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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Terrorism; Iran; Russia

IRAN'S RESTAURANT POLICE

Iran's clerical regime is expanding its domestic repression into a new domain: the food industry. In the past few weeks, more than 500 restaurants and cafes in Iran's capital, Tehran, were shut down for failing to observe Islamic principles, including "unconventional advertising in cyberspace, playing illegal music and debauchery." Eleven individuals were also arrested in connection with the perceived irregularities in these restaurants. The crackdown is part of a larger push by authorities to clamp down on a broad range of "decadent" behaviors; citizens have likewise been encouraged to text a dedicated hotline to report on everything from immoral Instagram posts to co-ed dance parties to women observed removing their *hijab* in cars. The head of Tehran's police has backed the initiatives, asserting that "[o]bserving Islamic principles is... one of the police's main missions and responsibilities." (*France24*, June 8, 2019)

WHAT IRAN IS UP TO IN SYRIA

Now that Syria's long-running civil war has ground to a halt, Iran is expanding and solidifying its presence in the south and northeast of the country, a leading watchdog group has said. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Iran is now making concerted efforts to gain strategic territory in Deir Ezzor and other parts of the capital, Damascus, and to reinforce its already-extensive presence in the country by attracting more personnel to join the militias and irregular forces under its sway.

Iran's expansion, however, is not uncontested. Russia, too, is seeking to strengthen its influence over the Syrian state - but doing so in different ways. Russian influence has led to at least three officials being appointed to powerful roles in Syrian security and army institutions in recent weeks, the Observatory notes - a sure sign that the Kremlin is gaining growing control over the levers of administrative power in the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

The parallel efforts by Tehran and Moscow have made the two longtime strategic allies into tactical competitors for influence in Syria. There is now a Russian-Iranian "cold war" underway for long-term geopolitical position in Syria, the Observatory says. (London *A-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 7, 2019)

IRAN'S ANSWER TO THE HIJAB PROTESTS

The proliferation of so-called "White Wednesday" protests - popular demonstrations against the requirement for women to wear *hijab* - over the past year is spurring the Iranian regime into action. Authorities in the country's northern province of Gilan have launched a pilot program of new morality police units. The initiative encompasses some 2,000 units in total, with each team made up of six women and possessing the authority to arrest or detain females they deem to be in violation of the country's requirement of mandatory veiling. The new effort reflects the seriousness with which regime authorities are treating the country's growing opposition to the practice; according to one regional commander of the Revolutionary Guards, "the issue of *hijab* is not a simple matter, but rather a serious political and security issue for our country." (London *Telegraph*, June 7, 2019)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The regime response to the *hijab* protests is sure to be unpopular - and may end up precipitating even greater social unrest than exists currently. A recent study carried out by Iran's parliament, or *majles*, found that "up to 70 per cent of the female population would like to see the relaxing of laws on the mandatory wearing of headscarves."]

CHANGES AHEAD FOR IRANIAN CYBERSPACE

After years of delays, is Iran on the cusp of launching its national internet project? According to Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, the country's Prosecutor-General, Iran's cyberspace restrictions will undergo a "major development" in July. Iran already maintains strict curbs on access to the Internet within its borders, blocking various social media platforms and websites. But Montazeri's warning raises the possibility that the Islamic Republic's long-moribund plan for a "halal" or "second" internet - which would shunt online users to regime-approved websites and portals, instead of the wider World-Wide-Web - could be gaining momentum once more. Montazeri and other Iranian officials have not yet divulged specifics of the impending changes, however. (*Radio Farda*, June 20, 2019)