

Iran's Shadow Warriors: Iraqi Shi'i Militias Defending the Faithful in Syria and Iraq

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Rami G. Khouri, the Beirut-based internationally syndicated columnist, recently noted that "the Syrian conflict has become the world's greatest proxy war since Vietnam...and has drawn in local, regional and global actors, many of whom see this as an existential fight that they cannot afford to lose." [1] Although the Lebanese Hizballah is heavily involved in the Syria conflict and has deployed its forces there to great effect, notably in the battle for Qusayr, "it is," according to analyst Phillip Smyth, "Iraqi Shi'a groups and individuals, mainly from Iranian-backed groups, that have sent the majority of militiamen to fight for al-Assad in Syria." [2]

As the Syrian civil war escalated over the last three years, Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) financed, trained, and armed Shi'i proxy forces in Syria. This activity is one aspect of the support Iran provides to the Syrian Ba'athist regime, with which it has been allied since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. [3] While Shi'i clerics in Iraq have generally remained neutral, neither issuing fatwas promoting, nor forbidding Iraqi Shi'a participation in the Syrian conflict, Iranian Shi'i clerics in Qom have actively promoted fighting for Bashar al-Asad's cause in Syria. [4] Iranian-backed, Iraqi Shi'i militias and Iranian-backed, Syria-based Shi'i militias whose composition are predominately Iraqi and which borrow fighters from established Iraqi Shi'i militias, constitute, at least numerically, a larger and more formidable proxy force than Lebanon-based Hizballah. This proliferation of well-trained, battle-hardened Shi'i militants fiercely committed to a pan-Shi'i religious ideology threatens the future stability and territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria. Increasingly radicalized and empowered armed groups—both Sunni and Shi'a are undermining the sovereignty of the central governments in Baghdad and Damascus as they carve out spheres of influence and create their own political fiefdoms, much as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, formerly al-Qa'ida in Iraq) has done from Iraq's Anbar and Nineveh provinces to the Syrian regions around Al Bu Kamal and Raqqa. [5]

The involvement of Iraqi Shi'i organizations in the Syria conflict dates to early 2012[6] and has increased since, spurred on by the fear that the Shi'a and Shi'i Islam are direly threatened by militant Sunni salafi-jihadi organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the ISIS. Despite being active since 2012, the involvement of Iraqi Shi'i militants in the Syrian conflict was only confirmed in the spring of 2013, via martyrdom announcements,[7] and by the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Hoshayr Zebari, in a press conference on June 28, 2013.[8] Iraqi Shi'i fighters, in particular, "were motivated partly by the desire to prevent a repeat of the wholesale sectarian violence that followed the 2006 attack on Iraq's Shiite Iman al-'Askari Mosque, blamed on al-Qaeda, which cost thousands of lives, both Sunni and Shiite." [9] In the Syrian case, the Sayyida Zaynab Mosque, housing the tomb of Zaynab, the daughter of 'Ali and Fatima and the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, has become a powerful symbol to rally the support of Iraqi Shi'i combatants.

Iraqi Shi'i militias—particularly 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous), Kata'ib Hizballah (Hizballah Battalions), the Badr Organization, and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' (Battalions of the Sayyid's Martyrs)—have turned defending the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine into the primary religio-ideological objective of their participation in the Syrian crisis. The shrine's centrality is demonstrated by use of its imagery in the symbols, social media, and propaganda of the aforementioned groups, as well as by the frequent battle cry of Labbayki Ya Zaynab ("We are here for you, Oh Zaynab") that is often heard in propaganda videos and appears in official statements.[10] These groups also use iconography similar to the symbols of IRGC and Hizballah, which may represent a visual expression of their alliance to Iran and ideological allegiance to Iran's supreme leader 'Ali Khamenei. These symbols often employ common Shi'i themes of sacrifice, martyrdom and militancy, as well as allusions to Shi'i history. Beyond the religious importance of defending Sayyida Zaynab, the Iraqi militias are contributing to the strategic defense of Damascus and the regime by securing access to Damascus International Airport, which lies to the southeast of the capital. Furthermore, although Iran's primary objective is ensuring the survival of the Asad regime, Iran's support for loyal proxy forces might well serve to maintain and promote Iranian interests in a Syria without Asad and the Ba'th.

Although these Shi'i groups have contributed considerably to bolstering the Asad regime and Iranian interests in Syria, they, like the ISIS, were established in Iraq, which is their primary base of operations. Unlike the ISIS, which has extended its control over a vast swath of Syrian territory, no Iraqi Shi'i militia has attempted, to date, to actually control an area of territory. However, if the fragmentation of Iraq and Syria continues, one or several of these militias may attempt to establish a territorial base in Syria and justify it by claiming they are protecting its Shi'i population, and Iraq's as well. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's visit to Washington at the beginning of November underscored the delicacy of the current situation. Maliki's message was simple: help Iraq combat the resurgent threat posed by ISIS, which threatens not only Iraq but the broader Middle East, particularly Syria.[11] Maliki's tendency to promote Shi'i interests at the expense of Iraqi Sunnis has certainly contributed to the resurgence of the ISIS and intensified sectarian tensions throughout Iraq. Maliki, confronted by a rising tide

of sectarian violence in Iraq, particularly ISIS attacks targeting Shi'i Muslims and reciprocal targeting of Sunnis by Shi'i militias like the Mukhtar Army,[12] must find a way to curb the violence if he hopes to not only preserve the peace and his own rule, but the territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. The Iraqi government's recent reconciliation attempts with Sunni tribes in Anbar province may be a start, though losing the support of these tribes in the first place was a political blunder. Moreover, Maliki must contend with growing internal pressure from other Iraqi Shi'i political parties, notably the Sadrists and the Supreme Islamic Council, who are resisting Maliki's bid for a third term. Maliki has sought Iranian and U.S. support for a third term and has allied himself with Iranian backed 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, using the group as a counterweight to his political rival Muqtada al-Sadr.[13]

