



PolicyWatch 2268

Iranian Proxies Step Up Their Role in Iraq

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Iran's proxy groups have been working closely with Iraqi government forces for some time and will likely become more important to Baghdad in light of recent events.

On June 10, Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki publicly called for the establishment of popular militias in response to the latest jihadist offensives in Mosul and other areas. Yet well before this announcement, Iran's proxies -- including Kataib Hezbollah (KH) and Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH) -- had already redeployed some of their forces fighting in Syria back to Iraq. Extensive evidence shows that these proxy groups have been recruiting fighters for Iraq, and that such recruits are working closely with the Iraqi army and Internal Security Forces (ISF).

RECRUITMENT EFFORTS

Iran's proxies have been involved in extensive recruitment efforts for months, with KH stepping up its efforts in late April to rally fighters behind the "defense of Iraq." One result was the establishment of a new group, Saraya al-Dafa al-Shabi (the Popular Defense Companies). In May, an official KH video announced that this force was fighting alongside the ISF. In addition, AAH and another Shiite militia group, the Badr Organization, have established numerous city-based "popular committees" since April.

As early as January, fighters from AAH and the Iranian-guided Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) announced that they had sent forces back to Iraq from Syria. Subsequently, AAH claimed that its fighters were involved in this year's fighting in Fallujah. These redeployments and recruitment efforts also entailed major restructuring of organizations in Syria.

The group Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) and its constituent RRF (also known as Afwaj al-Kafil) are a case in point. Both forces look to Ayatollah Qasim al-Tai -- a cleric who split from Muqtada al-Sadr and embraced the Iranian concept of *velayat-e faqih* (rule by the

jurisprudent) -- as their leader. Initially, these largely Iraqi-staffed forces were marketed as Syria-centric, with their military activities limited to serving as "defenders of Sayyeda Zainab," a Shi'ite shrine in Damascus. The RRF, which appears to have strong links to ISF SWAT teams and to the Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF), was one of the first specialized Iraqi units deployed to Syria in spring 2013.

Yet in January and again in March, LAFA and the RRF were described as "protectors of holy sites in Syria and Iraq," including the Hadi al-Askari shrine in Samarra, Iraq. By mid-May, both groups had launched their own recruitment efforts to field fighters in Iraq. And by late May, the RRF had reportedly deployed to Abu Ghraib, an area with no prominent shrines to "protect."

Since June 5, a multitude of Iranian-backed Shi'ite Islamist groups have actively promoted deployments to Samarra. The introduction of these forces to the city marks a furthering of the "shrine defense" narrative. In a June 7 document published on its social media outlets, the Badr Organization threatened any group that harmed the city's shrines. According to reports from fighters and official webpages belonging to Iranian proxy groups, units from several organizations have been deployed to the city, including Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), Kataib Hezbollah, the Badr Organization, AAH, and Saraya Talia al-Khurasani. The leader of KSS -- Falah Hasan Jassim al-Harishawi (a.k.a. Mustafa al-Khazali) -- is a newly elected member of parliament from Basra and has been photographed in Samarra with Iraqi army and ISF figures.

FROM ALEPPO TO BAGHDAD

Since early this year, the Badr Organization and AAH have announced numerous deaths among their forces in Iraq. A number of these lost fighters have been photographed wearing Iraqi military insignias, including ISF and SWAT logos. Similarly, when the Badr Organization announced the "martyrdom" of Qassem Jamil al-Salami and Hassan Hadi al-Maryani, the memorial posters for the two men showed them in ISOF uniforms, with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gazing down on them.

For its part, KH posted two Iraqi death notices on its internal networks on May 2 and May 4, announcing that members Haydar Jabar Qasim al-Jabari and Falah Hassan Jasim al-Muhamadawi had been killed in Anbar. On June 10, the group reportedly flew limited forces to Mosul Airport; from there, they were deployed to join the battle in that city. That same day, KH member Akram Sami al-Fareej was also cited as a "martyr" reputedly killed in Anbar.

Other groups and fighters have been linked to Anbar as well. On June 7, KSS announced the death of member Ali al-Asmar, who had "defended Sayyeda Zainab...Anbar, and Samarra." And in photos released last month, Ahmed al-Fareej -- a well-known Shi'ite Islamist militant who was listed as a member of the RRF and Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn and had been present at Sayyeda Zainab since 2013 -- was shown firing a mortar in Anbar.

Muhammad Jassim Tohme is another example of a slain militant who fought in Syria and returned to Iraq. According to his "Will of Testament," he had reportedly "participated in resisting the U.S. occupation in Iraq in several battles." When he returned to Iraq from the war in Syria, he continued operating as a fighter associated with Harakat Hezbollah al-

Nujaba. The organization claimed he was dismantling explosive devices north of Baghdad with the Iraqi army when he was killed.

Further demonstrating the modularity of Iran's proxy networks is Muhammad al-Biyadh, another Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba fighter who was listed as a field commander with the group's Ammar ibn Yasir Brigade in Aleppo. There, he gained a level of fame due to video of him singlehandedly firing a machine-gun against enemy forces near Aleppo. When he returned to Iraq, he participated in February protests against *al-Sabah al-Jadeed* newspaper, which had published a cartoon criticizing Ayatollah Khamenei. At the protest, Biyadh was photographed in an ISOF uniform. And in mid-April, he was photographed wearing patches belonging to Faylaq Waad al-Sadiq, a Khomeinist group that had been deployed to Aleppo at the same time he was there. He later claimed to be stationed at Abu Ghraib with Iraqi security forces in May. In June, online outlets affiliated with the group announced that Biyadh had been named as a commander of a newly proposed subgroup called Kataib al-Zahra. Around the same time, this new unit claimed it was deployed with Iraqi SWAT teams to Samarra, where Biyadh reportedly assisted with the dismantling of explosive devices.

In sum, many of the Shiite Islamist forces fighting in Iraq operate as part of Iranian proxy groups that have been attached to ISF and Iraqi army units. Some even operate as a direct part of these official Iraqi military forces.

IRAQ LIKELY TO RELY MORE ON IRANIAN PROXIES

On June 10, LAFAs official Facebook page announced that Iran had mobilized elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to assist Iraq, and that Lebanese Hezbollah had sent units to fight there. Other media outlets have since reported an IRGC presence in Iraq. Although this would be a major development if confirmed, it would hardly be shocking given the many previous deployments by the IRGC and its Arab proxies in Syria. IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani reportedly went to Iraq last week to visit representatives of Iranian-backed organizations -- further evidence that Tehran views the Iraq front as seriously as it does the war in Syria.

Given the difficult security situation it faces, the Iraqi government is likely to become more reliant on these Iranian proxies. The crisis has now hit the point where Iraqi Shiites rightfully view the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as an immediate existential threat, so commands, arms, and training from Iran will most likely be accepted. Nevertheless, Washington must tread a fine line on this matter, supporting efforts to counter ISIS while actively distancing itself from and at least stating its opposition to Iran's direct and sectarian proxy deployments in Iraq.

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