

Testimony of Mr. Phillip Smyth, Research Analyst at the University of Maryland – Laboratory for Computational Cultural Dynamics, House Committee Foreign Affairs Committee – Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, November 20, 2013, Hearing: Terrorist Groups in Syria

Chairman Royce and Ranking Minority Member Sherman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee. As Syria continues to burn and the United States attempts to both assess its interests and protect our existing interests, there is a major player and its proxies which are often misunderstood and receive less attention.

In early March 2013, British Foreign Minister William Hague said, “Syria today has become the top destination for jihadists”. The jihadists he was referring to were Sunni Islamists fighting as part of a number of Syrian rebel units. However, an often overlooked, growing, well-organized, and highly militarily capable jihadist element within Syria is not only pro-Assad, but is also Shi’a Islamist in nature, in addition to being backed and run by Iran. Shi’a jihadis, their movements, and the narratives they utilize are highly developed and form part of a larger Iranian regional strategy.

Tehran’s main regional proxies which believe in, promote, and project Iran’s “Islamic Revolutionary” ideology are the main contributors of Shi’a fighters to Syria. The proxy groups sending combatants include Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq’s Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and other smaller splinters from Iraqi Shi’a radical leader, Muqtada al-Sadr. Announcing its existence in May, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, another Iraq-based Iranian-proxy organization, claims to have sent 500 fighters to Syria. Starting in mid-October, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq publicly called for Iraqi Shi’a volunteers to join the organization’s fight in Syria. For months prior there had been reports of trained volunteer fighters who had joined Kata’ib Hezbollah or Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, were trained in Iran or Lebanon, and were then flown to Syria. Some of the combatants have included Shi’a from as far afield as Saudi Arabia, Côte d’Ivoire, and reportedly Afghanistan.

These Shi’a elements have constituted a key element which has secured and has provided a powerful kinetic force to keep the Assad regime in power. According to one Lebanese Hezbollah fighter interviewed by Time Magazine, “If we don’t defend the Syrian regime, it would fall within two hours”.

Without the initial push by Iran and the utilization of its proxy-network, Shi’a armed involvement via the deployment of volunteer fighters and trained assets would likely had miniscule role in the fighting. It is also probable that without Iran’s regional network of Shi’a Islamist fighters, the Assad regime would have been unable to mount most of its successful recent offensives.

What Motivates the Shi’a Jihadist?

Iran’s overarching influence and control of Shia militia activity in Syria is undeniable and pervasive. The numerous Shi’a groups fighting in Syria rarely hide their loyalty to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The majority of these fighters adhere to the Iranian political and religious ideology of Wilayat al-Faqih, or the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurisprudent (in this case, the jurist is Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). Despite the fact that Khamenei is the head of state of Iran, he wields incredible influence over a multitude of organizations and individuals in different geographic zones due to his religious title and connected ideology. In fact, the revolutionary ideology of Iran was not simply created for just that state, but is global and pan-Islamic. When Khamenei gives an order to a loyal follower, they act.

According to one Lebanese Hizballah fighter, the group's order to fight in the May-June 2013 battle of Qusayr and in other parts of Syria came from a direct religious command called a taklif shar'i. A taklif shar'i, comes from Iran's Supreme Leader and is a religious obligation which must be followed. If this obligation is not followed, it is tantamount to disobeying the will of God. The fact that a taklif shar'i was issued was also uncovered when a video leaked of Hizballah and possibly other allied Iraqi Shia Islamist militants executing captured Syrians. One of the fighters said, "We are performing our taklif and we are not seeking personal vengeance." Thus far, a publically accessible copy of the taklif shar'i is unavailable. Nevertheless, this follows a general trend, since many religious edicts are not published. Instead, at times, they are conveyed via networks of loyal clerics and military leaders which adhere to the concepts of Wilayat al-Faqih.

The war has also not been marketed to Shi'a in the Middle East and worldwide as one to defend the Assad regime. Instead, the narrative has been one of "defending shrines", namely the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in southern Damascus. Lebanese Hizballah and Iran's other Iraqi Shi'a Islamist proxies have also claimed their roles in Syria are to protect their host countries from Sunni Islamist radicals they have branded as, "Takfiris". Starting in August, their war-narratives took on a far more sectarian tone and the collective of Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations have now started to openly refer to themselves as a "Shi'a Resistance". This stands in stark contrast when juxtaposed to the more normative and ideologically sound (in terms of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary ideology), "Islamic Resistance". Widely shared musical propaganda for Iran's Iraqi-Shi'a proxies and for Lebanese Hizballah has also adopted a more sectarian tone.

