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Non-Iranian Shiites Paying the Price in Aleppo

by [Ali Alfoneh](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ali Alfoneh](#)

Ali Alfoneh is a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute.



Brief Analysis

The costly siege has spurred Iran to withdraw or relocate certain IRGC units, but this is unlikely to hurt the Assad coalition's strategy in Aleppo so long as Hezbollah and other Shiite militias remain willing to fight there.

The besieged city of Aleppo has come to symbolize the sufferings of a Syrian civilian population caught between competing rebel forces on one side and the regime and its Shiite allies on the other. Yet the long campaign has also taken a heavy toll on the besiegers, who include personnel from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Shiite militias.

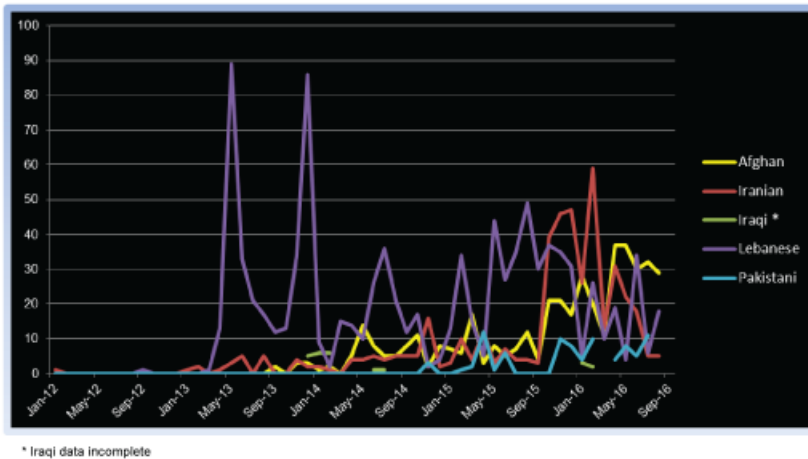
Looking at the numbers for Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, Lebanese, and Pakistani nationals killed in combat since January 2012, one finds significant losses in the suburbs of Aleppo, particularly since the Russian intervention began in September 2015. Yet while some of those fatalities fit press reports of recent battles in Aleppo, other battles are not reflected in the data. Closer investigation of these discrepancies provides valuable insights into the division of labor among Shiite coalition forces, and into Tehran's tactical considerations during the siege of Aleppo. Breaking the losses down by nationality indicates Iran has gradually established a burden-sharing arrangement with Shiite militias and reduced the loss of its own nationals in Aleppo.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

According to official death notices and press reports on funeral services held in Iran and Lebanon, a total of 1,987 Shiite fighters (including Iranian military personnel) were killed in combat in Syria between January 19, 2012,

and August 29, 2016.

Fig. 1: SHIITE COMBAT FATALITIES IN SYRIA, JAN 2012–AUG 2016



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Place of death was announced for only 408 of these fighters, with great variations depending on nationality. While location was reported for more than half of the Iranian fatalities, the other groups -- the Afghan Fatemiyoun Division, Iraqi militias, Hezbollah, and the Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade -- remain extremely secretive about where their fighters have died (note that the author is still compiling information on fallen Iraqi fighters, so this data remains incomplete here and in the charts).

Fig. 2: LOCATION OF SHIITE COMBAT FATALITIES, JAN 2012–AUG 2016

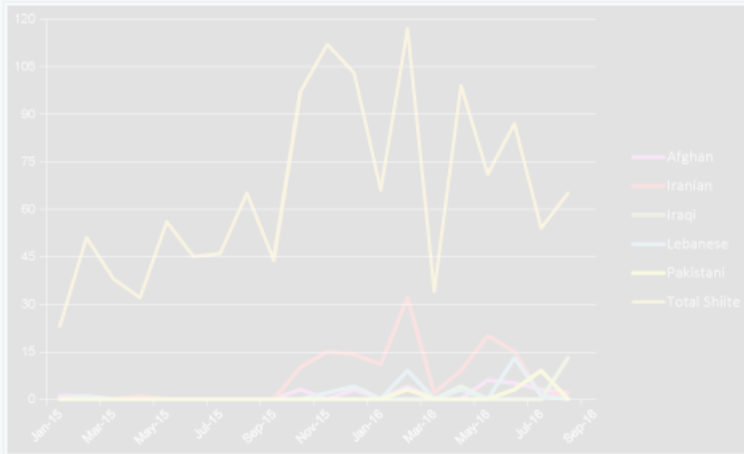
	AFGHAN	IRANIAN	IRAQI	LEBANESE	PAKISTANI	TOTAL
HASAKA	0	1	0	0	0	1
ALEPPO	29	133	18	34	15	229
DAMASCUS COUNTRYSIDE	2	31	2	58	0	93
DERAA	5	9	0	0	0	14
HAMA	0	3	0	11	0	14
HOMS	3	4	0	18	0	25
IDLIB	0	1	0	11	0	12
LATAKIA	0	3	7	0	0	10
QUNEITRA	0	2	0	5	0	7
SYRIA-LEBANON BORDER	0	0	0	3	0	3
NOT KNOWN	390	251	43	825	70	1,579
TOTAL	429	438	70	965	85	1,987

