

The Implementation of Iran's Axis of Influence

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The Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Air Force giving his threatening address regarding the USA with several of the Iranian militia's flags in the background.

Source: <https://ara.tv/2dup7>. (accessed: 16.02.2020)

Table of Contents

The Shi'ite Militias in Syria: The Implementation of Iran's Axis of Influence	1
Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
The Shi'ite Militias in Syria: In Practice.....	7
The Financial Cost of the Militias' Funding	9
About the Research	9
The Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba Movement	10
Asa'ib Ahl al-Hag	13
Liwa Fatemiyoun	17
Liwa Zainabyon from Pakistan	21
Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas	22
The Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade	23
Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada	26
Revolutionary Guards' Basij	27
The Villages' Army: A New Militia in Syria	29
Flaws of the Cooperation Between Assad's Regime and the Iranian Militias	29
The Imam Ali IRGC Military Base	30
Conclusion	31

Image Index

No.	Details	Page
1	The Land Bridge Between Tehran and Beirut	6
2	The Map of the forces fighting in Syria	8
3	A Nujaba combatant raising a militia flag in the town of Al-Uss	10
4	Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah with Sheikh Akrem Ka'abi in Lebanon	12
5	Khazali visiting the Lebanon border and looking out towards Israel	16
6	The Asa'ib Ahl al-Hag Militia Site	17
7	Muhammad Jinati's Funeral	21
8	Muhammad Jinati with Qasem Soleimani	22

9	Abu Shahid al-Jabouri and his assistant Abu Mahadi al-Kanani	24
10	Aerial shot of the Imam Ali military base in Al Bukamal	30

Executive Summary

At the height of the civil war in Syria from 2013-2014, the first Shiite militias began to appear on the battlefields in Syria. As President Bashar Hafez al-Assad stretched the Syrian military's capabilities to a maximum, in the face of increasing territorial expansion by the various resistance organizations, Iranian Shiite militias began fighting to save the al-Assad regime. When it became clear that the regime's military might find it difficult to hold up against the momentum of the rebel's conquest, al-Assad contacted his ally Iran with an urgent request to rescue him. The Syrian aid request fitted in nicely with the Iranian expansionist vision of a "ground axis of influence" stretching from Iran to Beirut. From a geopolitical point of view, Syria is of great importance in realizing the Iranian vision. Hence the Syrian President's request was met by sending Shiite militias to help him contend with the many armed groups facing him and threatening to take over the Syrian Republic completely.

The combination of Iranian Shiite militias has led to widespread success on the battlefronts in Syria. The total number of Iranian militias at the peak of their operations is estimated to have been between 120,000 and 140,000 fighters¹, about 2.5 times the size of Assad's entire army. Infused with high combat motivation, these militias succeeded in overcoming the previous balance of power. The previous power balance tended to favor the rebels. After the Shiite militias entered the fighting, they gradually began to push the rebel organizations out of the territories in which they ruled and return these territories to the control of the Syrian regime.

Syria's Shiite militants are an Iranian creation from their inception and training to their guidance and command. The regions of combat and front lines where they operated in Syria were varied. We found the militia fighting in the most important regions of combat throughout Syria: in the re-occupation of the city of Aleppo, in the Rif Dimashq Governorate (which includes the city itself, and the surrounding countryside²), the Dara region, Homs, Hama, South Syria, the Latakia region, and even aiding the Hezbollah in the Kalmon Mountains on the Lebanese border. In many cases, we find the militia forces at the front of the fighting where they were used as "cannon fodder"³.

Iranian militia fighters come from different origins. Among those recruited are fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and even Iran (members of the Basij). They can still be found amongst the militias that continue to operate in both Iraq and Syria in "dual actions"⁴ on two fronts at the same time and more precisely "militias fighting on two

¹ There are different estimates regarding the Shi'ite militias' size that fought in Syria (including Hezbollah and the Basij that will be discussed later). See for example:

Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence: Strategy and Use of Proxies", American Enterprise Institute, Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2016, <http://www.aei.org/publication/iranian-deterrence-strategy-and-use-of-proxies> ;

Seth Jones, War by proxy: "Iran's growing footprint in the Middle East," CSIS. March 2019. <https://www.csis.org/war-by-proxy>. (accessed: 17.11.19).

² The Rif Dimashq Governorate is located in southwest Syria and borders with the Qunaytirah, Daraa and Sawida districts in the southwest and with Jordan in the south.

³ Ghaddar H. "Hezbollah losing its Luster under Soleimani". Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Middle East Policy, *Policy Watch*, 2766, 2017.

⁴ "Dual operating System", by John Kotter, discusses the organizational structure model designed to enable the rapid development of new ideas and models whilst still maximizing the operational efficiencies needed to manage a business as usual.

See: JOHN P. KOTTER, *ACCELERATE*, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS; 1 EDITION, 2014. However, for the sake of accuracy we chose a military strategy term that directly refers to "TWO FRONT WAR" and to our topic: TWO-FRONT (WAR) MILITIA, and in

fronts" namely TF (war) Militia. Alongside this TFM dual operation, one can find militias concentrated in Syria. Today TFM militias are beginning to reduce their presence in Syria and are turning back to Iraq whilst maintaining loyalty to "Liat al-Fakya" (see below). Iran may continue to exploit such TFM's as part of its ongoing struggle to achieve hegemony in Iraq.

Recruitment to the militias comes from various sources. We find, among others, recruitment from amongst the Shi'ite refugees who fled their countries to Iran, but their residence is not recognized, and they are still requesting permission to settle in Iran. They have escaped ethnic threats and other persecution in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. To obtain Iranian citizenship, they are required to fight in Syria. Among these "foreign" recruits we find forced recruitment of weak immigrant populations, including youth recruitment. Alongside the "foreigners" can be found Iranian citizens who were sent to Syria after being drafted into the large "Basij Revolutionary Guards" organization, details of which can be seen below.

The structural links between the militias are dynamic. Some of the militias underwent frequent integral changes: branching out from one organization and establishing a new one, as well as branching out on sub-levels as well, connecting to parallel factions, etc. These militias can also be found in Syria, operating loosely under umbrella corporations such as "al-Hashd ash-Sha'bi", as well as cooperating with other factions ad hoc.

Ideologically speaking, there is a common denominator for the majority of the militias: displaying loyalty to Iran through the practice of the "Guardian of the Islamic Jurist" theory that recognizes Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran, as the ultimate ruler of the Shi'ites. Loyalty to *Velayat-e faghih* is essentially complete loyalty to Iran and its policy. Thus, the militias' directives come from the IRGC, particularly from the Quds Force, and are trained, armed, and financed by it.

The militia's presence in the field brought demographic changes, especially in the Damascus area. There are instances in which combatants decide to settle in Syria instead of returning to their homeland, being that they have nowhere to return to (because of not having Iranian or other citizenship). This case stands out especially with the al-Fatmayoun Afganian militias situated near Al-Sayeda Zainab's holy grave in south of Damascus, as well as Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas in the neighborhoods of Damascus (details of which will be discussed later). There are individuals from other militias who are interested in settling as well. This is part of the Shi'itization process, one that is expanding to other cities whilst seizing abandoned civilian houses because of the war for its use.

In conclusion, it can be determined that Iran's proxy organizations' operational strategy in the war in Syria altered the battlefield and for the first time, nearly brought victory to Assad's regime in the civil war. The Iranian Shi'ite militias were the infantry's corpus. They were deployed anywhere they were needed as a combat force willing to charge and fight the enemy civilian rebels face to face and conquer their territory. This was made possible by the Russian Airforce, by bombing the rebel forces (the Russian aid is outside this area of research, therefore it will not be elaborated upon). Israel views this as a change in the military strategical balance in Syria that requires constant monitoring and Israeli military intervention, as is happening using aerial strikes in the "War between Wars". Iran's direct use of militias in Syria has proven itself as the Syrian regime's most significant power amplifier in ground combat, as can be seen of late in the Aleppo district, where the Syrian regime succeeded in recapturing the area with the massive aid of the Shi'ite militias.

short: TF (WAR). See for example: KARTIK BOMMAKANTI, "INDIA'S TWO-FRONT WAR CHALLENGE: THE PROBLEM OF CHOICE, SCENARIOS AND UNCERTAINTY", OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, OCT 10, 2019.

[HTTPS://WWW.ORFONLINE.ORG/EXPERT-SPEAK/INDIAS-TWO-FRONT-WAR-CHALLENGE-PROBLEM-OF-CHOICE-SCENARIOS-AND-UNCERTAINTY](https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-two-front-war-challenge-problem-of-choice-scenarios-and-uncertainty).
(ACCESSIBILITY: 15.01.2020)

At the peak of their activity, the size of the militias subject to the Quds Forces (including Hezbollah) is estimated at between 120,000-145,000 combatants⁵. We believe this estimate is exaggerated because it is 3 times larger than the opposition forces and Salafi organizations put together. If this was the size, the pro-Iranian militia force should have won the war already, which is not the case.

Introduction

Since the days of Hafez al Assad, the Assad family's regime led the secular-socialist Ba'ath Party to power in Syria. The Assad family belongs to the Alawite sect, a minority located mainly in the shoreline area in north-western Syria, that makes up 10% of the country's population. They consider themselves Shiite Muslims, worship Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose name the Alawites are named after. Yet, most of the traditional Muslim sects do not recognize them as Muslims and even perceive them as heretics.

There is also a small Shi'ite population in Syria that is estimated at 2.5% of the entire population, yet only 0.5% of them belong to the Twelver Shia group, Iran's primary group. In contrast, the Sunni Muslims in Syria comprised more than 70% of the population, before the war's outbreak.⁶

The issue of this double legitimacy threatened Hafez al Assad from two different directions: on one hand he belonged to the minority within the minority that held most of the positions of authority, and on the other hand not recognizing that same party as Muslims. Al Assad dealt with this issue using a two-pronged strategy: he made the country secular by legislative means and bridging the gap between the ethnic differences using pan-Arabic indoctrination. The regime adopted Grand Ayatollah Mussa al- Sadr's *fatwa*, or religious opinion, who was a Lebanese Shi'ite leader in the 1970s, whose ruling recognized Alawites as a Shi'ite faction. From then on, the religious leaders of the Alawites would travel to Iran to learn the Twelver Shi'a principles and then spread them upon their return to Syria.⁷

Syria was one of the only countries that supported Iran throughout the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Over time, Syria became Iran's strategical and dominant ally on the Iranian "Axis of Resistance". Iran invested highly in restoring holy Shi'ite sites in Syria and turning them into places of Shi'ite pilgrimage, such as Sayyida Rokia, Sayyida Zaynab and others in Damascus. In addition, the Iranian government invested in the establishment of Shi'ite mosques and Hussaniyas (buildings for rituals and other Shi'ite ceremonies).⁸ The background of the relations between the two countries helps us better understand al- Assad's request for aid from Iran to help him successfully deal with the threat to his regime in the Syrian civil war.

The civil war in Syria broke out as an uprising on March 15th, 2011 in the Daraa governorate in southern Syria. The illegitimacy that defined Assad's regime throughout his reign was not only because he oppressed the population but also due to the fact his regime was that of the Alawite minority.

In 2012, Iran decided to assist Assad with the uprisings in Syria by forming Shi'ite militias that on one hand would assist Assad, but on the other hand be under Iran's control. The militias' manpower was made up of recruits from Syrian villages. Iran also provided equipment, training, weapons, and reasonable salaries. The militia's ethnic make-up was Shi'ites, Syrians, and Alawites. There were Shi'ite Iraqi recruits as well, those who lived in Syria or moved there from Iraq. Later, the 313 Command (Liwa 313) was founded and comprised of Shi'ite volunteers from Iran, Iraq and

⁵ Seth Jones, *Ibid*.

⁶ Khalifa Mustafa. "The impossible partition of Syria", *Arab Reform Initiative*. <http://Arcives.arab-reform.net/en/node/510>. (accessed: 27.01.2020).

⁷ Sindawi Khalid. "The Shiite turn in Syria", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 8, 2019, 82-107.

⁸ Smyth Phillip, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects", Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>. (accessed: 27.01.2020).

Afghanistan as well. It was supposed to integrate itself into the Syrian army, or at the very least operate under it, however, instead it was subjected to the Quds Force of the IRGC and was the Shi'ite militias' overseer, advising them with the support of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁹

The IRGC's desire to assist the Assad regime was not the main reason for Iran's haste to bring Iranian presence into Syria. Rather, Iran desired to execute its strategy of "expansion of the Humanist-Iranian Revolution" outside Iran's borders by use of the IRGC's implementation force – the Quds Forces. The aim was to create a "ground-axis of influence" that would stretch from Tehran to Lebanon's shores via Damascus.¹⁰ The bridge was divided into 3 routes (see Image 1): the northern route, that stretched from northern Iran, through the Mosul district in Iraq, the al-Hasaka route in north-eastern Syria, westward to the Kurd territory in northern Syria and the port of Latakia (marked in red). The middle route stretches from southern Iran, through Baghdad, the Abu Kamal border crossing and westward to the seaport in Tartus, Syria (marked in green). The southern route begins at the Persian Gulf coast on the Iraqi border (Abadan – Basra), through the Anbar district in western-Iraq, through the tri-border area in al-Tanaf and then continues west to the port of Beirut via Damascus (marked in red-green). Iran's assertion of its dominance in Syria serves its ultimate goal well.

