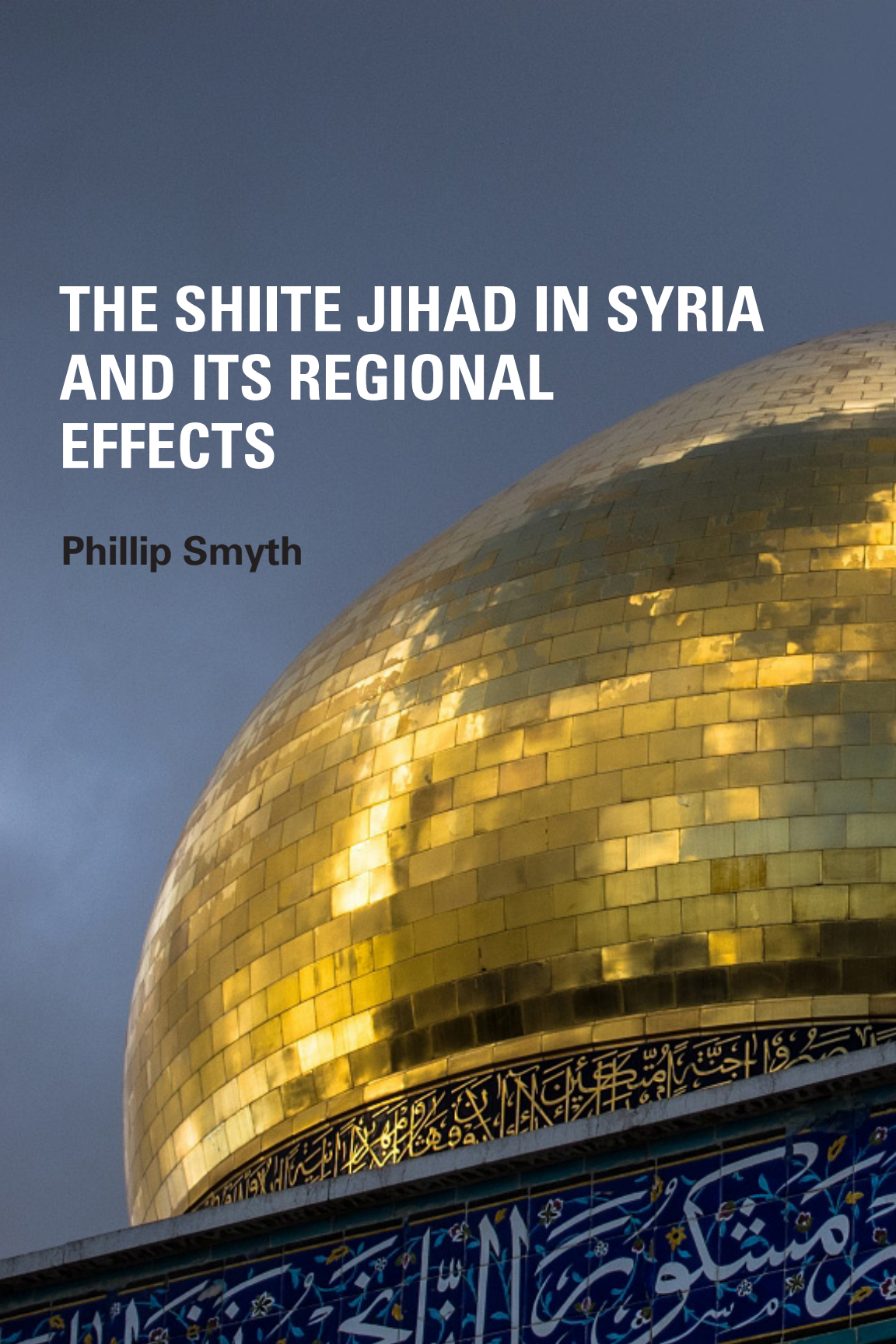
THE SHIITE JIHAD IN SYRIA AND ITS REGIONAL EFFECTS

Phillip Smyth



This piece is dedicated to the memory of a true scholar, friend, and mensch, Barry Rubin. I would never have been able to complete such an undertaking without his confidence in me.

POLICY FOCUS 138

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PHILLIP SMYTH

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The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
1828 L Street NW, Suite 1050
Washington, DC 20036
www.washingtoninstitute.org

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Photo: Sayyeda Zainab mosque, Damascus (Ahmad al Husseini).

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Appendices (online only)

ACRONYMS

AAH	Asaib Ahl al-Haqq
HHN	Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba
HTI	Harakat al-Talia al-Islamiyah
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
KH-SDS	Kataib Hezbollah–Saraya al-Difa al-Shabi
KSS	Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada
LAAG	Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib
LAFA	Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas
LAIY	Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir
LIH	Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein
NDF	National Defense Forces
PCMDSZ	Popular Committee for the Mobilization to Defend Sayyeda Zainab
QQAFA	Qaeda Quwet Abu Fadl al-Abbas
RRF	Rapid Reaction Forces
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party

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Introduction

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR, which began in earnest at the end of 2011, has become a regional and arguably a sectarian conflict.[1] Throughout 2012 and early 2013, claims that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad was "losing control" to primarily Sunni rebel forces were common in Western and Middle East media sources.[2] Reports streamed in showing that the Assad regime had lost control of border posts with Iraq and that the embattled leader may even have lost the support of its key ally Russia.[3] By the spring of 2014, Syria and Iraq had essentially become a joined front, including thousands of combatants, millions of displaced persons and refugees, along with the involvement of multitudes of global actors. Yet at the time of this writing in late 2014, Assad has not only survived, but forces supportive of his rule have retaken and secured wide swaths of territory. How did such a feat occur?

Foreign fighters were central to both the rapid turnaround on the front and the Assad regime's continued survival. In line with the influx of anti-Assad foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria, much research and coverage has focused on Sunni jihadists—so much so that the term "foreign fighter" has become a virtual synonym for Sunni jihadist.[4] Just as pivotal as the Sunni jihadists, however, if less frequently covered, are the thousands of Shiite jihadist fighters who have mobilized in opposition to their Sunni foes. These fighters have come primarily from Iraq and Lebanon, but also from other countries. Indeed, what may have appeared to be a disjointed or even organic flow of Shiite fighters into Syria, ostensibly to defend the country's Shiite holy sites, was actually a highly organized geostrategic and ideological effort by Iran to protect its ally in Damascus and project power within Syria, Iraq, and across the Middle East.

The aid these Shiite jihadist fighters have provided to the Assad regime represents just one of their accomplishments. Far more significant has been the underlying creation and development of new front groups, a trend that

suggests Iran is continuing efforts to expand its regional network of Shiite militia-type organizations following the model established with Lebanese Hezbollah. The fighting has also allowed Tehran to spread the state's radical ideology more intensively, with the presence of Shiite militants of many nationalities fighting in Syria demonstrating Iran's power projection in Shiite communities worldwide.

This Shiite jihad engineered by Iran has not stopped in Syria. When the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) made its startling gains in Iraq earlier this year, many Shiite veterans of the war in Syria redeployed to Iraq. Fighting has also spilled over into Lebanon, with Hezbollah clashing against Sunni rebel and jihadist forces, including those of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. In Iraq, many fighters have even traded in their fatigues for tailored suits, using their wartime experience in Syria to campaign for parliamentary positions.

The development of Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq has been complex, obscure, and hardly linear. The subject matter can therefore be more easily assessed through an emphasis on the main elements of the respective militias' development, along with their commanders and governing ideological narratives. This approach also reveals the interconnectedness of groups, fighters, and leadership networks, along with the means by which new groups are spawned, including their specific functions. Recruitment techniques, ranging from tents set up on Shiite pilgrimage routes to advanced Internet and social media methods, further help clarify the Shiite militias' role in the conflict, as do disagreements among Shiite clerics over the war and details on equipment and training.

Indeed, in a wider political sense, the real victor of the Syrian war and in Iraq has been Iran, a triumph for which the Islamic Republic has its militia forces to thank.

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The Narrative of Jihad

SINCE THE SYRIAN UPRISING began in 2011, Shiite Islamist Iran and its proxies, namely Lebanese Hezbollah and a collection of Iraqi Shia Islamist militias backed by Iran, have not only offered their diplomatic and political support, but beginning in 2012 have supplied fighters to assist in bolstering the rule of Syria's Alawite leader, Bashar al-Assad. Other Shiite recruits have also joined the effort, regularly being routed through Iranian training camps and proxy groups. (See Appendices 2, 4, and 5 for more details on Shiite organizations deployed to Syria and Iraq.)

The traditional alliance between the Syrian regime and Iran's Shiite leadership offers the broadest explanation for the influx of Shiite fighters into Syria, but the actors have drawn on several other narratives rooted in sectarian rhetoric, radical ideology, and even nationalist themes. These narratives have invariably relied on the demonization of the other side, namely Sunni fighters, extremists and avowed moderates alike. The messaging campaign to tear down the opposition has helped justify Iran and its proxies' efforts to supporters, and helped draw support from other regional actors and groups.

In effect, the messaging strategy is fueling the growth of extremely sectarian outlooks among Shiites, an end, at least in the short term, desired by Iran. This push is seeking to revive Shiite support for the revolutionary ideology championed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founder. Even as the war in Syria is a primary strategic concern, Tehran is using the conflict to promote its goal of becoming the predominant regional and global representative of Shiism.

At Your Service, O Zainab!

Since Iran and its proxies first announced their involvement in the Syria fight, the defense of the golden-domed Sayyeda Zainab shrine has been central to

their narratives.[5] Given its location in southern Damascus, with the international airport to its east, the shrine's strategic value cannot be overlooked, Fighting around the shrine has been sporadic, surging at times, and as early as August 2012, reports emerged of the kidnapping nearby of forty-eight Iranians.[6] While Iran claimed those kidnapped were merely pilgrims, rebels said they were all members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).[7]

The site's prominence in the view of Shiite fighters is further evidenced by the shrill, mantra-like chant "*Labayk ya Zainab*!" (At your service, O Zainab!), sung regularly at funerals for Lebanese Hezbollah members and Iraqi Shiites killed in Syria.[8] Propaganda songs produced by Iraqi Shiite organizations and Hezbollah have also featured the slogan.[9] In fact, the early presence of Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria was largely heralded by a music video containing combat footage and set to "*Ya Zainab*," a song by the Iraqi Shiite Islamist singer Ali Muwali, who is associated with Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud.[10] Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), an Iraqi Shiite proxy of Iran that funnels fighters to Syria, employed the slogan in large lettering in a photo showing the organization's logo and one of its leaders.[11] And on less militant Shiite social media sites, especially Facebook, "*Labayk ya Zainab*" has emerged in meme-type images of individuals around the world holding signs in support of Shiite militias fighting in Syria.[12] This campaign has promoted a broader acceptance of the narrative that Shiite militias fighting in Syria are there for religiously based defensive purposes.

The historical explanation for the primacy of the site, whose dome figures largely in martyrdom posters for Shiite fighters killed while fighting in Syria,[13] can be traced to Zainab herself, the sister of Shiite Islam's martyred third imam, Hussein. For Twelver Shiites—the Shiite majority—Zainab has saintlike status.[14] Following Hussein's defeat at the Battle of Karbala—a battle that confirmed the split between Sunni and Shiite Islam—Zainab was taken to Damascus by Yazid, the Umayyad leader and Hussein's killer.[15] Edith Szanto explains, "Zainab courageously confronted the Umayyad caliph in Damascus and spread the message of Husayn by conducting commemorative mourning gatherings at which pious Shiite listened to the story of Karbala, cried, and, at times, performed self-flagellation."[16] According to Syed Akbar Haydar, "Zainab is its feminine face" of martyrdom,[17] thus explaining the shrine's symbolic resonance today for Shiite Muslims.

In this narrative, the rebels are often likened to the evil Yazid. In some Shiite militia imagery, Zainab is shown giving her symbolic speech or pointing her finger at the Saudi king Abdullah, who supports the rebels and makes for

a useful Yazid stand-in.[18] The text "*Zainab batat Karbala*" (Zainab has become Karbala) often accompanies the image.[19]

For Shiite Islamist actors in Syria, the defense of the shrine is referred to as the Sacred Defense (*al-Difa al-Muqaddas*),[20] a term previously used by Islamic Republic leaders to characterize the 1980–1988 war with Iraq.[21] Indeed, Sayyeda Zainab has been a regional focal point for Iran's attempt to extend its religious and political influence among Shiites. Tehran has many holdings and has launched religious programs around the shrine. According to one source, some 202,000 Iranian tourists visited the shrine in 2003,[22] and "scholarships are made available [by Iran] for study at Qum and Teheran" to the Shiites of Sayyeda Zainab.[23] Accordingly, these students were educated in the Iranian religious ideology as opposed to other forms of Shiite religious study. Iranians have also distributed religious literature and opened lending libraries in the area.[24] In 2006, the increased Iranian activity around the shrine was seen as demonstrating a stronger alliance between the Assad regime and Tehran.[25]

Lebanese Hezbollah also has strong links to the shrine. According to Matthew Levitt and Aaron Zelin, "As early as the 1980s," the organization "used the site as a place to identify potential militant recruits. For Saudi Shi'a recruits in particular, the Sayyeda Zainab shrine served as a transfer hub and a cover for travel between Saudi Arabia and training camps in Lebanon or Iran."[26] Additionally, a number of Saudi Hezbollah members involved in the 1996 bombing at Khobar Towers were recruited at Sayyeda Zainab.[27]

However important the site may be, Iran and the Shiite militias could not lean on it alone to explain their fight all across Syria. Thus, the justification for the Shiite jihad has been expanded by its agents to be a defense of *all* Shiite holy sites. Along these lines, in May 2013, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), initially a shadowy Iran-backed organization based in Iraq, announced its main goal of defending all Shiite shrines worldwide,[28] even as its activity thus far suggests involvement in Syria and Iraq alone. The next month, the Iranian proxy Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) announced the creation of Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir (LAIY), an Iraqi Shiite militia[29] whose name echoed a Raqqa, Syria, shrine to Ammar ibn Yassir that was destroyed by Sunni jihadist rebels.[30] Although, at first, LAIY stated its goal as defending Sayyeda Zainab alone, in late spring 2014 the group was redeployed within Iraq against Sunni rebels and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). As for LAIY, it would employ the perhaps circular logic that by fighting in Aleppo in support of Assad, rather than in Damascus, where

most Shiite militias are reportedly based,[31] it was defending Sayyeda Zainab from future threats. Likewise, other Syrian Shiite fighters such as Qassem Fuad Khader, who was killed in the mountains north of Aleppo—nowhere near Sayyeda Zainab—have been appropriated in the service of the shrine narrative.[32]

The reach of the Sayyeda Zainab narrative is exemplified by its ensnaring of even the fascistic, rabidly secular Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP),[33] one of Syria and Lebanon's oldest parties. The SSNP's platform calls for parts of Egypt (Sinai), Turkey (Antakya and other southern regions), Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Jordan to be folded into a "Greater Syria." In Lebanon, the party has acted as a direct proxy for the Assad government and has been a Hezbollah ally. In the Syrian war, it has contributed fighters to bolster Assad's rule, as exemplified by the funeral of party member Adham Najem, a Lebanese Shiite killed in combat. At Najem's funeral, the SSNP's symbols were ignored in favor of an emphasis on his defense of Sayyeda Zainab. Martyrdom posters pictured him against the shrine as a backdrop,[34] his casket was draped in a banner reading "Labayk ya Zainab," and his grave featured a similar banner.[35]

The shrine-protection narrative resonates intimately in Middle East Shiite communities. Memories, for example, of the 2006 al-Qaeda destruction of the al-Askari shrine (a.k.a. the Golden Mosque) in Samarra, described as Shiite Islam's holiest, are still fresh in Iraqi as well as broader Shiite circles.[36] In Afghanistan and Pakistan, home to large and often repressed Shiite minorities, Sunni Islamists have launched numerous attacks against Shiite communities, shrines, and mosques.[37]

When the Sayyeda Zainab shrine was attacked by rebels in July 2013, Iran's foreign minister called on international organizations, particularly "Islamic bodies," to condemn the strike.[38] Online Shiite press organs recorded Pakistani Shiite condemnations of the attack while noting that the shrine was "*protected* [my emphasis] by hundreds of Shiite militants from Iraq and the powerful Lebanese Hezbollah group."[39]

As the Syrian civil war continues, the Sayyeda Zainab shrine remains the epicenter for Iran and its Iraqi and Lebanese proxies. Indeed, following major advances by ISIS and other Sunni groups in Iraq, the shrine-defense narrative has been revitalized and expanded. The original refrain of "*Lan tusba Zainab marratayn*" (Zainab will not be captive twice) was reintroduced to cover the Iraqi arena, and the defense of the al-Askari shrine became the rallying cry for Shiite jihadists in Iraq.[40]

An Open Shift to Pan-Shiism

As the war has grown increasingly sectarian, the defense of the shrines has evolved into an appeal to pan-Shiism as a rationale for involvement. Hezbollah has been particularly active in promoting this theme, which initially appeared as a subtext in the Sayyeda Zainab reasoning. As early as February 2013, Hezbollah announced that a main reason it had sent forces into Syria was to protect a number of Shiite-inhabited border villages.[41] The group thereby opened a new narrative for other actors backed by Iran.

