

# Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**With Iran's help and Baghdad's continued inaction, Iraqi Shiite militants have moved from fighting U.S. forces in their own country to fighting on Assad's side in Syria.**

**A**s the war in Syria drags on, external actors may play an increasingly important role in tipping the balance through material support and sponsorship of individual armed units. One of the most significant international brigades currently fighting on the Assad regime's side is the Damascus-based Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), a collection of predominantly Iraqi Shiite fighters organized and supported by the Qods Force, an elite branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Though relatively small in size, LAFA could have a strategic impact on the war's course. More broadly, its expansion marks a potentially dangerous turn for the region, giving Tehran a transnational Shiite militant legion that it could use to bolster its allies outside Syria.

## TRAINED BY IRAN, FIGHTING FOR ASSAD

**A**ccording to Phillip Smyth, an independent expert on LAFA's operations, the number of Iraqi Shiite militants in Syria fluctuates between 800 and 2,000. These fighters are drawn almost exclusively from three Iraqi groups. The main contributor is Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), a 2,000-3,000-strong militant group that splintered from Muqtada al-Sadr's movement in 2006 with support from the IRGC Qods Force and Lebanese Hezbollah. The second is Kataib Hezbollah (KH), an elite 400-man cadre of experienced Iraqi Shiite fighters reporting directly to the IRGC Qods Force leadership. The third is Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), a 200-man force led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani (a.k.a. Hamid al-Sheibani), an Iraqi Shiite who has worked under the Qods Force since the late 1980s. Reports also indicate the presence of Iraqi Shiites from the Badr Organization and Muqtada al-Sadr's Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud (Promised Day Brigades). Regardless of its exact composition, LAFA appears to have soaked up a large proportion of the hardened, Iranian-supported militant cadres that harassed the U.S. military in Iraq.

Indeed, Iran has played a key role in the formation and sustainment of Iraqi volunteer groups active in Syria. Since fall 2011 -- about the time that Shiite insurgents in Iraq began to scale down their attacks on the dwindling numbers of U.S. forces in that country -- AAH and KH have apparently been streaming fighters to Iran and Lebanon to be retrained for intervention in Syria. Specifically, they have been taught how to move from the insurgent tactics used in Iraq (e.g., roadside bombs, hit-and-run rocket attacks, assassinations) to the urban street-fighting and conventional military skills required for regime security operations in Syria -- skills that could also be used in Lebanon or even Iran if needed.

According to Phillip Smyth, Iraqi Shiite volunteers quietly began arriving in Syria from spring 2012 onward, with their presence gradually becoming more overt. Some entered the country via Damascus International Airport on Iranian flights. Others have entered by road from Iraq, riding in pilgrim buses or commercial trucks; some of these convoys have been attacked by Iraqi and Syrian jihadist elements inside Iraq before they could cross the border. Most of these volunteers now rotate in and out of Syria, with some purportedly undertaking multiple missions. For those killed in action, Iran speedily expatriates their bodies back to Iraq for prompt burial -- perhaps the most graphic indicator of Tehran's responsibility for Iraqi Shiite volunteers.

Martyrdom statements for these fighters tend to maintain the fiction that LAFA's only role in Syria is to defend the Shiite shrine of Sayyeda Zainab in southern Damascus. In reality, Iraqi volunteers are active across the strategically vital southern Damascus sector, serving as a reliable fire brigade that can be deployed to ruthlessly quell unrest in the suburbs, defend the airport, and protect residential neighborhoods used by regime elites. LAFA forces are well equipped and cohesive, apparently benefiting from Hezbollah training in Lebanon. Martyrdom statements also suggest that most of these fighters are in their late twenties or older -- in other words, experienced militants who often boast years of combat against U.S. forces in Iraq. Moreover, death notices and funerals indicate that one to two dozen Iraqi Shiites are now dying in Syria each month, pointing to periodic LAFA involvement in heavy fighting.

## IMPACT OF IRAQI VOLUNTEERS

**S**mall but highly motivated forces can have a disproportionate impact in civil wars, where the fighting is often focused on specific locales, and where small, iconic battles can significantly affect morale. Lebanese Hezbollah's direct intervention at al-Qusayr is one example of this phenomenon, and the role of the predominantly Iraqi LAFA forces around Damascus could become another -- particularly if the IRGC Qods Force further expands the brigade's cadres in Syria through AAH, which is developing into a mass political movement. Whether in Syria or elsewhere, Iraqi volunteers could become a common feature of Iranian-backed proxy wars if left unchecked.

The increased training and combat experience of these forces, coupled with continued Iranian involvement, could also have significant implications for the future stability of Iraq. In the coming years, Tehran will no doubt continue pressuring Baghdad in order to reduce the effects of international sanctions (i.e., by demanding access to Iraq's banking sector, foreign currency reserves, and markets), constrain Iraq's military capabilities, and limit U.S. influence. To achieve these and other strategic goals, Iran will have an ongoing need for armed Iraqi proxies. The deployment of Iraqi Shiites to Syria is threading these fighters ever more tightly into the "axis of resistance" alongside Hezbollah, as well as teaching them new conventional combat skills at a time when Iraq's military is atrophying in the aftermath of U.S. withdrawal. Baghdad may therefore face a greatly elevated security threat once these Shiite militants return from Syria for good, bloodied but confident.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**O**n June 25, the Iraqi government announced that it would increase border surveillance and halt all flights between Baghdad and Damascus in an effort to prevent Iraqi fighters from entering Syria. Unfortunately, all prior Iraqi offers to stem Iranian support for the Assad regime have proven hollow, and the latest restrictions would

not prevent direct flights from Iran to Damascus. Although the United States should pressure Iraqi authorities to periodically board Iranian flights bound for Syria, the only truly effective way to interdict such flights is to render Damascus Airport -- or, better yet, Syrian airspace -- unusable to the regime. Washington could also link its counterterrorism assistance to Iraq (which Baghdad badly needs) to verifiable closure of the country's airspace and land borders to pro-Assad flights and convoys.

It is often said that sunlight is the best disinfectant, so Washington should also do more to publicize the Iraqi Shiite role in Syria. For example, it could use information operations tools -- such as senior briefings by Washington-based officials or the embassy in Baghdad -- to emphasize that the United States will continually increase its provision of arms to the Syrian opposition precisely because Iran and Hezbollah, abetted by Iraq, are directly supporting the Assad regime. If, as Baghdad claims, arms are passing from Syria's rebels to insurgents in Iraq, this is partly because of the Maliki government's own stubborn backing of Damascus.

Washington should also seize any opportunity to acquire and publicize evidence of massacres undertaken by Iraqi Shiite elements in Syria, a tactic that has reportedly become common in the Damascus suburbs. Such evidence could spur the Iraqi religious establishment in Najaf to discourage young Shiites from volunteering in Syria. Securing this type of indirect assistance from Najaf and its preeminent cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is more than feasible given that AAH and KH actively seek to adopt the Iranian system of clerical rule (*velayat-e faqih*) in Iraq, sweeping away the old religious establishment in favor of a hierarchy led from Qom, Iran. To facilitate Najaf's involvement, Washington should repeatedly enunciate that it is arming the Syrian opposition not to take sides against the Shiites in a sectarian civil war, but rather to topple a criminal regime -- or, at the very least, to force a stalemate and a negotiated compromise in order to protect all parties, including the Shiite Alawites in Syria.

*Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute. He gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Institute researcher Ahmed Al Brich and independent expert Phillip Smyth, whose work on Iraqi Shiite fighters in Syria can be found at <http://jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade> (<http://jihadology.net/hizballah-cavalcade>).* ❖

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