

Iran's Iraqi Shiite Proxies Increase Their Deployment to Syria

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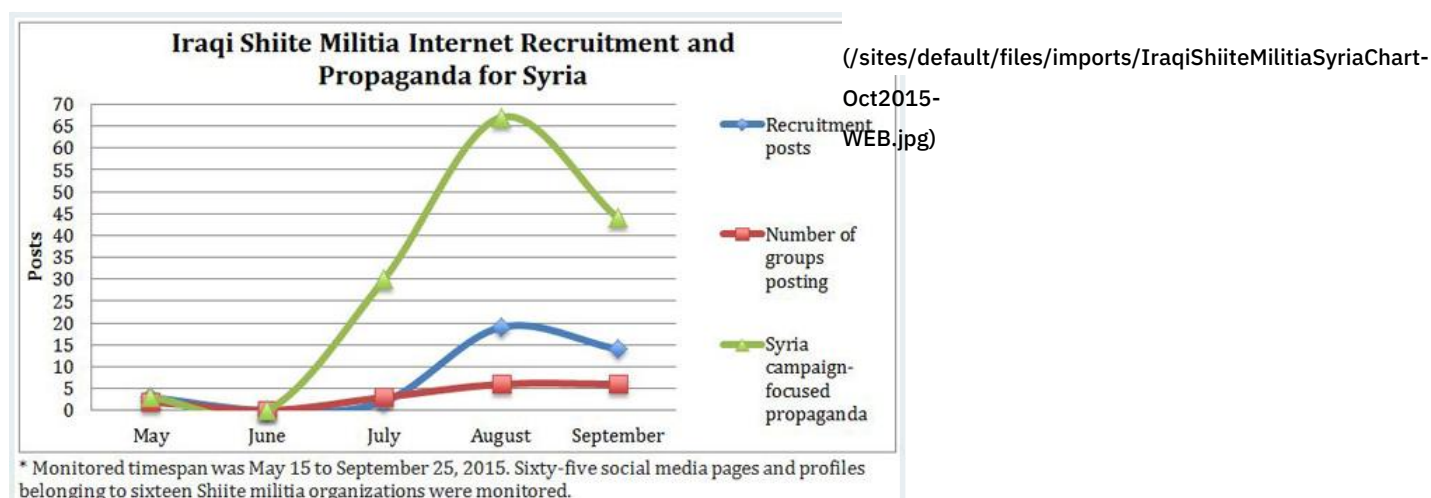
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Brief Analysis

Recent online activities show that various Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militias have greatly expanded their recruitment efforts in support of the Assad regime, including numerous reports of significant battlefield action.

On September 21, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that forces under the command of Iran, Russia, and Bashar al-Assad were coordinating efforts to secure the Syrian regime. As Moscow sends advanced aircraft, armored vehicles, and more, Iran's Iraqi Shiite proxies have simultaneously stepped up their recruitment and deployment for the Syria war. Since July, their Syria-focused online campaigns have jumped significantly (see chart), morphing from infrequent mentions in late 2014/early 2015 to a full-fledged recruitment program involving a number of newer Iranian-backed groups. These Shiite fighters are now spread across Syria, primarily in the western part of the country, launching operations from the suburbs of Damascus to Idlib.



TWO MAIN MILITIAS IN THE LIMELIGHT

Following the June 2014 seizure of Mosul and much of northern Iraq by the so-called Islamic State/ISIS, a group called Kataib al-Imam Ali (KIA) announced its creation (for more on this militia, see [PolicyWatch 2352, "Kataib al-Imam Ali: Portrait of an Iraqi Shiite Militant Group Fighting ISIS"](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kataib-al-imam-ali-portrait-of-an-iraqi-shiite-militant-group-fighting-isis>)). Formed by Iranian-controlled splinter elements from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi

Army, KIA is probably best known for its fierce battlefield reputation and particularly gory videos featuring severed heads and men being cooked above open flames.

When compared to other organizations, KIA's Syria-focused recruitment and propaganda campaign has been the largest. Using messages issued via its offices, billboards, and social media, the group has actively recruited new members, especially around Najaf, Iraq. These efforts began with online imagery connecting its fighters with Sayyeda Zainab, an important Shiite shrine near Damascus. Other posts have announced that Jaafar al-Bindawi, the militia's former head of training and logistics, would be leading the deployment in Syria, while Ali Nizam would serve as the new logistical director for Syrian affairs.

While this effort marks the group's first publicized deployments to Syria, KIA is no newcomer to the war. Prior to its formal creation, and with Iranian assistance, elements of the militia were very active in Syria beginning in 2013. Alaa Hilayl, one of the group's heavily glorified "martyrs" and leader of its submilitia Kataib Malik al-Ashtar, was one of the first Shiite commanders to publicly announce combat operations in the Aleppo area in spring 2013.