In June, a leader of Egypt's Shiite community, Sheikh Hassan Shehata, and four others were lynched by a Salafi mob,[42] offering the first non-Syrian incident for Iran and its proxies to use in promoting its pan-Shiite message. This event was generalized, including by Shiite media outlets, to demonstrate a larger campaign against Shiism.[43] Reports of Shehata's death coincided with others run in Iranian and Hezbollah media that focused on abuse of Shiite Muslims by Wahhabis or *takfiris*.[44] Images of Shehata were used in propaganda posters by Shiite militias operating in Syria, including LAIY.[45] The posters implied that Iran-backed Shiism, with its muscle and militancy, was ready to defend Shiites everywhere.[46]

In line with this emphasis on Shiite unity, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah took steps to reaffirm his group's Shiite composition, a particularly important move considering that the group's Khomeinist ideology is technically pan-Islamic.[47] On August 2, 2013, at a Jerusalem Day speech aimed simultaneously at reinforcing pan-Islamic unity toward destroying Israel,[48] Nasrallah implied that Sunni jihadist elements were not fighting against Israel:

> Hizballah, the Islamic Shi'a party, will not abandon Palestine, al-Quds, and the holy sites of the nation. We were born and arisen on bearing the responsibility of defending Palestine and al-Quds. We—the Shiites—won't abandon this cause, never, ever. Describe us as rejectionists [*rawafidh*], describe us as terrorists, describe us as criminals, say whatever you want and keep killing us at every front, at the door of every mosque, we the Shiites of Ali bin Abi Talib will not abandon Palestine.[49]

Pan-Shiite messaging has often entailed a less blunt, more nuanced, and at times duplicitous strategy inside Syria. When, for example, Lebanese Hezbollah claimed that its involvement was limited to protecting Lebanese-inhabited border villages, such claims often emphasized the Shiite orientation of inhabitants,[50] allowing the group to simultaneously market itself as a regional defender of Shiites.

In fall 2013, the major Shiite holiday of Ashura, which commemorates Hussein's 680 martyrdom at Yazid's hands, occasioned further invocations of the Shiite cause. In particular, Hezbollah and its fellow proxies adopted a new motif modeled on the Arabic word *hayhat* ("It is impossible"),[51] which is tied to Shiite concepts related to Imam Hussein, oppression, and martyrdom and linked to the phrase *hayhat mina al-dhila* ("disgrace/humiliation is finished").[52] This term had also been used by Hezbollah in propaganda regarding the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, including in the song "*Hayhat ya Mehtal*" (It Is Impossible [Dare Not], O Occupier).[53] Demonstrating the interlinked nature of Iran's proxies, the logo has been utilized by AAH, KSS, the Badr Organization, and Kataib Hezbollah.

Pan-Shiism was explored in other songs as well. In September 2013, Ali Delfi, a singer associated with AAH, released the song "*Ashat al-Muqawama*" (Long Live the Resistance).[54] The song featured the refrain "*Ashat al-Muqawama, Shia al-Muqawama*" (Long live the resistance, the Shiite resistance). The song's video showed Kataib Hezbollah and AAH attacks against U.S. targets during the Iraq war of a decade ago, Lebanese Hezbollah attacks against Israelis, and speeches by Nasrallah. The war in Syria was framed in this way: *Muw al-Bashar ahna hamna al-Shia* ("Bashar is not our concern, it is the Shiites"). Themes relating to shrine defense, the "Islamic resistance" factions started by Iran, and a distancing of the Syrian fight from realpolitik motivations thereby coalesced. Thus, the conflict was morphed into a romantic jihad addressing a varied existential threat.

Takfiris: A Perfect Enemy

Following Assad's lead, Iran and its proxies have since fall 2012 engaged in an extensive media campaign casting the Syrian rebels, whatever their actual beliefs, as *takfiris*, or Muslims who accuse *other* Muslims of apostasy.[55] In turn, when a *takfiri* accuses other Muslims of apostasy, this marks those "apostates" for death.[56] In Shiite usage, the term is often synonymous with the extremist Sunni Wahhabis, who have historically predominated in Saudi Arabia.[57]

Through the early propagation of the inaccurate view that all Syria's rebels embrace radical Sunni ideology,[58] Iran and its Shiite proxies have effectively stirred visceral support among their coreligionists. The message especially struck those who feel oppressed in their various cultural and national contexts. The argument also fans fears that if Assad were to be deposed, *a takfiri* organization such as al-Qaeda or ISIS would take over Syria.[59] Ibrahim

al-Amin, editor of the pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* newspaper, reinforced such positions in an August 2012 column: "These days, the new *takfiris*—be they Islamic fundamentalists, liberal fundamentalists or leftist fundamentalists—resort to the same method. Do you support the Syrian regime? If the answer is 'yes,' you are sentenced to excommunication if not death."[60] Any rebel, according to this view, is prone to extremist violence and implicitly could be dealt with uniformly.

Iran and its proxies have also used the *takfiri* threat to persuade Levant minority groups to support their actions. Long fearful of being drowned in a "Sunni sea," particularly one rife with Sunni radicalism, Christians and other minorities have proved an easy target for such messaging.[61] Like the Shiites, Christians in Iraq and later in Syria have suffered numerous attacks by al-Qaeda and other radical Sunni Islamist groups.[62] This has led Iranian and Iran-backed media outlets to give particular emphasis to rebel attacks on Christians. The Hezbollah satellite television network, al-Manar, has published stories claiming Christians were forced at gunpoint to convert to Islam by *takfiri* rebels.[63] And the IRGC-linked Fars News Agency has claimed that *takfiri* rebels attacked Christian villages in Homs and killed Christian civilians.[64]

This messaging strategy has targeted not only Shiites and minority groups but also, to a lesser extent, more secular or doctrinally different Sunnis. Nasrallah showcased this line in his May 25, 2013, speech addressing Hezbollah involvement in Syria's battle of al-Qusayr: "This Takfiri mind has killed [many] more Sunnis than members of other Muslim sects...We are not evaluating the matter from a Sunni or Shiite perspective, but from a perspective joining all Muslims and Christians together because they are all threatened by this Takfiri project."[65]

In this narrative, the West has often been implicated as an abettor of the *takfiris*. In one piece published by the Iranian state-run Press TV, fighters noted as "U.S.-backed rebels" were identified as beheading Christians in Syria.[66] These "Western mercenaries," hyperextreme though many were, were thus pitted against benevolent forces anchored by Assad, Iran, and their "resistance" proxies.[67] The grain of truth in such narratives—that is, the presence of al-Qaeda and other Salafists among the rebels—has helped give them credence. And when al-Qaeda-type groups have clashed with other rebel organizations, such as the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, the situation has been described by Iranian media organs as a power struggle between fractious *takfiri* organizations.[68]

Any announcement of U.S. support for the "rebels"—even vetted organizations—could thus be recast by Iran and its proxies as direct backing for *takfiris*.[69] Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, even told Iran's Assembly of Experts, "America has tested various methods in toppling Bashar. Political pressure and *bringing in al-Qaeda* [emphasis added] are among those."[70]

Of course, the painting of Western states, particularly the United States and Israel, as conspiratorial backers of extremist Sunni Islamist or other elements to "destroy Islamic unity" is not new. Following al-Qaeda's 2006 destruction of the al-Askari shrine, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei claimed the bombing reflected a U.S. plot to split Sunnis and Shiites.[71] Such rhetoric follows in the spirit of Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurisprudent), under which the Supreme Leader sought ultimately to unite all Shiites and Sunnis. The continuing failure to achieve this goal has been attributed to a Western conspiracy to split the *umma*, or Muslim nation. According to Khomeini, "The imperialists and the tyrannical self-seeking rulers...have separated the various segments of the Islamic Ummah from each other and artificially created separate nations."[72] Khomeini explored this point more deeply in his other political writings: "The Sunnis...are our brothers and equal with us and are opposed to the attempts at creating dissension that certain criminals, agents of America and Zionism, are currently engaged in."[73]

Such reasoning has even been pursued by more moderate members of the Iranian political class, such as former president Mohammad Khatami, who stated, "We are faced with a criminal phenomenon which kills people in the name of Islam and...in the form of Takfiri Wahhabism...Wahhabism started with murder and crime from day one and is a brainchild of the British colonialism."[74] Ayatollah Khamenei has echoed these views: "An important issue...is what the enemy does to create discord between Shia and Sunni. [The West] is suppressing different groups of Shia Muslims in different parts of the world of Islam. The bases of the Islamic Republic are not confined to Shia Muslims. Many Sunni brothers defend the Islamic Republic much more vigorously than many Shia Muslims."[75]

Thus, a violent Islamic element, the *takfiris*, whose ideology openly calls for the destruction of other Muslims sects, especially the Shiites, made for a perfect enemy. The notion of *takfiri* extremists, whom Iran and its proxies could brand as false Muslims, fit the Khomeinist paradigm of a Western-backed sector bent upon splitting the "Islamic nation." By Khomeinist logic, it would only be natural for the West to support such a foe.

In a February 2012 speech, Khamenei established the foundations for a grand Western-*takfiri* alliance in Syria, contending that Western powers and Israel were attempting to destroy "true Islam" through secular and extremist proxies:

> Be suspicious of the kind of Islam that is favorable to Washington, London and Paris, be it laïcist and westernized or rigid and violent. Do not trust the kind of Islam that tolerates the Zionist regime but confronts Islamic denominations in a brutal way, the kind of Islam that extends a hand of peace and friendship to America and NATO but fans the flames of domestic sectarian and tribal conflicts, the kind of Islam that is cruel to believers and compassionate towards unbelievers.[76]

Nasrallah rehashed this theme in an August 2013 speech following extensive Hezbollah combat engagements, including heavy fighting that May and June in al-Qusayr:

> [The West and Israel] invented another name, "Shi'a expansionism" [to confuse and manipulate Muslims]. Please...Where is this Shi'a expansionism?...They invented the enemy and they have tried to convince many Islamic groups that Iran is the enemy, and their goal should be to confront the Shi'a danger. The Shi'a ideology, Shi'a expansionism, and Shi'a are a larger danger to the Ummah than Israel and the Zionist project. For many people, Israel is no longer a danger...[T]hey have made internal conflicts which are sectarian and this is dangerous...In countries like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or Bahrain they make it sectarian, but the differences are political…Hasn't the time come to realize that someone wants to destroy this region, its countries, its armies, and its people?...Until now we have not taken the time to point the finger [at those responsible for sectarianism]...everyone who sponsors the *takfiri* groups throughout the Islamic world...[benefits and assists] Israel and America.[77]

Hezbollah has made particular use of the Western-backed *takfiri* theme. During his May 2013 speech commemorating seven years since the group's 2006 war with Israel, Nasrallah blamed *takfiris* for a bomb attack in Beirut's Hezbollah stronghold of Dahiya.[78] During the speech, he upped the ante against Syria's rebels and declared, "If the battle with these *takfiri* terrorists requires that I and all Hezbollah should go to Syria, we will go for the sake of Syria and its people and for the sake of Lebanon and its people."[79] Following the attack, Hezbollah placed posters on the buildings surrounding the blast site reading "Made in the U.S.A."[80]

Whatever the granularities of "moderate rebel" and jihadist infighting, as of late 2014, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra have come to dominate news coverage regarding Sunni rebels in Syria and Iraq. Their battlefield successes have effectively caused the Iranian and Assad messaging strategy to appear more like a self-fulfilling prophecy than an advanced operation to alter narratives about the rebels. That advanced messaging operation, encompassing Iran and its proxies, appears to have been masterfully executed.

3

Call to Jihad: Clerical Views of the Shiite Jihad in Syria

THE SHIITE JIHAD in Syria did not manifest itself in a theological or ideological vacuum. Historically, Shiite clerics are often the main figures pushing their coreligionists to fight in a jihad and legitimizing their martyrdom.[81] For the conflict in Syria, the call to jihad traversed a direct ideological path, set forth by clerics following Iran's ideology of *velayat-e faqih*. Looking at the clerics who have encouraged the Shiite jihad in Syria is just as important as focusing on the actual groups involved in combat. If one trend is slightly clearer, it is that both the traditional clerics of Najaf, Iraq, and radicals like Muqtada al-Sadr (also of Iraq) did not fully support the campaign and that efforts to rally Shiite fighters to join the war were mainly driven by Iran-backed clerical circles.

