



Shi'ite Foreign Fighters in Syria



Group picture of Shi'ite foreign fighters in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade, a military framework composed mainly of militia operatives from Iraq. In white is Qassim al-Ta'i, a prominent Shi'ite Iraqi cleric who recruits Shi'ite operatives for the fighting in Syria (Facebook page in Farsi dedicated to the Shi'ite fighters in Syria)

Overview

1. **This study examines the presence of Shi'ite foreign fighters** operating in support of the Syrian regime. **Their numbers are increasing, and in our assessment today there are at least 7,000-8,000,¹ including several thousand Hezbollah fighters** (whose numbers change from time to time). The overall number includes **several thousand Shi'ite Iraqi operatives** organized into military units, the most prominent of which is the **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade**. In addition to the hard core of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'ite fighters, there are **several hundred Shi'ite foreign fighters from the Shi'ite communities in Arab and Muslim countries** such as **Bahrain, Yemen** (Houthi rebels), **Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan** and **Afghanistan**.

¹ Western sources place the numbers higher. According to researcher **Aaron Y. Zelin** of the Washington Institute, the largest figure places them at **10,000**. According to information received from Shi'ites who fought in Syria, in June 2013, **there were more than 10,000 foreign Shi'ite operatives** (The Guardian, July 4, 2013). The London-based Arabic newspaper **Al-Sharq Al-Awsat**, quoting "Western experts," recently claimed that there were **more than 40,000 Shi'ite operatives** (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, February 19, 2014); in our assessment the number is greatly exaggerated.

2. The conclusion drawn from this study is that **Iran is primarily responsible for the presence of the Shi'ite foreign fighters from around Arab-Muslim world who fight in the service of the Assad regime in Syria.** Iran supports them **not only by providing religious justification, but money and equipment** as well. In addition, in our assessment Iran is **involved in operating the Shi'ite military units in collaboration and close coordination with the Syrian army and the Assad regime's security forces.** Handling Hezbollah and the other Shi'ite foreign fighters in Syria follows **Iran's strategy of supporting the Syrian regime through proxies, limiting its own direct military intervention in the fighting.**

3. The direct Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war is, in our assessment, **several hundred soldiers, primarily members of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards' (IIRG) Qods Force.** The Qods Force is an elite framework whose tasks include support for the Syrian regime and the subversion of Shi'ite communities around the Arab-Muslim world. (Recently the Qods Force was involved in an attempt to smuggle weapons from Syria to the Gaza Strip by sea.) Iranian support for the Syrian regime includes establishing militia units of Shi'ites and Alawites; providing weapons, military advice, guidance and training; as well as economic aid and political and propaganda support. **The Qods Force,** which has strong contacts with the Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'ite militias, recruits and handles Shi'ite foreign fighters in Iraq, Lebanon and other countries. Thus **Iran's extensive support (alongside Russia's) is a strategic prop, enabling the Syrian regime to survive in the civil war whose end is not in sight and whose outcome is not clear.**

4. **Hezbollah's operatives make up a skilled military force,** well motivated and loyal to the Syrian regime. Hezbollah forces in Syria are handled through close collaboration with the Syrian security forces (according to the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Ra'i, the Syrian army and Hezbollah maintain a joint operation room). **Hezbollah operatives played an important role in the successful and strategically important campaign for the city of Al-Qusayr in the summer of 2013,** suffering heavy losses until the city was conquered by Hezbollah on June 5, 2013.² Over the past few months Hezbollah operatives have been integrated into the supporting units of the Syrian army's campaigns in the rural areas east of Damascus; the areas around Aleppo; and the ongoing campaign along the Syria-Lebanon border (the Al-Qalamoun mountains,

² For further information see the June 4, 2013 bulletin "Hezbollah Involvement in the Syrian Civil War," the June 27, 2013 bulletin "Hezbollah Operatives Killed in Syria – Update" and the August 3, 2013 bulletin "Hezbollah Operatives Killed in Syria (Updated to the end of July 2013)."

especially the city of Yabrud, which according to the media the Syrian forces, with Hezbollah backup, are about to complete their takeover). Hezbollah considers the Al-Qalamoun mountains, mainly the city of Yabrud, as the region from which the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda dispatch their car bombs and suicide bombers to Lebanon.

