

Hundreds of Iran-Backed Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun Terrorists Warehoused at Iraqi Government Bases

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Jan 29, 2025

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

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Since the fall of the Assad regime, Baghdad has provided shelter and material support to members of two U.S.-designated Afghan and Pakistani groups run by the Iranian military.

When the Assad regime imploded in December, one of many unanswered questions was what would happen to the large number of Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria who are controlled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and brigaded under the militias [Liwa Fatemiyoun \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-fatemiyoun-division-life-through-eyes-militia-member\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-fatemiyoun-division-life-through-eyes-militia-member) and [Liwa Zainabiyoun \(https://jamestown.org/program/the-zainabiyoun-brigade-a-pakistani-shiite-militia-amid-the-syrian-conflict/\)](https://jamestown.org/program/the-zainabiyoun-brigade-a-pakistani-shiite-militia-amid-the-syrian-conflict/). Both militias are U.S.-designated (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm590>) terrorist organizations; Zainabiyoun is also [banned \(https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-bans-iran-backed-shiite-group-fighting-in-syria-7566593.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-bans-iran-backed-shiite-group-fighting-in-syria-7566593.html) in Pakistan, where it recruits its fighters.

In December, some Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun personnel entered Iraq via al-Qaim. This area is controlled by Qasim Muslih, the commander of [Liwa al-Tafuf \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/18615\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/18615), the 13th Brigade of the Iraqi government-funded Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). As the head of PMF units based in Anbar province, Muslih takes orders from the [Jazira Operations Command \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/drones-kataib-hezbollahs-jazira-command\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/drones-kataib-hezbollahs-jazira-command), run by the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization [Kataib Hezbollah \(KH\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/16641\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/16641). Initially, the PMF and KH commands hosted these Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun fighters inside complexes in al-Qaim that have historically been used as transshipment hubs for Iranian ballistic missiles and other materiel en route to Syria and Lebanon.

Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun personnel are also [reportedly present \(https://www.aremnews.com/news/arab-world/o75x06a\)](https://www.aremnews.com/news/arab-world/o75x06a) at Camp Ashraf (aka the Martyr Abu Munthadher al-Muhammadawi Camp) in Diyala province. Formally under



Figure 1: Known locations at which Fatemiyoun and

the Iraqi government's control, this PMF base is actually run by the Iran-formed [Badr Organization \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/17003\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/node/17003) and was formerly used by Saddam Hussein to house Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK). Israel [reportedly \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-jets-appear-to-have-struck-iraq-for-the-first-time-since-1981-11564700841\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/israeli-jets-appear-to-have-struck-iraq-for-the-first-time-since-1981-11564700841) bombed Ashraf in 2019 due to the presence of Iranian missile and drone systems there.

Zainabiyoun terrorists were hosted by Iraq's government, in Anbar and Diyala provinces. Baghdad is shown for context.

Who Are These Groups?

Liwa Fatemiyoun consists of mainly Hazara Shia fighters recruited from the large pool of Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran. These [fighters \(https://jamestown.org/program/the-shia-fatemiyoun-brigade-irans-prospective-proxy-militia-in-afghanistan/\)](https://jamestown.org/program/the-shia-fatemiyoun-brigade-irans-prospective-proxy-militia-in-afghanistan/) were initially armed, trained, and funded by the [IRGC-Qods Force \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/evolution-irans-gods-force-1979\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/evolution-irans-gods-force-1979), then deployed in 2013 to support the Assad regime at the beginning of Syria's long uprising. Fatemiyoun also [oversaw \(https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Fatimiyoun-who-are-the-Afghan-fighters-killed-in-U-S-strikes-in-Iranian-backed-sites-in-Syria\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Fatimiyoun-who-are-the-Afghan-fighters-killed-in-U-S-strikes-in-Iranian-backed-sites-in-Syria) critical supply chain routes for weapons, drones, missile parts, and other technology flowing from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The group was [estimated \(https://www.voanews.com/a/what-happened-to-iranian-proxies-in-syria-/7901149.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/what-happened-to-iranian-proxies-in-syria-/7901149.html) to have around 5,000-10,000 fighters in Syria at the time of Assad's fall.

Liwa Zainabiyoun is composed of Pakistani Shia fighters [organized \(https://www.arabnews.com/node/1801476/amp\)](https://www.arabnews.com/node/1801476/amp) to protect the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in central Damascus and support the Assad regime's operations in Latakia, Aleppo, and Damascus. The group is currently estimated to have around 2,500-4,000 fighters.

Iraq's Government Providing Material Support to Terrorists?

The U.S. government should ask why Iraq—a U.S. economic partner and substantial aid recipient—is providing terrorist groups with housing and other material support, noting that such actions will require the imposition of U.S. sanctions. Washington should also ask who approved the entry of these fighters into Iraq and permitted them to remain there. Constitutionally, only the prime minister as commander-in-chief of the armed forces has the legitimate authority to give consent for such actions (meaning, [inter alia \(https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/9_6_2001.pdf\)](https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/commentaries/9_6_2001.pdf), that the consent must be freely given and actually expressed). In this case, either Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani gave terrorists permission to shelter in Iraq, or these steps were taken without his approval—hardly a better scenario since it would underline how little control he has over Iraq's security environment and the cross-border movements of Iran-backed militias and their allies. Washington should bluntly ask: which is it?

If Baghdad has formally decided to host Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun, then their presence either violates the Iraqi constitutional prohibition against nonstate militias, or it represents the government's consent to Iran basing its “troops” on Iraqi soil. Again, Washington should ask which of these conclusions is correct.



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