A World of Front Militias

Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations operating in Syria continue to be announced. During the summer, 3 separate Syrian-based militias were announced in a 3-week period. Militia organizations announced as operating in Syria should generally be considered as front organizations for other Iranian-backed groups based in Iran, Iraq, or Lebanon. The creation of a multitude of front groups resembles earlier efforts by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps when they created proxy forces to project their power in the region. In the 1980s the early Lebanese Hizballah often utilized many different front names when it carried out operations. During the Iraq War (2003), "Special Groups" created by Iran would also go by many different names depending on their areas of operation. This is not simply done to create plausible deniability, but to make the force sizes appear larger (to their enemies and potential supporters) and to confuse enemy forces. In Syria, there has been a lot of overlap in terms of membership for Syria-based front groups and the forces which have supplied them with fighters.

The majority of Shi'a jihadist combatants primarily originate from Iraq and Lebanon. However, there have been Shi'a from around the world which have fought and died in Syria. In June, Saudi Shi'a Ahmed Adnan al-Qar'oush, was reported to have been killed fighting in Syria. Extensive Lebanese Hizballah and Iranian presences in West Africa has also supplied sub-Saharan African fighters. On July 26, 2013, the "First African martyr", Muhammed Suleiman al-Kuwni was reported in Iranian media.

- *Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF)*: The IRGC-QF has been instrumental in every major overseas operation executed by Iran. Answering directly to Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, IRGC-QF's commander, Qassem Suleimani has gone about reforming and retraining Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'a fighting units in order to make them

more unified bodies. Overall, the IRGC-QF along with Lebanese Hizballah maintain key leadership roles in relation to the Shi'a Islamist forces on the ground in Syria. There have been many estimates of the IRGC's presence in Syria and it is likely their number runs into the thousands.

- *Lebanese Hizballah*: According to French intelligence, Lebanese Hizballah has anywhere from 3,000-4000 fighters inside Lebanon. Many of these fighters serve in Syria through different rotational periods. Often, they function as “core-forces”, which means they provide a well-trained, motivated, and equipped core for the Syrian army and the primarily Iraqi Shi'a staffed militias in Syria. Hizballah has launched its own major operations in cooperation with elements from the Syrian Army. The most prominent was during the May-June Battle of Qusayr and in the developing Battle for Qalamoun. Lebanese Hizballah has also worked many joint operations with front-militias staffed primarily by Iraqi Shi'a fighters within Syria. One operation in December 2012-February 2013 took control of the road and areas leading to Damascus Airport. Lebanese Hizballah generally operates under its own name while fighting in Syria. Nevertheless, the group has supplied fighters to other Shi'a Islamist front militias. In part, Lebanese Hizballah had developed a good rapport with its allied Iraqi Shi'a Islamist organizations due to combat experience during the Iraq War (2003) and because Iranian leadership and trainers often lacked Arabic language skills. Thus, the IRGC-QF has used Lebanese Hizballah as an important middleman and chief conduit to command other loyal elements.
- *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)*: Created by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in cooperation with Lebanese Hizballah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq began life as a splinter from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. The group claimed responsibility. In September, the group threatened to attack U.S. interests if the U.S. struck Syria. It is claimed via social media sites and through their funeral ceremonies that their units in Syria operate under the name of *Liwa' Kafeel Zaynab* (Sponsors of Zaynab Brigade). In October, the group moved from recruiting Shi'a volunteers via word of mouth and local recruiters to a phone and social network-based approach. It is unknown how many fighters AHH has contributed. Though, it has been reported that its combatants are well trained and exhibit superior command skills when compared to their Syrian allies.
- *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada* (KSS or The Master of the Martyrs Brigades): This Iraqi group claims its reason for being is to protect “shrines across the globe”. KSS has also mentioned that Israel is “Cancerous”, the U.S. occupation of Iraq was a symbol of “Arrogance” (a regularly-used Iranian Revolutionary term to describe actions of Western states), and called for Jerusalem to be liberated. Though, it is clear from the group's symbolism (which features the dome to the Sayyida Zaynab shrine) and that they have not been deployed outside of Syria, that their main purpose may be to function as a Syria-centric fighting group. Unlike fighters from other Iranian-backed organizations, KSS fighters do not appear to operate as part of other Syrian front militias and openly fight under the KSS banner. KSS does not hide its affinity for the Iranian Revolutionary ideology or for Ayatollah Khamenei. Most of the group's martyrdom posters include Khamenei and fighters killed fighting for the group are flown to Iran before burial in Iraq. Some of the group's fighters were killed in East Ghouta by rebel elements and a large quantity of material praising Lebanese Hizballah leader, Imad Mughniyeh and the Iranian Supreme

Leader was found on their bodies. KSS's fighters were also part of an October-November offensive which took sections of southern Damascus.