5. The Shi'ite units operating in Syria are sometimes heterogeneous and composed of Shi'ite foreign fighters from various countries. In some instances the units are homogeneous, especially when the **foreign fighters are Iraqi** and originated in the Shi'ite militias that waged a guerilla war against the American army and its allies (until the United States withdrew from Iran at the end of 2011). Prominent among the Iraqi units is the **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade**; smaller Shi'ite units fight alongside it. Despite the guerilla experience of the Iraqi foreign fighters, in our assessment they are less proficient as fighters than Hezbollah. However, the Shi'ite foreign fighters play an important role in defending the religious sites sacred to Shi'a, especially the grave of **Al-Set Zaynab**, south of Damascus.³

6. **The presence of Shi'ite foreign fighters in Syria has several ramifications:** Hezbollah and other Shi'ite fighters support the Syrian security forces and improve their ability to fight the rebels. To a certain extent, in our assessment, they balance the involvement of foreign Sunni jihadists in Syria, and at the same **time greatly complicate the civil war and intensify its religious-sectarian nature**. In addition, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has resulted in the **trickling of Al-Qaeda and global jihad terrorism into Lebanon, threatening to undermine Lebanon's already fragile internal stability and possibly eroding Hezbollah's status**. It might also **aggravate the Arab-Muslim Sunni-Shi'ite rift**. In our assessment, Iran might profit from the involvement of Shi'ite foreign fighters in Syria when they return to their countries of origin, especially Iraq. Their return is liable to create for the Iranians, especially the Qods Force, ready-made networks of trained, battle-experienced fighters that can be leveraged by Iran for its terrorism and subversive activities.

³ The **grave of Al-Set Zaynab** is located south of Damascus and considered the Syrian site most holy to Shi'ite Muslims. According to one version, it is the grave of Zaynab, the daughter of Sheikh Ali bin Abu Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Shi'ites consider her as a model of perfection and a role model. The compound of her grave was under constant military pressure from the Syrian rebels, especially the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad. The slogan "Zaynab will not fall again" became a battle cry for Hezbollah and its supporters during the civil war and the defense of the grave became the main political and religious justification for Hezbollah's and Iraqi Shi'ites' involvement in the fighting (See below for information about other Shi'ite holy sites defended by Hezbollah operatives and Shi'ite foreign fighters.)

7. This study is divided into three sections:

Section A – The goals and nature of Iran's support for the Syrian regime –
Overview

Section B – The countries of origin of the Shi'ite foreign fighters

Section C – The combat frameworks of the Shi'ite foreign fighters

Section A – The Goals and Nature of Iran's Support for the Syrian Regime

Iran's Interest in Syria



Saudi cartoon about Iran's involvement in the fighting in Syria (Al-Jazeera, Saudi Arabia, February 24, 2014).

8. **For Iran, preserving Bashar Assad's regime is supremely important, because Syria is Iran's main ally in the Arab world and its partner in the "resistance camp."** Shi'ite Iran also identifies with Syria's Shi'ites and the Alawite sect, a branch of Shi'a. Iran also plays a leading role in the fierce Sunni-Shi'ite rivalry played out not only in Syria but in other countries in the Arab-Muslim world as well. Iran regards Syria as a main sphere of influence, and therefore the results of the fighting there will influence its regional and international status.

9. **Bashar Assad's regime is vital for preserving the strength of Hezbollah, Iran's main proxy in the Middle East and the most important example of the success of Iran's policy of exporting the Islamic revolution, rooted in the ideology of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Syria also supports Hezbollah's military buildup and preserves its deterrent capabilities against Israel. Syria provides Hezbollah with advanced weapons and ammunition, and channels them Lebanese territory.** When Syria enjoyed political influence in Lebanon and its internal politics, it participated in the terrorist campaign Hezbollah waged against its enemies (the "March 14 camp") and gave the Hezbollah political and propaganda backup.

10. Having Syria handle Hezbollah is part of Iran's overall strategy, but **Hezbollah has its own interests and motives for supporting the Syrian regime**. One motive is **religious**, that is, to protect the Shi'ite (and Alawite) population of Syria and defend the Shi'ite religious sites, especially the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, south of Damascus. Another motive is **security**, preventing the fighting in Syria from seeping of Sunni jihad terrorism into Lebanon and keeping it from threatening Lebanon. The seeping of Sunni terrorism into Lebanon was illustrated at the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 by the wave of terrorist attacks initiated by the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria (The Islamic State) against Hezbollah and the Shi'ites (especially in the southern suburb of Beirut, Hezbollah's stronghold). Hezbollah's motives became **more pressing as the civil war in Syria continued and they became an important claim for Hezbollah in justifying its direct military involvement in the civil war in Syria**.

11. Beyond preserving the survival and strength of Syrian regime and the power of Hezbollah, Iran's support for Syria is a **bid for influence, not only in Syria but also in the entire region**. Iran wants to neutralize the influence of the Western world and the pro-Western Arab states on the rebel organizations; to influence the nature of the future Syrian regime; to weaken the strength of the organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad, regarded as bitterly opposed to Iran, Hezbollah and the entire Shi'ite community; and it wants to prevent retaliation against the Shi'ites and Alawites in Syria for whom Iran and Hezbollah feel religious and sectarian solidarity.

