com](mailto:info@aleatrah-altahira.com)

Phone: 0966050038



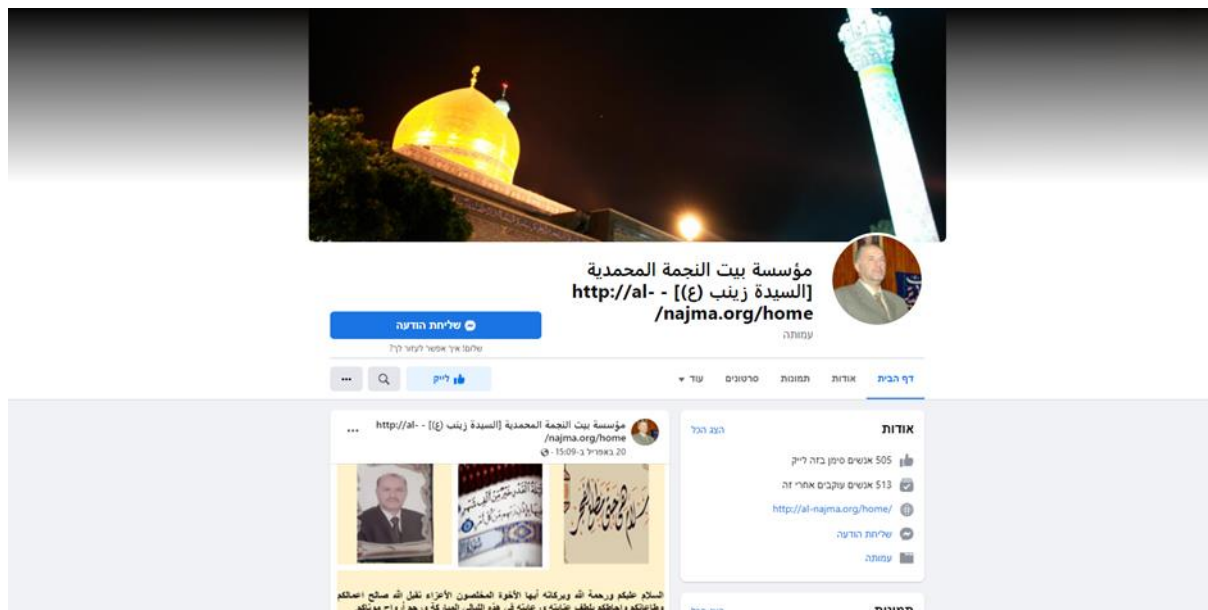
Above: Website page of the Ahl al-Bayt Cultural Center.

The "Bayt Al Najma Al Muhamadia" (بيت النجمة المحمدية), managed by Dr. Issam Abbas, is located opposite the tomb compound. It is a cultural center that promotes spreading Shi'ite culture and its values.

Website: [al-najma.org](http://al-najma.org)

email: [dr.issamabbas@gmail.com](mailto:dr.issamabbas@gmail.com)