The middle route was conquered by ISIS in 2014. To fight ISIS, Iraq's pro-Shi'ite government was forced to deal with its army's collapse by establishing the "Popular Mobilization Units", better known as "al-Hashd ash-Sha'bi", an umbrella corporation of over 50 local Iraqi militias, mostly Shi'ite, that received vital aid from Iran in the form of recruitment, support and mobilization of the militias into it. Some of the prominent Shi'ite militias in the "Popular Mobilization Units" operate in Syria as well.¹¹

Forces (such as the Kurds) with the support of the USA, as well as airstrikes, played the main part in the fight with ISIS. In those areas of conflict, the Shi'ite militias drove ISIS back from unpopulated areas and the Iraq-Syria border in southeast Syria, to secure control of the area (and then of the rest of the country) following the Islamic caliphates' collapse, that was run by Abu Bakhr al-Baghdadi, towards the end of 2017.

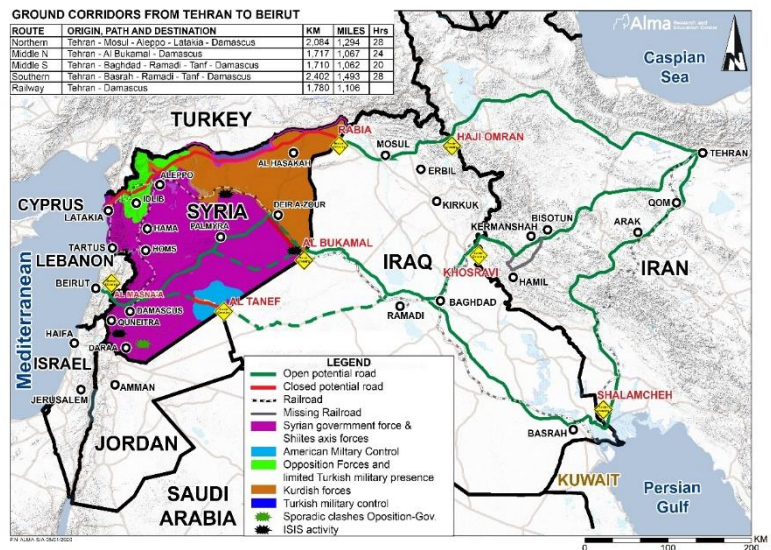


Image 1: The "ground axis of influence" between Tehran and Beirut: 3 different routes.
Source: Alma Research and Education Center

⁹ Ephraim Kam: "Iran Settles in Syria", *INSS*, October 7th, 2019

¹⁰ Seth Jones, War by proxy. (Ibid).

¹¹ Chulov Martin, From Tehran to Beirut: Shia militias aim to firm up the Iranian arc of influence, *The Guardian*, June 16, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/16/from-tehran-to-beirut-shia-militias-aim-to-firm-up-irans-arc-of-influence>. (accessed: 27.01.2020).

The Shi'ite Militias in Syria: In Practice

In 2013, protests that began in 2011 turned into armed opposition, and Assad's regime had a difficult time dealing with it. This difficulty stemmed from the fact that the Syrian army operated according to the Soviet Union's model of warfare, and therefore was not prepared for dealing with guerilla warfare combined with standard warfare. And thus, Assad's regime attempted to bridge this gap, first by contacting gangs in the Latakia area, that were into smuggling and other illegal activity. Past informal connections with these gangs brought about the establishment of armed groups that operated in the regime's interests, namely the oppression of the rebellion. An example of this can be found with the Shabiha organization, that has been running even before the rebellion's outbreak.

The formal turning point in which these groups began to be utilized came on August 5th, 2013, when Order no. 55, that granted aid for these groups and essentially legalized them.¹² In a way, the need for armed groups exposed Assad's "confession" that he is unable to provide internal security whilst waging war with opposing forces, such as the Salafi-Sunni organizations. The paramilitary array that Assad implemented against his opposition developed into "popular committees", the Jaysh al-Sha'bi militia, and the founding of the National Defense Forces (NDF) that was controlled by the regime in 2013.¹³ However, it did not stop there – Assad's regime urgently needed substantial external aid, specifically combatants, to deal with these military challenges, and therefore turned to Iran.

Iran's formal military involvement in the civil war in Syria began in mid-April 2013 when Iran's participation was outlined. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, senior-Iranian leaders led by Ali Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Forces and the IRGC, all held a covert meeting, in which Soleimani became in charge of implementing Iranian policy in Syria and Lebanon.

According to the AlShiraa newspaper, normally hostile towards Hezbollah and Iran, in this meeting, the members drew up a plan of operations for aiding Syria, that included: (1) the establishment of an ethnic army comprised of Shi'ite and Alawites, supported by forces from Iran and Iraq, Hezbollah and groups from the Persian Gulf. (2) This force will comprise of 150,000 combatants. (3) The plan will prioritize the forces from Iran first, then Iraq, and only then other Shi'ite elements. This regional force will be integrated into the Syrian army. Soleimani himself visited Syria at the end of February-beginning of March to organize this plan.¹⁴ Hezbollah began fighting for Assad's regime in Syria since the beginning of 2012. (Its activity there will not be discussed here, because it is a lengthy topic.) We will focus on the militias "imported" to Syria, while Hezbollah was considered an "almost" local force. However, it participated in most of the key battles in Syria, including the battles for the release of Aleppo, the battles for southern Damascus (al-Ghouta), and others. In the end, however, it focused on conquering western-Syria, particularly the mountain region in Al-Qusayr, the border crossing between Syria and Lebanon. This area is vital to Hezbollah's transport of military equipment, logistics and combatants from Iran to Hezbollah's facilities in Lebanon. After Hezbollah's joining, mercenary Shi'ite militias from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran (Revolutionary Guards Basij) joined as well.

¹² In Syrian Arabic, the translation of the word "Shabiha" is "ghost" and refers to the smuggling of Mercedes vehicles by coastal smugglers. With time, Shabiha became a term for the gangs sent by the regime to oppress and harm the regime's opposers in general, for settling scores and other criminal activity during the civil war in which law enforcement was minimal. See: Mohammad D. "The Original Shabiha", [EurasiaReview](http://www.eurasiareview.com/19082012-the-original-shabiha-oped/), August 19, 2012. (accessed: 25.11.19). <https://www.eurasiareview.com/19082012-the-original-shabiha-oped/>. (accessed: 25.11.19).

¹³ Fulton, W., et al. 2013. "Iranian Strategy in Syria", [Washington, Institute for the Study of War](http://www.institutefortheStudyofWar.org/), May, 2013 .
Moa Rydell, "Syria: Iran's and Saudi Arabia's new playground", Lund University, Department of Political Science, July 11, 2017. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria>. (accessed: 25.11.19). Fulton, W., et al. 2013. "Iranian Strategy in Syria", [Washington, Institute for the Study of War](http://www.institutefortheStudyofWar.org/), May, 2013 .
Moa Rydell, "Syria: Iran's and Saudi Arabia's new playground", Lund University, Department of Political Science, July 11, 2017. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria>. (accessed: 25.11.19).

¹⁴ A-Shiraa, March 15, 2013. There are no details as to where the newspaper's source of information.

The size of the militias subject to the Quds Force (including Hezbollah) at the peak of their activity is estimated between 120,000-145,000 combatants.¹⁵ We believe this estimate is exaggerated because it is 3 times larger than the opposition forces and Salafi organizations put together. If this was the size, the pro-Iranian militia force should have won the war already, which is not the case.

Along with speeches, signposting and television broadcasting, another important tool for recruitment that is used is social media. Internet-based announcements for recruitments and propaganda are frequently used for empowering larger and more significant methods of the Iranian militias. In time, the advertisements became more advanced – they improved visually and were better-organized content-wise compared to beforehand, aiming to increase awareness for joining the war with Syria and recruiting new combatants. The first to utilize social media in this way was the Iraqi military wings such as Kataeb al-Imam Ali that was split from the Mahdi Army, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who would publish online impressions that would connect his combatants to Al-Sayeda Zainab’s grave near Damascus, to promote more recruitment. One Iranian-Shi’ite militia that stands out in this regard is “Hezbollah al Nujbah”, that will be discussed later. To get an inkling of the circumference of the use of social media, the Washington Institute examined 65 social media pages and profiles with the purpose of recruitment and propaganda. These pages belong to 16 Shi’ite militias during the period between May 15th and September of 2015 – a year with constant fighting on all the different fronts of the war in Syria. The examination’s results showed that the peak of online recruitment and propaganda occurred in August, with 68 propaganda posts and 20 recruitment posts.¹⁶

An area crucial for Iran’s expansion of its “ground-axis of influence” is the Al-Bukamal border crossing in south-eastern Syria. This border crossing is essential for the transportation of combatants, weapons, and logistical equipment between Syria and Iraq. The border crossing and its surrounding area have been the grounds for many bloody battles against the Salafi rebel forces, ISIS, and its factions, up until it was conquered by the Shi’ite militias and the regime’s army with Russian air support at the end of 2017. “Fox News” published satellite images that prove Iran’s renovation of the Iranian base “Imam ‘Ali” that is adjacent to the border. According to the Israeli media, this base was attacked numerous times. It is designated for storing ammunition and housing Iranian militias fighting in the area.¹⁷ Apparently, the renovation will affect the border’s strategic operation and will even cause contests for control over it between Syria, Russia, and Iran.

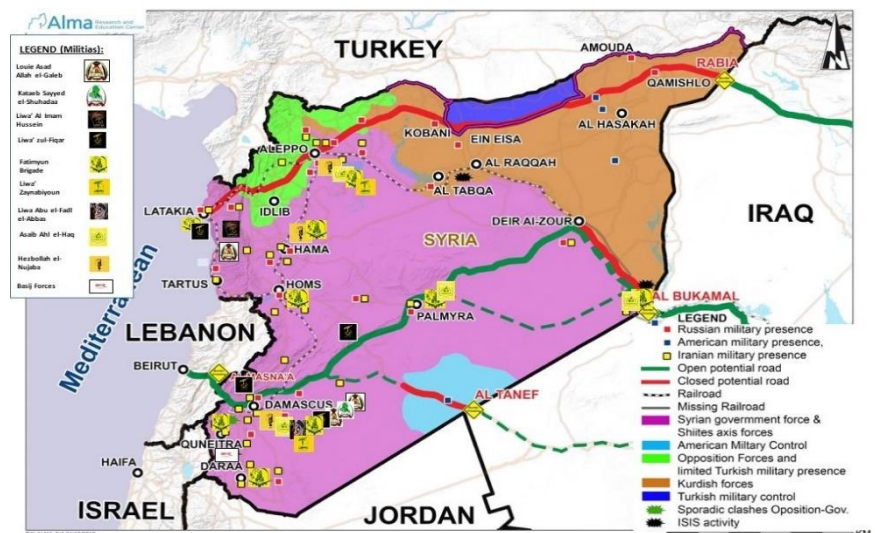


Image no. 2: Map of the forces fighting in Syria.
Source: Alma Research and Education Center

¹⁵ Seth Jones, Ibid.

¹⁶ Phillip Smyth, “Iran-backed Iraqi militias are pouring into Syria”, *The Washington Institute For Near East Policy*, Oct. 2, 2015. <https://web.archive.org/web/20181005001712/http://uk.businessinsider.com/iran-backed-iraqi-militias-are-pouring-into-syria-2015-10?r=US&IR=T>. (accessed: 29.1.2020).

¹⁷ Raz Tzimet, “A look at Iran: November 17-December 1, 2019”, *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox?projector=1>. (accessed: 2.12.19).

The Cost of the Militia's Funding

Despite Iran's financial crisis because of the US sanctions that were placed on it that limited petrol import and export from the west, Iran invests a lot of money into the funding of its militias. The total salary of all the militia combatants alone amounts to 70 million dollars per month. On top of that, there are others who are paid salaries as well: Hezbollah combatants in Syria (and not in Lebanon), the "National Defense Militias", that include the Shahiba organization, as well as the IRGC itself (including the Quds Force and the Basij). The funding for the Syrian National Defense Militias alone amounts to 9 million USD a month, and death gratuity payments to the families of militia combatants add up to 2 million USD a month. In addition, Iran supports the displaced Shi'ite families that settled in Syria and altered Syria's demography (Shi'itization) and pays them 1 million USD a month.¹⁸

The combatant's personal salaries and benefits amount to 82 million USD a month. These funds are withdrawn directly from Iran's budget and add up to one billion USD every year. These estimates do not include other important budgets, such as the funding of the supply of weapons, military, and logistical equipment, as well as Iran's direct funding of Assad's regime (weapons, energy sources, infrastructure, etc.). In short, the cost for Iran waging war reaches several billion USD every year. What is more, these funds come at the cost of not addressing the dire need for funding in Iran proper, where recent oppression of protests of the dire financial situation in the country was just barely accomplished. The extent of the aid shows Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader's, determination to accomplish Iran's hegemonic goals in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, and his willingness to pay the necessary price to do so.

About the Research

Three key players changed the playing field in the war against the rebels in Syria, especially since the end of 2014: (1) The Kurdish forces that fought the American support bombers. (2) The Russian Air Force that gave air support to Assad's army by bombing rebel targets. (3) Iran, that sent Shi'ite militias as ground-aid for Assad's army. These key players toppled the rebel forces (the rebels, ISIS, and the Organization for the Liberation of al-Sham) and forced them to retreat from the territories they captured beforehand. The recapture of towns, villages and key cities (such as the liberation of Aleppo) and the expansion of the territories that were returned to Assad's control, show the dramatic change in the war and the return of control to Assad in Syria.

