

Iran May Double Down on Foreign Militias After Its 'Victory' Against the Islamic State

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Brief Analysis

The Islamic Republic's self-declared triumphs in Syria and Iraq could embolden it to expand the role of its "International Basij" and build more-formidable proxies in Afghanistan, Yemen, and other locales.

On November 21, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), [sent a letter \(http://fa.alkawthartv.com/news/104817\)](http://fa.alkawthartv.com/news/104817) to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in which he declared victory over the Islamic State (IS) "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq. In his reply, Khamenei [called \(https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/08/30/1580495/%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4\)](https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/08/30/1580495/%D9%BE%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4) on all "Mojahed" forces (i.e., fighters in the name of God) to maintain readiness for meeting future regional challenges. In that vein, recent statements by IRGC chief Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari and other commanders [have emphasized \(https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/09/01/1581551/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF\)](https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/09/01/1581551/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%84-%D9%86%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF) the "Basij of the Islamic World" (*Basij-e Jahan-e Islam*, or BJI) as an emerging model for international Shia mobilization under Soleimani's leadership. Armed forces chief of

staff Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri believes

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/09/02/1581802/%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%88%DA%AF%DB%8C%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2-%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4>

a combination of this model and Iran's expanded military capacities can unite allied countries to prevent an IS resurgence, especially in Afghanistan

<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13960902000221>) and parts of Pakistan, which Iranian commanders see as future flashpoints with the group. In addition to continuing the momentum against IS, this expanding "resistance front" will be asked to soldier on "until the destruction of Israel and expulsion of the last American service member from the region," according to a November 24 statement

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/09/03/1582910/%D8%B1%DA%98%DB%8C%D9%85-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA%DA%A9%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%86%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF>) by acting general staff chairman Brig. Gen. Masoud Jazayeri.

FATEHIN BRIGADE LEADING THE CHARGE

Similar views have been expressed by Col. Sayyed-Mahmoud Hashemi, head of the Fatehin (Conquerors) Brigade, the principal Iranian-manned fighting force in Syria (as distinct from the many Iranian-supported militia units composed of foreign fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries). Fatehin is a little-known, semi-volunteer Basij special unit from the IRGC's Muhammad-Rasul-Allah Corps. Although it is closely associated with the Qods Force's advise-and-assist mission in Syria, it is mainly tasked with infantry fighting. It was originally formed in Tehran following the 2009 post-election uprising and tasked with keeping an eye on the citizenry at home, but the scope of its mission has been expanding ever since.

Fatehin members undergo more rigorous training than regular Basij militia. Their advisors also train foreign fighters (<http://defapress.ir/fa/news/110799/%D9%87%D9%85%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%B3%D9%84%DB%8C%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%B3%D8%AA%DB%8C%D9%85-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AD%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%DB%8C%DA%98%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%82%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>) recruited for the BJI and are apparently involved in assisting Houthi rebels in Yemen. As General Jafari explained on November 26 (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13960905000271>), "The Basij is a model for resistance by the people of the region such as Hezbollah in Lebanon,...the vast army of al-Hashd al-Shabi in Iraq, as well as in Yemen and other countries...Their know-how has already been transferred to [the Yemenis]."

APPLYING THE IRAQI MODEL TO AFGHANISTAN?

Now that Iranian commanders may be focusing on Afghanistan and Pakistan as the next Sunni jihadist hotbeds, they may decide to propagate the Fatehin model by seeking a "home front" role for their Afghan and Pakistani proxy brigades (Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun respectively). At some point these brigades will begin withdrawing from Syria and returning to their home countries. In Liwa Fatemiyoun's case, Tehran may push

Afghanistan to grant them formal status similar to al-Hashd al-Shabi in Iraq (aka the Popular Mobilization Forces), and/or offer to help form a new Iranian-trained paramilitary organization. If these Iranian links do in fact materialize, they would surely become a matter of contention between Kabul and the U.S.-led coalition.

In going down that path, Iran would probably seek to avoid the experience of the 1990s, when it failed to assert control over Afghan Shia parties and their rival "Revolutionary Guard" and Nasr militias. This time around, it may decide to install a united Hezbollah-style Shia militant party backed by battle-hardened Afghan veterans from the Syria war.

In other countries, such armed militias often operate in parallel to or even replace military and policing structures, gradually expanding their political influence and legitimacy thanks in part to foreign supporters. They are particularly successful in countries where national forces lack the ability or will to fight effectively; this allows them to increase their popularity via battlefield victories against hostile nonstate actors. Afghanistan has a history of private militias such as Abdul Rashid Dostum's, yet none of them has achieved Hezbollah's level of organization or been granted robust financial, training, and ideological support from Tehran. If Iran decides to lend such support after the Syria war, its well-trained, well-equipped proxies could gain substantial influence in Afghanistan in the long term once NATO forces withdraw.

On the social level, much of Afghanistan's sizable Hazara Shia population feels undermined by the central government and holds strong familial and ideological ties with Iran. The country is also home to half a dozen Shia political parties, each of which could establish paramilitary wings with Iranian encouragement. Parties such as Hizb-e Wahdat-e Islami have a history of Iranian influence, so Tehran has ample room to promote pan-Shia political Islamism among them.

CEMENTING ITS ROLE IN SYRIA

Recent comments by General Jafari indicated that Iran is **pressuring (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13960902000221>)** the Syrian regime to grant official status to the National Defense Forces (NDF), the country's main IRGC-created militia. On November 23, he stated, "It is up to the Syrian government to officialize the NDF or not, and we cannot force them to do so. In Iraq, they officialized al-Hashd al-Shabi and they're very grateful for that...Now the Syrian government and parliament must sign into law and officialize the Syrian version of al-Hashd al-Shabi."

If the NDF is formalized and becomes the main beneficiary of postwar Iranian military aid to Syria, Tehran would hold major leverage over how Damascus uses some of its most capable armed forces. For example, Iran could demand that Syria deploy NDF units near the Golan Heights in order to threaten Israel. This threat could be magnified if they coordinate with Hezbollah, which has expressed a readiness to withdraw from Iraq and Syria -- after which it will likely resume its faceoff with Israel.

POTENTIAL EXPANSION IN YEMEN

Iran is also presumably considering how to increase its assistance to Yemen's Houthis, especially in light of their recent consolidation of power and increased tensions with their mutual enemy Saudi Arabia (e.g., in a November 23 interview with the *New York Times*, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman called Khamenei "the new Hitler"). In contrast to Syria and Iraq, however, Tehran lacks a reliable logistical route for sending men and supplies to Yemen. As a result, there is little evidence that it has been able to unfold its BJI model on a large scale there.

To be sure, Saudi authorities complain that Hezbollah and Iranian personnel have infiltrated Yemen and furnished missile know-how to Houthi forces, and **recent launch activities (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/possible-iranian-links-to-the-claimed-houthi-missile-launch-against-the-uae>)** may support such claims. Whatever the case, Tehran has so far refrained from confirming any of the reports of Iranian casualties in

Yemen, so the degree of its direct on-the-ground involvement is unclear.

CONCLUSION

The slew of recent IRGC statements about an emerging regional Shia army suggest a surplus of geopolitical confidence. While it remains to be seen how or when this rhetoric will be translated into real action, the United States should be prepared to curb any Iranian militia expansion in the region. For now, this means keeping a watchful eye on the BJI and liaising with regional allies as necessary to limit its activities, including recruitment. The BJI is Iranian-led but increasingly multinational in composition, so any affiliate organization could further Tehran's anti-American interests in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and other strategically important countries even without a sizable Iranian presence on the ground.

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