THE SHIITE JIHAD IN SYRIA
and Its Regional Effects

Phillip Smyth
…But don’t foreign fighters only come in Sunni?
- Shi’a jihadist foreign fighters likely number in the tens of thousands.
- Most originated from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

"You know, ISIS uses Facebook and Twitter…"
- Advanced recruitment techniques.
- Fundraising and Recruiting.

"All of these groups look pretty independent."
- Interconnected organizational networks, commanders, and ideologies.

"Still, they’re less brutal and we’re fighting the same enemy."
- Shi’a militias have engaged in ethnic cleansings, executions, and other nefarious activities.

“These groups…were a reactionary/defensive response to ISIS.”
- "The Shi’a jihadi presence in Syria was free flowing and not as organized."

“Iran’s reach is overstated.”
- This doesn’t mean all recruits are Khomeinists.
- Do not ignore top-down strategies vis-à-vis ideology.
Manufacturing a Religious Crisis:

- “Protectors of the Shrine”: Defense of Sayyida Zaynab.
- Grand American/Western/Israeli plot.
- Branding of all Syrian rebels as “Takfiris,” “Nusra,” or “ISIS”.
  - Outreach to minorities.
  - “Good Sunnis” vs. “Bad Sunnis”
- Pan-Shiite themes.
- Promotion of Absolute Wilayat al-Faqih.

Minimization of the link between Iranian geopolitical interests and the jihad.
The Militias

- Sadrist Splinters/Sadrists
  - Liwa al-Youm al-Mawoud
- Old standard-bearers
  - Lebanese Hizballah
  - The Badr Organization
- ‘Special Groups’ from the Iraq War
  - Kata’ib Hizballah
  - Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq
- New Groups
  - Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada
  - Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba

- Syrian-based groups
  - LAFA-Network
    - Liwa Dhulfiqar
    - Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn
    - Rapid Reaction Force
A Glimpse At Iran’s Proxy Web

- Initial Interaction used to grow new groups.
- Subsequent path.
- Directly under control of parent party.

* Note: Most of the Sadrist Movement is not under full IRGC control
Iraq-based groups with members from Syria's LAFA-related orgs.

Iraq/Lebanon-based group with shared members/commanders/direct combat links

New groups formed off of LAFA-Syria.

Iraqi groups created from previously established Iraqi orgs.

Iraq branches

Iraqi groups created from previously established Iraqi orgs.
Hilayal announced in Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba social media as an Iraqi militia commander in Syria. (July 2013)

Hilayl is promoted as a “Sadrist” on social media. (July 2013-January 2015)

Hilayl returns to Iraq. (Spring 2014)

Photos emerge of Hilayl with members of Kata’ib Hizballah and Kata’ib al-Imam Ali. (November-January 2015)

Hilayl is named as the commander of Kata’ib Malik al-Ashtar. (August 2014)

Hilayl is listed as a martyr for Kata’ib al-Imam Ali. (January 2015)
Local committees and independent fighters.

Iranian proxy Shi’a Militia groups, including FTOs have a highly advanced internet recruitment strategy.
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Embedded phone numbers in imagery/text posts.

Coupled to centralized recruitment fronts and phone lines.

Future for Iran proxy Shiite militia recruitment.
Accomplishments

- Securing most of Damascus from rebel advances.
- Establishment of Hizballah “security zone in Qalamoun.”
- Building of local Hizballah-style groups.
- Construction of a new Golan front.
- Establishment and growth of new groups in Iraq and Syria.
- Building narratives of strength, projection, and protection.
- Infiltration extends beyond the military sphere.
Regional Consequences

Will Iran’s Shiite militia proxies moderate/reform when the wars in Iraq and Syria end?

- Remember Lebanese Hizballah?
- Stronger concentrations on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.
- America is still the “Great Satan.”