- *Kata'ib Hizballah* (KH or the Hizballah Brigades): Considered one of the more elite Iraq, "Special Groups" created by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hizballah, Kata'ib Hizballah is one of the most openly pro-Iranian organizations in Iraq. The group made a name for itself through the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), particularly the deadly Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) against U.S. and Coalition forces. KH claimed its first loss in Syria in March, 2013. The group has funneled many fighters to Syria, though the numbers it has contributed are unknown.
- *The Badr Organization*: The Badr Organization, while initially claiming that they were dropping their armed capability, Badr has become a key Iraqi Shi'a Islamist militia in Syria. Through their "Armed Wing", Badr has claimed to have sent some 1,500 members to Syria as part of their expeditionary unit called *Quwet al-Shahid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr* (The Martyr Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr Forces).
- *Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba'* (The Hizballah Movement of the Outstanding. It is also known as Harakat Nujaba'): Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba' was formed as a front group comprised of fighters primarily from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizballah, and there are claims it also includes members of the Promised Day Brigades (the successor militia to Muqtada al-Sadr's *Jaysh al-Mahdi*). This front sends fighters to Syria who fight under the banner of three militias formed from their fighters. Little is known about the first Syria-based militia, *Liwa' al-Hamad*. However, *Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir* (The 'Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade) has reportedly been active in Aleppo, especially in rural areas. Sheikh Akram al-Ka'bi, a founder of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leads the group. Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir's fighters openly describe themselves as "Jnood al-Wilaya" or "Soldiers of the Wali", a reference to Khamenei's political-religious title (Wali al-Faqih). Though social media, Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir claimed they would, "fulfil the mandates of Wali". The group has also described Khamenei as the "Lion of Shi'ism". Banners of Khamenei and the late Iranian Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini often accompany the caskets of fallen members of Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir. Another militia, *Liwa' al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba* (The Imam Hasan-The Chosen Brigade), which claims to operate along the main road leading to Damascus Airport and in the rural sections of East Ghouta, acts as another Syria-based front militia for Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba'.
- *Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas* (The Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade): Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas was the first Shi'a militia to be announced in Syria. Reportedly, this militia was formed out of local Shi'a (many of whom are Iraqi) living in the area around the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in southern Damascus. However, based on the group's own imagery, statements, and interviews which have been conducted with the organization's fighters, it is clear the group's core fighting force was comprised of a mix of Iranian-backed organizations, such as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Lebanese Hizballah, Kata'ib Hizballah, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas's current commander goes by the nom de guerre of Abu Ajeeb.

- *Liwa' Zulfiqar* (The Zulfiqar Brigade): Liwa' Zulfiqar's fighters have included members of Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations. Its commander was Fadel Subhi, an Iraqi more commonly known as Abu Hajar. Subhi was also a commander in Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas. He was killed in Dara'a on September 16, 2013. Iranian media had reported that prior to his deployment to Syria, he spent time in Iran. Following his death, his body was shipped from Syria to Iran and then onto Najaf, Iraq. The group is now led by another Iraqi Shi'a named Abu Shahed who was also a leader within Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas.
- *Sariyya al-Tali'a al-Khurasani* (The Vanguard of Khurasani Unit): Claiming to be based in Arbil, Iraq (which is unlikely), this group of Iraqi Shi'a fighters primarily operates in East Ghouta. Commanded by Iraqi Shi'a Ali Yasiri, the organization uses Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' logo on its flag and identification patches. It is unknown which groups have contributed fighters to it.
- *Liwa' al-Imam al-Husayn* (The Imam Husayn Brigade): Liwa' al-Imam al-Husayn purports to be an organization loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. While the group appears to be real, its messaging does not fit reality. Iraqi Shi'a radical leader, Muqtada al-Sadr has been extremely vocal about opposing efforts to send Shi'a fighters to Syria. Additionally, he has been involved in many disputes with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which appears to share members with Liwa' al-Imam al-Husayn. Thus, it's likely this group actually utilizes Sadrist splinters and may be an Iranian-backed attempt to sway Shi'a followers of Muqtada al-Sadr to join their efforts in Syria.