The research will focus on the actions Iran took in sending Shi'ite militias into Syria. Therefore, we will discuss in detail Iran's utilization of the militias as a tool for implementing the "ground-axis of influence" from Iran to the Mediterranean shoreline. After the militias proved themselves in Syria, Iran began sending some of them to Iraq to achieve Iran's homogeneity in Iraq as part of the ground-axis of influence. This shows that the militias are a useful tool for Iran's war and forcing its influence in other areas and countries. For this reason, we chose the Shi'ite militias as the topic of this research.

For the research, we chose the main Shi'ite militias that are active in Syria. We will discuss the origins and circumstances of their establishment, their leaders' funding, their combatants' ethnicity and recruitment, their organizational structure, and their connection to other militias. We will also explore their ideology, the places they

¹⁸ [No name], IRAN: The Rise of the Revolutionary Guards' Financial Empire, US Representative Office, 2017, pp. 51-53. The author notes that these estimates are the product of the cross-examination of different news sources. For the calculation of the estimates, see note 7 on page 154-155. "The funding of the displaced people in Syria" is another term for the "demographic Shi'itization" in Syria.

have fought in, and the level of success they had there. Finally, we will conclude with their status today and how they are likely to affect Israel's security.

Hezbollah's activity in Syria, as mentioned before, is not part of this research. Instead, we want to focus on the "imported" militias in Syria, as opposed to Hezbollah, the "almost local" force, in other words, a Shi'ite militia that was requested by Iran to aid the Assad regime and is now in the process of reducing its forces and focusing more on its military interests in the Al-Qusayr border and the Tri-border between Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. Hezbollah, in our opinion, requires its own article. In total, we explored 10 important militias that are still active, as well as adding cases in which the militias disbanded and/or reformed. The research is based on credible internet sources in the Middle East: news channels, blogs, Twitter posts, research centers, the militia websites, opposition organizations, and more. In some cases, as you will see, the information we were interested in was/is not available. Still, it is still possible to sketch out the overall situation of the militias' and other organizations' activity in the field, which has more to it than meets the eye. The order in which the militias are listed is of no significance to the reader. Every militia is mentioned separately, with no connection to the others. In the conclusion of the research, we will discuss the different players' interactions with each other in their areas of conflict, and their effect on the area's security.

Here are the details of the Iranian Shi'ite militias that are deployed in Syria:

Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba حركة حزب الله النجباء

Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba is an Iraqi-Shi'ite militia that operates in Iraq and in Syria simultaneously, in other words, a TFM militia. It was one of the first militias Syria was provided with and the first Iraqi-Shi'ite body to announce its involvement in the battles on the city of Aleppo and its surrounding area. The militia was accused by the UN for war crimes in those battles. Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, its leader, recruited many Shi'ite combatants in Iraq for the war with ISIS in Syria. Approximately 3,000 of its combatants operate in Syria. Akram al-Kaabi is considered a "terrorist" by the United States and sanctions have been placed on him. Al-Kaabi declared his complete loyalty to Iran and his cooperation with Hezbollah in its battle with Israel. Al-Nujaba assists Iran with strengthening its logistical route from Iraq to Syria and is slowly turning into one of the more important Iraqi militias operating in Syria.

Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba, the "Movement of the Noble Ones", is an Iraqi militia that made its debut in Iraq in 2013. It then spread out in Syria as part of Iran's aid to Assad's regime in its war against the rebel forces.

The militia has strong ties to Iran and as a result, it operates with Hezbollah and with the "Kata'ib Hezbollah" Iraqi militia. It has loosely tied divisions such as Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir, Liwa al-Hamad, and Liwa al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mojtaba.¹⁹

The militia's leader is Akram al-Kaabi, and its spokesperson is Hashim al-Musawi. In 2012, al-Kaabi resigned from service as a senior officer in the Asai'ib Ahl al-Haq Iraqi militia. From 2013-2014, he established the al-Nujaba militia with the aid of Iran to recruit Iraqi Shi'ite combatants to the war against ISIS in Syria.



Image no. 3: An al-Nujaba combatant waving the militia's flag on top of the al-Walid mosque in the town al-Os in the Aleppo district, following the conquering of the town.

¹⁹ "Harakat al-Nujaba", [Jihad Intel](https://jihadintel.meforum.org/group/129/harakat-al-nujaba), [no date], <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/group/129/harakat-al-nujaba>. (accessed: 11.6.19). There are no details about the 2 militias under it, their way of operating or subordination to it.

Al-Nujaba continued its expansion in Syria and became one of the most important militias there.²⁰ In July 2013, Akram's visit of his combatants in the Idlib district was published in the media, combatants who were trying to deal with the Salafi rebels "Jish al Fatah", or "the Army of Conquest" and reclaiming Jisr al-Shughur, which ultimately failed. At the end of August, television reports stated that the militia's combatants are fighting in Aleppo, Hama, and in the heart of the Alawite area near Latakia.²¹ These reports helped cast the militia as a leading Shi'ite militia of Iran operating in northern Syria.

Al-Nujaba's religious outlook stemmed from Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the Grand Ayatollah clerk and anti-Baathist leader of the rebellion against Saddam Hussein that started in 1991 and fought for reform in the poorer Shi'ite areas. Al-Sadr was apparently eliminated by Hussein's people in an ambush at the beginning of 1991, causing the rebellion to escalate. He is the father of Muqtada al Sadr, the leader of the Mahdi Army. Muqtada is known for his opposition to foreign presence in Iraq, both American and Iranian. In contrast, al-Kaabi remains loyal to Iran, and to prove it, he declared his willingness to overpower the Iraqi government at the simple behest of Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran.²²

According to various opinions, the militia has approximately 10,000 combatants in both Iraq and Syria, 3,000 of them being combatants in Syria. The militia has light weaponry, but also American-made vehicles called HANVEEs and M113 armored personnel vehicles that it received from Iraq (it being part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, see later on), and will return them at the end of the war. They also have Soviet Union-made anti-tank missiles.²³ The militias' value increased after ISIS conquered parts of Iraq – Iraq accepted them in their new form – the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), led by Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, to fight ISIS.²⁴ In 2016, the al-Nujaba militia joined the recapturing of Aleppo. At the time, Kaabi informed the press that his militia is comprised of 3,000 combatants in Syria.²⁵ The militia is accused by the UN for the murder of 60 civilians, including women and children, in the battles in Aleppo in December of 2016.²⁶

The Reuters news agency reported that in 2017, the militia assisted Iran in creating a supply route from Iraq to Damascus. The United States recognized Sheikh Kaabi, the militia's leader, as a terrorist, and its Department of Treasury began placing sanctions on him in 2008, him being "a threat to Iraq's peace and stability".²⁷

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Phillip Smyth, "Iran-backed Iraqi militias are pouring into Syria"

²² Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite Leader says he would overthrow government if ordered by Iran's Supreme Leader," FDD's Long War Journal, November 12, 2015. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/us-designated-terrorist-of-iraqi-militia-reportedly-in-aleppo.php>. (accessed: 11.10.19).

²³ Sindawi Khalid. "The Shiite turn in Syria"; Ahmed Aboulein, "Iraqi militia indicates will hand heavy guns to army after Islamic State quashed", REUTERS, November 23, 2017.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-nujaba/iraqi-militia-indicates-will-hand-heavy-guns-to-army-after-islamic-state-quashed-idUSKBN1DN1JY>. (accessed: 05.02.2020).

²⁴ James Haines Young, "US sanctions Iranian militia in Iraq: Here's what you need to know about Harakat Hezbollah Al-Nujaba", NWORLD, March 6 2019. <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-sanctions-iranian-militia-in-iraq-here-s-what-you-need-to-know-about-harakat-hezbollah-al-nujaba-1.833952>. (accessed: 11.10.19)

see also: "Iraqi Shiite militia leader says he would overthrow government if order", f.n. no. 10.

²⁵ Amir Toumaj, "Iraqi militia leader receives warm reception in Tehran", FDD's Long War Journal, September 9, 2016. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/09/iraqi-militia-leader-receives-warm-reception-in-tehran.php>

²⁶ Stephanie Nebehey and Tome Miles, "Syrian army, Iraqi militia accused of 'slaughter' civilians in Aleppo," REUTERS, December 13, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-un/syrian-army-iraqi-militia-accused-of-slaughter-of-civilians-in-aleppo-idUSKBN1420ZX> (accessed: 06.11.2019).

²⁷ Lisa Lambert, U.S. sanctions the Nujaba militia backed by Iran, REUTERS, March 5, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-militants/u-s-sanctions-the-nujaba-militia-backed-by-iran-idUSKCN1QM2J1>

In 2016, al-Kaabi announced during his meeting with Hassan Nasrallah that the two organizations became “the opposition’s twins”. In 2017, al-Nujaba fought in east Damascus and Hama simultaneously, even while its war with ISIS went on in Iraq. The militia announced the establishment of “the Golan Liberation Brigade” and swore its fealty to Hezbollah in its future war with Israel. The militia’s spokesperson, Sayyid Hashim al-Musawi, stated in a Tasnim news agency (affiliated with the IRGC) press conference that the unit was established following “recent victories” (Aleppo). According to him, the “Golan Liberation Brigade” is the combined experience in combat gained in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, and is comprised of “special units”. He added that they are willing to join the Golan’s liberation, should Syria request so. “We will not allow,” he added, “the Arab states’ lands to remain under the conquerors’ control.” The report also contains a short video of combatants marching with flags saying, “Israel will be destroyed”.²⁸



Image no.4: Hassan Nasrallah with Sheikh Akram Kaabi in Lebanon.
 Source: <http://www.skypressiq.net/2015/11/30>

There are constant reports about Kaabi’s strong ties to the Iranian government. For example, according to the MEHR news agency, Ali Khamenei’s representative, Seyed Mojtaba Hosseini, met with Kaabi in January 2018 in al-Nujaba’s main headquarters in Iraq. Hosseini praised Kaabi for his recent victories over ISIS and for his protection of the homeland and holy Shi’ite sites. He also showed his appreciation for the volunteers’ and the Popular Mobilization Forces’ courage and presence in both Syria and Iraq simultaneously to defend the Shia’s holy sites.²⁹

In March 2019, the United States placed economic sanctions on the organization as part of the Counter-Terrorism Sanctions on proxy organizations, while emphasizing the organization’s dual operations in Iraq and Syria.³⁰ These sanctions are not expected to have a significant impact, since the militia has a western banking system, like the other militias.

Al-Nujaba’s activity in Iraq and Syria benefits it in many ways, such as having a long-lasting administration, a stable economy, a well-defined Islamic ideology, and mobility between Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Akram al-Kaabi’s spiritual and military leadership of the militia proved itself balanced, unshakable and long-lasting.

The organization’s operative abilities include mobilization capabilities of its weapons, equipment, and recruits along the Iranian ground-axis of influence. The central route is the one between Ramadi and Syria, starting from north-west Iraq (where the Sunni rebellion started and indirectly brought about ISIS’s rise to power), via the Al Bukamal border to the Deir ez-Zor district and other parts of Syria. The Al Bukamal border crossing allows al-Nujaba flexibility with the transportation of manpower and weapons from Iraq to Syria. Al-Nujaba’s routine of constant transportation from Iraq to Syria, along with other militias, blurs the Iraq-Syria border that was determined in the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the geopolitical effects it has on the region. Control of the border became a cause for clashes between the Iranian militias and the Syrian Regime, which began building a checkpoint for control of transported goods and commuters in and out of Syria (see image no. 1, the main route marked in pink).

²⁸ Amir Toumaj, “IRGC-controlled Iraqi militia forms Golan Liberation Brigade,” FDD’s long War Journal, March 12, 2017. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/irgc-controlled-iraqi-militia-forms-golan-liberation-brigade.php>. (accessed: 06.11.19);

“Sardar Soleimani is supported by the Iraqi government, nation and authority” MEHR News Agency, March 1, 2017. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/3926523>

²⁹ “Leader’s envoy meets Nujaba sec. Gen. in Iraq”, MEHR, 1 January 2018. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/130821/Leader-s-envoy-meets-Nujaba-Secy-Gen-in-Iraq>. (accessed: 06/11/19)

³⁰ As is it known, 11 years prior the United States placed personal economic sanctions on Ka’abi. The sanctions here were placed on the organization in general and on its economic activity. See note 10, “US sanctions on Iranian militia in Iraq.”

The strong ties between Hezbollah and other Iranian organizations placed the al-Nujaba militia as an Iran proxy, benefitting from Iran's support, its strengthening in power, and its flexible logistic rear in Iraq. Being so, we predict that the militia can run independently for longer periods in relation to other militias in Syria. These strong ties, as well as its leaders' support of Hezbollah's war with Israel, define it as a serious future threat to Israel's northern border – with both Lebanon and Syria.