Phone: 96394367771

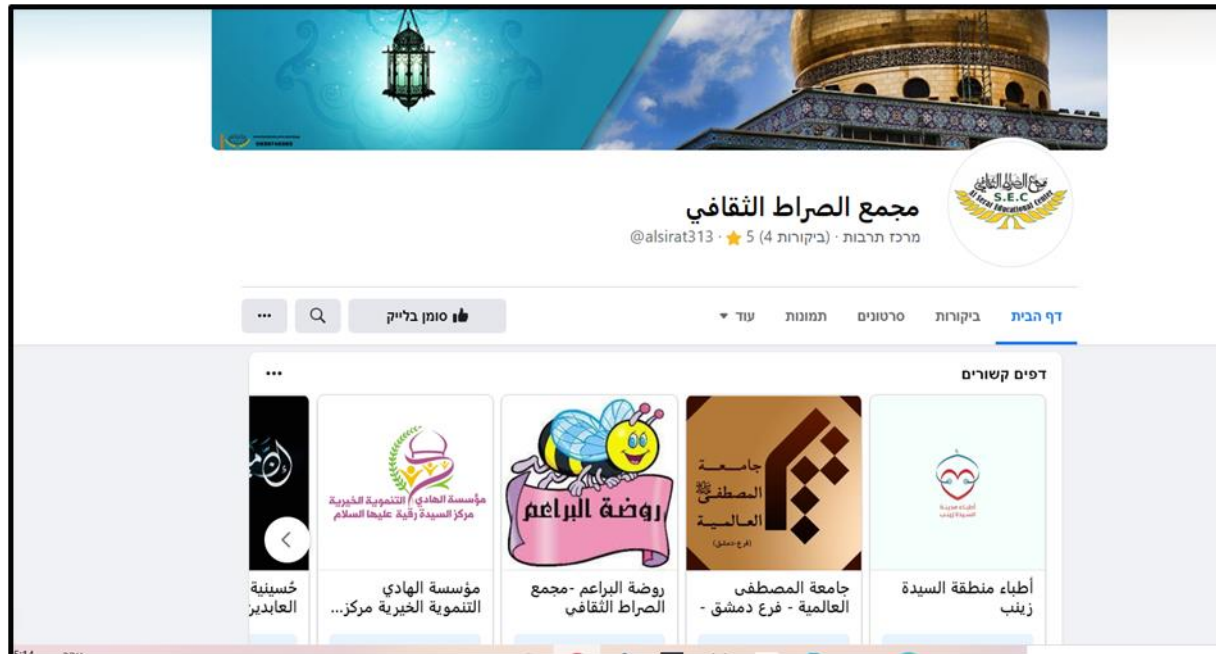


Above: Bayt Al Najma Al Muhamadia website page.

**The Al-Surat Cultural Center** (مجمع الصراط الثقافي) works among children inducing Shi'ite culture and faith through activities and performances glorifying the Shi'ite leadership and Iran. In addition, the center leads visits to Shi'ite holy sites such as the Sayyidah Zaynab Tomb.

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Above: The Al-Surat Cultural Center website page.

**Hussainiyat Imam al-Sajad for the Afghan Community** (حسينية الإمام السجاد عليه السلام للجالية الأفغانية), a non-profit organization, operating throughout Syria in general and in Sayyidah Zaynab in particular, rendering to the needs of the country's Afghan-Shi'ite community. During the summer vacation, when the schools are closed, the organization holds classes for about 300 students each year, in which religious content (such as jurisprudence, interpretation, and beliefs) and Shi'ite history are taught alongside computer studies, English, and swimming.

Website: [imamaskari.org](http://imamaskari.org)

Email: [webmaster@imamaskari.org](mailto:webmaster@imamaskari.org)

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**Two other Shi'ite Hussainiyas** were established in the Sunni neighborhoods of the town of Hajira, one on Ali al-Wahsh Street near the Fatma Mosque and the other on Al-Akashash Street.



Above: A parade on “World Jerusalem Day” in Sayyidah Zaynab, waving Iranian and Hezbollah flags alongside pictures of Iranian leaders such as revolution founder Khomeini and Syrian President Bashar Assad.

### **The civilian establishment – Religious tourism (a platform for military use):**

Since 2022, about 125,000 Iranians have entered Syria to visit the holy Shi'ite sites in south Damascus / Sayyidah Zaynab as part of religious tourism. In addition, about 100,000 Iraqis entered for a similar purpose. It should be emphasized that these are only those who entered legally and registered. A minority of them arrived on civilian flights to Damascus. Most of them arrived by land from the Iraq-Syria border, and on flights to Beirut, and from there through the land border crossings to Syria.



Above: Iranian pilgrim tourists at the Sayyidah Zaynab tomb plaza.

The Iranians take advantage of the Shi'ite pilgrim's civilian buses traveling from Iraq into Syria through the land corridor to visit the holy Shi'ite religious sites, to transport advanced weapons components. The Iranians are likely using civilian buses to transport weapons components for the precision missile project and components used for the maintenance and assembly of UAVs. These buses enter Syria from Iraq through the area of Al-Abbas and Kafr al-Hari, southeast of Al-Bukamal, and from there reach the site of the tomb at Saida Zaynab, among other places.

