

Foreign Shiite Fighters in the Syrian Civil War: Actors, Recruitment Strategies and Iran's Regional Role

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Abstract: Due to the country's nuclear program, international efforts regarding it and the impact of the sanctions, the economic and political consequences of the termination of these sanctions, and the "proxy war" it actively carries out in the region, Iran has been one of the key focal points of international relations. Iran's efforts to shape its immediate geography through by "proxies" have undergone significant progress, and the Syrian Civil War has been one of the most influential battlefields where Iran has used this "know-how" it had accumulated over years.

In this study, how Iran devised a transboundary strategy to ensure the regime's authority in Syria will be discussed. The study, in order to do so, will provide a general discussion of Iran's post-revolutionary regional ambitions and key actors within this context. After that, the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War dimensions of this regional strategy will be discussed by profiling some key foreign Shi'a actors with an eye on their recruitment strategies online and offline. By doing so, how Iran has become an influential actor in the Syria Civil War, as the battlefield where Iranian regional strategy in a transnational pattern is played out quite effectively will be made sense of.

Key words: Iran, Syria, Quds Force, Fatemiyoun, Shi'a, Foreign Fighters

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Suriye İç Savaşı’nda Şii Yabancı Savaşçılar: Savaşçı Devşirme Stratejileri ve İran’ın Bölgesel Rolü

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Özet: Ülkenin nükleer programı, bununla ilgili uluslararası çabalar ve yaptırımların etkisi, bu yaptırımların sona ermesinin ekonomik ve politik sonuçları ve bölgede aktif olarak izlediği “vekâlet savaşı” stratejisi nedeniyle İran, uluslararası ilişkilerin gündeminde oldukça önemli bir yer işgal etmektedir. İran’ın yakın coğrafyasını şekillendirmeye yönelik çabaları “vekiller” yoluyla önemli bir ilerleme kaydetmiş ve Suriye İç Savaşı, İran’ın yıllar boyunca biriktirdiği bu “know-how” ı kullandığı en etkili savaş alanlarından biri olmuştur.

Bu çalışmada, İran’ın Suriye’deki rejimin otoritesini sağlamak için sınır aşan bir strateji geliştirdiği öne sürülmektedir. Çalışma, bu argümanı temellendirmek adına İran’ın devrim sonrası bölgesel hedefleri ve bu bağlamdaki kilit aktörlerin genel bir tartışmasını sunacaktır. Takiben, Arap Baharı ve Suriye İç Savaşı kapsamında bu bölgesel stratejinin, bazı önemli Şii’i aktörlerin oyuna dahil edilme süreçlerinin çevrimiçi ve çevrimdışı süreçleri göz önünde bulundurarak bir profillemeye çalışması üzerinden tartışılacaktır. Böylelikle İran’ın bölgesel stratejisi bağlamında sahaya en etkin biçimde ağırlığını koyduğu alanlardan olan Suriye’de nasıl bir sınır-aşan strateji üzerinden etkin konuma geldiğinin anlaşılması hedeflenmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İran, Suriye, Kudüs Gücü, Fatimiyun, Şi’a, Yabancı Savaşçılar

Use of Shiite militias as a means of increasing influence in the context of the “Export of Revolution” and “Axis of Resistance” discourses

Following the revolution, an important stage with respect to the efforts to broaden the influence of the regime or to establish the “Shiite Axis” or “axis of resistance” has been the aftermath of the US intervention in Iraq. Aiming to increase its influence in Iraq step by step following 2003, Iran set, on the one hand, off to increase its political influence on both the central government and the KRG, and, on the other, tried to boost its military influence in the country through the Hashd al-Shaabi organization with around 140 thousand fighters, which Iran invested in heavily to strengthen and to be recognized as an official security apparatus by the central government. Thus, it was a clear achievement within the context of Iran’s broader “proxy game” that the group’s militias gradually come to be paid by the Iraqi government especially thanks to the group’s perceived contributions to the fight against ISIS.

