

Iran's Shiite Foreign Legion

Ephraim Kam

A significant and troubling phenomenon has been taking shape in Iran's regional conduct over the past few years. Iranian military advisors, operating under the authority of the Quds Force, have been involved in the fighting in Syria since 2012, almost from the outset of the civil war. A turning point occurred in 2014, with the emergence of the Islamic State organization and its seizure of large areas of Syria and Iraq. Following this dramatic development, Iran sent ground forces into Syria, under the leadership of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, to fight alongside the Syrian army in extricating the Assad regime from its difficult situation. However, as more details emerge regarding Iran's military involvement in Syria, the more it is evident that from a numerical perspective, the bulk of the Iranian forces that Iran has dispatched to Syria do not comprise Iranian forces but rather Shiite militias fighters from other countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, all under Iranian leadership.

The Operational Model

The idea of building armed Shiite militias to do Iranian work is not new to Tehran's strategic concept. As early as 1982, three years after the Islamic Revolution, the regime established Hezbollah in Lebanon to fight on its behalf against IDF forces in southern Lebanon. In recent years, Iran has sent thousands of Hezbollah fighters to Syria to help the Assad regime fight its opponents. In addition, over the past decade, Iran has either established or helped establish armed Shiite militias in Iraq. These frameworks were meant to promote Iranian aims, such as assisting the Shiite camp in Iraq – which constitutes the majority in the country – to seize control of government institutions and security forces, push out the American forces operating

Dr. Ephraim Kam is a senior research fellow at INSS.

there, and consolidate Iranian influence in the country. The Afghan and Pakistani militias are newer forces set up by the Iranians in recent years, built on Afghan and Pakistani Shiite refugees who fled to Iran and remained there. These refugees volunteered in large numbers for the Shiite militias established by Iran, in exchange for payment or the assurance that they would be granted Iranian citizenship or Iranian work and residency permits. To build the Afghan militias, the Quds Force apparently recruited volunteers from the Shiite minority in western Afghanistan as well.

The Shiite militias were organized and trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, which technically operates under the authority of the Revolutionary Guards (although General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, reports directly to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei), and Iranian officers were assigned to them as commanders and instructors. After undergoing basic training, they were sent to Syria to take part in combat, where many were killed or wounded in battle.

While Russia's position on the militias in Syria is unclear, it appears supportive of their participation in the fighting, and in any event, certainly does not oppose it. This position may be influenced by the fact that Russia itself used irregular volunteer forces, *inter alia* in its military action in Ukraine. Note that since Russia intervened in the fighting in Syria, Russian officers, with representatives of Iran, Hezbollah, and Assad's army, have manned joint operations centers. Less clear is how Russia's interest in working with the United States in brokering a settlement in Syria will influence Russia's views on the future use of militias.

From Iran's perspective, Hezbollah is the preferable model of a Shiite militia. Inherently linked to Iran to a much greater extent than the other militias, the mutual obligation between Iran and Hezbollah is more substantive than the mutual obligation between Iran and the other militias. Hezbollah adopted the Iranian model, with a religious leader rather than a political or military figure at the helm of the organization. Hezbollah's military capability is highly significant: it has existed for 35 years and has more than 18 years of experience of warfare against Israel. In its activity in Lebanon, it regards itself as fighting for its home. In addition, its religious and sectoral Shiite motivation is more prominent and significant than that of the other militias, which also makes it more dangerous. In contrast, it is difficult to imagine fighters from Pakistan or Afghanistan – and to a certain extent, even Iraq – fighting with such devotion for a land that is not theirs,

hundreds and thousands of kilometers from their homes, even if they are following Iranian orders and are driven by strong Shiite religious motivation.