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This secrecy may stem in part from military considerations, but religious factors also play a role. After all, defending the Sayyeda Zainab shrine in the suburbs of Damascus is still the main legitimizing factor behind the presence of foreign Shiite forces in Syria, so any operations they conduct beyond that area may lack religious legitimacy.

Among the 408 fatalities whose place of death has been announced, 229 were reportedly killed in the suburbs of Aleppo. Many of the Shiite personnel killed since October 2015 were probably slain in the Aleppo area as well, even if that information has not been publicly confirmed. This conclusion seems warranted because the Aleppo casualties that have been announced reached their peak at the same time as total Shiite losses in Syria.

Fig. 3: ALEPPO FATALITIES BY NATIONALITY VS. TOTAL SHIITE FATALITIES IN SYRIA



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Moreover, a comparison of fatalities since October with battles reported by the international press shows mixed results. While some fatality peaks fit the dates of those skirmishes, other battles seemingly resulted in no Shiite fatalities or much-delayed death announcements.

The first record of a Shiite combat fatality in Aleppo was the December 19, 2013, death of Hezbollah fighter Ali Mousa Kourani, which coincided with the Syrian army's Operation Canopus Star. Hezbollah suffered as many as 86 fatalities that month, but place of death was not indicated for most of them, and when it was, the location reported was the suburbs of Damascus or Qalamoun, not Aleppo.

In contrast, the regime's February 2016 offensive to capture the Shiite towns of Nubl and Zahra in Aleppo governorate is reflected in the data: 4 Afghans, 32 Iranians, 9 Lebanese, and 3 Pakistanis were registered as killed in Aleppo that month. Similarly, the May debacle at Khan Touman, another Aleppo locale, claimed the lives of at least 3 Afghans, 22 Iranians, and 10 Lebanese.

One cannot overestimate the impact of the Khan Touman losses on the Iranian public. The majority of the Iranians killed in that battle were natives of Mazandaran province in northern Iran and served in the IRGC's 25th Karbala Division. The losses provoked an outcry back home, spurring the IRGC to do something it had not previously done during the war -- officially announce the transfer of all surviving members of the unit back to Iran, including twenty-one wounded. Meanwhile, on June 24, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered a major speech in which he pledged to deploy more fighters to Syria.

Following Khan Touman, the number of Shiite coalition fatalities seemed to fluctuate. The late July rebel counteroffensive to break the siege of Aleppo resulted in the deaths of 3 Afghan Shiites, 1 Iranian, 1 Lebanese, and 9 Iraqis. And in August, 2 Iranians, 2 Afghans, and 13 Hezbollah fighters were killed in the area.

While such fluctuations could stem from multiple factors, Tehran may have initially anticipated the imminent collapse of rebel strongholds in Aleppo and transferred various frontline positions to Bashar al-Assad's forces so that the regime could take credit for "liberating" the area. Yet when the rebels did not capitulate as expected, Tehran had no choice but to allocate more Hezbollah fighters to continue the siege. For example, on August 27, al-Alam television broadcast footage allegedly showing the Syrian Republican Guard, the Syrian Armed Forces, and Hezbollah fighters in a major push to capture Aleppo Technical College. Despite the increase in military operations, however, Tehran has managed to keep most Iranian personnel from harm's way recently.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of Tehran's tactical considerations this summer, its overall strategy for Syria and its resolve to help the Assad regime conquer all of Aleppo remain unchanged. A constant stream of non-Iranian Shiite fighters is essential to these goals, since it reduces the loss of Iranian nationals in what has become a costly siege. As for whether Tehran's proxies are still willing to pay the price of the Islamic Republic's regional activism, some -- such as Hezbollah and Iraqi militiamen -- will likely continue to do so for religious, ideological, or political reasons. Others, such as the growing number of Afghan fighters, do so in return for **promises of jobs and citizenship**; in other words, as long as there are desperate Shiite Afghans, there will be Afghan volunteers for Syria.

Ali Alfoneh is the author of Iran Unveiled: How the Revolutionary Guards Is Turning Theocracy into Military Dictatorship (AEI Press, 2013). ❖



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