Interviews and Presentations

The Shia Militia Mapping Project

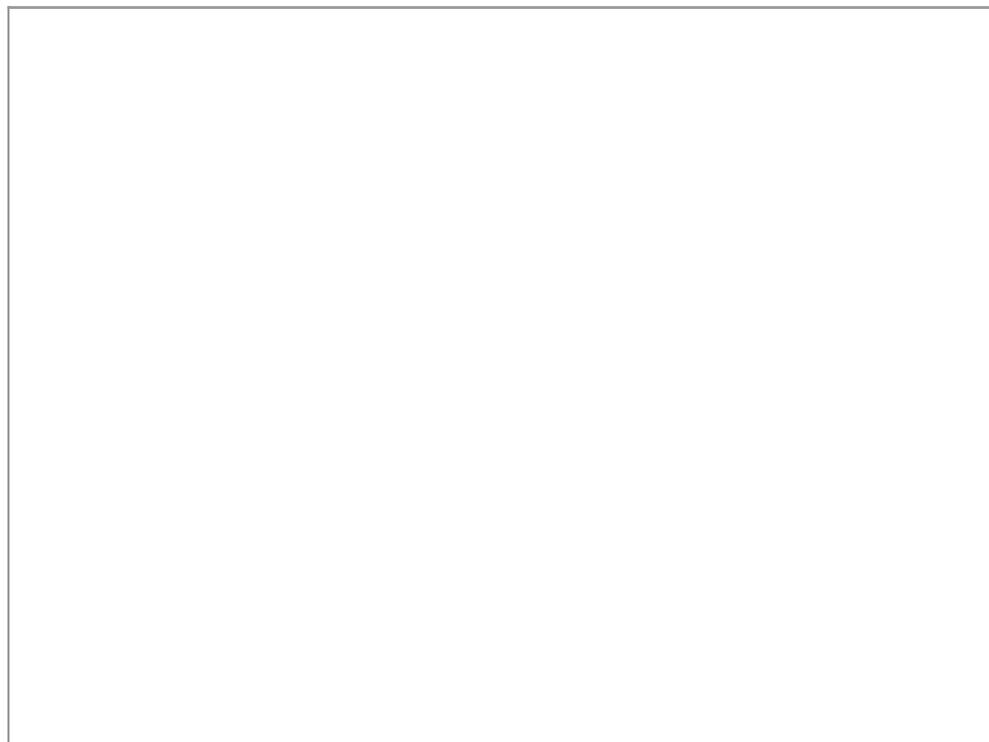*Phillip Smyth*

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Explore a comprehensive interactive map of Shia militias across the Middle East, charting their location, movements, ties to Iran, and involvements in conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

Interactive Website Details Dozens of Iranian-Backed Shia Militias

For decades, Shia armed groups have altered the sociopolitical and military landscape of the Middle East. As of 2019, more than a hundred different Shia groups and subgroups, the primary drivers of Iranian influence, operate in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Yet despite the complexity of fronts, the number of belligerents involved, and Iran's active participation in these conflicts, most publicly available maps on the subject have neglected or downplayed the need to illustrate important data about specific militias. This approach has fundamentally altered international

perceptions of the region's ongoing wars and, more important, Iran's propensity for using proxies.

Shia militia activities are often wrapped in a broader narrative about "pro-government forces." Even when these groups take on dominant roles in a given conflict and pursue goals that differ from those of government forces, they still tend to be described as little more than supportive elements. This further disguises crucial regional and ideological developments related to the militias and their patronage networks.

The Islamic Republic of Iran remains the principal creator and backer of Shia militias throughout the Middle East. As the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy noted, "Iran is competing with its neighbors, asserting an arc of influence and instability while vying for regional hegemony, using state-sponsored terrorist activities, a growing network of proxies, and its missile program to achieve its objectives." The 2019 U.S. Worldwide Threat Assessment added that Iran "probably wants to maintain a network of Shia foreign fighters" in Syria. Its existing proxies there, in Iraq, and in Lebanon have contributed to myriad terrorist activities while maintaining stances that are violently opposed to the United States and its regional allies. A view into how Iran uses these multinational networks can help clarify the state's ideological and political goals in the region.

At the same time, not every Shia armed group is a proxy of Tehran. Conflicts between Shia militias over ideological, political, and commercial interests are plentiful, and tracking these tensions can help expose key vulnerabilities and trends.

Mapping these militias has become especially important since the Iraqi government's 2014 creation of al-Hashd al-Shabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces), an umbrella group of mostly Shia militias dominated by Iranian-backed groups. The rise of the PMF has further obfuscated who is actually doing the fighting on the ground and which areas have a significant militia presence. Some of the most powerful PMF elements are also fighting in Syria, while many have established significant political power within the Iraqi government.

Thus, a more comprehensive and detailed mapping method is required. For the benefit of policymakers, area specialists, and observers, The Washington Institute's Shia Militia Mapping Project seeks to rectify the knowledge gap by providing deep graphical insight into the movements of specific militias, Iran's expansion of power abroad, Iraq's efforts to address instability, the Islamic State's return to insurgency, the manner in which Shia armed groups preserve and increase their power, and the near-term outlook for Syria.