Hezbollah serves as the preferred model of a Shiite militia for another reason as well. It began as a small terrorist organization whose primary aim was not only to bring about the withdrawal of IDF forces from southern Lebanon but also the withdrawal of American and French forces from Beirut by means of attacks against their soldiers. However, over the years, with the assistance of Iran, Hezbollah has transformed itself into a military organization that though small, is armed with quality weaponry, including a large rocket arsenal, which has made it the most important military force in Lebanon. Moreover, Hezbollah has become an important religious organization, political party, and social movement in Lebanon, which has also helped the country's Shiite population develop into the strongest and most important minority in Lebanon while taking advantage of the weakness of the Lebanese government and its military system. Based on this example, Iran appears to harbor expectations that the other militias linked to it – particularly the Iraqi militias – will attain political power and assist in the expansion of Iranian power in their respective countries.

The second most important group of militias consists of the Iraqi Shiite militias, which after 2014 united under an umbrella framework known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). From Iran's perspective, the advantage of these groups lies in their longstanding ties to Iran, which reach back more than a decade, as well their combat experience against the American forces stationed in Iraq since 2003. Iran seeks to make use of these groups to strengthen the Shiite camp, establish its desired corridor from Iran to Syria, consolidate Iranian control along both sides of segments of the border between Iraq and Syria, and reduce US influence in the region and in Iraq itself.

The older Iraqi Shiite militias were established when US forces operated in Iraq following the conquest of the country, as a response to the American occupation. The militias can be divided into two principal groups. The larger of the two consists of militias that were established and trained by Iran and/or receive support from Iran in the form of arms and financial assistance, and whose members were trained by the Quds Force. The largest, strongest, and most important militia in this category is the Badr organization, which fought beside Iran against Saddam Hussein's army during the Iraq-Iran War, and whose commander, Hadi al-Amiri, is reportedly a close friend of

Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. The two smaller militias with ties to Iran are Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah.

These three militias attacked the US forces in Iraq, fought against Iraqi Sunni militias, took part in liberating parts of Iraq from the Islamic State, and sent contingents to fight in Syria under the command and control of Iranian officers. They are loyal to Iran, which relies on them to carry out sensitive tasks, even if their loyalty is less certain than that of the Lebanese Hezbollah. Nonetheless, Iran is presumably not eager for the Iraqi militias to become too strong to the point of shaking off its leadership, and it therefore encourages competition among them. These Shiite militias increased in strength after the appearance of the Islamic State in Iraq in 2014. After the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in the face of the Islamic State's conquest of Mosul in mid 2014, the Iraqi government relied to a great extent on the Shiite militias in order to stave off the organization. However, in the battle to liberate Mosul in 2016-2017, the government preferred to distance the Shiite militias that Iran had sent in by the thousands to take part in the fighting and promote Iranian influence and intervention in Iraq.

The second group of Iraqi Shiite militias includes those with ties to the Iraqi religious establishment and other Iraqi organizations. The most important are the militia that operates under the authority of religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr and the militias that are influenced by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the senior religious leader in Iraq. These militias have reservations about the growth of Iranian power in Iraq and, despite Iran's limited ties with them, have not helped Iran in the fighting in Syria.¹

The Scope of the Forces

It is difficult to assess the scope of the manpower at the disposal of the Shiite militias. However, most estimates place the number of fighters in their ranks at more than 100,000. According to one assessment, the militias include the following numbers of fighters:²

- a. Lebanese Hezbollah: 45,000 fighters, including 6,000-8,000 who have been dispatched to Syria.
- b. The Iraqi militias: approximately 100,000 fighters, including 80,000 members of Iranian-supported organizations. These include 10,000-20,000 al-Badr fighters, of whom a few thousand were sent to Syria; 10,000 fighters of Kata'ib Hezbollah, of whom 1,000-3,000 were sent to Syria; and comparable numbers for Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.
- c. The Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade: 2,000-3,000 fighters.

- d. The Pakistani Zainebiyoun Brigade: 2,000-3,000 fighters, of whom 1,000 were sent to Syria.