The Arab Spring has been the next and probably the most manifested examples of Iran’s adherence to the concept of “proxy war”. Iran, which aims to have an influence upon a broad region stretching from Bahrain and to Yemen through Shiism after the Arab Spring, also strived to engender and/or support like-minded groups in the countries where the Shiite population is not the majority by utilizing its critical attitude towards foreign interventions in the context of the Arab Spring. Following the Arab Spring, as an extension of the phenomenon itself, the Syrian Civil War has been the peak point of Iranian desire to project its influence abroad where a more integrated and multi-linguistic approach is adopted to the concept of “proxy warfare”. In the context of the Syrian Civil War, becoming one of the most influential actors not only on the field, but also on the table partly thanks to the Shiite militias it brought to Syria along with the country’s direct support to the regime in Syria, its support for Bashar al-Assad, and close contact with Russia, Iran has made a serious breakthrough at the point of shaping both Iraq and Syria by means of the Shiite identity and its “proxies”. In this sense, the Shiite militia groups joining the Syrian civil war from outside of the country, the very last and maybe the most effective phase in terms of the process of advancements in the Iranian strategy and experience of using proxies, will be discussed in this study. Firstly, after the evaluation of the non-state armed actors and the security problems that could be caused by them, the Syrian Civil War and the gradually increasing influence of Iran through the process will be analyzed. Later on, “foreign Shiite militias”, as one of the most crucial tools of this influence, will be discussed with short profiles of the existing groups. Finally, how this emerging atmosphere might have an impact on the Syrian Civil War, regional politics and regional and international balance of power will be discussed.

Carl Schmitt’s concept of “grossraum politics” which refers to Nazi Germany is a quite useful conceptualization in order to understand Iranian regional policy

and the motivations behind the regime's ambitions (Farzam & Sarı, 2017, p. 269). According to Schmitt, there are three components in "grossraum politics". The first component is a state located at the core; the second component is the idea that this state mechanism represents and through which it keeps itself strong and dynamic, and the third component is a geographical belt. This geographic belt is the area where the state can both expand its influence and strengthen its position by establishing channels to exert influence, if not direct control. In line with Schmitt's idea, the existence of all these three components provided Iran with a mechanism through which it can exert influence; a dynamic state mechanism and the ideological euphoria of the post-revolutionary period at the core, the Shi'a system of thought that nourished and justified the revolution itself, and the geography Iran wants to "export" the revolution and/or in which it desires to increase its influence. In this context, the Iranian-Iraqi War, which was considered to offer an important opportunity, failed to yield to the expected result and the revolution was not exported to Iraq, thus, making the export model enter into a period of relative stagnation. The Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, in this context, has played a vital role. The Revolutionary Guards, one of the main actors in ensuring Iran's Shia militia mobility outside the country, is one of the major actors that needs to be examined in this context. The Revolutionary Guards take their legal basis from Article 150 of the Iranian Constitution. According to this article, "The Islamic Pasdaran Revolutionary Corps, established in the early days of the victory of the Revolution, will remain in effect in order to continue in its role of protecting the Revolution and its achievements. The range of the duties and responsibilities of this Corps, in relation to the duties and range of responsibilities of other armed forces, will be determined by law, with emphasis on fraternal cooperation and harmony among them" ("Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran", WIPO). The Revolutionary Guards, which could enjoy a wide range of activities without any geographical boundaries thanks to this legal basis, do not only have the primary objective of the protection of the revolution, but can also take actions ranging from construction to cultural and agricultural activities, and constitute a quite discreet and disciplined structure with 230,000 land, 15,000 air and 20,000 naval forces. The Quds Force, which is a sub-unit of the Revolutionary Guards and commanded by Qasem Soleimani, is the main actor in the context of the activities abroad. This structure, which is thought to be between 15 and 20 thousand strong, is responsible for military activities outside Iran. Members of this unit undergo military and intelligence training in Tehran and Shiraz, followed by religious education and indoctrination in the city of Qum (Fazram & Sarı, 2017, p 274).

Accordingly, the export of revolution model was revised in the post-2003 period in such a way that the new main goal was to increase the Iranian sphere of influence and to back up and direct the "proxy" armed groups in line with this objective. In this context, the Hashd al-Shaabi structure in Iraq constitutes an important example. The Hashd al-Shaabi structure, which has been established

step by step as an umbrella structure, has more than 40 large and small Shiite militia forces under its umbrella. Over time, thanks to Iran's increasing influence and the mechanism that has been transformed into a structure which the official and central government of Iraq accepts the legitimacy of it and the discourse of its possible contribution to the fight against ISIS, has turned into an integrated identity within the Iraqi security apparatus, the salaries of which are paid by the central government.

