

מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי



The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

The Persian Gulf Observer

Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



***Iranian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War:
Transnational Pro-Iranian Shi'i Networks in Action***

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Iranian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War: Transnational Pro-Iranian Shi'i Networks in Action

*By Mr. Yossi Mansharof**

The participation of Shi'ites from Lebanon and the Persian Gulf in the Syrian civil war in support of Bashar Assad and against local Sunni Syrians as well as Sunni global jihadists has brought to light the Iranian regime's links to Shi'ite communities outside Iran. These links are part of a series of trans-national Shi'i networks that Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini and his Islamic movement began to lay already in the early 1960s, during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941 – 1979), and with greater gusto since 1979, after the downfall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The fighting of Arab and Iranian Shi'ites alongside each other is not a new phenomenon. For example, AMAL and Hezbollah Shi'i activists from Lebanon and Shi'i members of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain fought with the Iranians and against the Iraqis during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). It was recently [publicized](#) by *Wall Street Journal* (in mid September 2013) that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) are providing military training to thousands of Shi'ites from the Arab world, and particularly from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, at the Amir Al-Mumineen Base, located near Tehran, in anticipation of their dispatch to Syria to defend the Bashar Al-Assad regime. The training includes fighting tactics and weapon operation in urban areas alongside religious and ideological lectures by Iranian Shi'i clerics. Such Shi'i volunteers are told that an epic Shi'ite saga is about to unfold in Syria and that if they were to die in defending the Shi'a, then they would be elevated to the high status as martyrs.

Iranian, Arab and Western media has been publishing many reports on the civil war in Syria, including video clips, such as the [video](#) on the funeral of Iraqi Hezbollah activists killed in the battles in Syria. Such materials provide ample information for the analysis of the pro-Iranian Shi'i presence in Syria since the eruption of the civil war there.

In the framework of its strategic defense pact with Syria, signed in 2007, Iran hurried to assist Assad in his most difficult hour and it provides him with significant support in the survival struggle that he's been conducting for the last three years. The Iranian regime furnishes Assad with a comprehensive assistance plan that includes both economic assistance –estimated at billions of dollars – and political-diplomatic support that attempts to thwart moves against Syria at the United Nations. However, a major component of the assistance plan was the dispatch of a

military force to participate in the fighting against Assad's opposition. The Iranian military force to Syria included IRGC troops and members of the Basij – the paramilitary popular militia – all under the command of General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Qods Forces, the IRGC's operational units for actions abroad. This force also included Arab–Iranian fighters from Iran's Khuzestan Province, aimed at camouflaging their Iranian origin. The dispatch of a sizable Iranian military contingent to Syria was expected to snuff out the popular revolt in the country, but the continuation and persistence of the anti–Assad revolt convinced a number of experts to doubt the combat capabilities of the IRGC and the Basij, and even to suggest that had the popular protests and demonstrations in Iran following the vote fraud in the 2009 presidential elections been armed, then these forces would have had probably failed in suppressing them.¹

Together with its active participation in dispatching the Iranian and Hezbollah forces to Syria, Tehran established the 'Defenders of Zaynab's Shrine' (*Modafe'an-e Haram-e Hazrat-e Zaynab*). This is a para–military transnational network that was established for the purpose of suppressing the anti–Assad revolt in Syria. In order to obtain Shi'i recruits from among the Shi'i communities in the Persian Gulf, Iran played on their religious sentiments encouraging them to defend the most sacred Shi'i site in Syria, namely the tomb of Zaynab, Imam Hussein's sister, near Damascus.