Iran prefers to use primarily the Shiite militias in the fighting in Syria as opposed to its own forces for a number of reasons. One is its desire to preserve its freedom of action and to avoid involvement in direct fighting against enemies such as the United States and Israel. Iran also finds it important to be able to demonstrate, as it continues to maintain today, that Iranian military personnel are not fighting in Syria but rather only serving as advisors and instructors. However, the heavy losses inflicted upon the Iranian forces indicate that they have indeed been engaged in the fighting. Iran also seeks to show that the struggle in Syria is not only an Iranian matter but rather a cause embraced by the entire Shiite camp, and to display the power of this camp. However, the use of the militias enables Iran's enemies – led by the United States and Israel – to strike at the militias when the need arises, without necessarily being involved in direct fighting against Iran itself, as it can be assumed that Iran itself will be in no hurry to launch a significant response to an attack on its proxies. In this manner, Israel launches attacks on Hezbollah from time to time, particularly against weapons shipments to the organization, or in exceptional cases, against Hezbollah preparations for an attack on an Israeli target. Indeed, outgoing Israeli Air Force Chief Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel said that since 2012, Israel attacked convoys loaded with arms and weapons intended for Hezbollah and other groups on almost 100 occasions.³ In most cases, Hezbollah did not respond, but more importantly, Iran did not respond to the attacks against Hezbollah. Iran and the militias also failed to respond to the US attack on a militia force in eastern Syria in June 2017.

Hezbollah's behavior demonstrates that the organization can be deterred. After the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon in June 2000, Hezbollah continued to provoke Israel, mostly by attempts to kidnap IDF soldiers. The major intentional provocation of Israel by the organization occurred in June 2006 and led to the Second Lebanon War. However, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has openly acknowledged that the war was the result of an error in judgment on his part. Indeed, since this war, Hezbollah has generally refrained from provoking Israel, based on the fear that Israel's response will target not only Hezbollah but Lebanon as well. This means that the militias that were established later may also potentially be deterred, particularly as their motivation to provoke the United States and Israel may be lower than that of Hezbollah.

The militias' military power is of course not comparable to that of the United States or Israel. The militias have no air forces and no precision guided weapons; their tank and artillery forces are limited, as is the quality of their intelligence; and they are not trained to operate in large frameworks. As they operate far from their bases of origin, Iran's ability to assist them is also limited, even if Iran succeeds in building and solidifying a corridor linking Syria and Lebanon. If such a corridor is established, convoys that pass through it, escorted by militias, will be vulnerable to air strikes by Iran's enemies.

The level of motivation among the militias is also uncertain. For example, the factors motivating many members of the Pakistani and Afghan militias are not nationalist-religious in nature but rather stem from promises of benefits such as salaries, citizenship, and work permits in Iran. Some of the Shiite leaders in Iraq who have no ties to the militias operating in Syria have expressed reservations about the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, which may influence the willingness of the Iraqi militias to fight for Iran. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who is a Shiite, reportedly does not support the Iraqi Shiite militias' entry into Syria, out of a desire to prevent Iraq from becoming mired in the civil war there.

Yet despite the militias' limited military strength, their ability to carry out terrorist attacks against the ground forces of their enemies should not be underestimated. US forces, stationed in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, lost approximately 4,500 troops, a few hundred in attacks carried out by militias like the Shiite militias. For its part, Hezbollah grew from a small terrorist group into an organization that poses a serious threat to Israel. In the long term, it is possible that if not checked, the Shiite militias could, with Iranian support, develop into a strategic threat to their rivals.

Significance

If not blocked, the array of armed Shiite militias can be expected to expand, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Iran will presumably take action to increase the number of fighters in their ranks and improve the quality of the weapons they possess. In any event, the continued fighting in Syria, the joint military activity with Iranian units, the cumulative experience and lessons learned, and the improved weaponry can all be expected to improve the performance of the militias. If Iran succeeds in establishing and maintaining a corridor from Iran to Syria and Lebanon, the militias will grow stronger both as a result of the increased strength of Hezbollah

and the Iraqi militias, and the creation of a strong and stable framework of militias.