Khamenei's Blessing, Sistani's Opposition

The Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the world's most influential Shiite clerics, was initially mum on whether Shiite fighters—particularly those originating in Iraq—should go to Syria. Even days before Hassan Nasrallah's May 2013 public announcement of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war, Sistani continued to refuse to issue a fatwa supporting a Shiite jihad in Syria.[82] It was later reported that senior Najaf-based clerics around Sistani considered Shiites traveling to fight in Syria as "disobedient."[83]

Despite Sistani's ambivalence, the Iranians have attempted to co-opt him, using his image and manipulating his statements to fit their position and build broader support for the Shiite jihad. Even as Sistani has never supported absolute *velayat-e faqih*,[84] Iran's leaders have unleashed a campaign aimed at presenting Sistani as a willing participant in the Shiite jihad and a backer of Ayatollah Khamenei. This messaging strategy has been used

to draw both radical and more quietist Iraqi clerics and laypeople to the Iranian way of thinking.[85]

In its effort, Iran has tapped clerics who attempted to convey a level of closeness to Sistani and who backed the Syrian jihad. One of these figures is Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, the leader of Baghdad's important Buratha Mosque. Once described as a representative for Sistani, Saghir had headed the council for the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI; formerly known as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI) and led the ISCI National Iraqi Alliance in parliament.[86] He had even openly stated that it would be a "huge mistake" to impose a Khomeinist form of government in Iraq.[87] However, Saghir's historical links with ISCI and its former military wing, the *velayat-e faqih*–backing Badr Organization, likely helped shape his opinions on the conflict in Syria.

Under the leadership of Ammar al-Hakim, ISCI partially turned away from Iran and instead backed Sistani, going so far as to drop "Islamic Revolution" from its name and distance itself from absolute *velayat-e faqih*.[88] This step reportedly led the ISCI's militia, the Badr Organization, to split off and form a new party, the Badr Organization.[89] Additionally, the ISCI has not publicly announced that it has sent any fighters to Syria. Despite these changes, Saghir maintained links to Badr and fully backed the Shiite jihad in Syria.

Since Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's fall, Saghir, whose mosque was bombed in 2006 by Sunni jihadists, has also espoused a more hostile public view of Sunnis than most of his ISCI compatriots.[90] In 2007, his mosque was raided by Iraqi government forces over accusations it was used as a base for Shiite death squads.[91] Demonstrating his sights were focused on Syria as a potentially new sectarian battlefront, Saghir was quoted by Al-Arabiya in April 2011 saying, "We have to take into consideration that Iraq would be the most affected by instability in Syria."[92]

By May 2013, Saghir had already taken to the pulpit and extolled Shiites fighting ostensibly to defend Sayyeda Zainab.[93] In January 2014, in another public demonstration of support, Saghir announced via his official web page that he had visited Shiite fighters wounded in Syria being treated in an Iranian hospital.[94] This was followed by posts from February intimating he was a recognized leader of a new militia group, Saraya al-Aqidah (a.k.a. Saraya Ansar al-Aqidah), which had reportedly been deployed to Syria and had links to the Badr Organization. One of the group's commanders, Muhammad Jaafar Shakr al-Musawi, had been a security official in Saghir's court.[95]

During his public funeral, Musawi's coffin was draped in a Badr Organization flag. Musawi was named posthumously as a member of the Badr Organization Expeditionary Force, known as Quwet al-Shahid Muhammad Baqir Sadr. Following ISIS's summer 2014 advance in Iraq, Saraya al-Aqidah adopted a far more publicly pro-Iranian stance by uploading imagery supportive of AAH, the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah, and other Shiite proxy groups.[96] By October 2014, Saghir was photographed with Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani and in other photographs with groups of Badr Organization fighters.[97]

Alongside the attempt to link Sistani with Saghir, statements released by Iranian proxies sought to intimate Grand Ayatollah Sistani's support for the Syria campaign. In an undated statement released in December 2013, the Popular Committee for the Mobilization to Defend Sayyeda Zainab (*Lijna al-Tabia al-Shabiyah an al-Sayyeda Zainab*, or PCMDSZ), an umbrella recruitment group with links to AAH, KSS, the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxy groups, issued an extended argument as to why the fight in Syria was not only a legitimate campaign but also backed by high-ranking religious authorities:

> It is obvious that the goal of going to Syria is to defend the Shiites and the sect of Ahl al-Bait and Islamic shrines and the resistance because the *takfiri* groups in Syria have been targeting our sect and our shrines in a clear and direct way. We also confirm that our goal is not just restricted to Syria but also extends to our presence in Iraq, especially in Najaf. And we are going to defend and fight assailants who are coming to fight us, just like the prophet came out of Medina to face the *mushrikin* [idolaters] when he was informed that they were heading to Medina to destroy Islam. Thus, this is a defensive war and defensive wars do not require permission from anyone…
>
> Despite the issue not requiring anyone's permission, [the jihad in Syria] has been overseen by a legitimate ruler who is the *veli-e faqih* [lead religious and political authority managing affairs on earth as an imam, in this case referring directly to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei]...Based on this, there is no doubt about the legitimacy of the figures who are abiding by the [leadership of absolute] *velayat-e faqih*. There is a dispute that some are bringing up, which is that some religious figures are saying: "I do not see any interest in going [to war]." Regarding these statements, they do not harm the legitimacy of those who go to fight under the emblem of obligatory interest [duty to go to war]...and this is something *veli-e faqih* supports and is convinced about. Not seeing the interest [in going] and labeling going as illegitimate activity are two different matters. The higher

> religious figures support the leadership of *veli-e faqih* and acknowledge [his] capability. [This is] why there is no doubt about the legitimacy of going to fight and fighting *takfiri* groups to defend the Shiites of Syria and Sayyeda Zainab and also to defend ourselves and our existence in Iraq, because the *takfiris* are targeting the existence of the sect and its followers.[98]

Even though this statement, issued by an Iranian proxy organization, claimed a Shiite jihad in Syria was backed by Khamenei, no direct fatwa by the Supreme Leader has been made public. However, reports have emerged of religious orders, or obligations, called *taklif sharii* issued by the Supreme Leader and his subordinate clerics to groups like Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in the region.[99] The failure to obey such an order is tantamount to disobeying the word of God.[100]

Moreover, instead of a direct public fatwa from Khamenei, subordinate clerics were utilized to slowly encourage a move toward a religiously sanctioned jihad in Syria. Ayatollah Kadhim al-Husseini al-Haeri, a Tehran-based cleric with links to Iraq, and an ardent supporter of absolute *velayat e-faqih*, was the first from the Iranian camp to issue a public fatwa on the matter. His private endorsement was made in mid-2013, but a public fatwa was circulated on November 5, 2013. This fatwa was the first major public religious announcement specifically aimed at not only justifying jihad in Syria but also signaling that the war was viewed by Iran as a means to "defend" and propagate the absolute *velayat-e faqih* ideology. Foes of the jihad in Syria were cast as "infidels."[101]

The timing of Haeri's fatwa was also significant, coinciding with the full-scale launch of the so-called Ashura Hussein Offensive, which saw Shiite forces take large sections of Damascus and its environs. As the offensive's name suggests, the release occurred on the first day of Muharram, a holy month, which marks the start of Ashura. It was also announced before major operations in Aleppo and in Qalamoun.

For his part, Haeri had emerged from the Sadrist Movement and once had close relations with Muqtada al-Sadr, serving as his spiritual leader.[102] Al-Sadr soon became the focus of another Iranian strategy to promote the jihad in Syria.

Tehran and the Discord among Sadrists

While Iran's clerics supporting *velayat-e faqih* were clear about their backing of a Shiite jihad, the positions presented by members of the Sadrist Movement were far more diverse and shadowy. In part, this might have owed to

direct Iranian moves to create further splits in the bloc, undermine the influence of al-Sadr, and engender a spread of the regime's own ideology within Sadrist ranks.

In a January 2014 interview with *al-Hayat*, al-Sadr himself proclaimed, "None of the parties to the conflict are ethical, neither the extremist opposition nor others....What is happening in Syria is an internal issue and no one is entitled to interfere."[103] However, according to some publications, claims emerged that fighters under al-Sadr's political leadership were heading to Syria.

As for al-Sadr's relationship with Iran, it has been a complicated matter resulting in both cooperation and open hostility. During the Iraq war, elements of al-Sadr's Mahdi Army were regularly used as Shiite proxy elements by Iran. Still, in 2004, Haeri cut his ties to al-Sadr and opposed his strategy in Iraq.[104] When Sadr went into self-imposed exile in Iran from 2008 to 2011, it was unclear whether he had patched up relations with Haeri or engaged any other Iranian clerics.[105] Later, in 2012, al-Sadr publicly rejected a Haeri fatwa stating that the Iraqi government should not be led by a secular official.[106]

Al-Sadr's own history of direct military confrontation with Iranian proxy groups has been a bloody one. In August 2007, clashes between elements of his Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization in Karbala left fifty dead.[107] Reportedly, an assassination campaign involving AAH and the Mahdi Army continued into 2012.[108] Later, in May 2013, al-Sadr issued an ultimatum against Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and by extension Maliki's AAH militia allies following their deployment within Iraqi cities after a series of bombings.[109] A political element likewise figured in al-Sadr's views of the Iran-led Shiite jihad. Since Tehran had generally thrown its support behind Maliki, al-Sadr, who stood in opposition to Maliki's State of Law Alliance, also stood on the other side of that coalition.

Along with violent conflict with AAH and Badr, al-Sadr publicly opposed other Iran-backed Iraqi militia proxies. In 2012, he was asked about Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq, a direct Iraqi Shiite proxy of Iran that backs *velayat-e faqih* and has sent fighters to Syria.[110] He responded that he had never heard of the group but also that it represented "foreigners" and was "against... [his] beliefs."[111]

Iran and its proxies engineered a multifold strategy to counter al-Sadr's opposition. As with the development during the Iraq war of AAH, which emerged as a Sadrist Movement splinter, Iran went so far as to design groups marketed as "Sadrist" or under the direct control of al-Sadr. Through imagery

employed by these organizations, a number of their fighters were simultaneously also identified as being AAH members or supportive of Khamenei. Prominent examples include the Rapid Reaction Forces (RRF), certain fighters within the Badr Organization, and Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein (LIH).[112]

Although these groups have used imagery suggesting support for al-Sadr, Badr is a solid backer of absolute *velayat-e faqih*.[113] Liwa Dhulfiqar's commander has stated to the Iranian press that he too is pro–absolute *velayat-e faqih*.[114] LIH's spokesperson, in an interview with Iraq's Bas News, explained that members of the group formerly belonged to Jaish al-Mahdi and actually maintained links to AAH, not al-Sadr.[115] RRF fighter Marwan al-Asadi has simultaneously worn the patches of Lebanese Hezbollah, the RRF, and other Sadrist splinter groups.[116] AAH connections to the LAFA network groups also included fighters deployed to Liwa Dhulfiqar, such as Ammar Ammar al-Tamimi, who was photographed operating with the group in Syria and in separate photos wearing AAH uniforms.[117] (See appendix 3 for a breakdown of the LAFA network of organizations.)

Fighters holding photos, posing with large billboards, or featuring Muqtada al-Sadr's face on martyrdom posters, all while claiming to be "Sadrists," were some of the original personnel present in Syria. In fact, a number of fighters have also attempted to demonstrate a connection to Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud (the Promised Day Brigades), the Iran-backed successor to al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Yet al-Sadr still appears to be neither fully toeing the Iranian line by backing Iran's allies in Iraq nor otherwise exhibiting much support for the Shiite jihad in Syria.

A key figure from Muqtada's circle who maintained his own political organization within the Sadrist Movement was Sheikh Qasim al-Tai. In 2011, following al-Sadr's radical line, Tai even prohibited his followers from dealing with the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.[118] Tai has also been a featured contributor to the Iranian-maintained YaZeinab.com, including writing an article on his support for *velayat-e faqih*.[119]

Relatedly, Saudi Arabia's *al-Sharq* newspaper claimed that Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), the predominantly Iraqi Shiite brigade operating in Syria, was given its blessing for existence by the Najaf-based Tai.[120] Footage was also released of a March 2013 visit by Tai to Syria.[121] While there, he greeted and praised a number of Iraqi LAFA members, including RRF leader Ahmed Hajji Saadi. This was followed by an April announcement in which Tai claimed to represent the Sadrist Movement and endorsed sending forces from Iraq to Syria to protect the shrine. Leaders affiliated with

al-Sadr contradicted Tai's announcement, claiming he did not represent the movement.[122]

The connection to Tai gives an additional layer of explanation for the reports of so many "Sadrists" finding their way into Shiite Islamist militant organizations in Syria. The connection underlines the likelihood that these combatants, despite the imagery they have posted, have not been acting on al-Sadr's orders. Instead, the images were likely used deliberately either to suggest al-Sadr-controlled forces or to indicate less specific support for the Sadrist Movement.

The use of the Sadrist Movement's Sheikh Auws al-Khafaji further underscores Iran's willingness to work with Sadrist splinters, no matter their links to al-Sadr or their members' previous criticisms of Tehran. In 2004, Khafaji publicly criticized Iranian influence within Iraq.[123] He also commanded a leading position within Sadrist ranks and the Mahdi Army in clashes with U.S. forces during the Iraq war.[124] Despite his earlier comments, he was heavily employed by Tehran to draw support away from al-Sadr, confuse Iraqi Shiites about al-Sadr's true position over the conflict, and win recruits for the war in Syria. Al-Sadr had distanced himself from Khafaji a number of times since 2012, after the sheikh had engaged in his own political activities against al-Sadr's wishes.[125] In spring of 2014, the sheikh visited Damascus accompanied by RRF members sporting patches featuring al-Sadr's face.[126] Later, as the conflict in Iraq intensified, Khafaji established a Shiite militia named Qaeda Quwet Abu Fadl al-Abbas (QQAFA) with the help of AAH members and other Syria veterans.

The war in Syria has correspondingly facilitated Iran's continuing efforts to usurp the legacy of highly influential radical Shiite clerics, particularly Muqtada al-Sadr's late father, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was assassinated in 1999 by Saddam Hussein and whose image has been adopted by many newer Iraq-based Shiite proxies of Iran, including AAH.[127] Similarly, in Lebanon, the "vanished" Shiite cleric Musa al-Sadr often had a rocky relationship with Iranian revolutionaries such as Khomeini. Reportedly, al-Sadr also did not support absolute *velayat-e faqih*.[128] In fact, some have claimed Khomeinists actually killed al-Sadr.[129] Nevertheless, his image and legacy were later co-opted by Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's Khomeinists.[130] Likewise was the image appropriated of Hezbollah "spiritual advisor" Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who in his lifetime was critiqued by Iran for distancing himself from *velayat-e faqih* and later declaring himself a *marja taqlid* (source of emulation), a direct affront to Ayatollah Khamenei.[131]

Following Fadlallah's death, Hezbollah recast him as a lower-ranking religious leader completely in line with the group's leadership and, by extension, that of Iran.

Thus, Iran's campaign to promote its interests in the Syrian conflict continues in the tradition of identifying and co-opting seemingly "weak links," while boosting more supportive nearby figures in their stead.

4

Building an Army for Zainab

REPRESENTING THE MOST dynamic and among the most numerous contingents of Shiite foreign fighters, Iraqi units have helped create a bulwark for the Assad regime. Along with Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite jihadists have formed the core Iranian proxy units sent to Syria.

Iraqi Shiite fighters have been organized into many, often overlapping groups, the first and best known belonging to what could be called the LAFA-Syria network. Militias emerging from this network have often assumed their own independent profiles. With leadership and recruitment apparatuses based in either Iraq or Syria—or at times both—these groups' efforts have focused on Syria, often ostensibly on the defense of Sayyeda Zainab.