One of the most important breakpoints in the post-Arab Spring period is that the international crisis related to the nuclear program has been resolved for at least a period of time by 2015. This provided Iran with both the room to maneuver and the possibility of using funds to transform this room for maneuverability into direct influence on the field. Particularly, it is seen that the Iranian influence, which has been increasing gradually in the Syrian Civil War, has coincided with this timeline of the nuclear crisis. In this context, while especially Fatemiyoun and Zeynabiyoun Brigades come to the fore, several organizations such as Quds Forces, Hezbollah, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, Zulfikar Brigade, Iraqi Hezbollah, Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigade, Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, al-Sadiq Brigade, Assadullah Galip Brigade, Imam Hossein Brigade, the Mahdi Army, make their presences actively felt. Although Iran's increasing influence over these groups in Syria did not significantly come to the fore until 2015, it has been seen that Iran has increasingly strengthened its role at the international level in the context of Syria's current situation and its future especially following the process that started with the Vienna meeting by the end of 2015. Therefore, Iran, along with Russia, has not only contributed significantly to the recovery of the regime in the country and to the survival of the regime through the Shiite militias, but also increased its influence on Syria and has persuaded the international community either willingly or unwillingly that the country is among the key actors for a settlement

1. Syria and the Rise of Shiite non-state Actors

In this study, which examines the Shiite militias in Syria, before entering into a detailed discussion on the origin of the Shiite warriors and on the profiling of groups, it should be mentioned that Iran follows different ways of recruiting warriors. In addition to many fighters originating from Lebanon and Iran as a natural result of the Hezbollah-driven moves, similar to the ISIS and Al-Qaida examples, Iran also displays an important activity in channeling the Shiite fighters from countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, Yemen (Zaydis) and Iraq. It is also known that the tools such as social media and messaging applications such as Telegram are also used intensively by Tehran for the purpose of recruiting foreign fighters and expanding the human resources pool by making use of religious symbols. For instance, there are information forms whi-

ch the potential members are expected to fill with personal information through these channels, and following the access through telephone, detailed information of these people such as the ethnic and sectarian identities, family information and so on are also received (Smyth, 2014(b), s. 29). As physical contact points, it is known that in Afghanistan, the offices in Kabul and Herat are charged with recruiting new fighters and send them to conflict zones. Following this process, new warriors sent to Iran are deployed to the conflict zones after a short military training period lasting around a month (Peterson, 2016). Considering that the Syrian Army which had approximately 200 thousand soldiers at the beginning of the civil war fell to about 100 thousand by the end of 2017, and at the end of 2017 the number was between 20 and 30 thousand, the importance of the support provided by these foreign fighters whose numbers were considered to be between 150 and 200 thousand to the regime and the role of this support in the regime's re-gaining the control over the lost territories are better understood (Lister & Nelson, 2017; Kam, 2017).

Iran took her place next to the Assad regime in Syria from the very start of the demonstrations, reiterated the idea it adopted with respect to the Arab Spring in general and stated that this was an "instigation set up by external actors" (Worth, 2012). Following the demonstrations in Syria in 2011, Iran and Hezbollah declared their support for the Syrian regime and as of 2012, started to provide direct and indirect assistance to the country (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 3). As Hinnebusch pointed out, the struggle in Syria witnessed a competitive intervention environment, which would have significant implications on which side of the balance of regional power would shift. Both the regional countries and the global powers started to increase their presence and strength in the field as much as their respective spheres of influence expanded (Hinnebusch, 2015).

The fear that the possible overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, one of the most "nonexpendable" actors in the region for Iran and which has proved to be the closest partner to Iran after the revolution, would replace Assad with an anti-Iran regime that could damage the existing relationship has been the main motivation behind Iran's support for the Syrian regime. Furthermore, the possible subsequent weakening of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi regime in such a scenario, which has gradually emerged as a result of the post-2003 period and had close contact with Iran provided as an additional impetus. Iraq has been already suffering from the fight against ISIS along with the tensions with Northern Iraq, and in order to avoid a possible additional impact on the regime coming from Syria that could result in a more weakened pro-Iran actor, Iran felt the need to be more engagement-minded in Syria. By doing so, the goal was to project a strength that could protect the Iraqi regime from likely threats and help the Syrian regime survive through the support it receives by the Iraqi Shiite groups (Termill, 2015, p. 226-228; Cigar, 2015). As such, Iran's increasingly active role in Syria appears to be a part of the country's regional leadership effort and its strategy to achieve regional superiority in the