Meanwhile, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN, a.k.a. "The Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding," or simply Harakat al-Nujaba) has been the other main Iraqi Shiite player in Syria recruitment, and its background is similar to KIA's. HHN emerged from Iranian-controlled Sadrist splinter group Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) in 2013 and is led by that group's cofounder, Sheikh Akram Kaabi. The militia was an early provider of fighters to Syria and one of the first Iraqi Shiite forces to announce its involvement in battles in the Aleppo area. Initially, HHN had three submilitias operating in Syria, but these units have received less attention of late.

Demonstrating the interconnected nature of KIA and HHN, both groups posted images of KIA secretary-general Shebl al-Zaidi and HHN's Kaabi going over maps and targets in late July. The connection was further emphasized following the September 19 death of HHN's Aleppo commander Alaa al-Musawi -- both groups commemorated him as a "martyr" who had fallen during the "defense of sacred sites" in Syria.

SHIITE MILITIAS ON THE GROUND

Beginning in early July, an increase in HHN activity in Idlib was declared on media outlets associated with the group. In a briefly publicized inspection tour, Kaabi visited HHN fighters in Idlib, and the group claimed these units were aiming to eventually retake Jisr al-Shughour, a city seized by elements belonging to the al-Qaeda-linked group Jaish al-Fatah in April. The July reports helped establish HHN as a leading Iranian-backed Shiite militia operating in northern Syria, a trend that continued into September.

By late July, increasing claims on social media accounts belonging to members of Kataib al-Imam Ali indicated that the group had sent a number of experienced fighters and new recruits to Syria. On July 31, KIA announced that it had achieved "great victories" there, and while the locations of these "victories" were withheld, imagery later emerged showing elements of the group in the Damascus area.

Moreover, beginning on August 26, broadcasts by HHN's Nujaba television network claimed that the group's fighters were being heavily utilized in the Aleppo area, Hama, and the Alawite heartland near Latakia. One day later, HHN announced the deaths of five members in Syria. Although their martyrdom posters were decorated with the golden dome of the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, social media outlets run by the group initially offered mixed claims as to where some of them were killed. On September 2, however, publicity surrounding the group funeral for these five fighters and two more fallen "martyrs" established that they were all killed in Syria.

On September 17, in an unusually detailed announcement, HHN claimed to be engaged in heavy fighting sixty miles from the coastal city of Latakia, during which it purportedly killed twenty-four enemy fighters and destroyed a "training camp for terrorists of Turkmen [background]." The inclusion of HHN forces in this vital area for Assad further demonstrates the erosion of Syrian regime forces. In addition, Russian deployments to bases in Latakia provide some evidence that Iranian-controlled proxies may be working in coordination with Russian forces.

Around the same time that KIA and HHN were ramping up their deployments, Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib (LAAG) -- a group that formed out of the original Syria-based Shiite militia, Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas -- also stepped up its activity in Syria. In early August, LAAG secretary-general Sheikh Abdallah al-Shaibani came back from a trip to Iraq, where it was claimed he was busy recruiting and meeting with other allied groups. By mid-August, LAAG was fighting intermittent campaigns in East Ghouta, Syria, and had initiated an online effort to recruit Iraqi Shiites for a new offensive there.

MONITORING ONLINE RECRUITMENT

Internet-based propaganda and recruitment materials (mainly through social media) often serve as harbingers of larger moves by Iran's Iraqi Shiite proxies. This summer, these groups began to disseminate a collection of professionally produced imagery in a highly organized manner, all aimed at raising awareness of the Syria fight and calling for new recruits.

Previously, in fall 2014, the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite group Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) instituted a sporadic Internet recruitment program. The group's fighters were primarily deployed for a failed campaign on Syria's southern front that lasted into early 2015. Meanwhile, HHN initiated its own limited recruitment program from December to April. Both programs demonstrated that Iraqi Shiites would once again play a major role in Syria ([see PolicyWatch 2430, "Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the Rise Again in Syria" \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-shiite-foreign-fighters-on-the-rise-again-in-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-shiite-foreign-fighters-on-the-rise-again-in-syria)). Yet these moves were only the tip of the iceberg.

While May and June were relatively quiet on this front, Iraqi Shiite recruitment for Syria quickly began to rise in July and spiked in August. September saw slightly decreased recruitment and propaganda posts online, but the traffic was still sizable enough to be regarded as a continuation of the Syria program.