The establishment of a large and increasingly strengthening array of Iranian-led Shiite militias in the area between Iran in the east and Syria and Lebanon in the west – especially if accompanied by Iranian success in establishing the corridor between Iran and Lebanon – will pose threats and dangers to a number of countries in the region, as well as to the United States and Israel. First, this measure would solidify Iran's grip and influence as the major force in this area and would compel the states and organizations located within it to take Iranian interests, influence, and activity into consideration. In turn, Iran is liable to take advantage of its rising status and the new tools at its disposal to intervene in countries in the region and influence their internal systems in its favor. Such intervention could undermine the internal stability of these countries. The development of a Shiite stronghold in the Iraqi-Syrian-Lebanese region could also pose a threat to Jordan and Turkey, although presumably Iran is in no hurry to provoke Turkey and would actually prefer to cooperate with it, especially as the Shiite militias are currently operating far from Turkish soil. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states stand to be concerned by the use of such a multinational Shiite army and regard it as part of the Shiite-Sunni struggle. They will also likely be concerned that the use of the militias in Syria could serve as a precedent for the use of similar militias in other countries, such as Yemen.

In addition, Iran may pose new dangers to Israel. Signs are already visible that Iran is considering placing a force linked to it in the Syrian Golan Heights, based on the idea of expanding the front with Israel from southern Lebanon into the Golan Heights and threatening Israel from another angle. Iran will presumably prefer to refrain from stationing Iranian forces in the Golan Heights out of concern that they will constitute an easy target for attacks by Israel if the need arises. It is therefore likely to elect to dispatch Hezbollah forces or those of other Shiite militias – perhaps of Iraqi origin – to the Golan Heights for a protracted period, and to extend the front with Israel from southern Lebanon into the Golan Heights. The provision of weapons to the forces at this front will be quicker and easier via the corridor, if Iran is able to thwart Israeli attacks on arms convoys en route from Iran to Syria and Lebanon. From Hezbollah's perspective, maintaining forces in the Golan Heights would allow it greater flexibility

and a larger variety of possible courses of action vis-à-vis Israel. It might also reduce the danger of an Israeli response against Lebanese targets.

What can be done to stop the construction of the corridor between Iran and Syrian and Lebanon and to prevent Iran's Shiite proxies from infiltrating the Golan Heights? For Iran, the corridor is important as an additional or alternative route to the air route for the transport of weapons and troops, particularly to Hezbollah. A shorter and quicker means for Iran to provide weapons to Hezbollah could be construction of weapons factories in Syria and Lebanon. For this reason, an understanding must be reached between Israel and the United States regarding the measures necessary to keep Iran and its proxies out of the Golan Heights. It is important for these measures to be taken as early as possible, as once Hezbollah and the militias entrench themselves in the field they will be more difficult to uproot. Inter alia, it is important for a future settlement on Syria to keep Iranian forces and the Shiite militias out of the Golan Heights as much as possible. If forces of Hezbollah or other Shiite militias are in any event stationed in the Golan Heights, Israel will need to make it clear that its response to attacks on Israeli targets launched from the Golan Heights will not be limited.

Second, in the framework of disrupting the construction of the corridor, it will be necessary to prevent the passage of Shiite military units and convoys carrying high quality weapons toward the Golan Heights and Lebanon, and to deter Iran from using the corridor freely. For a number of years Israel has launched periodic attacks against the convoys transporting weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Striking at the corridor would be more meaningful if the American government were to assume some of the role of deterring the Iranians by attacking convoys deep inside Syria and Iraq, far from Israel. The fact that in June 2017 Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that the United States was making an effort to prevent Iran from infiltrating the areas vacated by the Islamic State, and that US planes attacked a motorized convoy of the militias in the region of the tripartite border between Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, may indicate that under certain circumstances, the Trump administration will be willing to take action to stop Shiite militia activity in eastern Syria and western Iraq.