Middle East. In that light, for Iran which had economic, political and cultural barriers to its leadership in the region through conventional and symmetric military means, one of the most important fields in terms of establishing a permanent network and increasing its influence through “proxies” in the region has been Syria since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

When Iran’s goals some of which were already present since the very beginning of the crisis and some others developed and shaping in the course of the process are considered, its main goals in the agenda in Syria can be enumerated as follows: the elimination of the Nusra Front and ISIS, return to the pre-civil war situation and the restoration of the control of the regime over the country, the maintenance of a regional power base for the future policies and current ambitions of Iran, increasing Iran’s visibility and influence in the international arena on the occasion of the Syrian Civil War, and the enhancement of military and political influence of Iran both in Syria and in Iraq by efficiently benefiting from the civil war.

As a result of the oppositional groups’ advances in the wake of the intensification of the Civil War in Syria, Iran, transformed People’s Committees into “National Defense Force” of 90 to 100 thousand people after 2012 with a more professional training and higher levels of support (“Iranian Forces and Shia Militia in Syria”, 2018; Hatzman, 2019). The assassination of two high-level commanders from the Quds Force in Damascus in 2012 and 2013, the dates that could be considered as early phases of the Syrian Civil War, reveals Iran’s early involvement in the process and in the capacity building efforts for the National Defense Force (“Syria: Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces, 2013). Due to the lack of proper capabilities of these forces as well as the advances of the opposition, Iran had to send troops directly through the discourse of protecting the Shia holy places. Nevertheless, as a result of the Iranian casualties which even increased with this latest decision, Iranian position gradually more and more tended to organize and strengthen “proxies” rather than sending direct military forces. In line with this decision, Iran channeled militias from Lebanon and Iraq in 2012, from Afghanistan and Yemen in 2013, and from Pakistan to Syria in 2014. As a result of this effort, it is estimated that the Revolutionary Guards with 8 to 10 thousand forces, the National Defense Force with 90 to 100,000 forces, Hezbollah with 5 to 8,000 forces, Fatemiyoun Brigades with 10 to 12 thousand fighters, and the Nujaba Movement with around 9,000 warriors, Mukhtar al-Thaqfi Brigade with 1,500-2,000 forces, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas with around 4,500 forces, Imam Baqir Brigade with 1500-2000 forces, Kata’ib Hezbollah with around 1,500 forces and Zeynabiyoun Brigade with 1000 forces are on the ground (Farzam & Sarı, 2017, p. 277). According to the report published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 2018, 1213 Lebanese (including 75 serving at the command level of Hezbollah), 841 Afghans, 535 Iranian, 153 Pakistani and 112 Iraqi Shiite have died in Syria between the years of 2012-2018, further showing the “internationalization” of the

conflict thanks to Iranian efforts (Alfoneh, 2018). In this context, the letter sent by the Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani to Khamenei in November 2017 is of great importance. In this letter, the commander said while the operation in the Abu Kamal region in Syria was completed, this was one of the last regions of ISIS, and thus declared the end of the terrorist organization, but more importantly, added that he was grateful for those Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Afghan and Pakistani fighters who “sacrificed” their lives. In his reply, Khamenei sent his thanks to the “sacred fighter brothers” from Iraq, Syria and “other” places and congratulated their victory (Alfoneh, 2018).

In this internationalized civil war atmosphere and as a result of the Iranian efforts to channel the energy of its “axis of resistance” to the Syrian battlefield, the next section will touch upon different Shi’a non-state armed actors on the ground with an eye on not only their profiles and areas of operation, but also their strategies in terms of bringing more and more human resources to Syria.

2. Foreign Militias and Shi’a Non-State Armed Actors in Syria

a. Hezbollah

Hezbollah, established in Lebanon in 1982 for the main purpose of fighting against Israel, has gradually increased its influence not only in Lebanon but also in the Middle East in general. Hezbollah, by establishing an alternative economic, political and social mechanism that acts independently of the system, prioritized providing an alternative space for the Shi’a population in Lebanon which would result in their recognition of the group as the only interlocutor instead of the state establishment.