Nature of Iranian Support

12. Because of Iran's vital interests in Syria, since the outbreak of the civil war it has invested great military, political and economic resources to support the Assad regime and to deter and weaken its foreign and domestic rivals. However, **the Iranians are aware of the complex nature of the war and the dangers posed by direct involvement in the fighting**. Thus they do not have massive, direct, military involvement in Syria, instead using as proxies thousands of Hezbollah operatives and several thousand **Shi'ite foreign fighters** from Iraq and other countries (at least 7,000-8,000 foreign fighters).

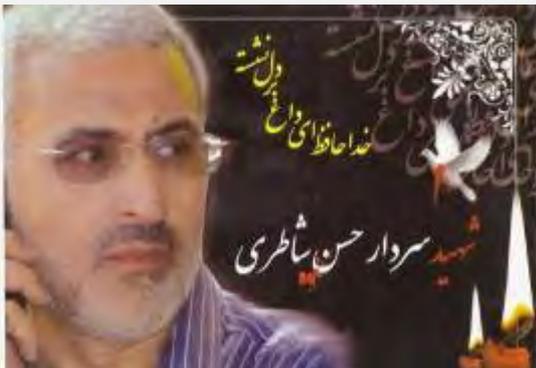
13. **Iran's direct military presence in Syria is limited**. In our assessment, **there are several hundred Iranian military personnel located there, most of them soldiers and officers of the IIRG Qods Force** (Western media reports of 3,000-4,000 IIRG

soldiers are, in our assessment, exaggerated). In addition, there are operatives of the **Basij**, the IIRG's militia. **Several scores of Iranian military personnel have been killed in the fighting in Syria** and their bodies were returned to Iran.

IIRG Operatives Killed in the Fighting in Syria



Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei views the coffins of the IIRG operatives killed in the fighting in Syria (Jazannnews.com, April 7, 2013)



Hassan Shatiri, senior Qods Force officer, reportedly Qods Force representative in Lebanon posing as "responsible for renovating construction in Lebanon." Killed while en route from Syria to Lebanon (Abna.ir)



Memorial ceremony for Haj Ismael Haydari, senior commander who headed a framework of Iranian operatives in the region of Aleppo (Alarabiya.net)



Muharram Turk, IIRG officer, killed in Damascus on January 9, 2012 (Alarabiya.net)

Riza Kargar-Birzi, IIRG officer, killed in July 2013 (Facebook.com)



Sayyid Ali Asghar Shina'i and Mahdi Khurasani, two IIRG operatives killed in the compound of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Alarabiya.net).

Muhammad Hussein 'Itri, Qods Force officer, killed in Syria (Alarabiya.net)



Amir Jan, apparently a Basij operative
(Nadyelfikr.com)

Amir Riza Ali Zade IIRG officer killed in Syria
in May 2013 (Aralabiya.net)



Jahanpour Sharifi, IIRG officer killed "while
defending the grave of Al-Set Zaynab"
(Askdin.com)

Haj Muhammad Jamali, IIRG officer
(Twitter.com)



Muhsin Haydari, Basij operative killed in Syria (Facebook.com)

14. The Iranians' indirect military and security support for the Syrian regime is as follows: supplying weapons and logistic equipment delivered to Syria primarily by air; training the Syrian army and security forces in the tactics of guerilla warfare; supporting intelligence; organizing militia units of Shi'ite and Alawites loyal to the Syrian regime; providing financial and logistic help in enlisting Shi'ite operatives to fight in Syria and handling their defensive and offensive military missions.

15. In addition **Iran gives the Syrian regime economic, political and propaganda support and maintains constant contact and consults with its senior figures.** Senior Iranian political and military figures (including Qods Force commanders) and senior Hezbollah operatives occasionally meet for coordination and consultation with members of the Syrian regime to discuss strategic issues related to conducting the fighting against the rebels.



Iranian Iran Air and Mahan Air transport planes that flew aid from Iran to the Syrian regime between 2011 and 2012. They are on the tarmac of the Damascus International Airfield (Picture from the website of the American Treasury Department⁴).

