

Appendix 6

Weapons and Equipment Tied to Shiite Militias

Weapons and equipment linked to Shiite militias have ranged from sophisticated to basic. Following is a rough inventory:

- **Heavier weapons** have included artillery pieces, rockets, light and heavy mortars, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). One of the main heavier weapons systems has been the “Burkan” improvised rocket-assisted mortar (IRAM). This rocket appears to have its roots in a type of IRAM supplied to Kataib Hezbollah during the Iraq war. The group filmed attacks against American bases using a device its members named the “Ashtar” rocket.¹ Other groups observed with this system have included Lebanese Hezbollah, KSS, AAH, and entities such as the Syrian National Socialist Party and National Defense Forces. Coming in various sizes, the Burkan IRAM system has often been mounted to light vehicles or fired from stationary rails.² Larger truck-mounted IRAMs have also seen use in both Syria and Iraq.
- **Improvised weapons systems** have included heavier weapons, such as smaller versions of the Burkan IRAM system mounted to pickup trucks, with such vehicles often modified to give them uparmored capability. The Burkan has also been used as a propaganda tool. In attacks filmed by Shiite fighters, the rocket was shown shelling rebel positions.³ In a spring 2014 release, LAAG was shown helping prepare and launch a larger Burkan rocket.⁴ AAH has also featured the rocket in propaganda materials for both the Syrian and Iraqi fronts.⁵ Similarly, in a video, LAFA combatants were shown equipping pickup and other light trucks with add-on armor and the group’s markings. Fighters from the RRF have likewise been photographed with modified armored vehicles. “Off road” operations, meanwhile, have been facilitated by Hezbollah and the Badr Organization with vehicles as primitive as all-terrain vehicles and dirt bikes. All such examples show that, while Syrian rebels have received extensive press coverage for their improvised systems, the Shiite militias too have enlisted such weapons.
- **Armored vehicles** such as the ZSU-23-4 (a.k.a. Shilka), originally designed as an anti-aircraft platform, have been used as armored support during infantry operations. This vehicle was widely used by Hezbollah fighters operating in al-Qusayr and Qalamoun against rebel forces.⁶ It was also featured supporting members of the Badr Organization. Fighters from HHN were shown manning a modified T-55 tank. The adoption of armored vehicles helps clarify a less asymmetric role for Shiite fighting groups, while further demonstrating the development of such organizations as regular-style fighting units. In Iraq, versions of the Iranian produced Safir vehicle have been in use with Shiite militias such as Badr, AAH, HHN Kataeb Hezbollah, the LAFA-Darraj Wing (using Badr’s vehicles), and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The vehicle often features mounted rockets or recoilless rifles.⁷
- **Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)** have been reported as being used by groups such as Hezbollah against Syrian rebels. In one case, Hezbollah was said to have tracked a car bomb driven by a Sunni jihadist.⁸ The aircraft were first claimed to have been in use between 2012 and early 2013.⁹ UAVs piloted by pro-Assad forces include a number of varieties made by Iran. However, it has been difficult to confirm whether these UAVs have been piloted by a Shiite militia or the pro-Assad forces.
- **Small arms** used by Shiite militias have often reflected Iranian or Syrian government influence. When LAFA was still in its early stages, the group’s fighters, including commanders (e.g., Fadhel Subhi a.k.a. Abu Hajar), were regularly featured using the 7.62 x 51mm Steyr SSG 69 bolt-action rifle. The SSG 69 rifle was initially bought and deployed as a sniper rifle by the Syrian government. Additionally, fighters belonging to groups

such as LAFA, LIH, and Liwa Dhulfiqar were shown from late 2012 to mid-2013 using FAL-type 7.62 x 51mm rifles. In July 2012, rebel forces were reported to possess “thousands” of these types of rifles.¹⁰ It is possible that some weapons captured by pro-regime forces were later repurposed and given to developing Shiite militias in their earlier stages of development. Other rifles used by Iran-backed Shiite elements have been mainly of the Kalashnikov type. In photos released by such organizations, many of these rifles appear to be new. SVD-style 7.62x54mm sniper rifles, produced in Russia, have constituted another heavily promoted small-arms system.

- Many other types of small arms have been observed in Shiite elements, including steady increases in newer Iran-produced weaponry. These weapons systems include the HS.50 sniper rifle, S-5.56 Sayyad, and possibly copies of the Russian SVD rifles. While the S-5.56 has found a place among IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah units in Syria, the HS.50 has been shown in the hands of numerous Shia militia organizations.¹¹ The Iranian role in producing and distributing such weapons, which often copy other designs, boosts the image of the Islamic Republic’s small-arms manufacturing capacity and shows that Iran is equipping many of its proxy forces.

One of the most vastly promoted of these designs was the Iranian copy of the 12.7x99mm Austrian Steyr HS.50 anti-material sniper rifle. Over the past decade, Iran’s version, known as the AM50, has likely been shipped to many organizations with strong links to the IRGC, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah.¹² As early as spring 2013, these rifles increasingly appeared on social media and official channels belonging to the militias and their backers. Fighters from the Badr Organization, Hezbollah, HHN, and KSS have all been shown holding the rifle. A fighter reportedly from Sierra Leone and serving with Shiite militiamen in Syria was also shown posing with the weapon.¹³

Another such weapon of Iranian origin apparently sent to Shiite proxies in Syria is the S-5.56 Sayyad. The weapon is actually a copy of the Chinese-produced Norinco CQ rifle, which itself is a copy of the U.S.-produced M16s. Mahmoud Reza Bayzesh, an IRGC fighter killed in Qalamoun, was pictured with the rifle.¹⁴ Members of Lebanese Hezbollah, including the slain commander Wissam Mohsen Sharif al-Diyan, were also photographed with the rifle.¹⁵ Throughout 2014, the Sayyad was featured in a number of posts featuring fallen Shiite fighters, primarily from Hezbollah. Even photographs of Hassan Nasrallah’s nephew Hamza Ali Yasin, who was killed in Syria on July 25, 2014, featured the rifle in his “martyrdom” photos and in pictures released of him after his death.¹⁶ While the rifle was likely used less often than promoted, its appearance in officially released “martyrdom” images is possibly aimed at the goals noted earlier: promoting Iran’s small-arms sector and showcasing Iran’s direct supply of its proxies.