In May 2011, Hassan Nasrallah announced his support for the Syrian regime before the demonstrations had turned into violence. In the early years, Hezbollah’s engagement was mostly based on military advice and support. Although the funerals of the people who were alleged to have been affiliated with Hezbollah in 2011 and 2012 were taken to Lebanon and buried, the group refrained from expressing its direct engagement in the conflict. As a critical juncture in this context in 2013, Hezbollah had to step up its role in the Syrian Civil War, even increasing its own presence in the field (Sullivan, 2014, p. 11-13). In April 2013, Nasrallah traveled to Tehran where he met with Qasem Soleimani and Khamenei, followed by increasing Hezbollah presence on the field. When Nasrallah returned to Beirut following the trip, he openly accepted, for the first time, Hezbollah presence in favor of the regime in Syria and signaled in his speech on TV that the aid would continue and the group would not allow Syria to fall into the hands of “the US, Israel or unfaithful groups.” (Sullivan, 2014 ,p. 14)

Hezbollah makes payments around between 500 and 1200 dollars to those who join the Syrian civil war (Ghaddar, 2017, p. 15-19). It is argued that approximately 8 to 15 percent (4 thousand to 8 thousand) of Hezbollah’s human force,

estimated to be around 50 thousand in total, has been transferred to Syria (Evans, 2013 and “Iranian Forces and Shia Militia in Syria”, 2018). However, because of the two main issues, Hezbollah’s engagement in Syria has aroused unrest within the group itself: the engagement of the organization in a broader territory in contrast with the aim of protecting the Shiite sacred sites and its fight against the opposition in Syria in particular; the provision of lesser economic opportunities to those who now fight in Syria compared to those who fought against Israel in 2006). More than 800 Hezbollah militants were killed between 2012 and 2016 in Syria alone. These figures vary between 1300 and 1500 by Israeli sources, and 5000 are reported to be injured (Joshi, 2016, p. 26-27).

While Hezbollah was pretty active in Syria, firstly in the regions close to the border with Lebanon, in al-Kuseyr between April and June 2013, and in Kalamun between May and June 2014, it expanded its engagement over time. When the regime shifted its focus to Aleppo in June 2013, it was stated that Hezbollah only had a force of 4,000 fighters around the city. The group while confirming its engagement in Aleppo stated that it would give only indirect support, and provide consultative support to the Syrian Army and the National Defense Force through Hezbollah commanders and experts. In Zahraa and Nubl, it was stated that there were around 2,000 Hezbollah fighters, who also trained the National Defense Force. However, as the operation of Aleppo did not achieve the desired success, the regime returned to its priority of protecting its gains in Homs after June 2013, and Hezbollah played an active role in the operations against the opposition in the region. Hezbollah, which plays a more limited role here, has been stated to provide more military and communication support along with the snipers it supplied and its special forces (Sullivan, 2014, p. 17-19 and Termill, 2015, p. 234).

Hezbollah played an important role, too, in the Russian-backed siege of Aleppo in 2015-2016 and the capture of Sheikh Mesqin in June 2016 and the advances towards Deraa in July 2016. Beyond al-Qusayr, Hezbollah’s most crucial role is thought to be played in Damascus. Here, one of the most important roles in the defense of Sayyidah Zaynab shrine was played by Lebanese Hezbollah fighters as well as Iraqi Shiite militias. It is known that the group of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, who emerged as the most influential group in the conflict in this region, received many fighters from Hezbollah along with the Iraq-based Zulfikar Army, which emerged in the mid-2013 (Blanford: 2013, p. 18-22). In this regard, it would be appropriate to consider the “siege of Aleppo” as a move in which Iran has been able to mobilize Shiite groups from different ethnicities in the field and to provide them with military and technical support and consultancy.

In 2013, shortly before Hezbollah secretary-general, Nasrallah Hezbollah announced the presence of its forces in Syria, the group also launched efforts to recruit fighters online. The Sayyidah Zaynab shrine was one of the most commonly used images in these online efforts. The phone numbers and website (ValieAmr.com) directives are available for the volunteers to contact.

On some websites exists a separate phone number for those who do not only contact directly but also leave and send messages. In May 2013, ValieAmr.com has announced that over 3200 people have registered to fight in Syria. The Ghobe.ir website also began accepting volunteers and meeting them on the “Syrian border”. Facebook is another tool that has been frequently used in gathering and distributing contact information to volunteers. In these advertisements, Zulfiqar Army stated that the contact information was for the “pilgrims” who wanted to go to the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 25-28).

