

Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?

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As part of its renewed effort to export the Islamic Revolution through armed proxies, Tehran has been recruiting and training Afghan and Pakistani fighters for Syria's battlefields, thereby giving them invaluable experience for potential future campaigns in other regional countries.

Iran has a long history of building up militant ethnic groups across the Middle East to wage unconventional fights against Israel, Western interests, and, more recently, Sunni Salafists. In due course, the Afghan and Pakistani Shiite proxies it has recruited to help defend the Assad regime in Syria have become significant forces that could ultimately be used to either quell or fan the flames of other regional conflicts.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

After Israel invaded southern Lebanon in 1982, Iran deployed conventional military units to Syria to help fend off further Israeli advances. Yet when the outside help promised by Arab countries failed to materialize, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini knew that his forces could not withstand an Israeli onslaught without a direct line of supply to Lebanon, so he ordered them back and instead chose to arm and train Lebanese Shiite militant groups as proxies. Tehran later used this same model to organize the Mohammad Corps in Afghanistan, Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and the Badr Corps and other militias in Iraq (for the latest on Iraq's current Shiite militias, see PolicyWatch 2674, "[Should Iraq's ISCI Forces Really Be Considered 'Good Militias'?](#)"). It also formed the elite Qods Force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to support these groups and conduct foreign military and intelligence operations.

In recent years, the Qods Force has increased its recruitment of young fighters from Afghan and Pakistani Shiite communities. Afghanistan has around 4.6 million Shiites, or 15 percent of the population; they mainly live in the central part of the country and are often targeted by the Taliban. Iran is home to a sizable Afghan community of its own, with over 70 percent of them being Tajiks and Hazaras; the latter are predominantly Shiite. Some of these Afghans live and work there without proper documentation and in constant fear of being deported back to Afghanistan, where around [40 percent](#) of the workforce is jobless. Prospects for local integration are increasingly difficult due to the deteriorating economic situation, according to an EU [report](#).

Neighboring Pakistan has the second-largest number of Shiites after Iran (about 20 percent of the population, or 38 million people). Sectarian tensions with Sunnis have led to a tighter, more secluded Shiite community, and the country has seen several Shiite uprisings in its recent history. Iran has supported Pakistani Shiites since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, mainly by opening its religious schools to Pakistani students.

During the current war, Iran began to recruit Afghan and Pakistani volunteers in earnest after failing to gather enough Syrians for the various irregular local militias the IRGC had been supporting since 2012. But what will happen to these thousands of veterans after they return from Syria? It is unlikely that all of them will be allowed to permanently settle in Iran like the Gurkhas of the British army. Instead, they will probably be encouraged to return to their respective countries, in part so that the IRGC can use them in an organized manner in the future. For example, during a recent visit with the family of an Afghan commander killed in Syria, Qods Force general Qasem Soleimani [suggested](#) that groups like the Afghan militia Liwa Fatemiyoun (Fatemiyoun Division) will continue to help Iran defend the entire Muslim world.

AFGHAN RECRUITS

Afghans were among the first foreign fighters to join Hezbollah guerrillas in Syria, beginning in 2014. They have been recruited from Afghan immigrant communities in Iran and Syria, and also reportedly from Afghanistan itself via participating travel agencies; some even hail from European countries. These recruits sign up for a variety of reasons -- on religious grounds, to improve their chances of obtaining permanent residency or work permits in Iran, for financial compensation, and so forth.

The late deputy commander of Liwa Fatemiyoun -- Sayyed Hassan Hussein, better known as Sayyed Hakim -- [claimed](#) that the Afghan militia's fluid head count had reached as high as 14,000 fighters, organized around three brigades in Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo and equipped with their own artillery, armor, and intelligence units. That number seems highly unlikely; sources cited by Western journalists suggest the force is much smaller, perhaps

around 3,000. Fatemiyoun commanders [have also noted](#) that fighters are paid a meager monthly salary of \$450 plus temporary immigration benefits for their families in Iran; other sources put this number at \$600-700.

In a revealing recent interview with the Iranian news outlet Mashregh, a former IRGC commander with experience on the Syrian front harshly criticized his country for not making greater use of Afghan Shiites residing in Iran as foot soldiers for foreign policy, even as it actively supported other Shiite groups like Hezbollah. According to him, "They should be an indispensable part of the Palestine Liberation Army."

Prior to deployment, these Afghans are trained by IRGC personnel, whom many foreign fighters refer to as "Ansar," meaning "supporters" or "defenders." The training [consists of](#) a short twenty-to-thirty-day basic course in Qarchak, southwest of Tehran. Some of Fatemiyoun's senior leadership first gained experience fighting with the IRGC's Abouzar Brigade during the Iran-Iraq War, or with the Mohammad Corps, a now-disbanded jihadist group that battled the Soviets and Taliban in Afghanistan. Some even received training in the Afghan National Army and police forces that were supervised by American and NATO advisors; for example, the father of one slain fighter claimed that his son [had been trained twice](#) by the Americans while serving in the Afghan army. [According to](#) the semiofficial Iranian news agency Tasnim, some of the Afghan fighters recently completed more rigorous training under Hezbollah instructors, including a sniper course.