However, the Trump administration's future policy on this subject is difficult to predict. Reports from Washington suggest division on the issue among senior government officials. They may also indicate that the Secretary of State and the leaders of the US military are not eager for a serious clash with Iran and its proxies over their involvement in Syria, as

from the perspective of these officials the priority should be defeating the Islamic State, as opposed to toppling the Assad regime or curbing Iran.⁴ Trump himself has defined Iran as a high level threat, with a substantial portion of this threat stemming from Iranian regional activity. In the future, the US administration may understand that the greatest beneficiary of the defeat of the Islamic State and a settlement in Syria is likely to be Iran, and that no one regional player can stop Iran on its own. This is particularly true now that it has added the Shiite militias to its arsenal, which are likely to continue gaining in quantity and in quality. If these indeed are the conclusions reached by the Trump administration, there may well be increased efforts to curb Iran and its proxies.

Third, the chances of driving a wedge between Hezbollah and Iran are slim, due to the deep and wide ranging nature of their relationship. There is, however, a chance of creating divisions between the Iraqi Shiite militias and Iran. Although tens of thousands of fighters from the Iraqi Shiite militias followed Iranian orders during the fighting in Syria, a substantial number of Iraqi Shiites have reservations about the intensification of Iranian influence in Iraq and Iraqi intervention in Syria. Memories of the Iraq-Iran War, which took the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers on both sides, also do little to encourage improved relations between the parties. Consequently, it is possible that an increased US effort to improve its relations with the Iraqi government, strengthen the Iraqi security forces vis-à-vis the militias, and highlight the discord between Iran and the Iraqi Shiite militias could serve to distance the militias from Iran.⁵

Finally, both the United States and other countries in the region must acknowledge that for several reasons, the Iranian and proxy forces are likely to end up stronger due to their participation in the fighting in Syria and the settlement that may ultimately be reached. Iran has gained experience in warfare that it had not experienced since its war with Iraq, while Hezbollah and the other militias gained experience in a what for them was a new kind of warfare. Iran and its proxies now have an opportunity to observe first hand how Russia conducts a modern war effort, and overall, the Shiite militias will grow into a larger and more effective force that will be at Iran's disposal. Iran will likely attempt to open up another front against Israel from the Golan Heights, apparently by means of Hezbollah, which will be aided in this effort by the establishment of the corridor from Iran. Moreover, a large weapons deal that is currently on the agenda between Russia and Iran will upgrade the outdated weaponry of the Iranian forces,

and possibly also facilitate the provision of higher quality weapon systems to Hezbollah.

Notes

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- 1 On the Iraqi Shiite militias, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi and Jonathan Spyer, "Iraq's Shi'a Militias and Iran," *The Tower*, December 2014, www.aymennjawad.org/15773/iraq-shia-militias-and-iran; Priyanka Boghani, "Iraq's Shia Militias: The Double-Edged Sword Against ISIS," *Frontline*, March 21, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/iraqs-shia-militias-the-double-edged-sword-against-isis/>; Rowan Scarborough, "Iran Positioning Shiite Militias in Iraq as Regional Expeditionary Force," *Washington Times*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/nov/21/iran-positioning-shiite-militias-in-iraq-as-region/>; and Jack Watling, "The Shia Militias of Iraq," *The Atlantic*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/shia-militias-iraq-isis/510938/>.
- 2 On the respective strength of the different militias, see Matthew McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies," American Enterprise Institute, Testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2016, <http://www.aei.org/publication/iranian-deterrence-strategy-and-use-of-proxies/>.
- 3 Amos Harel, "Israel Struck Syrian and Hezbollah Arms Convoys Nearly 100 Times in Five Years, Top General Says," *Haaretz*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.807246>.
- 4 Kate Brannen, Dan de Luce, and Paul McLeary, "Exclusive: White House Officials Push for Widening War in Syria over Pentagon Objections," *Just Security*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.justsecurity.org/42230/trump-administration-weighs-confronting-irans-proxies-syria/>.
- 5 Michael Knights, "How to Contain and Roll Back Iranian-Backed Militias," Congressional Testimony, *Policy Analysis*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 4, 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-contain-and-roll-back-iranian-backed-militias>.