It can be argued that the primary objectives of Hezbollah in Syria are to strengthen its presence in Golan, and thus to fight against Israel on a wider front from “Nakura to Golan”, and to establish close relations with the Druze community in the southern regions of Syria. The killing by Israel of Lebanese Druze Samir Kuntar, a member of Hezbollah, who was actively involved in the field in December 2015, is a significant development that has drawn attention to this very second objective (Smyth, 2014(b): 30). It is foreseen that the Golan Heights, which have been declared as a “red line” by Israel and which then witnessed limited military interventions, will constitute a lasting focal point in the foreseeable future due to these irreconcilable positions of Hezbollah and Israel.

b. Fatemiyoun and Zeynabiyoun Brigades

The defense of Sayyidah Zaynab shrine was described by the Shiite actors as the “Holy Defense” / “al-Difa al-Muqaddes”, which is also known to have been used during the Iran-Iraq War. In this context, the tomb has a central role both in terms of regional Shi’a politics and the increase of Iran’s influence in the region. In 2003 alone, more than 200 thousand Iranian tourists visited the venue. In the formation and strengthening processes of both Fatemiyoun and Zeynabiyoun Brigades, the tomb and the role of the defense of this tomb have stand out as the main objective (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 5). It should be stated that the strategic importance of the region, which is located in the south of Damascus and west of the international airport, is also quite critical.

In the second half of 2014, due to the rise of ISIS in Iraq and subseuent shortage of human resources from Iraqi Shiites who unsurprisingly prioritized the Iraqi front, Iran wanted Hezbollah to operate more actively in the field, Iranian military authorities assumed direct responsibilities in Syria and Iran tried to ensure the flow of Shiite fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan to the field (Bucala, 2017, p. 3).

Fatemiyoun Brigade, composed of militias from the Shiite Hazara population in Afghanistan, is one of the most active non-state Shi’a armed actors in Syria. It would be valid to argue that Fatemiyoun Brigade was built on a remarkable experience of “proxy war” when Iran was considered to have taken advantage of the Afghan Hazaras in the Iran-Iraq War (Reuter, 2014). Besides, it is seen that

the Afghan asylum seekers in Iran, the number of which is almost 3 million and only one third legally having migrant status (Peterson, 2016), constitute an important human resource for Fatemiyoun Brigade. Some of these people are sent to the Syrian area with promises such as citizenship, and economic support and citizenship to their families if they lose their lives in conflict. These fighters who fought under the umbrella of various groups (especially Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and the Afghan Hezbollah) when they were first sent to Syria, began in time to fight for the Fatemiyoun Brigade, affiliated with the Quds Force (Fazram & Sari, 2017, p. 279-280). The hawkish Kayhan Newspaper claimed that the Fatemiyoun Brigade is not organized by Iran and that a commander called Ali Reza Tavassoli (Abu Hamid) and 25 volunteers had gone to Syria to protect the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine who himself organized 5 thousand Shiite Afghans who had already lived Damascus. Nevertheless, Ali Reza Tavassoli in question went to Iran to join the Abuzar Brigade in 1984. It is known that the Abuzar Brigade is the branch of the Revolutionary Guards Office of Freedom Movements in Afghanistan. After the Iraq-Iran War, Tavassoli fought against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 90s and in 2006 he was in Lebanon against Israel. There is no reliable data on Tavassoli organizing Afghan fighters, except for his connection with Afghanistan in the past. Following Tavassoli's death on Deraa on February 28, 2015, and Rıza Bakhshi's death, who was seen as the second man on February 18, 2015, Iran increased its direct engagement with the structure, which was later understood due to the killings of several Iranian mid-level commanders. The rapid increase in losses and the loss of more Afghans after January 2017 also led to the idea that Iran perceived Afghans as more "expandable" fighters in Syria compared to Iranians (Alfoneh, 2017).

Generally speaking, when the profiles of the Afghan fighters who make up the Fatemiyoun Brigade are taken into account, it is possible to mention three main groups. The first group is Afghan immigrants who had settled in the country before the civil war began in Syria. They were already settled in the south of Damascus around the Sayyidah Zaynab shrine. It is stated that the number of these people is about 2 thousand (Smyth, 2014(a)). Following this group fighting under Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas group, the second is the Afghan Shiite asylum seekers who live in Iran and come from cities such as Tehran, Qum, and Mashhad. The third group consists of the Shiites, who were brought directly from Afghanistan to Syria by the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force. Considering the current figures in total, the number of Afghan Hazaras in Syria is estimated to be around 20 thousand. Many of the Afghan asylum seekers in Iran, who suffer from citizenship problems and economic woes, fight for economic gains of 500 to 700 dollars per month, due to sectarian motivations, and for the purpose of obtaining Iranian citizenship for themselves and /or their families. The citizenship law, which was approved in 2016, played an important role motivating these people to travel to Syria to fight, too. It was stated that the law envisaging the granting of citizenship