Many of these militias, established initially by the Assad regime as Popular Committees, were later re-formed and trained by Iranian and Hezbollah forces, as happened with the creation of the National Defense Forces (NDF) from smaller regional pro-Assad militias.[132] Regularly, advisors from Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's IRGC were also attached to these units and allowed to influence the groups' military and ideological development. (See appendix 1 for a chart on phases of Shiite militia development.)

Understanding the LAFA-Syria Network and Its Commanders

The name LAFA has become synonymous with the Shiite jihad in Syria. Recognizing LAFA's successful "brand," many groups, including AAH, Hezbollah, and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, have proclaimed their fighters' joint membership with the network.[133]

Initially, LAFA was formed like most Popular Committees (*lijan al-shabiya*), using a core of Shiite fighters based around the Sayyeda Zainab shrine. Its inception likely dates to late summer or early fall 2012, when

Damascus was pushing to establish friendly sectarian militias.[134] Many of the LAFA commanders were reportedly Iraqi Shiite refugees who had previously fought in militias at home before becoming refugees.

The core figures who helped establish LAFA included the group's nominal leader, Abu Ajeeb, along with the now deceased Abu Hajjar (Fadhel Subhi) and Haidar al-Jabbouri (Abu Shahid), Ahmed Hajji Saadi, Abu Ali al-Darraji, Ahmed Karaya (Abu Hamza), Sheikh Abu Karrar al-Bahladi, and Abu Fatima al-Musawi. All helped develop LAFA as a viable military force, and some eventually went on to command other groups within the network.[135]

With the possible exception of Abu Ajeeb, whom Syrian rebels lampooned as a Syrian Shiite vegetable salesman, all these leaders have Iraqi roots. Darraji, for example, claims to have been an Iraqi refugee who had been seeking asylum in the West.[136] While little is known about Musawi's history, his subsequent role as leader of Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib (LAAG) has demonstrated a close link, including through similarities in LAAG's logo, to AAH. One LAAG commander, Qasim Abdul Mamuri, is also reportedly an AAH member.[137] AAH connections to LAFA groups have likewise included fighters deployed to Liwa Dhulfiqar, such as Ammar Ammar al-Tamimi. Jabbouri, meanwhile, was first named a commander within LAFA and later, in mid-2013, listed as a deputy commander of Liwa Dhulfiqar; after the death of Abu Hajjar, who was then serving as Liwa's commander, Jabbouri assumed his position.

Karaya, who was killed in combat in late December 2012 and buried in early January 2013 in his home neighborhood of Sadr City, Iraq, had a history possibly pointing to early Iranian influence within LAFA. He exemplifies offshoot members of the Sadrist Movement who have acted in Syria and whose loyalty to al-Sadr himself is perhaps weaker than it is to Iran-influenced splinters. Karaya, a highly regarded sniper and commanding officer during LAFA's initial stages of development, had reportedly been part of the Mahdi Army during the Iraq war and fought under Sheikh Azhar al-Dulaimi, a Sunni convert to Shiism and one of the most anti-U.S. militia leaders in Sadr City.[138]

According to a leaked U.S. cable, Dulaimi had received training from Iran's IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah and plotted to kidnap U.S. military personnel in 2006.[139] Dulaimi's actual fingerprints were later reportedly found at the scene of an infamous and highly sophisticated January 2007 raid on the Karbala Provincial Headquarters. During the attack, Iraqi Shiite militiamen dressed in fatigues and driving vehicles used by security contractors and U.S.

military personnel killed five American service members. In a raid on AAH leader Qais al-Khazali's Basra safe house, documents were found linking Dulaimi to the AAH network and showing he had been put in charge of the Karbala attack.[140]

The connections to al-Sadr also exist with the late Abu Hajjar, whom Reuters identified as an "Iraqi defector" from the Mahdi Army.[141] As such stories make clear, the Mahdi Army was a fount for many fighters in Syria. Additional examples were provided in an October 2012 Reuters report[142] and a *New York Times* story shortly thereafter.[143]

Recruitment: Shiite Militias Establish Themselves

Recruitment for Shiite protomilitias took various forms. Willing residents constituted an early source of fighters. Once LAFA was established in 2012, combatants were supplied and armed by a combination of Syrian government and possibly Iranian sources. The scale and sophistication of Iranian supplies and arms, via proxy networks in Iraq and Lebanon, grew later in 2013. (For more details on recruitment for Shiite militias, see appendix 8.)

Certain local Shiite militias reportedly received training from the IRGC and Hezbollah. The IRGC role was given credence after NBC News correspondent Richard Engel and four members of his news team were kidnapped for five days in late 2012 before escaping during a firefight at a checkpoint. According to Engel, his kidnappers were "openly expressing their Shiite faith" and were "trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard."[144]

In fall of 2012, streams of combatants also flowed to Syria from Iraq. Initially, these fighters mainly followed two ideological trends. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many nonideological fighters were later recruited. In fact, they were the primary targets of most recruitment campaigns. The first trend, in any event, consisted of adherents of Ayatollah Khamenei and other clerics supporting absolute *velayat-e faqih*. These fighters often belonged to directly controlled Iranian proxy groups and were thus fully backed by the IRGC and answering to direct religious orders in the form of a *taklif sharii*. Fighters coming from Lebanon belonged overwhelmingly to Lebanese Hezbollah, although with limited participation by volunteers from the Amal Movement, whose members usually do not look to clerics toeing Iran's ideological line.[145] Iraqi proxies Kataib Hezbollah and AAH were also active, reporting their first losses in early 2013, although maintain-

ing deniability required that the locations of their casualties go unreported or be kept deliberately vague.[146]

Newer Iraqi Shiite proxies like KSS and HHN not only announced their presence in Syria but also asserted themselves via large funeral demonstrations for members in May and June 2013. Indeed, funerals were a main means to announce a group's involvement in Syria or to simultaneously announce its Syria activities and very existence. While reports surfaced that other Iranian proxy groups had sent fighters to Syria, some of these organizations remained mum on their involvement until summer 2013. The Badr Organization, following the deaths of two members in July 2013, admitted its involvement in Syria and its formation of a special force there.

The second trend consisted of Sadrists, most likely those belonging to splinter groups. The Sadrists present in Syria were not necessarily direct followers of Muqtada and often encompassed a group broadly subscribing to the tenets espoused by his murdered father, Muhammad Sadiq. Sadrists, who were active in the war with the United States, have been linked to Iran and its proxies, both during that earlier war and since. Indeed, Sadrist recruits for the Syrian war were politically mobilized, highly sectarian, with training experience ranging from basic to more advanced.

Viewed cynically, Iran and its proxies might have been seen to recruit Sadrists as both cannon fodder and to establish deniability for its efforts to bolster Assad. Considering Iran's tensions with Muqtada al-Sadr, fighters sent to Iran for training and equipment and then led, in part, by the IRGC and other advisors might also fuel future Sadrist splits, thereby building influence for Iran.

Whatever their idiosyncratic path, Sadrists have undoubtedly made a significant contribution to the Syrian Shiite jihad. The first trickle of foreign Shiite fighters to reach Syria emerged from this strain, and according to LAFA sources, the "first martyr to fall in Sayyeda Zainab" was Jaafar Adhab Farhud, who was killed on May 12, 2012, and buried in Diwaniyah, Iraq.[147] The placard above his tombstone, complete with images of Muqtada al-Sadr and his father, Muhammad Sadiq, says he was a "casualty of cowardly terrorists in Syria."[148]

According to an October 2012 report, members of al-Sadr's senior leadership were deploying to Syria under the guise of pilgrimages to Sayyeda Zainab. One such individual affirmed, "When we went to Najaf, they told us it's a call for fighting in Syria against the Salafis."[149] It was around the same time that direct Iranian involvement in the war, through proxy forces,

replaced the previous Shiite militia structure, whereby these militias were localized institutions with links to Syria's army and intelligence.[150] Some Sadrist-related fighters neither fully shared Iran's ideology nor were members of its proxy organizations.

From the start of the recruitment effort in Iraq, potential fighters were first routed through Iran and then flown to Syria. In April 2013, following the return of the bodies of ten Shiite fighters killed in Syria, Iraqi officials noted the "missing link [on their passports] between when they left for Iran and when their bodies arrived in Iraq from Syria."[151] Other younger recruits with the Badr Organization claimed they were trained in Iran over two-week periods.[152]

Following the first two main ideologically based fighter deployments, in Iraq popular committees acting as subcommittees for other organizations emerged. They often advertised ties to a parent group and would take the lead in recruitment efforts. The most active and largest of these was the PCMDSZ, which was used to recruit fighters for various Iranian proxies. The PCMDSZ focused heavily on displaying posters praising the martyrdom of Shiite fighters around Shiite holy sites. In particular, routes traveled by pilgrims in Karbala and Najaf featured phone numbers to call for those interested in defending Shiite holy sites. Recruitment in Hezbollah, by contrast, did not involve subcommittees but rather more direct entreaties by members to potential recruits. All the same, similar techniques were used to those in Iraq. Posters in Dahiya advertised phone numbers potential fighters could call to defend Sayyeda Zainab.[153]

Familial Links, Scouts, and Underage Fighters

Family connections and youth wings established by Iran's Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite proxies constituted core means of recruitment for the Syrian jihad. Some of the youths who fought were indeed very young, and during the recruitment peak period of November 2013 to January 2014, slain youth combatants were actively promoted in martyrdom posters and online.

Family connections are suggested by specific casualties. Hussein Ajeeb Jadha, the brother of LAFA's leader, Abu Ajeeb, died fighting in the winter of 2012. Hamza al-Darraji, the son of LAFA leader Abu Ali al-Darraji, had both legs amputated after being seriously wounded in combat. Both Darraji and his son eventually returned to Iraq, where the family's commitment to fighting Sunni jihadists was actively promoted as a symbol of strength and commitment.

Scout groups, meanwhile, including Hezbollah's Imam al-Mahdi Scouts (*Kishaf al-Imam al-Mahdi*), have attracted many young Shiites willing to engage in jihad. Again, martyrdom looms large. When, for example, Hezbollah member Hussein Ahmed Akhdar was buried in his home village of Zrarieh after dying in the war, his time as a Madhi Scouts leader was commemorated and promoted.[154] In one martyrdom poster, Akhdar is shown in his Mahdi Scouts uniform; in another, he is pictured together with a fellow martyr, Ali Nasser.[155] The poster reads "Shahid qaeda" ([Scout] leader martyrs).

Following Hezbollah's Imam al-Mahdi Scouts model, Kataib Hezbollah created its own Imam al-Hussein Scouts, which has worked closely with its Hezbollah counterpart and supplied fighters for Kataib Hezbollah operations. In December 2013, one of the scouts, Muhammad Baqr al-Bahadli, was killed fighting in Syria.[156] His experience as a scout leader was heavily utilized in messaging from Kataib Hezbollah's social media networks, which produced countless martyrdom posters and Internet posts demonstrating Bahadli's links to the Imam al-Hussein Scouts.[157]

Hezbollah, with its deepening involvement in the war, has expanded its initial scouting operations from Lebanon into Syria. Announced in early 2013 and centered in the Sayyeda Zainab neighborhood, Hezbollah's scout group has established its own marching band and sports competitions.[158] During the Ashura of 2013, the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in Syria (*Kishaf al-Imam al-Mahdi fi Suriya*) set up displays juxtaposing the "martyrdom" of Hezbollah and other Shiite militia fighters with that of Hussein ibn Ali during the Battle of Karbala. On July 28, 2014, Syria's Imam al-Mahdi Scouts claimed its first martyr, Yusuf Jawad Jawad, though it was not reported how he died.[159]

Fighters under eighteen have been lauded for their involvement. The Badr Organization, for example, publicized the martyrdom of seventeen-year-old Murtada Qasim (al-Karbalai) (b. 1996) in official videos and social media posts. Another seventeen-year-old compatriot with whom Qasim was photographed, Ahmed Haidar Abdul Ali al-Waeli, was reportedly killed in January 2014.[160] And the RRF heavily promoted a picture online of a seventeen-year-old, who was later killed in fighting, next to an RRF commander.[161] The presence of even younger fighters has been reported: local Syrian Shiite forces, including those with ties to Hezbollah, apparently lost a fighter on January 1, 2013; his gravestone cites his birth date as February 18, 1998.[162] Such an occurrence may reflect the dwindling pool of Syria's Shiite fighters who are "of age" as the conflict claims more casualties.

Recruitment 2.0: Enlisting Fighters Online

For Shiite militias operating in Syria, the Internet, in tandem with widely publicized phone hotlines, has been critical in messaging and recruitment of fighters. Since the end of 2012, social media has become increasingly used for Shiite groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Facebook pages for various fighting groups, in particular, have marked the first indications of their existence. Profiles have included combat engagements, "martyrdom" announcements, and photos of fighters, among other information, all the while growing into a fertile recruitment apparatus. Social media and Internet-based recruitment strategies, varying from one group to another, have been expanded to include fundraising and organized pilgrimage trips to the shrines these groups claim to defend. The success and rapid adoption of these techniques has spread with the expansion of Shiite military efforts elsewhere in the Middle East, especially Iraq.

In May 2013, ten days before Hezbollah secretary-general Nasrallah admitted his forces' involvement in Syria, the group's online recruitment efforts were already under way. The first of these efforts launched by Iran and its proxies was established directly in Iran. Facebook pages, profiles, and blogs featured the symbol of Lebanese Hezbollah combined with the dome of Sayyeda Zainab and the message "Zainab, we are all your Abbas." (See appendix 8.) Embedded within the image were a phone number and website (ValieAmr.com) for establishing contact between recruiters and potential fighters. Some of the blogs for pushing this recruitment program included two phone numbers, one for text messages and another for the direct line featured on the poster, along with links to the ValieAmr site.[163] At times, potential recruits would leave their contact information in these blogs' comment sections.[164] While ValieAmr and other Iranian volunteer sign-up pages were later taken offline, the posts and phone numbers remain online, even as these numbers too have been disconnected.

By May 11, 2013, the ValieAmr page had reported some 3,253 volunteer enlistees for action.[165] It is unknown how many of these volunteers were actually recruited or how many were subsequently trained and sent on to Syria. Open Iranian efforts via blogs and other websites to field more recruits lasted well into the fall of 2013. It was claimed that one website, Ghobe.ir, was started to "register volunteers" to meet at the "Syrian frontier."[166] The Ghobe website is still up, though its recruitment sections appear to be obscured. A wide range of Iranian proxies have followed this approach, especially through

the technique of embedding phone numbers in uploaded photographs. Some groups, meanwhile, have simply posted contact information in text form on the pages they control.

While a combination of Facebook pages, blogs, and websites has been the norm for Iranian online recruitment networks, Facebook was the main recruitment venue used by Iran's Iraqi proxies. Recruitment notices were spread quickly through the social networking site, aided by the tactic of established networks announcing new militia groupings online. Facebook allowed for relatively high anonymity, and direct links to target audiences for announcements could be achieved at a low cost. If recruitment efforts were disrupted, they could be easily and immediately replicated.