We know of two bus companies that transport Shi'ite pilgrims (at least their logos appear on the buses). The first is the shuttle company NRS (NRS Gute Reise GmbH & Co, KG), a transportation company that is a consortium of several German transportation companies. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 crisis, the consortium of companies found themselves in a significant crisis, and it was decided to shut down – while the companies that comprised it: Neukam-Reba, REBA ENO Reisen, and SCHIELEIN Reisen, turned to independent ventures.

It should be noted that according to the findings, these are city bus companies that are active in Germany. It is not clear whether they have operations abroad. Another possibility is that the buses have been converted for use by another transportation company or any other body operating in Syria/Iraq/Iran.

The second shuttle company is Hartmann Reisen (E. Hartmann Reisen OHG), an active company.



We assume that it is highly likely that some of these pilgrims are not innocent and that their arrival in Syria is not for religious pilgrimage. Some are military militia operatives that come under civil-religious cover to Syria, and some are members of the IRGC and the Qods Force in disguise.

Religious tourism to Sayyidah Zaynab brings with it the development of tourist infrastructure such as hotels. Many hotels were bought for the pilgrims' stay and the housing of Shiite militiamen. For example, the hotel "Al Rocha" in Sayyidah Zaynab. If you enter the lobby of this hotel, you can think for a moment that you are in the heart of Tehran...



Above: The reception of the Al-Rocha Hotel in Sayyidah Zaynab, with the Iranian flag and a picture of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis ("deputy" commander of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias' umbrella organization Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, who was eliminated along with Soleimani in January 2020).





Above: The lobby of the Al-Rocha Hotel, with Iranian flags and pictures of Shiite figures (marked with red arrows)