to the people who fought and died for Iran in the Iran-Iraq War would also include fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan who fight in Syria (Farzam & Sarı, 2017, p. 280-281; Peterson, 2016; Termill, 2015:, p. 235). Furthermore, the funerals of those who came from Afghanistan and died in Syria are shown in the media, and images of a new headquarters that is opened in Herat for Basij militias (Peterson, 2016). The funeral ceremonies also include uniformed Revolutionary Guards and the posters including the emblem of the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation of Iran. The short interrogation video of an Afghan warrior seized by the Free Syrian Army in October 2012 was broadcasted on Youtube. In July 2013, a photo of a fighter named Safer Mohammad, who lost his life in Syria, was officially published, and the Hezbollah flag, the regime flag and the flag of Afghanistan were used together in the declaration of his “martyrdom” (Smyth, 2014(a)). It has been asserted that more than 640 Shiite Afghans have lost their lives while fighting in Syria (Alfoneh, 2017).

The Pakistani Shiite fighters, on the other hand, are fighting under Zeynabiyoun Brigades. Since 2013, many Pakistani Shiites from the Turi tribe and the Hazaras from the Quetta have arrived in Syria to fight (Rathore, 2017 and Heistein & West, 2015). The number of Pakistanis who have fought and died in Syria is considered to be more than 20 whose funeral ceremonies were performed (Alfoneh, 2015) while in total 153 fighters given in the Carnegie report mentioned above seems to be offering a more realistic number in sum. In any case, this figure suggests that Zeynabiyoun Brigades and Pakistani Shiites, in general, have a relatively low profile in Syria. According to the Facebook page of Zeynabiyoun Brigades, volunteers are expected to be 18 to 35-year-old and physically ready. People who will participate in the war will be paid 1200 dollars a month and provided with a 15-days holiday every three months. When the group's activities in the field are examined, it is seen that the fighters of Zeynabiyoun Brigade first lost their lives while defending Sayyidah Zaynab shrine and seven of them died in the defense of Imam Hasan Mosque in Damascus later on. In March and April 2016, at least 11 Pakistani Shiite fighters, who were killed in Syria, were buried in the city of Qum (Zahid, 2016).

It is thought that the structure was commanded and administrated by Abbas al Moussawi. In that respect, al-Mustafa University in the City of Qum has been one of the centers where Pakistani Shiites are militarized and sent to the field. There are also some graduates of the university who have fought and died in the Zeynabiyoun Brigades (Alfoneh, 2018). After the Pakistani Shiites' closer contact was established with the Quds Force following the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, it is thought that the core of this organization emerged as a result of the pressure on the Shiites in Pakistan, constituting 20 to 25 percent of the population. As a consequence of the sectarian tension in Pakistan, 9904 people have lost their lives in 3021 attacks since 1986 (Zahid, 2016).

c. İraçî Şiiite Mililitias and the Syrian Civil War

Following the capture of Mosul by ISIS in June 2014, a Şiiite group called Kata'ib al-İmam Ali emerged in İraç. This structure, founded by the people who left the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, is known to have particularly brutal killing methods and to spread them online. Recruitment and propaganda activities of Kata'ib al-İmam Ali for the Syrian civil war are carried out by the group more intensely than many other groups. It is known that the group strive to recruit fighters in the vicinity of Najaf by using photographs of Sayyidah Zaynab shrine through the offices, billboards and social media accounts of the group. Jafar al-Bindavi, the former training and logistics chief of the group, announced that he would manage the transfer of fighters to Syria and Ali Nizam would operate as the logistics director (Smyth, 2015). In May 2013, another actor, the İraçî-based Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada group declared its aim as the protection of Şiiite sacred places around the world (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 24).