Organizations involved in Internet recruitment for Syria have included AAH, HHN, KSS, the Badr Organization, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran-controlled elements operating under the LAFA moniker, with some of the groups beginning their online recruitment activities later than others.

Liwa Dhulfiqar used its associated social media networks for a different strategy, posting photographs with embedded contact information for "pilgrimages" to Sayyeda Zainab. These pilgrimages were often used for further propaganda to boost Shiite militias' successes on the ground. (See appendix 8.) The pilgrimages, sponsored by the IRGC and Sadrist-themed groups, have reportedly included the dispatch of new fighters to the Syrian battlefield and have possibly yielded new recruits.

Looking Closer at Facebook

As for the Facebook pages themselves, for some groups the main social media pages would feature recruitment materials. Many of these official and quasi-official Shiite militia and related pages became recognized and established due to popular and media attention. One could "like" the page, view available imagery, and even contact those managing the page. In two cases in September 2013, Facebook pages affiliated with LAFA and AAH were contacted through a private message, with the potential recruit then receiving advice on how to join the Syria fight.[167] Nevertheless, while ISIS's social media–based recruitment has been the topic of discussion and focus by Western intelligence and media, very little attention has been paid to these incredibly open and active recruitment techniques.

The Badr Organization was one of the first groups to recruit directly on its public Facebook pages. Initially, the group posted images of actual recruit-

ment meeting areas established in Najaf and Karbala during Ashura and later Arbain, another Shiite festival, with the images showing posters with recruitment phone numbers easily viewable by anyone who clicked the uploaded images. By early 2014, Badr had improved its techniques by uploading publicly viewable and more professionally constructed images featuring recruitment numbers. Until summer 2014, the official Badr Organization's Quwet al-Shahid Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr Facebook page's main cover image was a recruitment poster featuring Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Ayatollah Khamenei, and a recruitment phone number to join forces "in the defense of Sayyeda Zainab."[168]

The Badr Organization was also one of the first groups to upload recruitment videos to YouTube—beginning March 27–28, 2014 (see appendix 8)—to be either linked to its Facebook networks or uploaded directly to related Facebook pages. Set to music celebrating Badr's ideology and mission to "defend Sayyeda Zainab," the videos included combat footage in Syria and, at the end, a Badr Organization Facebook page address and phone number. Some of the footage used in these videos was later repurposed for airing on the group's al-Ghadeer TV network.[169]

Another video-based recruitment effort, albeit a less direct one, was launched by the RRF. Like Badr's videos, these clips—posted at varying intervals to Facebook and YouTube—featured martial music and combat footage showing RRF fighters and commanders in Syria. Some footage seemingly included the video creator's phone number, although contacting this number yielded only information about joining with "forces to defend Zainab."[170]

Not all established groups used easily accessible Facebook pages or YouTube videos for recruitment. At times, potential recruits would be forced to seek out harder-to-find Facebook profiles with uploaded images containing embedded phone numbers. Many of these profiles would use imagery demonstrating a direct link to Shiite militia organizations.[171] KSS was one group to prefer this method. Beginning in summer 2013, the group began a sporadic campaign of posting photos of actual recruitment posters, with the posters generally including phone numbers, on KSS-related Facebook profiles. The picture would then be uploaded and circulated. Only in late July 2014 did KSS first post images specifically crafted for Internet distribution, with these images generally featuring phone numbers. (See appendix 8.) As with other KSS posts, such images could only be reached on a more-difficult-to-access Facebook profile.

The recruitment of Afghan volunteers in particular entailed embedding images with phone numbers and posting them to Facebook. (See appendix 8.) Clearly showing the LAFA name and imagery, the numbers were all posted as recruitment links for that organization, despite the announcement via official Iranian media of a special Afghan division of fighters. While Afghan Shiites living within Iran appeared to be the target audience, the phone numbers provided to new recruits originated in Iraq and, when called, were answered in Persian- and Iraqi-accented Arabic.[172] Nevertheless, these lines appeared to be part of a central recruiting phone bank for Shiite fighters catering to both Persian and Arabic speakers.

The PCMDSZ was initially active online during the period around Ashura in October–November 2013 and was most active during the Arbain period lasting from December 2013 to February 2014. The group's efforts included the posting of images with embedded phone numbers. These images ranged from professionally made posters, which were displayed prominently on the main streets of the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, to scanned statements with embedded phone numbers. (See appendix 8.) In Karbala, signs were placed on Arbain routes used by pilgrims visiting Shiite holy sites.

One of the PCMDSZ's most widely circulated poster designs features the faces of slain Afghan Shiites attached to LAFA, AAH, HHN, Kataib Hezbollah, Liwa Dhulfiqar, and Lebanese Hezbollah, suggesting the group was actively recruiting for these organizations. On one Facebook page, a PCMDSZ phone number is claimed to connect potential recruits to AAH recruiters. (See appendix 8.)[173] Further demonstrating the overlap among Iranian proxy elements, the phone numbers posted and the group name were also heavily pushed by the Badr Organization. In Badr tents set up in Najaf and Karbala, the PCMDSZ's posters were regular features. KSS has also specifically created PCMDSZ posters with embedded phone numbers, which were circulated on Facebook and displayed physically in Iraqi Shiite areas.

PCMDSZ posters and phone numbers have found their way onto social media sites besides Facebook. The site deviantART, an "online art community for artists and art lovers to interact in a variety of ways," was also used,[174] with PCMDSZ uploading one of its recruitment posters in April 2014 with embedded phone numbers.

When compared to efforts organized by ISIS or other Sunni jihadist organizations, Iran's Shiite proxies have maintained a highly centralized structure with what appear to be timed Internet campaigns for recruitment and indoc-

trination. With ISIS advances in Iraq in late spring 2014, these strategies saw further development among Shiite militias.

Internet Recruitment for the Iraqi Front

In Iraq, Internet recruitment of Shiites to combat ISIS was used even before the crisis exploded onto the world stage. Starting in May 2014 and rising throughout June and July, as ISIS advances hit front pages, new and established militia groups alike quickly engaged in recruitment efforts utilizing techniques learned over the previous year. For the first time, LIH posted a recruitment poster with embedded phone numbers to its Facebook networks. Additionally, the Badr Organization, HHN's Liwa al-Hamad, Liwa Dhulfiqar, the RRF, and the Badr-linked Saraya al-Aqidah all issued embedded images with phone numbers during this period.

Newer Shiite militia groups with links to Iran, such as QQAFA, Fatiyan Aqidah, and Liwa Sadiqin, all embraced this recruitment strategy and heavily marketed themselves and their phone numbers on Facebook. (See appendix 8.) Saraya al-Aqidah went a step further than most groups by issuing uploaded images used for fundraising and recruitment that would connect a caller with the office of the group's leader, Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir.[175]

Starting on April 22, 2014, after a *taklif sharii* was issued calling for the group's assembly, Kataib Hezbollah announced the creation of Saraya al-Difa al-Shabi (KH-SDS), a fighting force for combat in Iraq. At this time, notices with KH-SDS's new logo and a text-based phone number were posted on Kataib Hezbollah's social media networks. The group's creation came about six weeks before Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki called for volunteers to join in the fight against ISIS.[176]

On May 22, 2014, Kataib Hezbollah officially announced the establishment of KH-SDS in a video clip that also claimed to detail how foreign intelligence agencies were backing Sunni insurgent and terrorist organizations in Iraq.[177] In early June, Kataib Hezbollah uploaded more images, mainly photos of recruitment numbers broadcast on television, and then reposted these images on Facebook and Google+.

Coinciding with these posts, on June 17, 2014, KH-SDS uploaded video clips previously shown on the group's al-Etejah TV network. These recordings gave a brief explanation for KH-SDS's founding and then presented phone numbers for Kataib Hezbollah branches in Shiite population centers from Baghdad to Basra. About a month later, al-Etejah aired clips of fundraising attempts for

KH-SDS and the mujahedin, including routing numbers to send financial contributions. These clips were immediately recorded and redistributed on YouTube and Facebook. (See appendix 8.)

The techniques used to roll out KH-SDS will likely serve as a near-term model for Iran's Shiite Islamist proxies. Through a mix of different and complementary media platforms, full saturation of sites like Facebook could easily be attained. The material promoted demonstrates that Shiite militias understand their audience, particularly younger potential supporters and recruits. These youth are fully integrated into the social media and Internet-based atmosphere, and groups such as Kataib Hezbollah have seen that they can be exploited using various media. These strategies all found their genesis in the recruitment efforts for Syria and, given their success, asymmetric advantages, and the Internet's wide reach, will likely continue to be used by Iran and its proxies.

Recruitment Phone Banks

The discussion so far has shown the ways in which embedded links on social media with phone numbers and email addresses have allowed Shiite militias to recruit members with relative ease. It bears noting, however, that the mere fact of numbers being posted does not mean they are active on discovery. In fact, three number sets posted by an Iraqi Shiite Iranian proxy were inactive less than twenty-four hours after being posted.[178]

Calls to phone banks often included a brief discussion with the recruiter.[179] Out of twelve different recruitment numbers called in 2014, eleven recruiters would allow the potential recruit to give a brief statement of purpose for calling and would then ask questions. Most calls lasted from two to eight minutes, with an average of around three minutes. Callers from different locations (e.g., the United States and Europe) were never discouraged. Nevertheless, particular scrutiny was often paid to U.S.- and Europe-based callers. Recruiters were regularly vague and would offer few direct answers when asked details about recruitment, potential payments, or where a potential recruit would be trained.

For some numbers affiliated with recruitment lines established for LAFA, callers would first hear a Shiite religious song. Once the phone was picked up by the recruiter, a cryptic set of prayers would be recited.[180] When asked about recruitment and what training would entail, one recruiter claimed "personal expenses" would be covered but did not go into details.[181] When asked if train-

PHONE BANK RECRUITMENT THEMES

Conversations between recruiters and potential Shiite militia members often covered the following:

- Questions about the caller's place of origin, including town, city, and ethnonational background.
- Mixed messages in response to questions about whether Sunnis were permitted to participate. In three of five calls made in which the caller claimed to be Sunni, he was told to offer prayers and was not asked further questions.
- Questions about the caller's wishes to defend Sayyeda Zainab.
- The question "How did you come across this particular phone number?"
- If a caller cited Facebook as the source, the recruiter asked for the exact page URL and time accessed. This was particularly the case for PCMDSZ and the Badr Organization. Recruiters also often asked how the caller found the Facebook page, and when and where the phone number was discovered.
- Further questions regarding the caller's faith, often to confirm he was Shiite. Questions were often asked at random during calls, including to name all the martyred Shiite Imam Hussein's sons or Imam Ali's children.
- When asked about the ideology of absolute *velayat-e faqih* and its role vis-à-vis Shiite recruits, some of the recruiters (five of twelve) responded favorably. However, most reoriented the discussion to the "defense of the [Sayyeda Zainab] shrine" or the "defense of the Shiites."
- Potential Western recruits (from Germany, the United States, and Sweden) were not discouraged but were often heavily scrutinized. Some recruiters would explain they wanted "brothers" from the region but would accept the caller's "prayers for the mujahedin."
- Details on training, weapons systems, deployment times, and cash payments from recruits went unanswered.
- Written proof demonstrating the caller's positive qualities was not requested. Still, it was suggested during some calls that the caller arrive at a local office to confirm his identity.
- Often, while a particular group was publicly promoting certain phone numbers, those answering the calls would rarely refer to the group or answer questions about it.

ing would take place in Iran or Lebanon, the recruiter simply responded, "You will learn to defend the Lady [Zainab] and defeat [the] villainous force."[182]

Calls to the provided phone numbers also helped offer an early confirmation that Iranian proxy groups had changed their regional focus. During a May 15, 2014, call, when a PCMDSZ recruiter was asked if it would be problematic for a Lebanese living in the West to join forces "defending Sayyeda Zainab," the recruiter responded, "We are looking for brothers here in Iraq." Asked to elaborate, the recruiter added, "*Takfiri* forces are trying to conquer

Iraq and [there is a] need to defend sanctities there."[183] This claim was made a full month before ISIS initiated its main offensive that took Mosul. This shift was also evident in Internet-based recruitment and the redeployment back to Iraq of many Iraqi Shiite fighters who had gained prominence in Syria.

Iraqi SWAT Teams in Damascus?

Suspicions held, since the first images emerged of Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria, that some might belong to the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF), SWAT teams, and other units. On this count, attention focused especially on AAH, the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah, LAFA, LIH, and the RRF, which were seen as having close ties to Iraqi internal security and military forces. Whether these hints of affiliation reflected deliberate propaganda, perhaps to misdirect the groups' monitors away from deeper infiltrations, is unknown. Regardless, they were present in imagery and music released by Shiite militia groups populated by Iraqi personnel.[184]

In particular, signifiers such as the distinctive face masks worn by many ISOF and SWAT team members appeared on Iraqi Shiite militiamen outside the Sayyeda Zainab shrine.[185] Velcro patches reading "SWAT" or "ISOF" were commonly affixed to Shiite militiamen and their camouflage uniforms.[186] Customized camouflage-painted rifles, weapons often associated with ISOF units, also appeared.[187] (More generally, see appendix 6 for a discussion of weapons tied to Shiite militias.)

On AAH social media pages, it was claimed that one of the group's fighters, Karrar Abed al-Amir Fatlawi Abu Assad (a.k.a. Karrar), who was reportedly killed in Syria in spring 2013, belonged to the Iraqi army's Muthanna Brigade,[188] a claim bolstered by photos of Karrar operating as part of or alongside the brigade and other Iraqi troops.[189] Reports indicate that the predominantly Shiite Muthanna Brigade has been heavily involved in sectarian attacks and, during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, almost came to blows with U.S. forces. In 2007, citing a Sunni leader affiliated with the *sahwa* movement, the *New York Times* claimed that the Muthanna Brigade was "infiltrated by Iranian-sympathizing militiamen who abuse Sunnis."[190] Since Karrar was one of the first AAH members declared killed in Syria, he may have been part of a core group of well-trained, experienced fighters initially deployed to establish themselves in the country. These fighters were presumably picked from official military units whose extensive training had included that from U.S. advisors during the Iraq war.