Al-Nujaba is the leading organization in recruiting foreign combatants online, if not the pioneer in this area (see "The Shi'ite Militias in Syria: In Practice"). For example, al-Nujaba launched its first recruitment project from December 2014 to April 2015, the fruit of its sowing gleaned already in May and June of 2015. In September, following a slight decline in the number of recruits, the number of combatants recruited via the internet reverted to its original monthly number and has been consecutive since then.³¹

The militia's website, <http://alnujaba.com/>, provides comprehensive information on its military activity in light of Western-world news. The militia also has a television channel called "Al-Najaba Satellite Channel" and a news channel with the same name, followed by many on social media.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq عصاب أهل الحق

"Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" is a strong veteran Shi'ite militia that operates in Iraq and Syria (a TFM militia) and has strong connections to Hezbollah. It is led by Qais al-Khazali and receives monetary and military aid from the Quds Force and Hezbollah. The militia and its factions are extremely loyal to the Iranian leadership. During the years of the turning of the war in Syria, the militia sent thousands of its combatants to reclaim Aleppo and was considered one of the key militias in this operation. It was also one of the key players of the battle in the area of the tomb of Sayyidah Zaynab and played an essential role in aiding the regime with defending Damascus from rebel forces. The militia also partook in the battle of the liberation of Tadmur. The militia has an extensive recruitment and propaganda system and is based in Iraq to recruit for the war in Syria. The militia is blamed by the Amnesty International organization for the abuse of human rights and for committing war crimes in the areas it fought in and assisted Assad's regime.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, whose name means the "League of the Righteous", is a TFM-type Shi'ite militia that operates in Iraq and Syria.

The militia operated against United States forces in Iraq after being conquered by them. It is considered one of the most active groups against US forces stationed in Iraq and was classified by the US in the "Special Groups" category, the Americans' term for Iran-backed Shia paramilitaries in Iraq. This militia group split from the "Mahdi Army", led by Muqtada al-Sadr after he signed a cease-fire with the American army in August 2007.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq was founded in 2006 by Qais Khazali and comprises of between 7,000-10,000 combatants, eventually becoming one of the strongest Shi'ite militias in Iraq. After the civil uprising of "the Iraqi Spring" in 2008, it became the largest group and was named "Khazali's Network". It is controlled by the Quds Force and is an important part of the al-Hashad al-Shaabi umbrella organization. Its members began to be paid accordingly by the Iraqi army after it al-Hashad al-Shaabi was integrated into the Iraqi army in 2018. In 2017, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq established a political party called "Al-Sadiqoun Bloc".³² The Bloc maintains strong ties with Hezbollah, that provided it with military training

³¹ Phillip Smyth, "Iran-backed Iraqi militias are pouring into Syria".

³² "Asaib Ahl al-Haq", Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/asaib-ahl-al-haq>. (accessed: 13.11.19).

"Al-Sadiqoun Bloc", Howling Pixel, [no date], https://howlingpixel.com/i-en/Al-Sadiqoun_Bloc. (accessed: 13/11/19).

programs at the start of its journey.³³ There are claims that it even fought alongside Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon War.³⁴

During the attacks on the American forces in Iraq by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Khazali was abducted in March 2007 by the American forces and later in January 2010 released as part of a hostage-exchange.³⁵ Since his release, Khazali continued leading the militia, both militarily and politically. In the years following the United States' withdrawal from Iraq in December 2010, the militia succeeded in recruiting new members for Assad's war in Syria. According to the Guardian Middle East, Khazali captivated thousands of Shi'ite Iraqis and convinced them to join Assad's war, even while warning them about the ethnic conflict spreading out in Syria, knowing no bounds.³⁶

The militia recruited many of its members for the battle in Aleppo, along with other militias doing the same. It was the largest Iraqi militia taking part in a 3,000-4,000-man operation in Aleppo. The militia deployed its factions under the name of Kata'ib al-Imam Ali in Aleppo and Palmyra.³⁷ Kata'ib al-Imam Ali debuted in 2014 as a military branch of the "Islamic Iraq Party" that contended with the Sunni rebellion in Iraq, and later on with ISIS as well. Because Shibl al-Zaydi, the militia's Secretary General, had good relations with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Hashad al-Shaabi's leader, the militia received his personal support and was able to recruit veteran combatants, a feat that boosted the militia astronomically. In 2015, Kata'ib al-Imam Ali began sending combatants to Syria to defend the holy grave of Sayyidah Zaynab. At the start of 2016, the militias' combatants partook in Palmyra's liberation from ISIS, and at the end of 2016, it partook in Aleppo's liberation.³⁸

According to pro-Assad social media platforms, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq intelligence officers are in constant touch with Russian officers regarding the planning of the war. Their meetings were held in the field and have image-based documentation.³⁹

Khazali aspired to expand his political involvement in Iraq by taking advantage of his ethnic rhetoric. A few days before the Iraqi Parliament elections on April 30th, 2014, Khazali held an inciting speech in front of 10,000 supporters. ISIS attacked the rally, injuring 33 people, including 10 of the militias combatants that fought in Syria alongside Assad's forces. Khazali's party, Al-Sadiqoun Bloc, failed in the elections and only received one chair in the Iraqi Parliament.⁴⁰

Religiously speaking, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq,s ideology holds steadfast to the "Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist" doctrine. It is based on the Shi'ite ideology that the Fiqh, the Islamic jurisprudence, is responsible for the community's

For details regarding al-Hashad al-Shaabi, see: Doron Yitzchakov, "Al Hashad al-Shaabi: In between Iranian aspirations and geopolitical changes in Iraq and Syria", Moshe Dayan Center, July 16th, 2017.

<https://dayan.org/he/content/3894>. (accessed: 2.12.19).

³³ Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al Haq," Middle East Security Report 7 (December 2012) :9. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ResurgenceofAAH.pdf>. (accessed: 11.11.19).

³⁴ Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Stanford CISAC, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/asaib-ahl-al-haq#highlight_text_7962. (accessed: 13.11.19)

³⁵ Eli Lake, "Inside Iraq's Iranian-Backed militias", Bloomberg Opinion, February 4, 2015. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2015-02-04/inside-iraq-s-iranian-backed-militias> (accessed: 11.11.19).

³⁶ Martin Chulov, "Controlled by Iran, the deadly militia recruiting Iraq's men to die in Syria," Guardian (London), March 12, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/12/iraq-battle-dead-valley-peace-syria>.(accessed:11.11.19).

³⁷ Amir Toumaj, "Array of pro-Syrian government forces advances in Aleppo," Long War Journal, December 9, 2016. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/array-of-pro-syrian-government-forces-advance-in-aleppo.php> (accessed:11.11.19).

³⁸ "Kata'ib al-Imam Ali", Gihad Intel. <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/group/131/kataib-al-imam-ali> .(accessed: 06.02.2020); Leith Aboufadel, "Tiger Forces liberate Hill 800 in west Palmyra", Al Masdar News, 14.3.2016. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/tiger-forces-liberate-hill-800-west-palmyra/>.

³⁹ Amir Toumaj, "Array of pro-Syrian government forces advances in Aleppo."

⁴⁰ Associated Press, "Shiite rally bombing sparks reprisals in Iraq," Seattle Times, April 26, 2014. <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/shiite-rally-bombing-sparks-reprisals-in-iraq>. (accessed: 11/11/19).

unfortunate, and has since been furthered by Khomeini, who declared that the Fiqh has the absolute authority, similar to the Shi'ite imams and even the Prophet Muhammad. According to the Khomeini doctrine, the leader must create the right environment to enable the Mahadi's (the lost Imam) return, by enforcing a strict Islamic-Shi'ite rule. Therefore, the militia is loyal to Khomeini's ideology and to Ali Khomeini's, the current Supreme Leader, leadership.⁴¹ The militia is interested in making Iraq a Shi'ite country. It stated that its political agenda is to defend Islamic holy sites both to Shi'ites and Sunnis. Attacks on these places can provoke ethnic clashes with retaliation on both sides, such as the devastation of the Al-Askari mosque. Hence, the militia strives to keep this area sterile of such conflicts by defending Sayida Zaynab in Damascus.⁴² The site is located south of Damascus's capital city, Sayida Zaynab. The town is situated between the eastern and western "limbs" of Highway 5, a key location for this goal. Even though most of the south-Damascus area is under Assad's control, the defense of Sayida Zaynab ensures its safety of the reach of ISIS and other rebels that reside in the town and occasionally bomb it, provoking clashes with the Shi'ite militias.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq fought alongside the Iraqi forces against the Sunni rebellion in the Anbar district in northwest Iraq, as well as in Baghdad and Diyala on the border with Iran. The militia has opposers from the Iraqi Shi'ite community, especially Muqtada al-Sadr. The opponency stems from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's ties with the IRGC on one hand and its connection with Iraqi forces on the other. The duality fortifies the militia's position and makes it difficult for other militias to weaken it.

In Syria, the militia is an important tool for the Syrian army in defending Damascus from the rebel armed forces. Being so, ISIS justifies its attacks on the militia and its supporters. Thus, the militia is in an ongoing war with ISIS.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq receives training, ammunition and funding from the Quds Force as well as from Hezbollah. There is footage of Khazali visiting the border with Metulah, Israel in December 2017 with an escort of Hezbollah combatants.⁴³ According to Col. Rick Welch, and American intelligence officer, Iran contributed 20 million dollars to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq a month throughout 2007 for combatant training purposes.⁴⁴ From 2012, Iran began funding the militia with approximately 5 million dollars a month in the form of cash and weapons. In the following years, Iranian support decreased to 1.5-2 million dollars a month.⁴⁵ According to Amnesty International, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq constantly receives weapons from Iran and Russia. In January 2017, Amnesty International published violations of human rights committed by the militia, calling for foreign nations to end "irresponsible arms transfers fueling militia war crimes". It accused the militia also for war crimes, including making citizens disappear, abductions, and murder and torture of Sunni teenagers. The militia was also accused of exploiting 11-year children as combatants.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Sam Wyer, "The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq", Middle East Security Report 7,(December 2012). <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ResurgenceofAAH.pdf>.(accessed: 11.11.19).

⁴² See: "Iraqi Shi'a Militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Expands Operations to Syria", note 19.

⁴³ Ohad Yaari, "Footage: The Iranians on the Border, Mako, 09.12.17.

https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security-q4_2017/Article-6999e8a24dc3061004.htm. (accessed: 06.02.2020)

⁴⁴ Michael Weiss, "Trust Iran Only as Far as You Can Throw It," Foreign Policy, June 23, 2014. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/23/trust-iran-only-as-far-as-you-can-throw-it>. (accessed: 11.11.19).

⁴⁵ Associated Press, "Iraqi militia's shift into politics could stoke tensions, strengthen Iran's hand," Daily Star (Beirut), January 9 ,2012.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Jan-09/159183-iraqi-militias-shift-into-politics-could-stoke-tensions-strengthen-irans-hand.ashx> (accessed:11.11.19)

⁴⁶ "Iraq: End irresponsible arms transfers fueling militia war crimes," Amnesty International, January 5, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/01/iraq-end-irresponsible-arms-transfers-fuelling-militia-war-crimes> "Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye: the Arming of the Popular Mobilization Units," Amnesty International, January 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/5386/2017/en> (accessed: 11.11.19).

Khazali has 3 deputy commanders under him – Sayyid Mohammed al-Tabatabai, Kazim al-Abadi, Laith al-Khazali (Khazali’s brother). Hassan Salem, leader of the “Al-Sadiqoun Bloc”, spokespersons Jawad al-Talabawi and Naim al-Aboudi are in league with them as well.⁴⁷

In November 2014, Sheikh Halifa, President of the United Arab Emirates’ cabinet and leader of the proposition of “Federal Law no.7”, recognizing 88 organizations as terrorist organizations, including Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq.⁴⁸ Following the murder of protesters in the Diyala Governorate in Iraq at the end of 2015, the American Treasury placed sanctions on Khazali and his brothers.⁴⁹



Image no.5: Khazali (left) visiting the Lebanon border and looking out towards Israel, stating his future goals of the war (December 2017).
Source: <https://www.akhbaralyawm.com/>.

Besides for the militia’s activity in Iraq, its most remarkable attacks over the past few years were concentrated in war zones the Syrian army also operated in to reclaim conquered areas by ISIS. For example, according to claims by the “Human Right Watch”, in 2015 Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq was involved in the forced eviction of houses, villages and farms, abductions and executions of Sunni and Kurd citizens, in areas reclaimed from ISIS. In November 2017, the militia joined the campaign for the liberation of the Al-Bukamal border crossing from ISIS. The militia’s fighting drifted southward to the Iraqi side of the Al-Bukamal border, in the Al-Kaim district. The militia partook in the siege on Aleppo with the al-Nujaba militia, the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and others. According to a UN Human Rights correspondent, the militia executed dozens of citizens in its fight for the city.⁵⁰ Also, the militia fought in the area of the grave of Al-Sayeda Zainab, initially declaring its intention to join the war in Syria.

Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq recruits its combatants using two strategies: the first, traditional indoctrination to present the militia to the potential recruits. Like ISIS, the militia uses social media to expand its recruitment outreach. One of the main ways it does this is by casting itself as the defender of the Shi’ite communities in Iraq and Syria. In addition, it uses posters and television ads, emphasizing its connection to Hezbollah and Iran. The defense of the grave of Al-Sayeda Zainab was also a great charm for persuading people to enlist. The militia commandeered houses and offices and built recruitment centers. In southern Iraq, thousands of flyers were posted, calling for men to join the war in Syria alongside other Shi’ites, and even provided a telephone number for a hotline. The flyers depicted the militia’s logo, pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Iraqi Ayatollah Muhamad Sadak al-Sadr, accurately displaying the militia’s religious ideology.⁵¹

The second recruitment method is religious-educational activism. The militia used 2 mosques just for this – the Sabatyn mosque in Baghdad and the Abdullah al-Radiya mosque in al-Khalis. The militia’s leaders would demand social and religious reforms in Iraq, enticing people to join, fund, or donate to the militia’s cause. In addition, the militia also expands its advertising range using a chain of schools named “The Seal of the Apostles”, schools scattered all over Iraq.