Though Maliki believes the Syrian crisis is the primary cause of current instability and violence in Iraq,[14] he did not challenge Iran's role in fomenting the unrest during his recent visit to Tehran. Rather, Maliki made a vague plea to jointly "fight against terrorism" and affirmed Iraq's commitment to the Geneva II conference and pursuing a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis.[15] However, it is evident that the "terrorism" Maliki and the Iranians seek to confront is limited to that of salafi-jihadi organizations like the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. It is unlikely that Maliki, who needs Iranian political support to ensure a third term, asked Iran to curb its support and training of Shi'i proxy forces in Iraq and Syria. Iranian support for Shi'i proxy forces may ultimately contribute to the undermining of Syria's territorial integrity. However, it is unlikely Iran will cease seeking to extend its influence via Shi'i proxies throughout the Arab world, including in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

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[1] Rami G. Khouri, "Putting Out the Syrian Fire," *New York Times*, October 23, 2013, accessed October 24, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/24/opinion/international/putting-out-the-syrian-fire.html?_r=0.

[2] Phillip Smyth, "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias," *CTC Sentinel*, August 27, 2013, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/from-karbala-to-sayyida-zaynab-iraqi-fighters-in-syrias-shia-militias>.

[3] See Nicholas Blanford, "Leaked Video: Iran guiding thousands of Shiite fighters to Syria," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 23, 2013, accessed November 18, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2013/0923/Leaked-video-Iran-guiding-thousands-of-Shiite-fighters-to-Syria>, and *BBC*, "Syria footage sheds light on Iran's involvement," October 30, 2013, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24748143>. The reports on this raw footage, recorded by an Iranian filmmaker shooting a documentary for the IRGC, shows IRGC Quds Force members training militiamen and conducting military operations.

[4] *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, "al-harb fi suriyya tuwassi` al-khilaf bayn al-marja`iyyat al-diniyya al-shi`iyya fi'l-'Iraq wa-Iran" [The war in Syria widens the divide between the religious authorities (lit. "guides worthy of emulation") in Iraq and Iran], July 21, 2013, accessed October 29, 2013, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=65145>.

[5] Fehim Tastekin, "ISIS practicing statehood in Raqqa," *Al Monitor*, November 6, 2013, accessed November 6, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/11/isis-syria-raqqa-iraq-maliki.html?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=8513.

[6] Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," *New York Times*, October 27, 2012, accessed November 6, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/world/middleeast/influx-of-iraqi-shiites-to-syria-widens-wars-scope.html?_r=0.

[7] Smyth, "From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab."

[8] *Al-Hurra*, "Zebari yuqirru biwujud muqatilin shi'a `iraqiyyin fi suriyya [Zebari admits the existence of Shi'a Iraqis fighting in Syria]," June 28, 2013, accessed November 6, 2013, <http://www.alhurra.com/content/zebari-says-shiite-iraqis-fighting-in-syria/226473.html#ixzz2gz1snSSw>.

[9] Mariam Karouny, "Shiite fighters rally to defend Damascus shrine of Sayyida Zeinab," *Daily Star*, March 4, 2013, accessed October 24, 2013, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Mar-04/208671-shiite-fighters-rally-to-defend-damascus-shrine-of-sayyida-zeinab.ashx#axzz2j1KVS5Bt>.

[10] Phillip Smyth, "What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (Lafa)? Assessing Syria's Shia "International Bridgade" through their Social Media Presence," Jihadology.net, May 15, 2013, accessed October 29, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence/>.

[11] Mark Landler, "Surge in Iraqi Violence Reunites Maliki and Obama," *New York Times*, November 1, 2013, accessed November 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/02/world/middleeast/surge-in-iraqi-violence-reunites-maliki-and-obama.html?ref=middleeast&r=0>.

[12] Dina al-Shibeeb, "Iraq's Hezbollah forms new militia to frighten protestors: Sunni Leader," *Al-Arabiya*, February 27, 2013, accessed November 22, 2013, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/27/268685.html>.

[13] Liz Sly, "Iranian-backed militant group in Iraq is recasting itself as a political player," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2013, accessed November 10, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-18/world/37160889_1_al-haq-shiite-religious-leader-iraqi-shiite.

[14] Julian Barnes, "Iraq's Maliki Blames Rising Extremist Violence on Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, October 31, 2013, accessed November 25, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/10/31/iraqs-maliki-blames-rising-extremist-violence-on-syria/>.

[15] *AFP*, "Iraq PM in talks on Syria during Iran trip," *al-Arabiya*, December 4, 2013, accessed December 8, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/12/04/Iraq-PM-in-talks-on-Syria-during-Iran-trip-.html>.