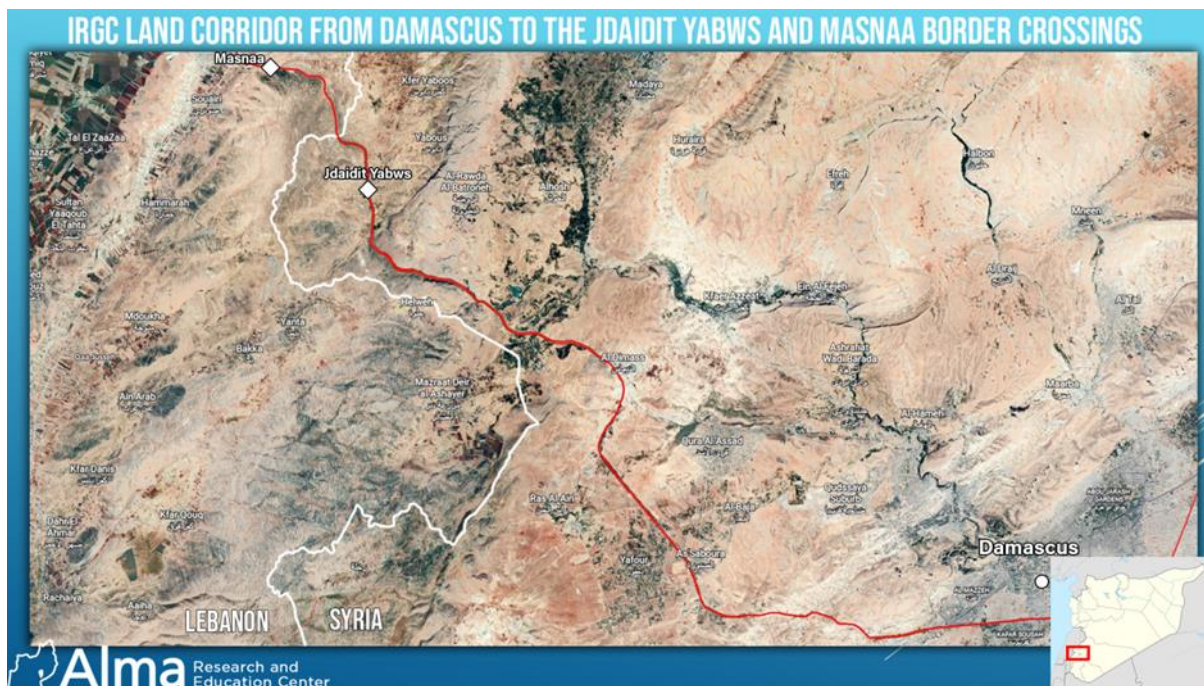


### **The military establishment – A logistical anchor and a "transit station" for weapons intended for Hezbollah in Lebanon:**

Alongside the Shi'ite-civilian establishment in Sayyidah Zaynab, there is also a greater military establishment, which is portrayed in the establishment and deployment of military bases and security headquarters affiliated to the radical Shiite axis headed by Iran (the Shiite militias and Lebanese Hezbollah).

Since the beginning of Iran's involvement in the civil war in Syria, it has worked through the IRGC/Quds Force to establish military bases in the Sayyidah Zaynab area. This was supposedly meant to protect the holy sites when the objective was to strengthen its control of the area utilizing the Shiite militias operating under its sponsorship.

The presence of Sayyidah Zaynab on the outskirts of Damascus and its proximity to Damascus international airport makes it an important strategic point that creates a possible route to the Iranian corridor, both by air and by land. From Sayyidah Zaynab, it is possible to move in a simple, fast, and secure way to Lebanon towards the Jdeidat Yabous / Al-Masnaa border crossing or alternatively to one of the less formal border crossings in Qalamoun.



The Sayyidah Zaynab area is considered a secure zone. Many checkpoints with advanced weapons detection systems, vehicle screening systems, and sniffer dogs for identifying bombs are deployed throughout the area.

There are weapons storage complexes throughout Sayyidah Zaynab and its environs, some in designated hangars, some in innocent civilian buildings, and some under sheds originally intended for parking vehicles.