Following their basic training, Afghan fighters are flown to Syria to gain experience against rebel forces, whom they are told pose a threat to the country's Shiite holy sites. According to numerous interviews and blog posts featuring Fatemiyoun personnel, the IRGC wants its proxy units to operate as independently as possible. And to ease their financial concerns about their families in Iran, the Martyrs Foundation -- Iran's version of the Department of Veterans Affairs -- [announced](#) on August 13 that it would offer welfare to families of foreigners killed and wounded in Syria on behalf of the Islamic Republic. According to the foundation and other Iranian sources, Fatemiyoun has suffered at least 200 killed and many more wounded in the war.

PAKISTANI RECRUITS

Formed two-and-a-half years ago and trained by the Qods Force in the Shiite holy city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran, the Zainabiyoun Brigade is another volunteer outfit fighting in Syria. The IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency [described](#) the unit as an elite assault force with over 5,000 young Pakistani Shiite fighters, though Reuters and other Western outlets cite no more than a thousand. Many originally lived in Parachinar and its surrounding villages in northwestern Pakistan, then migrated to Iran or the United Arab Emirates. While demand to fill Zainabiyoun's ranks reportedly increased when the UAE expelled some 12,000 Pakistani Shiite workers in recent years, the brigade's core members came from al-Mustafa International University, a religious institution that is based in Qom but has branches in Islamabad and Beirut as well as numerous affiliate organizations elsewhere (e.g., the Islamic College of London, Indonesia Islamic College, the Islamic University College of Ghana).

One key Iranian organization linked to such militant recruitment efforts is the AhlulBayt World Assembly, which operates out of Tehran under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's direct supervision and has lavish funds to "educate" young Shiite minds. Since 1990, the ABWA has been busy finding, organizing, training, and supporting Shiite youths and other converts and managing their activities around the Muslim world. Hezbollah is an active participant in the organization, with a permanent member on its governing council.

According to an [Iranian magazine interview](#) with Zainabiyoun's current commander, known only as "Karbala," recruits receive some training in Mashhad before shipping to Syria. Some also undertake special weapons training, including a forty-five-day sniper course.

Once on the battlefield in Syria, Zainabiyoun units are occasionally led by Qods Force or Hezbollah officers. A July 26 [Fars News profile](#) claimed that they have a reputation for perseverance and a no-retreat attitude, though this is not widely noted elsewhere. The Fars story also claimed that Zainabiyoun has suffered about a hundred deaths in the past three years of fighting, mostly while breaking the siege of the towns of Nubl and Zahra north of Aleppo this February. While this figure is not corroborated by funeral notices, most Zainabiyoun fighters prefer to hide their identity, fearing reprisals by Taliban or Pakistani intelligence.

Many brigade members are already speculating about what will become of them after the Syria war. In the same July 26 Fars story, one Zainabiyoun commander openly criticized the Pakistani army's "un-Islamic" character, then proclaimed, "God willing, the Zainabiyoun fighters will return [triumphantly] from the Syrian insurrection and will become the Supreme Leader's right hand in the world." Another commander promised that Zainabiyoun will fight the "takfiri-Zionist" enemies upon returning to Pakistan. Such statements point to aspirations for a future role in areas such as Parachinar, whose isolated Shiite population has been under pressure from Taliban militants and government-backed militias since 2007. For its part, Iran has made significant investments in Parachinar, Lahore, Karachi, and other Shiite areas of Pakistan in order to compete with Saudi Arabia in shaping local opinion and woo recruits.

Similarly, in the July 2016 issue of the conservative Iranian magazine *Panjereh*, one Zainabiyoun commander [expressed his willingness](#) to fight on any front deemed necessary by Supreme Leader Khamenei, whether in Iraq, Israel, or Saudi Arabia; another commander declared, "God willing, we will liberate the house of God and destroy the Saudi royal family before reaching [Jerusalem]." Other members of the Iranian-led "resistance front" have emphasized this prioritization recently as well -- for example, in an [August interview](#) with the Lebanese television channel al-Mayadeen, Hezbollah executive council chair Hashem Safieddine said that "Shiites should remove obstacles put in place by the region's hopeless and corrupt regimes before destroying Israel."

CONCLUSION

It is not yet fully clear how potent, well-trained, and enthusiastic these relatively new Afghan and Pakistani militias are. At some point in the future, however, these experienced fighters will likely decide or be ordered to take up arms again and fight under unpredictable circumstances -- perhaps against Sunni extremists like the Taliban and the Islamic State, or against state actors, or even against their own democratically elected governments. If they can manage to maintain their organizational coherence, Afghan and Pakistani militants could also shift gears from defensive warfare to offensive operations in territories of their choosing. As Fatemiyoun's previous commander declared before he was killed in action, the group "knows no borders and will not stop until all Muslim lands are freed...This resistance will not stop until Jerusalem is liberated."

At a time when direct and proxy conflicts are ravaging the Middle East and South Asia, rivalries such as the heated Saudi-Iranian standoff will continue to transcend national borders with unpredictably destabilizing effects. By progressively expanding paramilitary units and providing them with more advanced weapons and tactics, Iran seems bent on creating enough foot soldiers to realize Ayatollah Khomeini's dream of "[Islam sans frontieres](#)."

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