⁴⁷ Asaib al-Haq (League of the Righteous), Foundation for Defense of Democracies. <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Assaib.pdf>. (accessed: 13.11.19).

⁴⁸ “List of groups designated terrorist organizations by the UAE,” *The National* (Abu Dhabi), November 16, 2014, <http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/list-of-groups-designated-terrorist-organisations-by-the-uae> (accessed 11.11.19).

⁴⁹ “Treasury Sanctions Iran-Backed Militia Leaders Who Killed Innocent Demonstrators in Iraq”, *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, December 6, 2019. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm847>. (accessed: 06.02.2020).

⁵⁰ “Asaib al Haq(AAH) League of the Righteous”, *Global Security*, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/asaib-al-haq.htm>. (accessed: 13.11.19)

⁵¹ “Asaib Ahl ak-Haq”, *United Against Nuclear IRAN* <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/report/asaib-ahl-al-haq>. (accessed: 13.11.19).

Like Hezbollah, the militia also launches support programs for widows and orphans. These recruitment efforts are funded mostly by Iran.⁵²

The militia's formal website is rich with information and images. The main page depicts Secretary General Qais al-Khazali in interviews on Iraqi matters and condemning American involvement in Iraq. Also, in the "public statements" column, there are interviews with Sa'ed al-Asdi, political bureau member, who claims there is pressure from external authorities on the running Prime Minister Muhamad Topik Adaouy, with the intent of interfering with the formation of the government and imposing their own agendas and nominations of government officials. Militia persons' opinions are also displayed, condemning American hostility towards the 45th Brigade of Hashad al-Shaabi, situated west of Anbar. Sayyid Mohammed al-Tabatabai, Khazali's deputy, also voiced his opinion on the matter, exulting Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, al-Hashad's deputy commander, and Kassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, describing them as "2 holy people, flames that snuffed themselves out to show us the way of freedom and honor." In the "education" column, a picture of Sheikh Ali al-Matfar visiting the "Abi Al-Khatib" center is displayed. There are also pictures of Hassin al-Abadi in the Office of Educational Matters in the city of Kutha. On the bottom portion of the page, there are pictures of the militia's Shahids as well as those of al-Hashid, as well as other pictures and interviews with Khazali regarding Iraqi governing matters, condemnation of American presence and other similar messages. There is also media coverage of Shahid funerals and commemoration parades, waving Iraq's flag and a large picture of Khazali.

In conclusion, the website leaves an impression of the high prioritization of the militia's leadership of the Iraqi government, political and civilian activity and the empowering of Khazali. To access the website's Facebook and Twitter accounts, prior affiliation with the militia is required. I have not found a way to enlist to the militia via the website, apparently, there is another website for this purpose. However, it is possible to contact the website with a request.

The website's focus on politics indicates the militia's movement to preserve and strengthen its military and political influence in Iraq in Iran's interests.

Liwa Fatemiyoun (لواء الفاطميون)

Liwa Fatemiyoun is a veteran militia that was deployed by Iran in the 80s in the war against Soviet Russia to stop its conquer of Afghanistan and later deployed in the Iran-Iraq war. It is comprised of thousands of Shi'ite Afghanistan combatants and has been deployed in many different forms and methods until it was declared an active militia that will aid Assad's army in the war in 2014. Its founder is named Ali Reza Tavassoli. Its recruits are Afghani refugees in Iran, some of them forced to enlist in order to receive legal residency status in Iran. The militia was deployed in many significant and bloody battles in Syria, such as the ones in Aleppo, Daraa and Palmyra. Recently, it was posted across from Israel's Golan Heights. The militia has close to 4,000 combatants and has sustained heavy casualties in its wars, more than any other militia in Syria. The militias commanders have been killed one after the other as well, and the case being so, the militia command was transferred directly to the Quds Force officers.

Liwa Fatemiyoun's (also known as "Hezbollah Afghanistan") establishment was an initiative taken by Kassem Soleimani in May 2013, fighting in the war in Syria ever since 2014. Its founders are Ali Reza Tavassoli (as mentioned before) and



Image no. 6: The Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Militia Site.
<https://ahlulhaq.com/>

⁵² Ibid.

Sheikh Mohammad Baqer al-Alawi. It was established following Mosul's (city in northern Iraq) collapse, to alleviate the Shi'ite Iraqi combatant's shortage of manpower fighting ISIS and other Salafi organizations in Syria. Its primary objective was to defend Al-Sayeda Zainab.

During its war with Afghanistan in the 80s, the militia was also known as "Muhammad Arm". Its duty was like that of the Abuzar Brigade, that volunteered to fight Afghanistan in opposition to the Soviet Russia's conquest (1979-1989).⁵³ Later on, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini recruited Muhammad Arm for the Iran-Iraq war. At the end of the war, the militia was returned to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban. As a result of the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Muhammad Arm fell apart because many of its combatants fled to Iran, fearing persecution by the new pro-American Afghanistan authority. The militia provided the foundation for the eventual establishment as Liwa Fatemiyoun.⁵⁴ At the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, Tavassoli requested assistance from Iran and its Afghanistan combatants by them entering Syria and defending the holy Shi'ite sites. Iran heeded his request and entered Syria. The militia then fought alongside the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia, a faction that split from the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia that has been fighting in Syria since the summer of 2013. Tavassoli succeeded in recruiting many Afghanistan combatants, some of them from Iran and others from Damascus.⁵⁵ In 2014, Liwa Fatemiyoun was deployed by Iran in Syria to fight alongside the Syrian army against Sunni Jihad organizations. Eventually, the militia became a large, independent militia brigade under the IRGC's command, with thousands of combatants.⁵⁶

According to the militia's propaganda's agenda, the purpose of its deployment by Iran was to defend Al-Sayeda Zainab. In reality, it served in many other battles all over Syria alongside Assad's regime, such as Hama,⁵⁷ Daraa, the Damascus area, Aleppo, in the villages Nubl, Zahraa, Homs, Deir ez-Zur (particularly near the Al Bukamal border), Hama, Latakia and areas near Israel's Golan Heights. The militia has military bases in Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, Damascus and Homs. At the height of the war in 2015, the militia had an estimated 3,000-4,000 combatants deployed in Syria.⁵⁸

The militia sustained heavy losses during its battles in Syria. For example, Der Spiegel magazine estimated that during the militia's battles against ISIS in Daraa and Aleppo, approximately 700 combatants were killed.⁵⁹ Hundreds of its combatants were killed in the battle in the Al Bukamal border area.⁶⁰ According to the magazine, no other militia deployed in Syria was involved in so many key battles as Liwa Fatemiyoun was.⁶¹ The death toll, estimated at over 1,000, indicates the militia's intense involvement in the battles in opposition to the rebels' attacks in the "hottest" areas, to the point of them being cannon fodder for the Syrian army. Apparently, the IRGC buried them in Iran as martyrs to make their deaths significant.⁶²

⁵³ "IRGC Commander Praises Afghans for Fighting against ISIL in Syria", Fars News, August 09, 2016.

<https://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950519001076>
(accessed 03.11.19).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Tobias Schneider, The Fatemiyoun division. See note 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Marasel Syria – www.syrian-reporter.net, 22.3.2015.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Reuter, Christopher. "The Afghans Fighting Assad's War". *Der Spiegel*. May 11, 2015.

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghan-mercenaries-fighting-for-assad-and-stuck-in-syria-a-1032869.html>
(accessed: 03.11.19).

⁶⁰ <http://orient-news.net>, 11.2.2015 (accessed: 03.11.19).

⁶¹ Reuter, Christopher. "The Afghans Fighting Assad's War". *Der Spiegel*. May 11, 2015.

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghan-mercenaries-fighting-for-assad-and-stuck-in-syria-a-1032869.html>
(accessed: 03.11.19).

⁶² Ibid.

Liwa Fatemiyoun is slightly different from other Shi'ite militias regarding the chain of command. The militia lost many of its commanders one after the other, in battle or by elimination. Tavassoli's deputy, Reza Bakhshi, who was born and raised in Iran, was killed on February 18th, 2015. Tavassoli himself was killed in southern Daraa in May 2015 in a battle with Jabhat al-Nusra, a Salafi militia. There's more – Mohammed Hussein Hosseini, assistant to Tavassoli, also nicknamed "Sayd Hakhim, was killed in December 2016 by an explosive planted on the highway east of Palmyra.⁶³ On July 8th, 2017, the "Russia Today" website reported Ali Jafari's, a Liwa Fatemiyoun commander, death. We do not have any details regarding its cause. Since the commanders' deaths, Quds Force officers have taken direct command of the militia.⁶⁴

The militia is known not only for its size compared to other militias but also for it being comprised of combatants from weak populations that were recruited against their will. The militia is comprised of Shi'ites from Afghanistan, primarily from the Hazaras ethnic group. This is a Shi'ite group mainly from the Twelver Shia Group, Persian speakers in the Hazaras dialect, and account for 95 of Afghanistan's population, in other words 3.15 million people that live mainly in the heart of the country, in the Hazaristan area but also in Iran and Pakistan. The Hazaras is the poorest Shi'ite minority in Afghanistan.

The IRGC recruited thousands of Afghani refugees living in Iran to fight in Syria, ever since 2013. According to a Human Rights Watch correspondent, several of the recruits claimed they were forced to enlist. Iran beseeched Afghanistan to defend the holy Shi'ite sites, promising monetary compensation and legal residency in Iran to convince them to join. According to Syrian opposition websites' reports, the majority of the militia's combatants are Afghanistan refugees living in Iran, illegally in most of the cases, who were recruited by the IRGC in exchange for a 500 dollar-per-month salary (considered high in Iran), death gratuity payments to their families should the need arise, and correction of their legal status in Iran.

Iran is home to approximately 3 million Afghanistan people, most of them refugees who fled their country. Only 950,000 of them were recognized as legal refugees. Iran limits the number of refugees given legal status and allows many who are still undecided to stay in Iran, although these people are undocumented and have a temporary visa. The funerals of the combatants killed in Syria frequently take place in Iran with the attendance of Iranian officials. While Iran officially states that thousands of the Afghanistan refugees in Iran volunteered for the militia, it is known that their fragile legal status and their fear of deportation are likely factors of their decision to enlist. Many of the recruits claim that the threat of arrest and compulsory recruitment were the deciding factors of this decision. They stated that their training took place in military bases near Tehran and Shiraz in 2015. The "volunteers" were sent to a military training base named "Padegan-e Shahid Pazouki" in Varamin, 60 kilometers south of Tehran, to train with Pakistani, Arab, and other volunteers. After only 19 days of training, they were flown to Damascus and visited Al-Sayeda Zainab for their first time. They joined Liwa Fatemiyoun in Aleppo and received a 2 million tomens-a-month salary (roughly \$475) and an extra 650,000 tomens for 21 vacation days. As mentioned before, Quds Force officers commanded and supervised the militia, including their station near Israel's Golan Heights.⁶⁵

There are testimonies to the fact that the Iranian commanders forced recruits to perform dangerous military operations, such as storming well-fortified ISIS posts with nothing more than automatic rifles, and even without any artillery support. In some cases, the Iranian commanders threatened to shoot them if they will not follow those orders. There are even reports of children being recruited to the militia. International law forbids government authorities and

⁶³ "One of the most prominent Fatimid militia leaders has been killed in fighting in Syria", Watan Syria, July 11, 2017. <https://watan.fm/news/syria-news/97056>. (accessed: 27.11.19).

⁶⁴ Tobias Schneider, The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan fighters in the Syrian civil war, Middle East Institute, October 2018. https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2018-11/PP11_Schneider.pdf. (accessed: 28.11.19).

⁶⁵ Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria", Human Right Watch, January 29, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria>. (accessed: 30.10.19).

armed non-government authorities from recruiting and deploying children under the age of 18. In the past few years, Iranian officials began limiting the legal options for the refugees to request asylum in the country, even as the circumstances in Afghanistan continued spiraling downward. This policy greatly endangers the refugees that are not part of the minority that was recognized in the past as one and makes them vulnerable to the threats of deportation as well as being forced to fight in Syria.⁶⁶

Liwa Fatemiyoun became an integral part of the Quds Force. This is apparent by the fact that Quds Force officers, even the mid-rank ones, were blamed for the militia's deaths.⁶⁷ For example, there are reports of the militia going on co-op missions with the IRGC's unmanned aircraft unit in the campaign near the Al-Bukamal border crossing. In a video that was published by Al-Manar, Hezbollah's television network, an ISIS post is attacked by an unmanned aircraft and by the militia's combatants simultaneously.⁶⁸ The "Sky News" channel reported unmanned aircrafts attacking pro-Iranian Shi'ite militia posts in the Al-Bukamal area. According to the report, 5 militia combatants were killed in the attack, and 9 others were injured.⁶⁹ According to a report by the Syrian Revolutionary Forces' Department of Information" on August 16th, 2018 (Free Syrian Army – Rebels), a number of the militia's combatants killed by the "unknown" fighter jets that attacked them near Al-Bukamal in the eastern neighborhood Deir ez-Zur. Pirat Post reported on Facebook that 6 of the militia's combatants were killed from "unknown" raids on their artillery post near the "Plane Square" at the Euphrates Beach in Al Bukamal. According to the report, "Combined Joint Task Force" planes have been recently attacking Assad's forces and militias in areas on the east bank of the Euphrates River, east of Deir ez-Zur.⁷⁰ Attacks on Liwa Fatemiyoun attest to its presence in the areas under attack and to the importance attributed to it by the attacking forces, as a representative of Iran on the battlefield.