The extensive linkages between Maliki's State of Law Alliance and numerous Iraqi Shiite proxies of Iran that sent forces to Syria further suggest that these proxies may have fielded recruits from official Iraqi units. Maliki's increasing politicization and sectarianization of the Iraqi military and internal security branches provided further openings for Iran-backed groups that filtered into the Iraqi defense establishment.[191]

Alongside AAH, the Badr Organization is another group well represented within the Iraqi security forces, with significant numbers positioned in key units within ISF and Iraqi military units. According to the *Guardian*, "After the Pentagon lifted a ban on Shia militias joining the security forces, the special police commando (SPC) membership was increasingly drawn from violent Shia groups such as the Badr brigades."[192] Even during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Badr Organization had thoroughly infiltrated other specialized commando units, particularly those affiliated with the Ministry of Interior.[193]

The RRF in Syria also has links to the Iraqi security establishment, with its name and raison d'etre essentially echoing the Iraqi military's and ISF's own "emergency response units" (ERUs), which are manned by Muqtada al-Sadr supporters and particularly fighters loyal to the Badr Organization.[194] Reinforcing this development, martyrdom posters for the Badr Organization's Qassem Jamil al-Salami and Hassan Hadi al-Maryani, both killed in Iraq, show the former in an ERU uniform and the latter in SWAT/ISOF fatigues.[195]

Elsewhere in Syria, individuals involved in LAFA-related groups have regularly paraded symbols linked to the Iraqi military. Abu Ajeeb, the group's commander, was pictured wearing ISOF patches.[196] Indeed, a connection between Abu Ajeeb and Iraq's special forces would, if nothing else, dispel rebel narratives claiming he was a "vegetable seller from the northwestern governorate of Idlib."[197] Abu Ali al-Darraji, another LAFA-affiliated commander, also sported special forces patches. Nevertheless, as noted in an earlier section, he was reportedly an Iraqi refugee applying for asylum while exiled in Syria, making his special forces membership unlikely. Others in the LAFA network to feature Iraqi military gear—in this case, from the army—included Abu Dhima al-Amr, an LIH commander.[198] Abu Fatima al-Musawi, a LAFA cofounder and now leader of the AAH-inspired LAAG, was pictured with ISOF epaulettes.[199]

Beyond the possibilities already implied, a number of potential explanations may be offered for these groups' promotion of ties and overlap with official Iraqi government armed units:

- a means to demonstrate official Iraqi government support for Shiite militia operations in Syria.

- a tactic to overstate the presence of Iran's proxies, groups possibly affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr, and the influence of other Sadrist Movement splinters within official Iraqi military organs.

- a direct result of the use of actual units that simultaneously served within the Iraqi security forces.

- a signal to Sunni foes within Iraq and Syria that government-backed Shiite forces could deploy regionally and had superior training and equipment.

- a method to show potential recruits that they would be fighting alongside well-trained units with goals and historically proven track records.

Whatever the reasons, the very strong possibility exists that elements from Iraqi government forces were utilized from the start of open engagements by Iranian proxies and other Shiite organizations in Syria.

5

The Web of Multiplying Shiite Islamist Militias in Syria

WHILE THE FLURRY of direct Iranian proxies often appear to be independent organizations, they all follow the ideology and religious guidance of Ayatollah Khamenei and the military lead of Iran's IRGC and particularly its Qods Force. Important to note in this context is that Iran also shares links to numerous other Shiite militias, including those not adhering to absolute *velayat-e faqih*. As for the direct proxies, they seem to recruit from the same types of fighters and repeat the same narratives.

Iran's Interconnected Proxies

A trend in the development of Iranian proxies is the creation of seemingly new groups characterized by unified ideology and loyal, proven personnel. These groups typically emerge either from reported "splits" from an existing group or a commander's changed affiliation. What appears to be atomization within the ranks is instead more reminiscent of cell replication, with new groups simply expanding the size and influence of a broader IRGC-created network and model. This might be construed as a strategy to confuse outside observers as well as demonstrate broader acceptance for Iran's absolute *velayat-e faqih* ideology. In many ways, the approach follows that pioneered by Hezbollah, although Hezbollah fighters serve more as advisors to spinoff groups rather than leaders or members. Nearly all the Iranian proxy groups encompassed in this discussion can be explained as fitting a broader *muqawama al-Islamiyah* (Islamic resistance) brand, and they use this term to describe themselves. Along with projecting the same messages, these groups cooperate openly and participate in many of the same operations.

As for these newer groups' leaders and core members, many were culled from established entities created by Iran, namely the Badr Organization, which was originally the military arm for ISCI's predecessor, the Supreme

Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. For many years, the Badr Organization had served as a main IRGC conduit for manufacturing proxies in Iraq.

According to Brian Fishman, "Before 2003, the Badr Corps [as the Badr Organization was previously known] served as Iran's most important action arm inside Iraq, and was considered an official component of the IRGC-QF," with a number of the group's members heavily involved in weapons transfers to Iraq for use against U.S. and coalition forces.[200] Only in spring 2014, as the Badr Organization's efforts within Syria became more transparent, did the group announce on its al-Ghadeer TV network and official social media that it had attacked U.S. forces in Iraq. These attacks were used as propaganda to recruit fighters for Syria.

The Badr Organization's influence on Iraqi Shiite organizations is demonstrated in the exploitation of battlefield deaths such as that of Ali Hamza al-Darraji (Sadiqi), a KSS member who was reportedly killed on August 20, 2013. As it happens, Darraji was no volunteer recruit but rather the son of a prominent martyr, Abu Maytham al-Darraji, a Badr Brigades member whose martyrdom was celebrated in 2012 by the Badr Organization and commemorated in events marking Badr's thirty-fifth year.[201] For the son, whose martyrdom was "claimed" by both KSS and the Badr Organization, both online and real-world commemorations are still being created. Similarly, Ali Sami al-Zubaydi (a.k.a. Abu Mujahid al-Sadiqi) was an early Syria martyr buried under the KSS banner but jointly claimed by the Badr Organization.[202] In summer 2014, Zubaydi's legacy and martyrdom were rebranded to inspire conscription in the new Badr-linked group Harakat al-Abdel.[203] Badr ties can also be found with HTI and its Saraya Talia al-Khurasani. One of the fallen fighters claimed by the group, Shabir Hassan al-Zwain al-Zabahawi, sported the insignias of the Badr Organization's Quwet al-Shahid Muhammad Baqir Sadr.[204] Additionally, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a resident of Baghdad's Green Zone who advised former Iraqi prime minister Maliki as well as IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani, helped found Kataib Hezbollah, and masterminded the 1983 attack on the U.S. embassy in Kuwait, himself arose from the Badr Brigades.[205]

Within the proxy Kataib Hezbollah, a split was likely manufactured to give plausible deniability to a new, highly sectarian group, Jaish al-Mukhtar (Army of the Mukhtar a.k.a. Iraqi Hezbollah),[206] which is active in Iraq and reportedly sent forces to Syria. Jaish al-Mukhtar operates under the leadership of former Badr Organization member and Kataib Hezbollah leader Wathiq al-Battat,[207] who himself claimed involvement with al-Sadr's Mahdi Army dur-

ing the Iraq war.[208] The group's admission to following Khamenei's leadership and absolute *velayat-e faqih* strongly suggests continued links to Iran.

AAH, too, was instrumental in creating spinoffs for the Syria fight. Akram Kaabi, an AAH founder and leader, was responsible for launching and leading HHN. Initially, claims suggested that Kaabi had formed another group, the Haidar al-Karrar Brigade, over a dispute with LAFA leaders over fighting in areas outside Sayyeda Zainab.[209] However, this appears to have been a cover story given that HHN has reported regularly sending fighters under its own banner to Aleppo since June 2013. Additionally, HHN still deploys forces in the vicinity of Sayyeda Zainab, namely Liwa al-Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba. Groups associated with Liwa Dhulfiqar, which itself split from LAFA but maintains a close relationship with the network, fought in areas throughout southern Syria. Adding further levels of absurdity to the initial claim regarding HHN's formation, LAFA, Liwa Dhulfiqar, the RRF, AAH's Liwa Kafil Zainab, and the Badr Organization, among others, have all reportedly been active outside the Damascus area. If anything, HHN was yet another Iranian proxy front group used to expand Tehran's influence and recruit more fighters for Syria.

While Iran's proxies provided most organizational deployments to Syria, elements from the Sadrist Movement were also called upon to supply fighters. In the case of Liwa Dhulfiqar, the group's commanders would intimate they had connections to the more elite, Iranian-trained and equipped Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud. Abu Ithnan al-Budairi, one of Liwa Dhulfiqar's operational commanders, was photographed in front of a poster belonging to the group. He would affirm his links to the organization and post pictures with his family members in front of Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud posters.[210]

Another source for Iran's expanding Iraqi proxy network has been splinters associated with the Mahdi Army. These Sadrist Movement fragments helped establish AAH as well as LAFA, LIH, Liwa Dhulfiqar, and possibly the RRF. Despite imagery and claims projecting loyalty to al-Sadr, as discussed earlier, many of these groups have simultaneously claimed adherence to absolute *velayat-e faqih*, implying a break from al-Sadr's tenets.

Exotic Foreign Fighters

Shiite fighters from outside the usual recruitment zones of Iraq and Lebanon have helped push the idea of a truly global pan-Shiite jihad in Syria. In the United States and Canada, cases were observed of Hezbollah finding

fighters and commanders for its Syria campaign. In March 2014, a Lebanese-American Shiite living in Michigan was arrested by the FBI and accused of attempting to join Hezbollah and then fight in Syria.[211] Hassan Laqis, a key logistical organizer for Hezbollah and its Syria campaign, was assassinated by unknown assailants in December 2013.[212] Laqis had been a leader in Hezbollah's Canadian procurement network. Fawzi Muhammad Ayoub, another high-ranking Hezbollah member with dual Canadian-Lebanese citizenship and also on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists list, was killed fighting in Syria in May 2014.[213]

Reports of Shiite fighters from other Arab countries—particularly in the Gulf—joining the many militant groups remain relatively rare. In May 2013, reports emerged of the death of a Saudi Shiite fighter, Ahmed Adnan al-Qaraoush. Pro-Saudi sources claimed Qaraoush was killed fighting in Homs and was a member of Hezbollah al-Hejaz, a Saudi Hezbollah affiliate.[214] Nevertheless, the lack of reported deaths and recruitment of Gulf Shiites could reflect Iran and its proxies' struggle to recruit within predominantly Sunni states that are adversarial toward Tehran.

Other claims, made primarily by Syrian rebels and their supporters, indicate that Yemeni fighters associated with the Fiver Shiite Houthis—and associated with Ansar Allah—had also been deployed to Syria. In other reports, Pakistani Shiite fighters were deployed.[215] However, little evidence suggests the actual activity of Yemeni and Pakistani fighters in Syria. No martyrdom announcements have been made, and the organizations to which these fighters may have belonged have not issued any statements regarding their presence in Syria.

On social media pages supportive of the IRGC and LAFA, the latter's commander, Abu Ajeeb, was photographed and filmed with "Somali holy warriors."[216]

Notwithstanding these cases, Afghan Shiite jihadists have provided the largest supply of non-Arab foreign fighters. As early as October 2012, elements associated with the opposition Free Syrian Army claimed to have captured an Afghan Shiite fighter named Mortada Hussein. He was later interrogated by the rebels on a short YouTube video clip. The presence of other such fighters became a more regular and public subject beginning in spring 2013, around when Hezbollah announced it had deployed forces to Syria. Subsequently, opposition and regime social media circulated unconfirmed images of uniformed Afghans posing together and holding weapons. In many cases, their faces—which tended to be ethnically distinct—were

clearly shown, and the fighters were described as "martyrs." Yet these fallen Afghans were never named. In July 2013, however, a martyrdom poster named Safer Muhammad as one of the Afghans who had been killed. The gold-framed poster featured the flags of Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, and Afghanistan.[217]

ORIGINS OF IRAN'S AFGHAN LEGIONS. The Afghan Shiites fighting in Syria have three main origins. First is the contingent already residing in Syria before the war, a number of whom lived near the Sayyeda Zainab shrine. According to researcher Ahmad Shuja, some two thousand Afghan Shiites, mainly belonging to the Persian-speaking Hazara ethnic group, took up residence in Syria before hostilities broke out. As with Hazara refugees in other countries, many had fled Afghanistan after suffering regularly at the hands of the Taliban. Yet when the war started, many were once again reportedly targeted for attacks based on their sectarian identity, quickly becoming internally displaced persons.[218] Some of them joined the fighting; for example, Ali Salehi, a Hazara reportedly residing in Syria, was killed during hostilities in the Damascus area.

Fighters from this refugee population appear to have followed an organizational model similar to LAFA, whose original core consisted of Iraqi Shiite refugees from the Sayyeda Zainab area who assembled in a popular-committee format; their avowed justification for fighting was to defend the Shiite shrine. Iran-backed recruits and trained fighters from established organizations such as AAH, Kataib Hezbollah, and Lebanese Hezbollah later helped expand the brigade and build its combat abilities.

A second contingent of Afghan Shiite fighters hails from Iran; according to Iran-government-backed newspapers and Afghan Shiite sources, they are the largest such contingent. Many of these recruits were originally refugees in Iran, which is home to around half a million Hazaras; a 2010 Stimson Center report noted that a third of these refugees "have spent more than half their life in Iran."[219] Public funerals held in the Islamic Republic in November–December 2013 indicate that Afghan Shiite fighters came from cities throughout the country, including Isfahan, Mashhad, Tehran, and Qom.[220] One young martyr, Reza Ismail, had attended Iran's University of Mashhad, and a photo reportedly taken in Syria showed him holding an M4-type carbine.[221] Apparently, he had been beheaded by Sunni jihadist rebels.

A third and more debatable source of Afghan Shiite fighters is refugee populations in countries other than Iran and Syria. In April 2013, officials in Afghanistan announced that they would look into reports of Afghan

nationals fighting for Assad. And in May 2014, Kabul called on Tehran to not recruit its nationals to fight in Syria. If direct Iranian recruitment were proven, Kabul threatened it would file a complaint with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Yet real evidence of direct recruitment in Afghanistan has yet to surface.

In a discrete case, an unnamed fighter pictured holding a PKM machine gun was claimed to be an Afghan Shiite refugee who had been granted asylum in Australia before joining the war in Syria. But this claim, too, has not yet been proven.[222]

AFGHAN SHIITE SPECIAL GROUPS. Initially, Afghan Shiite combatants were present in the network of brigades associated with LAFA. When some of these fighters were killed in action, they were specifically named as LAFA members; photos have also shown Afghan Shiites wearing the group's insignia on their combat fatigues.[223]

These and other links to the most well-known Shiite brigades are a continuing reality, but the November–December 2013 funerals in Iran indicated that the nature of Afghan Shiite involvement in the war had shifted. The ten fighters mourned at those funerals were declared to be members of a new militant organization called Liwa Fatemiyoun. Although this brigade has since claimed to recruit more than just Afghan Shiites, materials released by its supporters emphasize the targeting of that particular constituency.[224]

Both Liwa Fatemiyoun and Tehran have also denied direct Iranian government involvement in the group's activities, but such claims are absurd. Not only have the group's recruitment efforts been executed in Iran, but funeral processions for fallen members have regularly included uniformed IRGC soldiers as well as posters featuring the logo of Iran's official Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs.[225]

Despite forming their own group, Afghan Shiite militants continue to coordinate and regularly fight side by side with other pro-regime Shiite groups. For example, photos released on social media sites belonging to Liwa Fatemiyoun showed one Afghan fighter with two militants from AAH. Also pictured with an Afghan militant by the name of Abu Ali were KSS's leader and one of the group's heavily promoted martyrs.[226] Similarly, an Iranian newspaper report claimed last month that Afghan Shiite fighters had a presence in AAH and other Shiite militias such as Liwa Dhulfiqar.[227] This presence has allowed such fighters to take part in major engagements throughout Syria, reportedly including April clashes in the Damascus area.