Areas of Operation & Impact

When Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist armed elements initiated their presence in Syria, they were often small forces with specialized tasks. Fighters, predominantly from Iraq, were flown into Damascus's and other major airports. As their deployments increased, they have been instrumental in forming so-called "core-forces" of elite and well-equipped fighters who help rally less experienced, equipped, and/or motivated fighters. As Iranian-backed Shi'a armed-presence grew, these units, particularly those belonging to Lebanese Hezbollah expanded beyond advisory, intelligence, and more specialized roles. The importance of securing Damascus Airport was neither lost on the Assad regime nor on Lebanese Hezbollah. Specialized Iraqi Shi'a and Lebanese Hezbollah units secured the airport as early as January 2013. In the spring of 2013, Shi'a militias were the main force used to take and secure Aleppo Airport.

Presently, Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations now comprise significant regular infantry units. At times these units have utilized artillery, rockets, mortars and armored vehicles, including tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.

Following Lebanese Hezbollah's victory in Qusayr, Shi'a Islamist armed elements have engaged in heavy fighting in Homs and East Ghouta. These engagements increased throughout the summer, from late June-early September. Some Shi'a Islamist forces were reported to be guarding roadways and other communications links between Damascus and the southern Syrian city of Suweida. By late-August, primarily Iraqi Shi'a manned militias with assistance from Lebanese Hezbollah began more extensive

combat operations in the southern Syrian city of Dara'a. These operations continued through September.

Starting in late October, organizations such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq began calling for volunteers to participate in what was deemed the, "Ashura Husayn Campaign". The campaign, as the name implies, was meant to coincide with the Shia religious holiday which commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shia Islam. The offensive began in mid-October in Damascus and led to Shia militias taking key neighborhoods in southern suburbs of Damascus and some rural areas to the south, east, and west of the city. Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada reported via its social media apparatus that it was involved in fighting in Hajar al-Aswad. Other districts such as Husaynia and Sbeneh were also taken by a mixture of Shia militia organizations and the Syrian army.

Around the same time, Lebanese Hizballah was reported to take the lead in an offensive in the mountainous area, known as Qalamoun, which is around 40 miles north of Damascus and is close to Lebanon. Syrian rebel elements have also reported a rise in the number of clashes their forces have been involved with Shi'a militia elements in areas around Aleppo.

A Khomeinist Style of Shi'a Revival

Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist groups in Syria are not seeking to impose a Khomeinist form of government on Syria, but their goals are multifold. IRGC-QF's Qassem Suleimani has been working tirelessly to build a more unified and cohesive network of ideologically-loyal proxy forces. Syria has provided that opportunity. While the conflict Syria, presents a serious challenge to Iran's regional interests, there are positive components for Iranian regional policy.

Militarily, the Syrian War is providing on-the-ground training for thousands of loyal forces and assisting with the construction of more unified proxies willing to fight for Iran's ideological causes. Due to the fact that training regimens were changed (from 2007-2010) to focus more on traditional forms of urban and rural combat, Iran has a foreign legion of sorts which it can use as a rapid reaction force.

This does not mean that these groups have "evolved" out of their abilities to execute asymmetric operations or terrorist attacks. If anything, it has made them far more deadly. Instead, their increased training, better equipment, leadership, and organization has made them into an extremely potent element in future Iranian armed projections around the Middle East.

The threat these organizations pose is not simply limited to direct U.S. interests which can be targeted with conventional munitions. In the long-term, Iran is being viewed by the region's Shi'a masses as their protector. As traditional Shi'a Islamic leaders lose relevance in an increasingly violent and sectarian region, more Shi'a will turn to Iran and its proxies for a sense of empowerment and ideology. This has not been lost on Tehran, which has been actively encouraging its proxies to market Iran and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei as Shi'ism's protector and leader.

If the IRGC-QF trained and equipped Lebanese Hizballah was particularly deadly against U.S. interests in the 1980s, and then Hizballah and IRGC-QF trained Iraqi "Special Groups" (such as Kata'ib Hizballah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) proved their deadliness by killing hundreds of U.S. and Coalition personnel during the Iraq War (2003), it is likely these groups will continue to pose a threat to American interests and forces in the region. Ideologically, they still view the U.S. as their main enemy and if a command comes from

the Wali al-Faqih, these forces will follow orders. In Syria, despite continued losses of their fighters, their power has not appeared to ebb.