According to fighters who promoted recruitment material or were sent to Syria in late July, training for the deployment often lasted around thirty days and took place in Lebanon or Iran. Considering that most training regimens for Shiite fighters heading to Syria have lasted between two and six weeks (depending on specialization), Iran likely timed the uptick in deployments to best demonstrate unity of arms with Russia and Assad. Specifically, the main spike in recruitment activity began in earnest on July 3, the first reports of experienced KIA fighters deploying to Syria emerged on July 20, and Qasem Soleimani -- commander of Iran's elite Qods Force -- met with Russian officials on July 24.

ROLE OF NEW GROUPS?

Beyond the roles of more established brigades, several newer and smaller Iraqi Shiite militias have been pushing recruitment material for Syria -- including some groups that had never previously announced any connection to the war. The use of new proxies follows a model that Iran has used in Syria since it first began supporting major deployments there in spring 2013. Initially, more established groups such as the Badr Organization, AAH, and Kataib Hezbollah sent large forces. Concurrently, other elements such as HHN and KSS -- outgrowths of AAH and Kataib Hezbollah, respectively -- began their own mobilization and placement of forces in Syria. Today, many of the established organizations are not advertising their roles inside Syria or pushing recruitment efforts, but this does not mean they have stopped sending forces. In late September, for example, Kataib Hezbollah supporters claimed that the group had sent a small number of fighters to help defend the besieged Syrian Shiite villages of al-Fua, Kefraya, Nubl, and Zahra. In general, however, Iran's major Iraqi Shiite proxies appear to have their hands full with combat in Iraq.

As for newer militias, the group Kataib al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq (The Battalions of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq) -- the militia wing of Harakat al-Imam Zain al-Abidin -- initiated a recruitment program for Syria in early July. Led by Sayyed Qasim al-Musawi, the group was formed in June 2014 and claimed to have sent forces to defend the Iraqi shrine city of Samarra. Its parent organization has long promoted *velayat-e faqih* (the doctrine granting absolute authority to Iran's Supreme Leader), in addition to regularly citing Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri as clerical models.

Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah (The Islamic Resistance Movement) is another player in the Iranian-backed recruitment effort. Within its umbrella-like structure, three submilitias have been active participants in Iraq during the war against ISIS. Yet one of these groups -- Kataib Aimmah al-Baqiyah (Brigades of the Enduring Imams), commanded by Abu Abbas al-Araji -- emerged as a prominent recruiter for Syria in August.

Other small Iranian-controlled Shiite militias have also been tasked with sending forces to Syria. For example, while the group Kataib al-Ansar al-Wilayah (Brigade of the Supporters of the State) claimed to be heavily invested in anti-ISIS campaigns in Iraq's Anbar governorate, it posted material supportive of the Syria campaign in late July and early August. More tellingly, private social media accounts associated with the militia showed photos of one of the group's field commanders, Abu Youssef al-Subihawi, in Damascus in August. Therefore, despite the fact that reports of its movements in Syria have been muted, the group most likely still has elements deployed there.

CONCLUSION

Attrition is eating away at Assad's forces, and pressure has also increased on Iran's main proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah. Following Sunni jihadist and other Syrian rebel advances over large tracts of territory, particularly those close to the coastal Alawite heartland, more pro-Assad forces were needed to secure these zones and push the enemy back. Iran's Iraqi Shiite proxies are helping

to provide those numbers. And given the legitimacy that HHN and especially KIA have gained from battlefield successes, their recent recruitment campaigns are bolstering the Iranian narrative that deployments in Syria are key to defeating ISIS in Iraq.

Although Iran could call on other loyal and established Iraqi Shiite proxies, newer groups have been given control of some recruitment efforts, at least temporarily. In addition to the fact that established proxies are still fighting hard in Iraq, creating new groups to do this work allows Iran to further obfuscate its role in Syria. The shared organizational origins and ongoing close relations between some of these groups also indicates that they are not as fragmented as they appear, and their operations in Syria may be a way to build loyalty and showcase their role in the larger Iranian-controlled "Islamic Resistance" network. Furthermore, as the presence of Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria becomes more commonplace, the sense of a unified front, devoid of other political realities and goals held by Iran, may become a reality.

Phillip Smyth is a researcher at the University of Maryland, editor of the blog Hizballah Cavalcade, and author of The Washington Institute report [The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>). ❖

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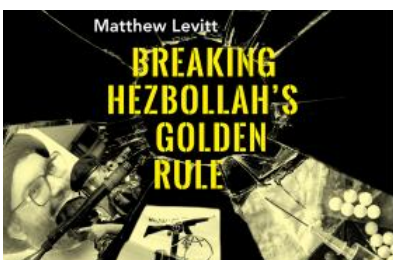
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