As part of the dwindling of the intensity of the battles in Syria, pro-Iran militias began returning to their countries, although we do not have details regarding the numbers. Even if we assume that half of them returned, we are still left with nearly 2,000 combatants (after the subtraction of the number of casualties sustained) still operating in Syria, in their respective areas. We did not find testimonies or documents declaring future deployment of the militia against Israel. On the other hand, their stationing at only a few kilometers near Israel's Golan Heights prevents us from abandoning this possible Iranian intent. Therefore, we consider the militia a threat to Israel's security in the Golan Heights, and it is important to take the militia into account as a force that the IDF may have to contend with if the situation escalates.

The first of the militia's groups that left Syria returned to Iran, as per Soleimani's wish to aid Iran with dealing with the big floods that have been plaguing the country since March 2019. Al-Nujaba members were the first to go, others following them. Their arrival was ill met by the Iranian citizens, who reacted violently in their protests of the dire financial situation in Iran. Some even claim the citizens feared the militias would quash any hopes of effecting change in the government.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ As seen on Ynet, Roi Case: "Footage: Iranian unmanned aircrafts attacking ISIS vehicles in Syria", YNET, 25.8.17 <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5007572,00.html> (accessed: 03.11.19).

⁶⁹ Ranem Irahim, "Report: A fighter jet attacked a military base of Shi'ite militias in Iraq, Mako, 22.9.19. https://www.mako.co.il/news-world/2019_Q3/Article-795f4a4a0685d61027.htm (accessed: 03.11.19).

⁷⁰ Warplanes Attack Iranian Afghan Militia in Deir Ezzor", Syria Progress Post, august 17 2018. https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=493368000712782&story_fbid=1824093560973546 (accessed 30.10.19).

⁷¹ "The pro-Iranian militias. Are they holding their return from Syria's American strategy?", Teller Report, 25.5.2019. <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2019-05-25---the-pro-iranian-militias---are-they-holding-their-return-from-syria-s-american-strategy--H1z5TyDpN.htm>. (accessed: 30.10.19).

As a result of many Liwa Fatemiyoun combatants' return to Iran, influential Afghan figures had mixed emotions. On one hand, Afghanistan's forces persecuted the militia's combatants for fear they will destabilize the country. On the other hand, members of elite Afghan Shi'ite groups, that do not have ties to the government and are only focused on their own interests, have a different view. The presence of war veterans in Syria, in their view, will have a positive effect on Afghanistan's internal strifes because they will be able to bring their own military experience to the war against the Taliban, ISIS, or other Sunni Jihad militant factions.

Liwa Zainabyon from Pakistan لواء زينبون

Liwa Zainabyon is a militia (or in IRGC's terms – a brigade) comprised of Shi'ites from Pakistan and operates as part of the Quds Force in Syria. Its recruits are Pakistan Shi'ites living in Iran, and it began fighting for Assad in 2014, at first under Liwa Fatemiyoun, and afterward separately. It has nearly 1,000 combatants, dispersed in the different fighting zones in Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa and Hama. Muhammad Jinati, the militia's commander, was killed near Hama in 2017, and since then, we believe the militia is under the IRGC's direct command, its new commander's identity unknown to us.

Muhammad Jinati's circumstances of death have yet to be determined. According to Iranian news agency "Mehr", his body's remains were found near Turabi hill in the Hama district. His body, confirmed with a DNA test, was discovered headless and missing an arm approximately 2 years after his death. His funeral took place in Tehran on June 13th, 2019.⁷² He was born in the village Dizj Khalil in the Shabestar district in the eastern province of Azerbaijan. After the ISIS attacks on Al-Sayeda Zainab, Jinati decided to defend the holy Shi'ite sites in Syria.⁷³ We have not found evidence of a new commander, or even a temporary one in his stead.



Image no.7: Muhammad Jinati's funeral.

Source: adramout.net
<https://www.7adramout.net/enabbaladi/2407115/>

⁷² "Pictures of the funeral of the commander of the "Zaynabiyoun Brigade" after his killing in Syria", Enab Baladi, February 12, 2020.

<https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=iw&sl=iw&tl=ar&u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.enabbaladi.net%2Farchives%2F308080> (accessed: 12.02.2020).

⁷³ "The Remains of the Commander of the Zaynabiyoun Brigade were found two years after his death", Kana Alalem, 12.6.2019, <https://katr.net/5b6dcd>, (accessed: 12.2.2020).

We assume that Liwa Zainabyon, like Liwa Fatemiyoun, is under the direct command of the Quds Force. If there is a new commander in Jinati's stead, his identity remains unknown.

The militia's combatant's funerals take place mainly in Iran, their base country as militants. The combatants fled Pakistan because of the ethnic clashes, in which minorities, especially Shi'ites, were persecuted by Salafi Jihad organizations (Sunnis). The militia is comprised of these refugees, as well as of Pakistan Shi'ites originating in Parachinar and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa near Peshawar on Afghanistan's border. The militia was established adjacent to Liwa Fatemiyoun's establishment.⁷⁴ Up until 2013, ISIS attacked many Shi'ite mosques in Iraq and Syria. The Pakistani refugees were witnesses to ISIS's crime against Shi'ites in Iraq and in Syria, which is also a source of their motivation to fight ISIS under Iran's command. In that year, American forces bombed the Al-Sayeda Zainab mosque's surrounding area, expanding the mosque's outer walls. The attack also hastened Liwa Zainebiyoun's establishment.



Image no.8: Muhammad Jinati with commander of the IRGC's Quds Force Kassem Soleimani.
Source: Sham Network, June 12th, 2019
<http://www.shaam.org/news/syria-news>

The militia has approximately 800-1000 combatants.⁷⁵ This estimate is based on the analyzation of the total number of the militia's wounded and killed between January 2012 to July 2019, which is not more than 160.⁷⁶ The militia began fighting in Syria in November 2014. It was a small militia at first, therefore it fought alongside Liwa Fatemiyoun at first, and only 2 years later in 2015 became a big enough militia to justify the establishment of a separate brigade.⁷⁷ Ever since the Russian intervention, the number of Pakistani combatants in Syria grew and they began fighting all over Syria. Although their initial mission was to defend Al-Sayeda Zainab, like other militias, they ultimately joined the epicenter of the battle in the heart of Aleppo. The Iranian militias' activity succeeded in deciding the outcome of the war in the city, with the help of the Russian Air Force. Editor Robert Fisk, who toured Aleppo at the beginning of 2016, affirms that there were several hundred Pakistani combatants on the battlefield in Aleppo. He also stated that the militia lost 69 combatants between November 2014 (the beginning of the war in Syria) and March 2016.⁷⁸

Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas لواء أبو الفضل العباس

Also known as Kata'ib

The Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Militia (Brigade) is a pro-government Twelver Shia Muslim militant group that eventually developed into a network of militias, all under its command. Maher Ajeeb Jazza is its commander. Since autumn of 2012, the militia has been viewing itself as part of the defense of Al-Sayeda Zainab and is has an attachment to Hezbollah. It operates in Syria alongside the Syrian army in Damascus, Aleppo, and south Syria. Al-Abbas is comprised of Damascus Shi'ites, Iraqi-Shi'ite refugees that settled in Damascus and Iraqi, Afghani and Lebanese - Shi'ite volunteers, among others, although Iraqis form its primary constituent. The militia had 1500

⁷⁴ "Meet the Zainebiyoun Brigade: An Iranian backed Pakistani Shia militia fighting in Syria", THE OSINT BLOG, April 28, 2016.

⁷⁵ Leo Wigger, "Why Pakistan holds a key in the Iranian-Saudi confrontation", Magazine.Zenithe.Me, October 1, 2019. <https://magazine.zenith.me/en/politics/pakistan-iran-and-saudi-arabia>. (accessed: 17.11.19)

"The Zaynabiyoun Brigade includes more than 1,000 Pakistani Shiites to fight alongside Assad", Shabakat Sham, 20.1.2017. <https://katzr.n,et/ef3e0e> (accessed: 17.11.19).

⁷⁶ Ibid. The Shi'ites in Pakistan make up about 10-20% of the 213 million people, making it the second largest Shi'ite population in the world after Iran.

⁷⁷ "Liwa Zainebiyoun: Syria's Pakistani fighters", Iraqeye, March 11, 2016. " <https://iraqeye.wordpress.com/2016/03/11/liwa-zainebiyoun-syrias-pakistani-fighters>. (accessed: 17.11.19).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

combatants at the beginning of 2013. They fought mainly in the vicinity of Damascus, Aleppo and southern Syria.⁷⁹ The militia was defeated by ISIS in Al-Sayeda Zainab.

The militia is named after Al-Abbas ibn Ali, son of Imam Ali, whose descendants led the Shi'ite-Sunni split. In the beginning, Al-Abbas operated as part of the countermeasures the Shi'ites took against the Sunni rebellion in 2013-2014. One of these countermeasures were the establishment of Iraqi-Shi'ite militias and their deployment in Syria, as specified above.⁸⁰

The militia was founded at the end of 2012 in order to defend Al-Sayeda Zainab that was systematically attacked by Sunni Jihad groups. This defense strategy was intended to prevent ethnic war, such as the one that broke out in Iraq, in which the Imam al-Askari mosque was bombed and thousands of Shi'ite and Sunni followers were killed.⁸¹

In May-June 2013, "Reuters" reported a discord within the militia regarding management and financial matters. As a result, many non-Syrian members split from the militia and established separate militias.⁸² In its struggle against Nour al-Din al-Zenki, a movement in Syria connected to ISIS, the militia was worn out, underwent reform, and split into new factions, such as Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib, The Rapid Intervention Regiment in Sayyida Zainab⁸³, and others, see later.

On May 19, 2014, Salafi combatants of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement managed to take over Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas' headquarters in Aleppo. The militia's downfall came after its defeat in Al-Sayeda Zainab, which was the militia's mission to defend. We assume that its downfall and reforms it underwent caused the militia to cease operating at the time, although its factions continued to do so.

The Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade **لواء ذو الفقار**

Dhu al-Fiqar is a Shi'ite militia with an Iraqi ethnicity that debuted in 2013 to defend Al-Sayeda Zainab. It split from Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and at first operated around Damascus and in southern Syria. The militia's Secretary General is Abu Shahid al-Jabouri and is estimated to have 2,000 combatants. It also helped Hezbollah in the battles in the towns on its border. Later, the militia fought east of Daraa alongside Assad's army. Today, it partakes in the battles of Idlib alongside other Shi'ite militias.

The militia was established on June 5th, 2013, to help save Assad's regime, the same date being the militia's website's debut.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Phillip Smyth, "Hizballa Cavalcade: From Najaf to Damascus and onto Baghdad: Iraq's Liwa Abu Fadl al-abbas", *Jihadology*, June 18, 2014. <https://jihadology.net/2014/06/18/hizballah-cavalcade-from-najaf-to-damascus-and-onto-baghdad-iraqs-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas/>. (accessed: 17.11.19)

Leith Aboufadel, "More Iraqi Paramilitary Arrive in Aleppo Under Orders from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard", *Almasdar News*, October 26, 2015. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/more-iraqi-paramilitary-arrive-in-aleppo-under-orders-from-the-iranian-revolutionary-guard/>. (accessed: 16.02.2020).

⁸⁰ Although their name is the same, they are 2 separate militias (with different chains of command) that split in 2013 for financial and management reasons. In our case: One of them operates in Iraq and the other in Syria, as already mentioned.

⁸¹ Mariam Karouny, "Shi'ite fighters rally to defend Damascus shrine", *REUTERS*, March 3, 2013 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-shiites-idUSBRE92202X20130303>.

(accessed: 17.11.19).

⁸² Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens", *REUTERS*, June 19, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-syria-militants/iraqi-shiites-flock-to-assads-side-as-sectarian-split-widens-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619>

⁸³ "Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas", *Jihad Intel*, <https://jihadintel.meforum.org/group/125/liwa-abu-al-fadl-al-abbas>. (accessed: 18.11.19)

⁸⁴ Matteo Puxton, "Zulfiqar: Iraqi Shiite militiamen serving Bashar al-Assad", *FranceSoir*, May 22, 2018. <http://www.francesoir.fr/en-coop-matteo-puxton/liwa-zulfiqar-des-miliciens-chiites-irakiens-au-service-bachar-al-assad>. (accessed: 17.02.2020).

The name **Dhu al-Fiqar**, in Islāmic mythology, is the two-pointed magical sword the Muhammad received from the angel Jibril (Gabriel) and then passed on to Ali ibn Abi Talib in the Battle of Uhud.⁸⁵

At the beginning of March 2015, the militia was deployed in the Latakia area in northern Syria. Its deployment in the Alawi area in the north part of the country is proof to the severe lack of manpower Assad's regime was in in that area, needing determined, experienced and trustworthy warriors to fight the wave of Sunni Jihad combatants in Latakia. Formally, the militia, who was established to defend the holy Shi'ite sites in Syria, is identical to its parent organization Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas. In its activity in the Damascus district, it fought alongside other Shi'ite militias and Syrian militias with the Syrian army. Later, a group of combatants from Dhu al-Fiqar returned to fight in Iraq. The rest continued operating from north-west Syria, along the M-5 highway, all the way to Daraa in the south.⁸⁶ The militia is estimated to comprise approximately 2,000 combatants, and it sustained heavy losses in its battles (a quarter of its combatants).