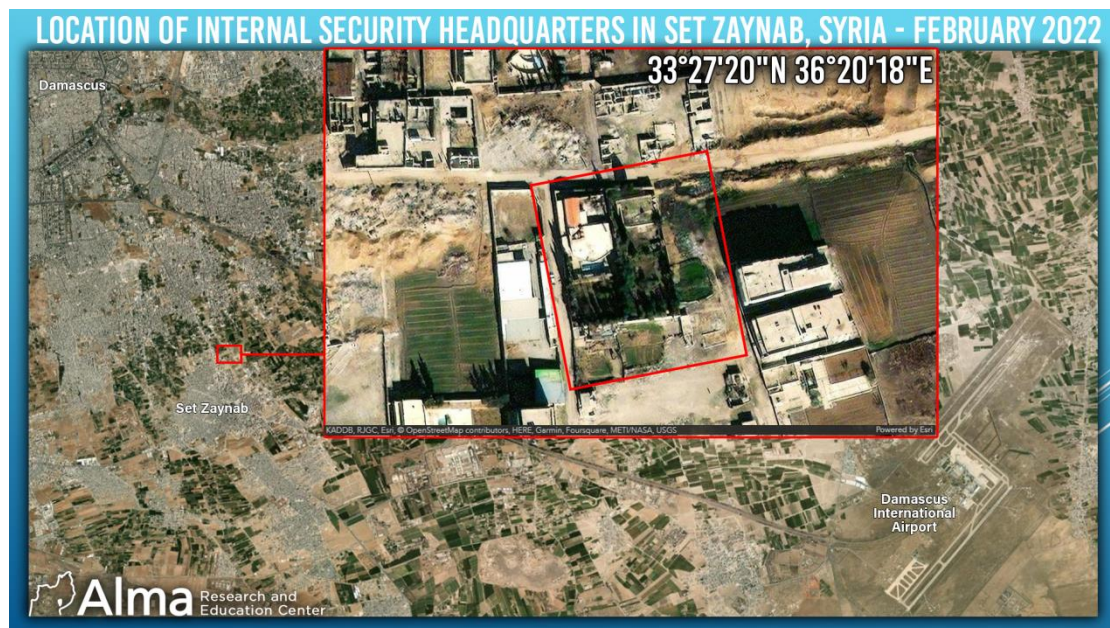


*Locations suspected of being stockpiles of weapons*

The Sayyidah Zaynab area is home to and operates several military headquarters used by elements of the radical Shiite axis. Some of the headquarters serve as headquarters that, in practice, control all the activities of the radical Shiite axis throughout Syria in general and the activities of the Shiite militias in particular:

**Detection and Surveillance Headquarters:** Its role is to present plans for the defense of the Sayyidah Zaynab area by obtaining intelligence from all the militias operating under Iranian aegis deployed in Syria. Hajj Ali Abu Hamdun serves as the General Monitoring Manager at Sayyidah Zaynab. The headquarters analyzes and processes the information and then sends it to Tehran. It is staffed by representatives of Iran, Hezbollah (Hajj Hussam Murtada), and militia representatives.

**The Internal Security Headquarters:** Located in an underground structure, it specializes in internal security investigations and includes a prison and an execution site. The headquarters is under the supervision of Hezbollah, and one of its investigators is a Hezbollah operative named Hajj Yasser Abd al-Asim.



**The headquarters for wiretapping and regional security:** It is one of the most well-kept headquarters in Sayyidah Zaynab due to the presence of Iranian and Lebanese intelligence personnel inside it. Part of this structure is above ground level, and part of it is underground. The headquarters is equipped with advanced technological systems and specializes in collecting and analyzing surveillance and wiretapping data collected by Hezbollah and the IRGC in Syria. The final products are sent, among other places, to the Qods Force operations headquarters (the "glass house") located at Damascus international airport. The headquarters is run by Hajj Alaa' al-Mahadi (an Iranian of Iraqi descent).

**Operations Headquarters:** It is engaged in internal and general military activity. The headquarters is responsible for securing the military infrastructures (headquarters, etc.) and for securing the presence of the Iranian militias in Sayyidah Zaynab. In addition, it reports the involvement of the militias in all their military activity in Syria. The headquarters provides periodic reports on ammunition stockpiles and maintains contact with militia commanders on the ground regarding contingency and routine plans. The headquarters determines the type of weapons and the number of participants in all operations. Hajj Muhammad Mousavi is the general director of operations, and Haj Sohail Al Bader (Lebanese) is responsible for the casualties resulting from the battles in Syria.

**Hezbollah's presence:** The presence of the "spirit of Hezbollah" and Hezbollah operatives is clearly felt in Sayyidah Zaynab. The military operatives from Hezbollah's various units serve as representatives and liaisons in the various headquarters, as noted above, and are responsible for receiving the weapons that arrive through the corridor and preparing them for their transfer to Lebanon. Lebanese Hezbollah operatives can be seen openly roaming around the area.



Hezbollah symbols such as hoisting the Hezbollah flag and posting senior figures' pictures can also be seen. The memorial event for Mustafa Badr al-Din, held inside the tomb plaza in Sayyidah Zaynab in May 2016, was attended by senior Hezbollah figures, and for a moment, one might think that we were in the heart of the Dahiye neighborhood in Beirut. Badr al-Din served as Hezbollah's "chief of staff" after Imad Mughniyeh. Badr al-Din died in Damascus in May 2016, and since then, Hezbollah has been cautious in fostering his persona, even though it is believed that he was killed on Nasrallah's orders with Iranian approval due to internal strife.





Above: the memorial ceremony in the plaza of Sayyidah Zaynab.



Above: Sheikh Nabil Al-Kauk (in the middle), who in 2016 served as deputy head of Hezbollah's executive council and is currently a member of Hezbollah's A Shuraa Council, was the keynote speaker at the memorial ceremony.

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