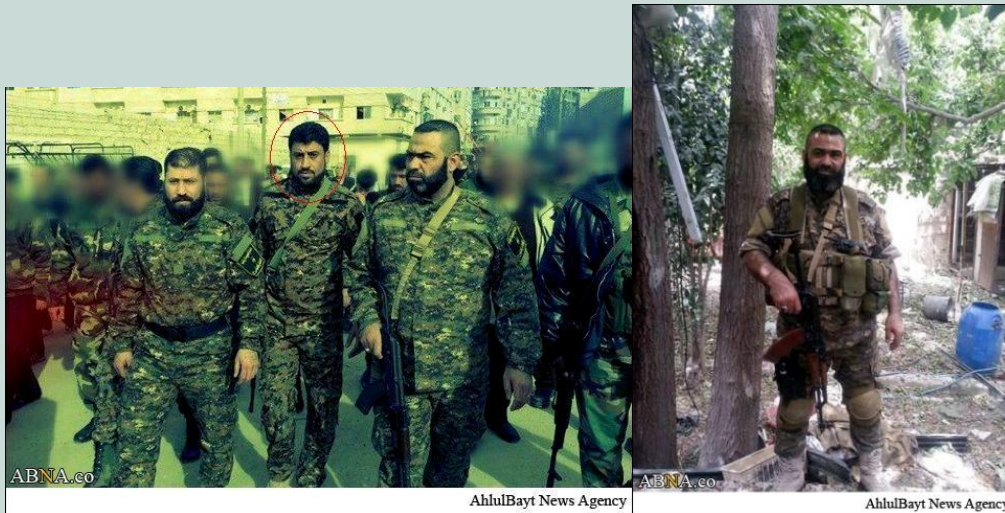
Zaynab's Tomb

Abu Hajar and Abu Noah (see their pictures below), senior commanders in the 'Defenders of Zaynab's Shrine', who were Iraqi Shi'ites, were killed in September 2013 by insurgent fire.

Apart from the above–mentioned network, Iran is also assisted by Asa'ib Ahl Al–Haq (League of the Righteous) – an Iraqi paramilitary organization; the Iraqi Badr Brigade (which works in close

¹ See for example: Ali Alfoneh, "Pilgrims or Mercenaries? Iranian Hostages Freed by Free Syrian Army", Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 15.1.2013. <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/fdd-policy-brief/>

an Iraqi Shi'ite cleric opposed to Iran, recently [explained](#) that the Sunni insurgents in Syria are mistaken in transforming their protests against the Syrian regime into a Sunni–Shiite war, and added that the only beneficiary of such mistakes is Iran, because it makes Iran as the only force capable of defending the Shiite holy places and thus makes it appealing to many Shi'ites who previously did not agree with Iran's political doctrine.



Abu Noah (circled in the picture on the left) and Abu Hajar (right)

Iran's use of transnational Shi'i paramilitary networks in Syria is intended to help the Iranian regime in a number of ways. First, it presents Iran to many Shi'ites as the defender of the Shi'a and their holy sites, and in this way the Iranian regime further consolidates its position in the Shi'a world as part of its drive for hegemony. Secondly, the training and dispatch of such Arab Shi'i forces into Syria allows Iran not only to reduce the total casualties of its own soldiers in Syria, but even to deny any Iranian military involvement in Syria. By the way, such denials are in total contradiction to Iranian media reports on numerous IRGC's and Basij soldiers killed in the Syrian battlefields. Thirdly, the formation of transnational Shi'ite networks helps Iran firm up its relations with the Shi'i communities outside Iran, and enlist at least some of them to promote its agenda. A major advantage of this and out of the paramilitary networks that Iran managed to establish among the Arab Shi'a is its increased capacity to threaten the Sunni regimes throughout the Persian Gulf. For example, Iran could employ these networks in order to undermine those regimes, should they collaborate with a Western attack against its nuclear facilities. During the 1980s Iran used its paramilitary transnational Shi'ite networks to bomb the interests of Gulf countries in their territories and even outside it in revenge for their support of Iraq during the Iran–Iraq war. And as Iran currently employs the Iraqi Badr Brigade in order to suppress the Anti–Assad opposition in Syria, Iran can similarly use it and the other Shiite networks in future conflicts against other Sunni Arab regimes. In addition, in each battle and fighting, these pro–Iranian groups earn further combat experience.



The funeral of Abu Hajar and Abu Noah in Najaf, Iraq

In summary, the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Seyyed 'Ali Khamenei, is determined to do everything in Iran's power in order to prevent its pro-Iranian ally in Syria from falling to the Sunni bloc. Criticism has been made in Iran, primarily by reformist circles but also by moderate conservative ones as well as the Chairman of the Expediency Council, Ayatollah ['Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani](#), Khamenei's main political rival, of the damage to Iran's status in the Arab world due to its support for Assad. Nevertheless, Khamenei is exploiting his lofty status as the Iranian Supreme Leader (Rahbar) in order to brush aside such criticism and in favor of a resolute and determined defense of his strategic ally in the region. Accordingly, Iran placed at Damascus' disposal a substantial part of its military and transnational capabilities, and as a result, Ankara has declared in 2012 that without such assistance the Assad regime would have fallen by now. Furthermore, despite the political price that the Hezbollah is paying not only in Lebanon but also within the Shiite community therein, the Iranian regime's insists on the continued participation of its satellite in suppressing the Syrian opposition to Bashar Assad. The pro-Iranian paramilitary Shiite networks which currently operate in Syria – namely, the Defenders of Zaynab's Tomb, the Badr Brigade, the Iraqi and Lebanese Hezbollah, the Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq, etc. – act as a supplementary arm of the Shi'ite fighting squads alongside the IRGC, an arm that may prove in future to serve Iran against the Sunni Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf.

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