In the middle of April 2015, forces from the militia moved south (from Latakia) to the mountain area near the Lebanon-Syria border, where Hezbollah was already deployed. Those forces operated in Yabous and Zabadani, where they claimed they killed hundreds of rebel forces. This wasn't the first time the militia aided Hezbollah. There was a series of battles in December 2013, in which was believed that in the first attack, led by the Syrian army and Hezbollah in the Qalamoun mountains, the militia executed almost 150 rebel organization prisoners. In addition, the militia was involved in the battles near al-Nabak in the northern area of the Rif-Dimashq Governorate in Damascus. On May 24th, the militia claimed it moved north to Idlib to aid the liberation of the Syrian army soldiers that were under siege in a hospital in Jisr al-Shughour. Abu Shahid al-Jabouri was presented as someone who partook in the battle, including initiating the missile strike in the hospital area, freeing the remaining Assad forces towards the end of May.⁸⁷



Image no. 9: Abu Shahid al-Jabouri (right) and his assistant Abu Mahadi al-Kanani.
Source: The militia's Facebook page.
facebook.com/676649955725704/photos

According to "Al-Arabiya", the militia announced on its "Facebook news" channel in June 2018 that its combatants fight alongside Assad's army east of Daraa. The announcement was made in retaliation of Russia's demand for withdrawal of all non-conscript forces from Daraa, leaving only the Syrian army. The militia's announcement was an embarrassment to Russia, especially after Russia promised other international organizations, including Israel, that its army will be the only one in southern Syria. Iran denied its forces' involvement there. This came as a continuation to

⁸⁵ Tradition states that the blade was double-edged and undefeatable. The Shi'ites believe the sword was passed from Imam to Imam, and according to the Twelve Shia Muslim tradition, it was lost with Muhammad al-Mahadi - "the Lost Imam". The sword is a significant symbol of tradition in the Shi'ite tradition and is displayed on flags, symbols, and talismans. Regarding this name, we also encounter the name "Zulfikar", popular in India and Pakistan. See: [No name], "World History", November 3rd, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/historiaolamit/posts/1026310154190187>. (accessed: 17.02.2020).

⁸⁶ Philip Smith, "Iraqi Shiite foreign fighters on the rise again in Syria", Washington Institute, May 29, 2015. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-shiite-foreign-fighters-on-the-rise-again-in-syria>. (accessed: 18.11.19).

⁸⁷ See note 60: Philip Smith, "Iraqi Shiite foreign fighters on the rise again in Syria"

its announcement that its militias deployed in Syria will not partake in the conquer of the Daraa and Quneitra Governorates, which were announced as its intention of conquering, as well as the entire southern part of Syria.⁸⁸

In an interview with the militia's official spokesman conducted by blogger Salam al-Safir in April 2019, the spokesman stated that the militia fought in villages located between Homs and Daraa, including in the Syrian army's attack on al-Malaha in east Ghouta, in coordination with other Shi'ite militias. The militia also fought in al-Jubar, west of Damascus. 500 combatants were killed and 300 were injured in the militia's various battles. According to him, the militia now partakes in the battles of Assad's army in the Idlib district. Al-Jabouri was also the commander of the Homeland Shield Forces Brigade, which has other pro-Assad militias under its command, working alongside the Syrian Air Force's intelligence unit.⁸⁹ Apparently, the brigade's purpose was to conceal the Shi'ite militia's involvement in the battles alongside Assad's army in Damascus.

A sister militia to Dhu a-Fiqar, also under Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, is Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib, which also operated in the heart of Alawi area. In January 2016, there were pictures on social media that claimed that the militia's forces and its commander, Abu Fatima al-Musawi, operated in the Baniyas area. When this campaign in the north ended, they returned to the more rural areas of the Rif Dimashq Governorate. The militia announced it lost 6 combatants in the battles from April 21st to April 25th.⁹⁰

Another militia by the name of Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein also operated at that time and stated that it deployed 50 combatants to aid the campaigns in the Latakia area. Sheikh Abu Karrar al-Bahladi, the militia's commander, was seen in al-Qadahah, Assad's family's hometown. Standing next to him was Ahmed Hajj Sadi, commander of the "Quick Reaction Battalion", who was previously the founder and commander of some of the militia's arms in Iraq.⁹¹

Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, however, continued its operations in Syria, although there are claims that other militias and Iranian proxy organizations in Syria are slowly reducing the scope of their recruitment to their cause as a result of the dwindling of the civil war and the battles (excluding Idlib). Examples of this are Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr organization and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Representatives of these 3 militias have already spoken about the return of some of their combatants back to Iraq. In contrast, other Shi'ite militias such as Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and al-Nujaba continue to recruit and send combatants to Syria.⁹²

In February 2019, Maher Ajeeb Jazza, commander of Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, was arrested by the Syrian intelligence unit on suspicions he was behind bombings in the Damascus area that occurred near the barriers that his militia was in control of. As a result of Russia's order to dismantle many of the road barriers in the Damascus area because of their hampering of day-to-day life in the city. According to experts, the Iranians wanted to show that the dismantling of the barriers will, in fact, increase the number of terrorist attacks in those areas, and therefore initiated the bombings with

⁸⁸ Ahed Fadel, "Iranian militia announces fighting in Daraa next to the Assad army", *Al-Arabiya*, June 26th 2018. <http://ara.tv/9k6v6> (accessed: 17.02.2020). Recently, the militia's Facebook page was deleted and has been inaccessible. Caleb Weis, "Confirmed: First evidence of Iranian-controlled militia involvement in southern Syria", *Threat and Matrix* [A Blog of FDD'S Long War Journal], June 27th, 2018.

See also the Twitter video, the source of the militia's movement to Bosra al-Harir as part of the attack on Assad's army in Daraa. <https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=iw&sl=ar&tl=iw&u=https%3A%2F%2Far.m.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2F%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%B0%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1&anno=2> (accessed: 17.02.2020).

⁸⁹ Ayman Jawad Al-Tamimi, "An interview with the spokesperson for Major General Zulfikar", *AymennJawad.org*, April 12th, 2019. <http://www.aymennjawad.org/22559/> (accessed: 16.02.2020).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

the help of the militias.⁹³

Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada كتائب سيد الشهداء

Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada is a Shi'ite militia operating in Syria and Iraq (TFM). It was established in May 2013, the circumstances of its establishment unknown, and is led by Abu Ala al-Walai.⁹⁴ The militia first appeared in Syria in 2013 and operated in Damascus and Ghouta, later moving to southern Syria. The militia is estimated to have a few thousand combatants. Al-Walai announced his intentions of expanding the militia's operations to Iraq, to liberate Jerusalem and even fight alongside the Houthis in Yemen. Its participation in Assad's biological attacks in Ghouta made it known to the public.

Al-Shuhada was first spotted in Syria in May 2013 when its forces operated in the southern neighborhoods of Damascus. The militia claimed that its reason for joining the civil war in Syria was because it wanted to defend Al-Sayeda Zainab. In any case, the militia continued expanding its operations to other areas in Damascus and to south Syria.⁹⁵ In August 2013, the militia was investigated internationally for its possible involvement in Assad's biological attack in eastern Ghouta on August 21st, 2013. The militia's social media network confirmed it operated there on the evening of August 20th, thereby bringing many of its followers to believe Assad used the militia to lay siege on the area, the biological attack's target, to ensure no Sunni rebel will be able to flee. Others claimed the militia's presence in the area had no connection to the attack and was simply for the defense of the area's train station. The militia itself did not address these accusations.⁹⁶

The militia's main target for attack was the Salafi organization "Jabhat Fatah al-Sham" (originally Jabhat al-Nusra), the Free Syrian Army and other militant rebel organizations opposing Assad.⁹⁷

In addition to the suspicions of the militia's involvement in Assad's biochemical attack in February 2013, in which it sustained heavy losses, estimated from 350-1429 combatants, it joined Assad's forces' attacks on Daraa and Quneitra. The militia fought alongside Assad's army, Hezbollah, IRGC forces, and other Shi'ite militias against the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra. Between 63-400 of the militia's combatants were killed and an unknown number of them were injured.⁹⁸ From this estimate, we believe the militia has close to a few thousand combatants.

The militia's circumstances of its establishment are disputed. There are sources claiming it was established by 2 Iraqi Shi'ite paramilitary organizations – Kata'ib Hezbollah and the **Badr movement**⁹⁹, to recruit more Iraqi Shi'ites for the

⁹³ "Assad Regime detains Iranian militia commander – Abu Alfaed al-Abbas Brigade", [nziv.net](https://nziv.net/18965/), February 7th, 2019 <https://nziv.net/18965/> (accessed: 2.12.19). There are no other verifications to the source.

⁹⁴ "Abu Ala al-Walai, Secretary General of the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigade", https://twitter.com/aboalaa_alwala?lang=he, personal [twitter](https://twitter.com/aboalaa_alwala?lang=he), (accessed: 19.02.2020)

⁹⁵ Gilbert, K. "The Rise of Shi'ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat." [International Institute for Counter-Terrorism](#), October 2013.

Al-Tamimi, Aymenn Jawad. "The Return of Iraqi Shi'i Militias to Syria." [Middle East Institute](#), 16 Mar 2015. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/return-iraqi-shii-militias-syria> . (accessed: 18.11.19)

⁹⁶ Gilbert, K. "The Rise of Shi'ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat." [International Institute for Counter-Terrorism](#), October 2013. (accessed: 18.11.19).

⁹⁷ Leith Fadel. "Patience is a virtue; Syrian Army launches an offensive in Al-Quneitra". [Al-Masdar News](#), 9 Feb. 2015. <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/patience-virtue-syrian-army-launches-offensive-al-quneitra> . (accessed: 18.11.19)

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ The Badr movement was founded in Iraq in 1982 (1980-1988). Its leader is Hadi-al-Amiri, known in Iraq as "General Tehran". Since 2014, he has been establishing himself as a leading political figure in Iraq that brought Iran's influence into Iraq's parliament, him being a former parliament member and secretary. Like other organizations, the Badr movement sent thousands of combatants to Syria. See:

"Hadi al-Amiri .. "General" Iran in Iraq", [Aljazeera](#), <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/icons/2016/2/28/%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A>. (accessed: 17.02.2020)

war in Syria. Others claim the militia was established by Abu-Mustafa al-Sheibani and Falih Khazali after they left Kata'ib Hezbollah. Still, al-Shuhada maintained ties with Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Badr movement, as well as with the Quds Force, one of the militia's main patrons.¹⁰⁰ Al Shuhada has been operating in Iraq as well since 2013 and is a member of the al-Hashad al-Shaabi's coalition.¹⁰¹

The militia accepts the idea of Velayat-e faghih, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, and its mission is to defend the holy Shi'ite sites all over the world, especially the defense of Al-Sayadeh Zainab. Al-Walai intends to expand the militia's areas of operation. For example, the militia stated in public its intention to liberate Jerusalem, preserve the Iraqi unity and end the ethnic clashes in Iraq.¹⁰² In July 2018, "Al-Marjie", a French website for the research of the Islam, published the militia commander's willingness to fight for Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the Houthi movement's leader in Yemen.¹⁰³

The militia's website: <http://saidshuhada.com>, is mainly involved with news of Iraq.

Revolutionary Guards' Basij¹⁰⁴

The Basij is an armed popular Iranian militia with the purpose of forcing Iran's policy on the public and repressing the opposition. Apparently, Iran deployed the militia in Syria at the end of 2013 and comprises of several hundred combatants.¹⁰⁵ Its forces are operated by the IRGC's ground forces and have operated in different sectors in Syria alongside Assad's army. They are also present in south Syria, between the towns Tasil and Arana, opposite the border with Israel's Golan Heights, particularly in the area of Quneitra. The Basij's commander is General Gholamreza Soleimani. The Basij operates as the IRGC's infantry in Iraq and Lebanon as well as its intense operations in Iran.

The Basij (=the volunteers) is an Iranian militia, popular, and armed, which aids the Iranian government in many areas such as internal security, enforcement of the society by the government, moral policing ("the moral police") and suppression the opposers. It was founded in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini as "an army of 20 million people" to defend the regime of the Iranian revolution and the political and religious systems¹⁰⁶ and was placed under the command of the IRGC. The Basij was renowned for violent oppression of the protests in Iran in January 2018 and of the protests that occasionally occur from time to time as of late. The Basij is the regime's "bad cop" and is its eyes and ears everywhere. As a militia, it is also deployed outside Iran in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The Basij's number of combatants is unknown. It is safe to assume that its combatants are those who were not accepted into the IRGC, some of them

¹⁰⁰ Martin, Patrick. "Iraq Situation Report: January 12-19, 2016." *Institute for the Study of War*, 20 Jan. 2016 .

Cigar, Norman. "Iraqi's Shia Warlords and Their Militias." *Strategic Studies Institute*, June 2015.

¹⁰¹ Knights, Michael. "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria." *The Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy*, 27 June 2013. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria>.(accessed:18.11.19).

Smyth, Phillip. "All the Ayatollah's Men." *Foreign Policy*, 18 Sept. 2014.

¹⁰² Myth, Phillip. "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias." *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, 27 August 2013. <https://ctc.usma.edu/from-karbala-to-sayyida-zaynab-iraqi-fighters-in-syrias-shia-militias/> .(accessed: 18.11.19)

¹⁰³ Allah Rajeb, "The militia of 'the master of martyrs'... a new Iranian arm to support 'Houthi' in Yemen", *Al-Marjie*, July 9th, 2018. <https://www.almarjie-paris.com/2342> (accessed: 19.02.2020).