Another group of İraçî Şiiite fighters in Syria is the Movement Hezbollah al-Nujaba or Nujaba Movement. The Nujaba Movement was formed as a separate group from the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq group and was founded in 2013 by Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi. The group was one of the first İraçî-based groups to send forces to Damascus and to confirm that they were involved in the conflict in Aleppo. It is known that these two groups operate very closely. In such a way to display this close relationship, the photos showing that general-secretary of Kata'ib al-İmam Ali Shebl al Zaydi and Nujaba Movement leader Kaabi examining maps and targets together were shared by both parties. In addition, after the death of Nujaba's commander of Aleppo, Alaa al-Mousavi, both groups praised al-Mousavi as a "martyr" who fought for the "defense of the holy places".

Through social media, the Nujaba Movement announced in May 2013 that it was active in Aleppo, Nubl, and Zahraa (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 45-51). Beginning in July 2015, the Nujaba Movement announced that it had increased its military presence in Idlib, Kaabi paid a visit to check the Nujaba fighters on the field, and the group stated that these fighters intended to take back Jisr al-Shugur which is in the hands of Jaysh al-Fateh. Social media accounts linked to Kata'ib al-İmam Ali also announced in July that the group sent fresh troops along with experienced fighters to the region, and several photos of the fighters in Damascus were published while the group announced that "great victories" were achieved in Syria. In August, it was announced from the TV channel of the Nujaba Movement that the fighters of the group were actively fighting around Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia.

In addition to the aforementioned two main groups, it is seen that some other groups try to increase their activities in the field, too. First of all, large groups such as Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (under the name of Liwa al-Sayyida) (Clarke & Smyth, 2017, p. 14-18) and Kata'ib Hezbollah send fighters to Syria. In 2014, the Badr Organization made a photo including Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Ayatollah Khamenei and a telephone number from which the volunteers

could get the contact information in the cover photo of its Facebook page (Quwet al-Shahid Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr) and urged the volunteers to the “defense of Sayyidah Zaynab shrine”. The organization was also one of the first groups to use YouTube in its efforts to recruit fighters, and in even mid-2014, uploaded Youtube videos containing images of war in Syria accompanied by songs praising the ideology of the group and directing viewers to the organization’s Facebook page. The images in the videos were later broadcasted on the TV channel of the group, al-Qadir TV, too (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 29). Furthermore, Kata’ib al-Muqawama al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq, the military flank of the movement al-Imam Zain al-Abidin, launched the fighter recruitment program for Syria in July 2015. The structure established by Sayyid Qasem al-Musavi in June 2014 sent, for the first time, troops to Samarra.

Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Nujaba Movement confirmed their presence in the Syrian area and marched in May and June 2013 for the fighters who died in Syria. As to the Badr Organization, it initially remained silent regarding its presence in Syria first, and announced its presence in Syria in July 2013 after its two members were killed in Syria (Smyth, 2014(b), p. 24).

Iran’s experience of supporting and strengthening the Shiite militias in Syria after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a valuable experience in terms of channeling Iraqi Shiite militias to the Syrian field. While Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Revolutionary Force Quds Force, brings together groups that resulted in the emergence of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, which has serious manpower, military capability and legitimacy in Iraq, and will enable Shiite groups to increase their weight in politics and on the military field, thanks to his experience and relations with the groups, he managed to organize and strengthen the Shiite militias in Syria, and facilitate the transfer of some groups in Iraq to Syria especially after 2013, too (Phillips & Valbjørn, 2018, p. 423).

Conclusion

One of Iran’s significant gains following the relaxation of the tension over its nuclear program is that it has gained a significantly broader room for maneuver in terms of being more actively involved in regional politics, especially thanks to more and more financial capability to be channeled to these efforts. Displaying a supportive positioning to the regimes since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Iran has found the opportunity to show this attitude on the field in the Syrian area most, and became one of the most influential actors of the civil war by integrating the Shiite fighters from various countries into the equation and using its already existing capacity more aggressively for the projection of the organization and operational skills of these groups in the field. In this context, in order to support the regime in Syria, Iran wanted to channel and improve if needed, the capabilities

of Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite groups, Afghan and Pakistani groups into the Syrian field with an eye on also expanding its own “grossraum”. In addition to the long-term impacts of the existence of like-minded figures and armed groups in the countries where these actors are currently located, Iran’s ability to direct groups from different countries to specific targets would also enable Iran to benefit from their increasing organizational and military capability in this process when they return their homes (Byman, 2018, p. 111). Therefore, the “Syrian laboratory” has provided Iran with a ground where it could test its experience and gains in the context of the “proxy war” concept in the region over the years, the depth of its connections with the local militia and its ability to hold different groups together and direct them to the same target (Bucala, 2017, p. 12).

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