The development of special groups for Afghan Shiite fighters did not end with Liwa Fatemiyoun, which is now apparently incorporated with another relatively low-profile group called Hezbollah Afghanistan. Material put out by the two groups has been similar, with both claiming the same members and martyrs. While Hezbollah Afghanistan has not yet made official headlines, it has developed its own symbols and expanded its presence in the cloistered ranks of IRGC-associated online social networks.

Tehran's Asian and African Pivots

The Afghan Hazara Shiite community was a logical target for Iranian recruitment in Syria's war. Tehran has a track record of exploiting Shiite populations that it can directly influence due to its geostrategic, religious, and historical position. Given the long-term population of Afghans in Iran, Tehran may view the war as an opportunity to extend its influence over disparate Shiite elements and push its leadership agenda. Furthermore, the presence of ethnically diverse fighters can be used to demonstrate wide Shiite support for the Iran-organized armed defense of Assad, with the presumed goal of legitimizing Tehran's approach.

As noted in other reports, it is also clear that the IRGC and its proxies are taking casualties in Syria and require replacements. Afghan Shiites, many of whom had formative experiences with harsh sectarian wars in Afghanistan, are perfect candidates to fight Sunni rebels in Syria, though their actual battlefield effectiveness remains to be determined. At the very least, their growing presence is likely providing a much-needed respite for Iranian forces and their proxies.

Iran might reap other residual benefits from training, equipping, and seasoning these units. As the United States begins its broader pullout from Afghanistan, Tehran could decide to reorient its new network of Afghan proxies eastward, with the goal of asserting broader influence among Afghanistan's often fractious Shiite communities.

Iran's link with Afghan Shiite communities also demonstrates a shift eastward toward the Indian subcontinent's millions of Shiites. This shift reflects another potential spot for future recruits and another area for Tehran's push for new influences abroad. In June 2014, Javed Hussein, a Pakistani Shiite foreign fighter, was reportedly killed in Samarra, Iraq, and his funeral held in Qom, Iran.[228] Reportedly, upward of 30,000 Shiites in India signed up to join the jihad in Iraq.[229] These potential fighters claimed to operate under

the leadership of Maulana Kalb-e-Jawad (a.k.a. Maulana Syed Kalbe Jawad Naqvi) of the major Anjuman-e-Haideri organization.[230] Jawad is another ardent supporter of absolute *velayat-e faqih* with deep ties to Iran.[231] Additionally, in mid-September 2014 via Facebook and Twitter pages written in Urdu and Arabic, HHN initiated a recruitment program targeting Pakistani Shiites to fight in Iraq. (See appendix 8.)

Alongside claims of Somali participation have been announcements of fighters originating from other African states. The exploitation and promotion of African Shiite fighters represents another foreign policy push by Iran. Muhammad Suleiman al-Kuwni, known as the Shiites' "first African martyr" in the Syrian war, reportedly died in July 2013 and hailed from Côte d'Ivoire, where almost half a million Shiites live.[232] Indeed, West Africa has seen an expanding Shiite population and Iranian influence since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. The growth of the Shiite community and, with it, Iranian sway has resulted in the creation of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria.[233]

Zones of Deployment

Within Syria, Shiite militias have been involved in a number of major engagements, as generally verified by comparisons of Shiite claims against those of the rebels. In particular, evidence makes clear that while Shiite militias were able to deploy to a wide variety of geographic zones, their victories around Damascus in particular were hard-won, and often short-lived owing to subsequent flare-ups against rebel forces.

By reviewing social media posts by different Shiite militia organizations, a partial map of the zone of conflict can be compiled. Data on battles and troop movements was collected starting in September 2013 and ending in June 2014.

The first major operation undertaken by Shiite forces, mainly Lebanese Hezbollah, involved the takeover in late spring 2013 of the rebel-controlled town of al-Qusayr, near Homs. Buildup toward this battle had been under way since March, fighting intensified by May, and Hezbollah claimed victory on June 5.

While al-Qusayr dominated the headlines, another major deployment was taking shape in Shiite villages near the city of Aleppo. In late May, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba's LAIY had claimed via social media posts that it was active in Aleppo and the Shiite towns of Nubl and Zahra.[234] In general, social media posts and Arabic-language media have located activity from LAIY, as

well as the Shiite militia Liwa al-Hamad, in the Aleppo area, a trend that has continued throughout 2014, as detailed in the spreadsheet "Shiite Militia Geography." (See appendix 7.) In April 2014, the group engaged in heavy fighting against rebel forces near the Aleppo Artillery School. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights called the area's clashes "the fiercest since the fighting began in Aleppo."[235] The Badr Organization has also been located operating around Aleppo.

By fall 2013, offensives in areas surrounding the Sayyeda Zainab shrine depended on using Shiite militias to counter rebel advances and later launch offensives against the rebels. From October 13 to November 5, groups such as the RRF, Liwa Dhulfiqar, Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, and others all engaged in fighting in Husseiniyah, a few miles south of the shrine. (See appendix 7.)

Al-Sbeneh, an urban area to the west of the shrine, was subjected to numerous rounds of conflict. Liwa Dhulfiqar claimed to be operating in the area on October 5, and in the first week of November, when posts about the fighting were most frequent, mentions also included KSS. Into 2014, fighting included engagements reported by the Badr Organization in February and other Shiite militias on March 10, 2014. (See appendix 7.)

From late 2013 through August 2014, heavy fighting overtook East Ghouta, which encompasses routes connecting Damascus and Damascus International Airport. Areas affected included Beit Sahem, Babbila, Jaramana, and particularly al-Mleha. In Beit Sahem, the RRF, LAFA, LIH, and the Badr Organization all saw action. At the start of 2014, Lebanese Hezbollah was reportedly engaged in Babbila. From January to April 2014, KSS, the RRF, and HHN's Liwa al-Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba were located in Jaramana. (See appendix 7.) Al-Mleha was an area of almost continuous conflict and saw reports of the broadest cross-section of Shiite fighters, including all the main LAFA subgroupings: LAAG, LIH, Liwa Dhulfiqar, and the RRF. These groups continued reporting their activities in al-Mleha until June–July 2014.[236] Primarily in April–May 2014, Iran's more open proxies also fought in the area, particularly the Badr Organization, KSS, AAH, Afghan Shiite fighters, and Hezbollah. Only in mid-August 2014 did pro-Assad forces, with "help from [Hezbollah]," finally take the restive town of al-Mleha.[237]

Starting in September, Liwa Dhulfiqar was placed in the middle of a number of larger-scale operations, deployed with larger Shiite militias in both offensive and defensive operations. By November 2013, Liwa Dhulfiqar announced operations in the northern section of Damascus known as Barzeh. These battles appeared to have the strategic goal of securing the northern

reaches of Damascus near the vital M5 Damascus–Aleppo highway. Following combat in Barzeh, on December 13, 2013, the group moved into towns to the north, notably Adra, which also abuts the M5 highway. These operations coincided with Hezbollah and other Iraqi Shiite militia movements in the more rural and mountainous area to the north known as Qalamoun, where LAFA was also reportedly involved in the battles. LAFA's operations commander, Ali Diab al-Rihal, was reportedly killed fighting in Yabroud, a town in Qalamoun where a major battle involved Iraqi Shiites and Hezbollah elements.[238]

The Qalamoun campaign demonstrated the highly cooperative, if not interlinked, nature of the many Shiite militia organizations operating in Syria. In addition to Liwa Dhulfiqar's movements, LAFA, AAH, and Afghan fighters were all reportedly present in the area along with Lebanese Hezbollah. Many of these deployments were announced from February to early March 2014.

Zainab Reprise and Syria's "Hezbollahzation"

The "defense of Sayyeda Zainab" theme has been embraced by foreign and domestic Shiite fighters, including those with Lebanese Hezbollah. Indeed, for Syrian Twelver Shiites, who make up just 2 to 4 percent of the country's population, Hezbollah is playing an outsize role when it comes to security, ideology, and the future at large. The group also wields remarkable influence over other Shiite groups operating within the country. And it has been aided militarily by Iran, which has helped rebuild, retrain, and at times construct from scratch elements that would later become Syria's NDF, along with Syrian Alawite groups.

The Hezbollah stance is especially pronounced when one looks at Nubl and Zahra, two Shiite towns surrounded by pro-rebel forces since 2012. In defending these towns, Hezbollah has not only showed its ability to reinforce security but has also altered the conflict narrative[239] from the Assad line emphasizing a secular "fight against terrorists" to an extension of the "defense of Sayyeda Zainab." This Zainab narrative has been promoted regardless of local conditions and narratives, and was notable in the SSNP example provided earlier.

This narrative shift was quite prominent in Busra al-Sham, a town best known for its Roman ruins and also home to a minority Shiite population. In 2009, Khalid Sindawi noted that the area "had an indigenous Shiite population for a century, but their Shiites have professed to be Sunnis."[240] Neverthe-

less, with pressures from the war and the presence of Hezbollah personnel, the area's Shiites have increasingly adopted sectarian identities. Reportedly, Hezbollah even lost a commander named Abu Jaafar who was leading local forces.[241] Within Busra al-Sham, Hezbollah branding of local fighters has been enacted through Hezbollah-themed martyrdom posters, Hezbollah insignias on uniforms, and local embrace of the Sayyeda Zainab narrative.[242]

Hezbollah-led cells have sprouted up all over Syria, led by Hezbollah commanders, populated by some Hezbollah fighters, and mainly staffed by Shiite and Alawite Syrians. One function of these groups has been to provide security backup for other Shiite entities. The Hezbollah-coordinated Jaish al-Imam al-Mahdi al-Muqawama al-Watani al-Aqaidiya fi Suriya (Army of Imam al-Mahdi, the National Ideological Resistance in Syria), for example, has not only incorporated Hezbollah symbols and a public loyalty to Hassan Nasrallah but also combined Khamenei, Khomeini, and Bashar and Hafiz al-Assad into a grand framework of Syrian and Iranian "resistance."[243] According to pages associated with this new force, it has drawn members primarily from Tarsus, the hometown of one of its leaders, Sayyed Hashem Muhammad Ali, a Shiite. The group has been active in Aleppo.

While Hezbollah actively aided in the creation of new Shiite sectarian entities, the group also helped build non-Shiite militias. In March 2014, images surfaced of two Armenian-American thugs turned pro-Assad militiamen wearing Hezbollah fatigues and posing with purported Hezbollah aides.[244] In August, Hezbollah encouraged Christians to form popular committees in Syria and Lebanon based on the "Islamic resistance" model. There was claimed to be a "high level of coordination between these committees… and Hezbollah's military apparatus."[245]

Overall, the spread of so-called "resistance" model groups, even without an absolute loyalty to Iran's Supreme Leader, represents a major strategic victory for Tehran and its proxies. Moreover, the experience and skill offered by Hezbollah fighters allows for the creation of new relationships in affected communities throughout Syria.

6

Joining of Fronts: Blowback in Iraq and Lebanon

SHIITE MILITIA ACTIVITIES in Syria were not without their costs in foreign fighters' home countries, particularly Lebanon and Iraq, where Shiite elements were targeted. In Lebanon, the first strike in a campaign against Hezbollah and Iranian interests occurred following the battle of al-Qusayr, with Sunni jihadists hitting Bir al-Abed in Dahiya, wounding about fifty.[246]

Following further fighting between Hezbollah and Syrian rebel elements in August, Nasrallah made a rare public appearance on Jerusalem Day, the anti-Israel event created by Ayatollah Khomeini. In the speech, he ridiculed Sunni Arab regimes for acting more strongly against Iran than they did against Israel. Nasrallah added, staking out his sectarian position, "Allow me at this time to speak as a Shia…We, the Shia of Ali ibn Abi Talib of the world, will never abandon Palestine or the Palestinian people."[247]

Thirteen days later, Sunni jihadists retaliated with a bomb targeting the al-Ruwais section of Dahiya near the Sayyid al-Shuhada complex, often used by Nasrallah for speeches.[248] Twenty-one people were killed and another 250 reportedly injured.[249] The Brigades of Aisha, a reference to Muhammad's second wife, who is generally held in low regard by Shiites, claimed responsibility for the attack.[250] In November 2013, a double suicide bombing struck the Iranian embassy, located in the Jinah area of southern Beirut, with a similar toll: twenty-three killed and around 150 wounded.[251]

In June 2014, ISIS struck at the Lebanese state, which the group has cast as an extension of Hezbollah. At the Duroy Hotel in Beirut, a suicide bomber wounded three members of Lebanese General Security as they attempted to apprehend an ISIS cell in the city.[252] In its statement taking credit for the attack, ISIS said, "We tell the Party of Satan [a derogatory reference to Hezbollah, the "Party of God"] and its agent, the Lebanese army, that this is the first rain and we tell you that there are hundreds of people seeking suicide, who love the blood of rejectionists [used pejoratively to refer to Shiites]."[253]

In Iraq, attacks specifically targeting Iran's proxies that had sent forces to Syria occurred less frequently, but were no less deadly. The more targeted bombings coincided roughly with an anti-Shiite campaign launched by Sunni jihadists throughout Iraq. On the same day as the al-Ruwais explosion in Lebanon, two car bombs were detonated near the headquarters of al-Ahad news, a station serving as AAH's version of Hezbollah's al-Manar.[254] Simultaneously, another four bombs were set off in Shiite-populated areas of Baghdad. The most deadly attack directly targeting an Iranian proxy occurred on April 25, 2014, during a large AAH rally in Baghdad, with more than thirty killed.[255]

From Front Lines to Ballot Box

Shiite fighters in the Syrian war have not limited their activities to the battlefront. Returning to Iraq, many exchanged their fatigues for jackets and slacks and ran for positions in parliament. These figures demonstrated a close link to former Iraqi prime minister Maliki, with many of Iran's Shiite proxies that had sent forces to Syria also belonging to Maliki's State of Law Alliance (SLA). During the May 2014 elections for seats in Iraq's parliamentary body known as the Council of Representatives, veterans of the Syrian conflict and their parties continued to use their wartime activities to win votes.

For example, when Abu Mousa al-Amiri, an AAH commander in Syria, ran on AAH's ticket, his service in Syria was actively showcased in posters and online venues.[256] Amiri's leadership position within AAH was further demonstrated in other photos taken during a summer 2013 visit by an AAH clerical leader and cofounder, Muhammad al-Tabatabai, to Syria. Amiri closely accompanied the leader during the trip. Other candidates fielded by AAH similarly emphasized the group's positioning of forces in Syria and the "defense of the shrines" narrative in election posters and Internet posts.

Despite these groups' overt role as Shiite proxies of Iran, Maliki actively courted them and rolled many into his own electoral alliance. According to an August 2, 2013, statement from HTI, the parent party for Saraya Talia al-Khurasani, the group would be part of the SLA and its secretary-general, Ali al-Yasiri, who served as a field commander in Syria, would run in the May 2014 elections. The Badr Organization, too, maintained extensive links with the SLA, winning twenty-two seats in the May 2014 elections. Additionally, throughout 2013, the group's leader, Hadi al-Ameri, was Iraq's minister of transportation.