Map Sources

In the past, information of the sort provided by this project has largely been the purview of the intelligence community and regional organizations rather than Western audiences. Moreover, some past reports on the subject have used proprietary sources that lacked cross-referencing with Shia militia sources.

The maps presented here have been compiled mainly from primary source data, including contacts within Shia militia circles and social media analysis collected for nearly ten years. More specifically, the project relies on interviews with a host of Shia fighters, observation of social media accounts belonging to around 200 formal organizations and unofficial fighter networks, messenger app accounts linked with Shia militant groups (including private and publicly available posts), Arabic- and Persian-language news sources, and reports issued by organizations that oppose Shia militias (e.g., Islamic State). The Google Maps platform has been used due to its ubiquity.

The project's methods include seeking out mappable data closest to where social media and messenger posts claim a given activity occurred. When posts lack specific place names, the information in question can often be traced to general locations with reasonable accuracy based on other data or methods. Locations culled from primary sources have been crosschecked and supplemented by open source articles from Arabic, English, and Persian newspapers, militia webpages, direct interviews with fighters, and/or opposition sources. In other cases, information has been mapped using geolocation methods. Any unconfirmed data is noted in the map entries.

The information illustrated in the maps includes the following:

- Internal fighting between Shia militias
- Demonstrations and other events held for or against different militias
- Militia operations against foes (e.g., Syrian rebel groups, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda)
- Special foreign trips taken by armed groups or their leadership
- Meetings between leadership elements within or among different groups
- Casualties suffered by militias
- Funerals for fighters
- Force deployments
- Construction of fortifications and checkpoints
- Social service projects

Which Groups Make the List?

Although the project focuses on Shia militias, some of the organizations covered herein have a more mixed sectarian composition, including Sunni and Christian fighters. Yet majority Sunni, Christian, and Alawite organizations are not included, even if they operate under the same structure as a Shia militia group (though Alawite-majority areas are marked on certain maps). Ethnoreligiously focused Shia groups are featured as well

(e.g., Quwat Sahel al-Ninewa, or the Nineveh Plains Forces, whose members hail from Iraq's Shabak minority but practice Shia Islam). The majority of groups covered are influenced or controlled by Iran, but not all of them.

Specifically, the project studies the movements and activities of

- Iraqi PMF groups (whether official or claimed)
- Lebanese Hezbollah
- Syrian Shia groups organized on the Hezbollah model
- Shia militias that claim alignment with the Syrian army
- Muqtada al-Sadr's groups Saraya al-Salam and Liwa al-Youm al-Mawud
- Iraqi and Syrian Shia tribal militias
- Groups that identify as part of a larger camp under the control of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani
- Newly announced Shia militias
- Militias with majority Ismaili (or Sevener Shia) membership, and
- Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and its subunits, including the Pakistani Shia group Liwa Zainabiyoun and the Afghan Shia group Liwa Fatemiyoun.

Areas of Focus

The main geographic areas covered include current conflict zones in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. If groups or individual fighters from these zones visit other states, such movements are mapped as well. For example, the maps account for reports that veterans of Liwa Fatemiyoun, Iran's Afghan Shia unit in Syria, have also set up local militias in some neighborhoods of Kabul.

In addition, the project distinguishes between current, former, and potential conflict zones. All of the conflict zones listed directly involve Shia-majority militias.

How are Group Activities Represented?

Activities by specific Shia militias are denoted by each organization's logo or a surrogate symbol placed on the map. The accompanying description includes an exact or approximate date for the activity. If photographs of the incident are available, they are included as well.

Ethnoreligious and Sectarian Mapping

It is important to get an idea of where Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria's Shia populations reside and where recruitment occurs. The maps of these locations are based on multiple sources, including historical maps, U.S. government maps, Arabic and English reporting, interviews, and personal trips to the region.

Many communities overlap and can be quite diverse. As a result, the maps are designed to give a general overview of where significant Shia population centers, zones of influence, and points of interest are located. Some of the mapped towns do not have majority Shia populations or are more mixed, but their Shia populations are nevertheless highly influential or consider the towns especially important. The following are also included:

- Holy sites. Often described as "shrines," these special sites normally serve as places of worship and veneration for Shia Muslims. For a number of Shia militias, however, claims of defending such sites constitute the core of their armed activities. In Syria, the "Defense of Sayyeda Zainab"—referring to the mosque and shrine south of Damascus—was used as the casus belli for Iranian-directed Shia groups beginning in 2012. In Iraq, images from the 2006 bombing of al-Askari shrine in Samarra were used to rally Shia fighters into the ranks of many militias. These mosques, shrines, and similar sites are marked and explained on the maps.
- Holy sites destroyed in conflict. Some of the Shia religious sites that appear on the maps were deliberately targeted by Sunni jihadists or destroyed during battles.