¹⁰⁴ Although the Basij is an Iranian organization, we decided to include it in this research because of its activity as a militia, one of the largest operating in Syria.

¹⁰⁵ Gili Cohen, "Security Source: Hundreds of Iranian combatants were stationed in Syria to help Assad", *Haaretz*, 10.09.2015. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2729025> (accessed: 19.02.2020)

¹⁰⁶ ¹⁰⁶"The Basij . . . A shield protecting the regime of the Iranian revolution", *Al Jazeera Encyclopedia*, <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/military/2016/6/26/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>. (accessed: 16.12.19).

even being teenagers under the minimum recruitment age, as well as older men, students, and women. The militia's budget is estimated at approximately 500 million dollars a year. The recruits are trained to "be prepared for D-day". The volunteers do not receive payment, but instead receive benefits from the government, such as a higher priority in being accepted to jobs in the government and the public service.¹⁰⁷

The Basij was established immediately after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and its volunteers were sent ahead of the troops to find and use themselves to blow up the Iraqi minefields, and even storm the Iraqi battle posts. After the war, the Basij were organized into battalions and regional brigades. Its operational activity outside Iran's borders included transferring weapons for various terrorist groups. As a result, the Basij was declared a "terrorist organization" by the United States.¹⁰⁸ The commander of the Basij since July 2019 is Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani.

The Basij's involvement in the various battlefronts in Syria contradicts Iran's claim that it only employs "advisors" in the civil war. The Basij is an Iranian combat unit in every sense. At the beginning of its deployment in Syria, Mohammad Reza Naqdi was its commander. Iranian news agency "Fars", in league with the IRGC, reported on 27.7.2016 that "General Naqdi visited Quneitra as part of his visit in southeast Syria and the conquered Golan Heights".¹⁰⁹

In December 2018, Mohammad Ali Ja'afri, commander of the IRGC, stated in his address before the Basij forces in Tehran, that he sees the Basij as a role model for the opposition of the other countries in the area, including Hezbollah. He also stated that "the Basij has become clear today in the hundreds of thousands of militants, trained in Iraq, Yemen and other countries with the Al Hashad al-Shaabi militia." According to him, "armed rebel forces cells were established in Islamic countries, and small networks of opposition were established in other countries, and we will witness their influence in the future."¹¹⁰ Brigadier General Gholamreza Soleimani elaborated and said that the Basij is no longer limited by Iran's geography. The Basij experience becomes clear outside Iran's borders as well, such as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Gholamreza's appointment as the Basij's commander by Ayatollah Khomeini in July 2019 was in order to replace Naqdi.

According to "Khaleej" magazine, Gholamreza's address was in retaliation to the escalation of the tension between Iran and the United States and Iran's threat to withdraw from Iran's nuclear deal.¹¹¹

In April 2019, "Al Arabiyah" network announced the arrival of a new Basij force to Syria, that will also be deployed across Israel's border in the Quneitra district, between the towns Tasil (in the south of the district, across from Tel Saki in Israel's Golan Heights) and Arana (north of the village Bet Jan), in the front of the area between Tel Saki and northeast of the Syrian Mount Hermon, in other words, over most of the area across from the Israeli Golan Heights (with the exception of the southeastern part of the Golan Heights).¹¹² On November 24, Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri stated that the Basij is capable of deploying hundreds of thousands of combatants in Syria at the Supreme Leader's whim.

¹⁰⁷ Shay Levi, "Iran KGB: The civilians that "It's good to die for your country" is no just a slogan for them", *Mako*, January 5th, 2018. <https://www.mako.co.il/pzm-magazine/Article-7d47943d7d0c061006.htm>. (accessed: 27.11.19).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. The declaration of the Basij as a terrorist organization was adjacent to the United States Treasury's declaration of the IRGC as one last April. See:

"Counter Terrorism Designations; IRGC Foreign Terrorist Organization Designation", U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY, April 15, 2019. https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20190415_33.aspx. (accessed: 27.11.19).

¹⁰⁹ "Iran's Basij militia commander, General Naqdi, visiting Quneitra, Syria", *MEMRI*, March 27, 2016. <http://www.memri.org/cgi-webaxy/item?4208>. (accessed: 27.11.19).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ "Itan reveals its transfer of the "Basij" experience to 4 Arab countries. What is it?", *Khaleej. Online*, 07.07.2019. <http://khaleej.online/LvVAK4> (accessed: 16.12.19).

¹¹² "Report: A new Basij force from Iran organizing itself across the Golan Heights, in cooperation with Hezbollah", *nziv.net*, April 2nd, 2019. <https://nziv.net/21506/>. (accessed: 27.11.10).

On November 19th, 2019, 4 missiles were launched from Syria to the bottom of Israel's side of Mount Hermon, which were intercepted by the Iron Dome, and fell in Syria instead. In retaliation, Israel attacked Quds Force's targets the next day, including their headquarters and military bases, as well as those of other Iranian militias, their names unspecified. On November 24th, the Iranian news reported the funeral of Esmail Gholami Yarahmadi, the Basij combatant that was killed on November 20th, that took place in the Lorestan district in Iran. His family received a letter of condolences from Kassem Soleimani. The circumstances of his death have not yet been published, although it is possible that he was killed in the IDF's retaliation attacks on November 20th.¹¹³

“Villages Army”: A new Syrian militia

Local news agency “Dir al-Zur” reported in October 2019 that Assad's forces are establishing a new militia in the Dir al-Zur area by the name of “Villages Arm”.¹¹⁴ According to their sources, the militia is under Iran's command, and Iran's army already began recruiting members in stem Iran's recruitment center on Port Sayid Street in Dir al-Zur, and that over the past few days, 100 volunteers have already been recruited. The militia's structure is like that of the “Tribal Army” that is backed by Russia. The Russian “Tribal Army”, an arm designated for a specific purpose, is comprised of groups whose purpose is to deploy in the rural area of Dir al-Zur (east of Euphrates) as an alternative to Assad's forces. Iran uses the Villages Arm to reduce the number of Assad's forces in Dir al-Zur, and replace the Syrian army's presence, the “formal” one, with a paramilitary one. This decision came after the threats by the International Coalition, led by the United States, even after Assad's forces and militias were attacked a number of times by the Coalition's fighter jets.¹¹⁵ Despite the United States' threats that were made because of the small militia's establishment, we assume that Assad's forces will continue insisting on expanding its presence in the area because of its strategic importance to Syria. This is seen in the tension between different groups in the area, all wanting to conquer it. We will elaborate on this later.

Flaws of the Cooperation Between Assad's Regime and the Iranian Militias

Over the past six months, there has been an increase in the number of clashes between the Syrian militias that are supported by Russia and other Syrian units that are loyal to Iran. Forces that have fought in the Free Syrian Army in the past have succeeded in coming to an arrangement with Assad's army, with Russian guarantees of support (see later that the Russians will try to benefit from this agreement).

This agreement was made after the Russian army conquered the towns in the Basr al-Hariri (50 kilometers north of Daraa), the main points of the agreement being that whoever refused to sign it will be sent to northern Syria, while those who agreed to sign will be allowed to return to their home villages, and their recruitment to the Syrian army will be postponed six months.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ See note no. 17, Raz Tzimett, “A look at Iran: November 17th, 2019

¹¹⁴ According to the “Dir al-Zur” news agency, it is comprised of civilian activists whose goal is to combat the implant of radical ideologies such as that of ISIS in the rural area of the Dir al-Zur district. Its reports are anti-Assad/Iran and examine the battles waged by Assad's forces in the effort to liberate the district, simultaneously air-striking the villages.

¹¹⁵ “A new Iranian military militia is formed in Deir Ezzor”, *Deir Ezzor 24*, 15.10.19. <https://en.deirezzor24.net/a-new-iranian-military-militia-is-formed-in-deir-ezzor> (accessed 30.10.19).

¹¹⁶ “Syrian forces loyal to Russia prevented Hezbollah access to the border area with Israel”, *nziv.net*, April 1st, 2019. <https://nziv.net/21475/>. (accessed: 27.11.19).

Opposition forces that signed the agreement were stationed in the Quneitra district and in the southern Golan and were placed under the Syrian army's command. These forces prevented the Iranian militia combatants from entering and taking up posts in the Yarmouk Basin, next to the southern Golan Heights border that is adjacent to the tri-border between Israel, Jordan, and Syria.

In response to the pro-Iran militias' insists on taking posts close to southern Golan Heights in the Daraa district, the Russians established the 5th Corps that will include the ex-combatants of the Free Syrian Army that signed the agreement with Assad's regime. These recruits are locals and the Russians gave them the task of repelling the pro-Iran militias from the area, including the IRGC and Hezbollah.¹¹⁷

The Imam Ali Military Base

The "Imam Ali" base is located in Dir al-Zur, adjacent to the Al Bukamal border crossing, and its existence symbolizes the Iranian presence there, possibly in the future as well.

From the beginning of September 2019, the IRGC began rebuilding the base, after it was severely damaged in the aerial strikes credited to Israel, losing 50 of its combatants. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed that Iranian sites and Iraqi militia combatants were injured in the Green Belt Region in the city of Al Bukamal.¹¹⁸



Image no.10: New tunnel-digging in the Imam Ali military base in Al Bukamal.

Source: ImageSat International Intelligence Report, December 12, 2019.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e0379a052a4b4d76a84bd693cf55df80>

According to satellite images that were published lately by Fox News that were analyzed by military experts, Iranian militias are digging tunnels for storing missiles and weapons transferred there while crossing the Al Bukamal border between Syrian and Iraq. The experts believe the underground military warehouses are massive and have been built in several sites in the district. Evidence of the work can be seen in the Imam Ali base in Al Bukamal. The tunnel in this base is 122 meters long, 4.5 meters wide and 4 meters deep (see image).

¹¹⁷ "Report: A new Basij force that arrived from Iran was deployed across the Golan Heights with the cooperation of Hezbollah", nziv.net, April 2, 2019. <https://nziv.net/21506>. (accessed: 27.11.19).

¹¹⁸ "The Iranian Revolutionary Guard is building huge military warehouses underground in Deir Ezzor", [Alghad](#), December 12, 2019. (accessible: 12.02.2020). See the image there.

Conclusion

The Shi'ite militias under Iran's command are key players in Syria, them being armed and a proxy organization, implementing the Iranian strategy in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. They are focused, well-trained, armed, and operated in the Quds Force's military method. Some of them operate both in Syria and Iraq, and others in Syria alone. There is no point in calling the deployment of the militias "proxy organizations" because the countries doing received the benefit of remaining anonymous and being able to not take direct responsibility, being that it did not deploy its own (government) forces. Now, after revealing to the world the fact that the militias in this research are Iran's product of coercion that operate with its support and receive their orders from the Quds Force, the term "proxy" is irrelevant, and therefore we considered the them Iranian militias in every sense, even if their combatants are not Iranian. Essentially, these militias operate as Iran's infantry in Syria, anywhere they are needed – in both urban and rural areas.

During the years of the war, the militias' importance as Assad's allies became clearer. This can be seen primarily in the militias' cooperation with Assad's forces in the hottest battlefronts in Syria – Assad's army was lacking manpower from the start of the battles and had difficulty recruiting. The militias' participation in these battles fortified Assad's forces and allowed them to reconquer areas taken control by the rebel forces and the Salafi organizations. The Shi'ite militias' entry into the war slowly but surely changed the face of the battle between the two sides. The turning point was in 2014 with the massive entry of Shi'ite militias and the Russian Air Force into the war. The militias' combatants' families came with them as well. They settled in neighborhoods in the surrounding area of the holy Shi'ite sites, such as Al Sayideh Zainab, but also in the neighborhoods in the west of Damascus that were abandoned by the Sunni residents that fled the war. Such is so also in Damascus's rural area in Ghouta. We do not have complete facts regarding the extent of the Shi'itization phenomenon in Syria. We can assume that several thousand combatants brought their families along with them, therefore their numbers probably reach the tens of thousands. This is a new factor in the already complex demography of Syria. This minority will continue the connection that strengthens developing Iranian hegemony in Syria.

Besides the Shi'ite's settling in Syria, we can also see the unceasing efforts of the IRGC to establish more and more militias to send to Iran. Why is there a need for so many militias and such a wide variety of them for the war in Syria? We think that Iran is taking advantage of the non-Iranian people, who are dependent on Iran's charity in order to be recognized as legal citizens, to use them as the manpower of the new militias it is establishing for the war in Syria. This recruitment's purpose is to implement the well-known strategy of building the Iranian ground-axis of influence from Tehran to Lebanon, but also for future purposes, for example, the militias' use by Iran to expand in the Middle East in general.

It is important not to view these militias as militias in the conventional sense, meaning that they complete their mission when they achieve their political goals, rather as constant entities striving to destabilize the Middle East and eliminate those who oppose the Fiqh ideology. Therefore, even though some of the militias have withdrawn from Syria and returned to their home countries, they will continue to operate in Syria.

We assess that in the possible clashes there will be with Israel on the northern border, the IDF will contend directly with some of these militias. When alone, their quality as militias and level of professionalism does not concern the IDF and do not impose a strategic threat on Israel. However, the possibility of their involvement in a war will require the IDF to divert resources to neutralize them, spreading the IDF's resources and forces thin and diverting resources from the central battlefront with Hezbollah in Lebanon.