Most prominent among the many Shiite militia veterans to serve in Syria and then run for parliament on Maliki's slate was Falah Hasan Jassim al-Harishawi (a.k.a. Mustafa al-Khazali), the purported secretary-general of KSS.

Seeking to represent Basra, Harishawi underlined his main motivation for running as being the result of a *taklif sharii*, as outlined in a flyer and online materials.[257] During the campaign, Harishawi trumpeted his service in Syria and the necessity of a "sacred defense" against *takfiris*.[258] In television appearances and printed materials, he showcased his wartime experience and injuries, including his loss of an eye "in front of Sayyeda Zainab."[259] Even his late campaign manager, Ali Falah al-Maliki (a.k.a. Abu Mujahid), was a Syrian war veteran.[260] Yet Maliki was a relatively shadowy figure. Appearing in few online photos since 2013, his position within KSS was never officially confirmed nor discussed until after Harishawi's announcement that he would run for office. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two in Syria was treated prominently. Thus, Harishawi's candidacy and campaign doubled as a venue from which to legitimize the jihad in Syria and the broader Iranian moves to push their Islamic resistance narratives and groups.

Only after Maliki's death in Iraq on August 12, 2014, was the extent of his historical involvement in Iranian proxy operations released on his official Facebook "martyrdom" page. In one post, it was asserted that he had also fought in the marsh campaigns against Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and "resisted [U.S. and coalition] occupation forces" when they were in Iraq.[261]

While stories of Maliki and his peers reflect the multiple purposes served by Shiite Syrian jihadists, they also reflect a larger strategy for Iranian proxy groups: to project their interests into various electorates and legitimize their involvement in Syria. Iran's proxies will, moreover, continue to view politics as a means of advancing their larger war for regional domination.

Iraq: Shiite Militias "Split," Grow, and Fight

The Iranian quest to achieve regional dominance through its proxies is further demonstrated by the experience of fighters returning to Iraq from Syria. Since former Iraqi prime minister Maliki's December 2013 offensive in Anbar, these returnees have seen action on a number of fronts. Related organizations have thus expanded from having bases in Syria alone—although staffed by Iraqis—to having bases in both Syria and Iraq. Many of these "defenders of Shiism," as the narrative goes, announced their support for Maliki's Anbar offensive; such groups included AAH, KSS, and Liwa Dhulfiqar.

The story of Muhammad al-Biyadh, who returned to Iraq after serving as a field commander in Aleppo for Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba's LAIY, further demonstrates the multiple, shifting affiliations held by Iran's proxy

members.[262] Biyadh, who had gained some fame in Syria thanks to films of him single-handedly firing a machine gun against enemy forces,[263] returned to Iraq donning an ISOF uniform and a holstered handgun. In February 2014, he participated in protests against *al-Sabah al-Jadid* for publishing a cartoon criticizing Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei.[264] Later, in mid-April, Biyadh was photographed with patches belonging to another Khomeinist organization, Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq,[265] which had also been deployed to Aleppo during Biyadh's Syria deployment. During this April deployment, he claimed to be stationed in Abu Ghraib with Iraqi security forces.[266] Two months later, Biyadh was announced via Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq Facebook pages as a commander of a new subunit of the organization, Kataib al-Zahra. Around the time this group was introduced, it claimed it was deployed with Iraqi SWAT teams to Samarra, where Biyadh reportedly helped dismantle explosive devices.[267] After Biyadh was killed in August 2014, his martyrdom was used to promote other new groups such as Kataib Rua Allah, which was linked to Kataib al-Zahra.[268]

Like Biyadh, Alaa Hilayl was present in Damascus, had reportedly fought near Aleppo, and was photographed with RRF commander Ahmed Hajji Saadi.[269] Although previously promoted as a supporter of Muqtada al-Sadr, he was identified, on his return to Iraq, as a leader of Kataib Malik al-Ashtar, an avowedly pro-Iran organization that pledged loyalty to the Supreme Leader.[270] Two professionally produced songs, with Hilayl himself appearing in one music video, had even praised his exploits.[271]

Muhammad Jassim Tohme, of HHN, was another example of a fighter who had fought in Syria and returned to Iraq. According to Tohme's death notice, he had "participated in resisting the U.S. occupation in Iraq in several battles" and, when back in Iraq from the Syrian jihad, had continued operating as a fighter associated with HHN[272]—which claimed Tohme was dismantling explosive devices north of Baghdad with the Iraqi army when he was killed.[273]

Reinforcing this claim, on June 5, 2014, HHN announced on its official web pages that it had joined Iraqi army forces to "defend the holy city of Samarra."[274] The announcement was followed by a June 7 statement by the Badr Organization threatening retaliation against ISIS if any of the shrines in Samarra were damaged.[275] These claims went hand in hand with those made by other Shiite militia groups that had sent forces to Syria only weeks before. One fighter named in such a release, Ahmed al-Fareej, who was listed as a member of the RRF and LIH and was present at Sayyeda Zainab since 2013, was shown firing mortars in Anbar and Samarra. For their part, LIH and

Liwa Dhulfiqar both named new commanders for activities in Iraq, and the former launched a recruitment effort for Iraq operations. (See appendix 8.)

Also reorienting toward the conflict in Iraq was the Badr Organization's Quwet al-Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, whose patches bear the dome of Sayyeda Zainab with a Kalashnikov to denote their Syria-focused mission. KSS, while increasingly active on the Iraq front, has continued to send fighters to Syria. On July 26, 2014, the group even began a renewed social-media-based recruitment drive for the jihad in both countries.[276] Elements once aligned with LAFA, too, have expanded their branding to include Iraq, with their Iraq activities helping expose various splits within the original network. As for the redeployments to Iraq, they were supported by a comprehensive program and new popular-committee-style militias guided by established Iranian proxy groups.

LAFA groups' presence in Iraq, centered on core fighters from the Syria battle, grew markedly following ISIS's advances in June 2014. Yet LAFA-Syria seemed to distance itself from its Iraqi outgrowth, denying in July any connection to an Iraqi fighter named Sayyed Hajj Hussein (Abu Zainab).[277] Throughout the recruitment effort for Syria, Iran-backed phone recruitment centers regularly used the LAFA name, although whether this was executed with the consent of the group's leaders is unknown.

Cast as LAFA's Iraq wing, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas Tashkil Iraq was announced via Facebook in March 2014 and claimed Sadrist ayatollah Qasim al-Tai as its leader. What appeared to be an extension of LAFA in Syria, LAFA-Iraq morphed into an organization that no longer answered to Abu Ajeeb in Damascus and began recruiting forces within Iraq to fight battles there. Indeed, LAFA-Syria's official Facebook page openly criticized this organization, including through wall posts by media representative "Daniel," who disavowed any connection to the Iraqi wing and said LAFA-Syria "will not allow or forgive those attempting to distort or steal our martyrs' pride."[278]

Abu Ali al-Darraji, introduced earlier in connection with LAFA's founding, also sought to import the LAFA brand to Iraq, establishing what appeared to be his own branch in June 2014.[279] This new group went by the name Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas Khadem al-Sayyeda Zainab (LAFA–Darraji Branch), whose official Facebook page refers to Darraji as "secretary-general," a position officially held in LAFA-Syria by Abu Ajeeb.[280] The LAFA–Darraji Branch has made little mention of Abu Ajeeb nor his Iraqi Shiite fellow travelers still commanding LAFA-Syria. In one Facebook post by the LAFA–Darraji Branch, Ajeeb is referred to as a "brother."[281]

Darraji's unit, consisting of Syria veterans,[282] appears to have engaged in its first Iraqi operations in June 2014 near Tikrit. In mid-August, the branch was reportedly attempting to advance toward the city of Mosul.[283] According to its Facebook page, the group also fought alongside Badr Organization elements in Awja, a town near Tikrit's airport.[284]

During a fight near Baghdad's airport, the LAFA–Darraji Branch had the distinction of receiving an exclusive CNN interview.[285] One of the interviewed fighters, a Syria veteran, had previously served with an Iraqi Shiite militant group that fought U.S. forces during the Iraq war.[286] CNN's Arwa Damon claimed the group was "applying skills they learned from attacking U.S. troops."[287] Most ironic in this context were Darraji's hopes, after the fighting ends, to "[apply] for asylum in the west someday."[288]

Yet another LAFA-type group announced in summer 2014 was QQAFA, commanded by Sheikh Auws al-Khafaji, a Sadrist Movement figure who had visited Shiite forces in Damascus in May. The announcement that Sheikh Abu Kamil al-Lami had attained a leadership role in the group signaled Iran's hand in its creation. Earlier in 2014, Lami, originally an AAH commander, had been involved in operations that included AAH and the Iraqi army in Fallujah.[289] QQAFA was also actively promoted by fighters and pages associated with Liwa Dhulfiqar and the RRF, whereas it went unmentioned in LAFA-Syria online networks.[290]

In August, LAFA-Syria announced the creation of its own Iraq wing[291] with a seasoned commander, Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Darraji, who reportedly led the Sayyeda Zainab– and Iraq-based Association of the Supporters of Imam al-Mahdi (*Rabita Ansar al-Imam al-Mahdi*).[292] He had also served as LAFA-Syria's Iraq representative and recruiter. LAFA-Syria likewise reverted to its messaging mode adopted in early 2013, which increasingly promoted loyalty to Bashar al-Assad and a more generalized and less ideologically specific Shiite Islamic image.[293]

Reflecting the shift toward Iraq, HHN and Kataib Hezbollah both established their own popular committees formed around local recruits. The latter's Saraya al-Difa al-Shabi was one of the first groups to be announced, and it began recruitment efforts two months before the main ISIS advance in June. Established training camps included one facility for HHN in Kumayt, Maysan, where up to a hundred fighters were shown performing basic calisthenics and marching.[294]

Recruitment and deployments have continued. In Samarra, AAH and Kataib Hezbollah are heavily deployed and have taken control of main sec-

tions of the city.[295] And in late August 2014, during the battle of Amerli, Shiite forces, aided by U.S. airpower and Kurdish Peshmerga, played a significant role when they pushed through an ISIS-imposed siege.[296]

7

Policy Recommendations

AS THE UNITED STATES continues its campaign against ISIS forces in Syria while simultaneously opposing Bashar al-Assad and his supporters, the presence of Iran-backed Shiite militias, along with the influence of their Iranian handlers, will keep growing.

Since the conflict in Iraq and Syria has expanded into a full-scale regional war, many Shiite militias are quickly adopting a role as the Iraqi rump state's main fighting force against ISIS and other Sunni elements. The rise to interior minister of the Badr Organization's Mohammed al-Ghabban shows just how doggedly Iran is working, through both armed and democratic methods, to thwart U.S. efforts within Iraq.[297] Through the use of Iran's Iraqi Shiite proxy militias such as the Badr Organization, U.S. efforts to push Baghdad to be more inclusive to Sunnis have been significantly crippled.[298] More specifically, Ghabban's appointment will likely further harm efforts to cultivate a National Guard type of anti-ISIS fighting group among Iraqi Sunnis.[299]

These militias' continued development and deployment, particularly in Iraq and Syria, threaten the United States in another way. Their unchecked proliferation is viewed by Washington's Sunni Arab regional allies as de facto acceptance of Iran's own sectarian regional goals.[300] One of these goals has been the virtual Hezbollahzation of militias now taking up many combat roles against ISIS. By late 2014, around fifty Shiite militias had been announced, either emerging as popular committees or as more dedicated organizations. Many of these groups have been crafted as Iraq-based near duplicates of Hezbollah.[301] Of further concern is how the activities and growth of numerous Shiite militias assist in the hypersectarianization and radicalization of regional conflicts. A number of these organizations were actively engaged in a campaign of sectarian attacks and ethnic cleansings

during the U.S. occupation of Iraq.[302] With the June 2014 ISIS advance, it would appear that many of these nefarious activities, including human rights abuses, are being continued in earnest.[303]

With these developments in mind, the rise of Shiite militias in Syria and Iraq, and their sponsorship by Iran, must be considered in reorienting a U.S. policy to address the entire complicated region. Some realistic, as well as easily integrated and promoted, steps to counter Shiite militias' influence include the following:

- **REFOCUSED ANALYSES.** Iranian proxy organizations should not be viewed as atomized entities. Instead, they should be recognized as subnetworks of a broader IRGC–Qods Force network and part and parcel of a larger regional strategy. This is especially the case for AAH and the Badr Organization. Both have direct links to new and established Shiite armed groups, including designated terrorist organizations such as Kataib Hezbollah. Mapping and potentially classifying these organizations will require creative methods to account for their sharing of members, equipment, ideological goals, and command structures. In particular, if new organizations or front groups are ever designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, their overlapping nature must be addressed. Assessments of these organizations, the threats they pose to U.S. and regional security, and their activities should be intrinsically linked in any future U.S. negotiations with Iran and regional allies.

- **INTERDICTION OF ONLINE RECRUITMENT.** By focusing on high-tech platforms, the United States can potentially disrupt the continuing Internet recruitment techniques run by designated terrorist groups and unregistered militias. The urgency of such an effort is underlined by the high likelihood of additional Western citizens being either recruited by militias or used for fundraising purposes. Denying militias freedom of operation in the social media space could be a cost-effective and productive step toward reducing their general clout. Since social media recruitment is now being expanded to attract fighters throughout the Middle East, South Asia, and the West, the United States must work closely with international partners to counter and monitor these efforts.

- **COUNTERNARRATIVES.** As the United States steps up efforts against ISIS, it should be simultaneously concerned about the proliferation of official and semiofficial narratives being cast by Shiite militias. Many

such narratives are not only anti-U.S. in nature but also blame the United States for ISIS's growth. Since Iraqi Shiites are increasingly backing militias they feel are defending their interests against ISIS, a growth in local receptivity to these themes could have long-term detrimental effects on U.S. policy regarding Iraq's Shiite population and Shiite populations in other states.

- **REAFFIRM COMMITMENTS.** The United States must reaffirm its commitment to a multisectarian Iraq. Opposing efforts to promote leaders from highly sectarian Shiite-militia-cum-political-parties, especially Iranian proxy groups, will help achieve these ends. Furthermore, as Washington and its partners increase their support to the moderate Syrian opposition, they will quickly see that the range of extremist foes expands beyond ISIS and JN. Indeed, Shiite militant groups will also counter U.S. strategy for Syria and Iraq, a reality that should be factored in to any support packages outlined for vetted rebel groups.

Shiite militias, their fronts, and associated political groups have thus far proven to be effective agents in projecting Iranian ideology and power throughout the region. It is only a matter of time before their focus shifts from dealing with nonstate Sunni foes in Syria and Iraq to possibly disrupting U.S. or regional allies' interests in the Middle East and globally.

8

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PHILLIP SMYTH, a researcher at the University of Maryland, publishes the blog *Hizballah Cavalcade*, which focuses on Shiite Islamist militarism in the Middle East. Other recent publications include the following:

- "Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS," *PolicyWatch* 2352, Washington Institute, January 5, 2015.
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Indeed, in a wider political sense, the real victor of the Syrian war and in Iraq has been Iran, a triumph for which the Islamic Republic has its militia forces to thank.

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