- Hezbollah’s Ali Shabib Mahmoud (a.k.a. Abu Turab), a commander at Sayyeda Zainab, and Hezbollah fighter Ahmed Ali Nasser were both featured using AKSU-74-type carbines, a shortened version of the AK-74.¹⁷ Jawad al-Talibawi, a commander in Iraq’s AAH, and other fallen AAH members have also been pictured using the weapon in Syria.¹⁸ The increased inclusion of the weapon could signify broader small-arms cooperation between Iran, its proxies, and Russia.
- **Fatigues** have ranged from digital camouflage, as spotted on some Hezbollah fighters, to more common, older patterns, such as those modeled on the U.S. M81 woodland pattern.

¹ “Qasaf qa’ida Amrikiyya busawarikh al-Ashtar,” YouTube video, 3:16, posted by Omar Almaleki, February 17, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNtcZkUglqw>; and “Kataib Hezbollah anashuda ‘Ashtar Ashtar,’” YouTube video, posted by nasserk nasser, 2:35, March 7, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wXLj4dWxWs>. The second clip actually features a song Kataib Hezbollah made for the rocket.

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- ² See Phillip Smyth, "What Is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (Lafa)? Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' through Their Social Media Presence," *Jihadology* (blog), May 15, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence/>. On this same page, see the video "Lafa Technical Fires a Rocket."
- ³ "Hizballah yadrab busawarikh al-Burkan," YouTube video, 0:59, posted by Doctora rima Rima, December 9, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5Lnk5Gh1as>.
- ⁴ "La midfa'ya w la baramiil, Burkan huw al-hul," YouTube video, 4:23, posted by Military Zone hamdy al assad, May 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALUJpK5I25o>.
- ⁵ "Jdiid | Fideo kaliib anashuda (muwqafak nar) al-munshid Mahdi al-'Abboudi," YouTube video, 4:01, July 30, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGEERJRpyhw>. The propaganda song was initially played on AAH's al-Ahad TV in early July 2014, as observed by the author.
- ⁶ "Rebels Say Foiled Hezbollah Attacks in Homs," *NOW Lebanon*, April 22, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nownews/hezbollah-attempt-to-storm-homs-suburbs-foiled-by-rebels>.
- ⁷ See <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Images/Books/Smyth/Combined/A6-7abc.jpg> for images.
- ⁸ Roi Kais, "Hezbollah expanding drone use to Syria and Lebanon," YNet News, January 30, 2014 <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4482951,00.html>.
- ⁹ Joby Warrick "Russian, Iranian technology is boosting Assad's assault on Syrian," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-iranian-technology-is-boosting-assads-assault-on-syrian-rebels/2013/06/01/aefad718-ca26-11e2-9f1a-1a7cdee20287_story.html. In 2012, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham claimed to capture a number of Ababil-3 UAVs. See: "Captured Iranian made Ababil UAV in Aleppo", 2:37, posted by curse thee, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3n7Z4QQt9o>.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Saul and Mariam Karouny, "Insight— Syria Rebels Get Light Arms, Heavy Weapons Elusive," *Reuters*, July 13, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/13/syria-arms-rebels-idUSL2E8IB63H20120713>.
- ¹¹ Phillip Smyth, "Khamenei's Cannon: .50 Caliber Anti-Material Rifles & Shia Fighters in Syria," *Jihadology* (blog), December 24, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/24/hizballah-cavalcade-khameneis-cannon-50-caliber-anti-material-rifles-shia-fighters-in-syria/>.
- ¹² Yuri Lyamin with Michael Smallwood, "Iranian AM50 and Russian ORSIS T-5000 Rifles in Iraq," *The Hoplite*, Armament Research Services, May 29, 2014, <http://www.armamentresearch.com/iranian-am50-and-russian-orsis-t-5000-rifles-in-iraq/>.
- ¹³ Phillip Smyth, "Khamenei's Cannon: .50 Caliber Anti-Material Rifles & Shia Fighters in Syria," *Jihadology* (blog), December 24, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/24/hizballah-cavalcade-khameneis-cannon-50-caliber-anti-material-rifles-shia-fighters-in-syria/>.
- ¹⁴ See Habibtm.net, <http://habibtm.net/news.php?item.637>.
- ¹⁵ See <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Images/Books/Smyth/Combined/A6-15abc.jpg> for photos (a), (b), and (c).
- ¹⁶ See <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Images/Books/Smyth/Combined/A6-16abc.jpg> for photos (a), (b), and (c).
- ¹⁷ See SouthLebanon.org, <http://www.southlebanon.org/archives/68659>; see also YouTube video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDLXK6kF1fc>, 1:22, January 28, 2014 (for Ali Shabib al-Mahmoud), and <http://janoubia.com/163356> (for Ahmed Ali Nasser).
- ¹⁸ See <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Images/Books/Smyth/A6-18.jpg> for photo. See also "Sahaq juradhan Da'ish al-Wahhabi 'Ala yad al-Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq...Fi Maqdama al-muqawama al-qa'id al-Hajj Jawad al-Tarabawi," YouTube video, 1:26, Al-A'alam al-Karar al-Shi'i, August 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GR9XQRhhH7o>.