16. In their public statements the Iranians do not deny their support for the Syrian regime. At a press conference held in Tehran on September 16, 2012, **Mohammad Ali Jafari**, IIRG commander, said, "**We are proud to defend Syria**, which is a cornerstone in the struggle against Israel. **We advise [the Syrians] and contribute our experience.**" He also admitted that Iran gave Syria **financial support**. He denied, however, that Iran had a military presence in Syria, but said that that could change if Syria were attacked (Al-Hayat, Al-Jazeera and Free-Syria, September 17, 2012). In May 2012, **Ismael Qaeni**, deputy Qods Force commander, **admitted that Iranian military personnel were in Syria supporting the Bashar Assad regime**. He said the objective of the Iranian military was to defend the Syrian people and regime from the rebels, because "**if the Islamic Republic were not in Syria, the slaughter of the Syrian people would be ten times worse**" (ISNA, Iran, May 27, 2012).

⁴ <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>

Section B – The countries of origin of the Shi'ite foreign fighters

Profile of the Shi'ite Foreign Fighters

17. The Shi'ite foreign fighters fighting in Syria can be divided into two main groups: one consists of **Hezbollah operatives**, of whom there are several thousand, **sent by the organization to participate in offensive and defensive operations in Syria**. The other consists of **Shi'ite foreign fighters from Iraq** and other Arab-Muslim countries who are sent to Syria to fight in support of the regime. **In our assessment there are between 4,000 and 5,000 such fighters, most of them from Iraq**. In retrospect, it can be seen that **the Iraqis exported fighters to Syria, both those who established the Al-Nusra Front, a branch of Al-Qaeda fighting against the Syrian regime, as well as some Shi'ite foreign fighters who fight for the Syrian regime**. The Shi'ite fighters from the Arab-Muslim countries are organized into military units, the most prominent of which is the **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade**. There are also smaller military formations (See below).



Scores of coffins of Shi'ite foreign fighters who were killed in Syria, brought to Iraq for burial (Bahrainforums.com)

18. The overwhelming majority of Shi'ite foreign fighters from Lebanon, Iraq and other countries are young (like the foreign fighters who join the ranks of the Al-Nusra Front and The Islamic State). **The socio-economic status of most of them is low** (Al-Hayat, June 30, 2013). Most of them have **religious motivation**, i.e., defending the Shi'ite holy places, and fighting against the "takfirs" (Salafist-jihadi organizations

affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad). Sometimes their **motivation is also economic** (gifts of money and salaries for Iraqi foreign fighters in Syria).

19. An examination of the names of approximately **200 Hezbollah operatives** who were killed in Syria reveals that **more than half of them came from south Lebanon**. Also prominent was the number who came from the **Beqa'a Valley** (more than a third). The rest came from other Shi'ite population centers (for example the southern suburb of Beirut and north Lebanon).⁵ **An examination of the names of 71 Iraqi foreign fighters killed in Syria** revealed that most of them were from **south Iraq and the Shi'ite neighborhoods of Baghdad**. Organizationally speaking, thirteen of them were **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade** operatives. The rest belonged to other Shi'ite military formations, most of them linked to the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade.

20. Most of the Shi'ite foreign fighters in Syria have **extensive battle experience**. **They are experienced in guerilla tactics gained during their years of fighting Israel (Hezbollah) and the United States and the coalition of Western countries (the Iraqi militias)**. Many of them **were trained in Iran** or their countries of origin (Lebanon, Iraq) while fighting Israel or the United States.

21. According to the Arab media, **the Shi'ite foreign fighters receive accelerated military training in Iran before they go to Syria** (similar to the training given to the Sunni jihadists when they arrive in Syria). The training courses last for a number of weeks and are held in **Qods Force camps**. They learn guerilla tactics, field survival, self-defense and sniping. **They also receive Khomeini-oriented Shi'ite religious instruction** (Alsharq.net, June 13, 2012, Wall Street Journal, September 16, 2013). Signs of their Iranian orientation can be found in the death notices where **pictures of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and sometimes the Ayatollah Khomeini also appear**.

⁵ For further information see the June 4, 2013 bulletin "Hezbollah Involvement in the Syrian Civil War," and the December 25, 2013 bulletin "In late 2013, Hezbollah again intensified its military involvement in the Syrian civil war, suffering heavy losses."

Pictures of Ali Khamenei in Death Notices of Iraqi Foreign Fighters



Sami al-Zubaydi, an Iraqi Shi'ite foreign fighter killed in the compound of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab on August 20, 2013, while fighting in an Iraqi framework called the Brigades of the Senior Shaheed (Facebook.com). In the upper right hand corner is a picture of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

The death notice of Mithaq Nijm 'Abdallah, an Iraqi who belonged to the Brigade Guaranteeing the Security of [Al-Set] Zaynab (See below) in the compound of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. The picture shows Mithaq Nijm 'Abdallah flanked by pictures of Ali Khamenei (left) and the Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, an extremist Iraqi Shi'ite cleric executed on the orders of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s and the father of Muqtada al-Sadr, affiliated with Iran (Facebook.com).

22. The following is the distribution of Shi'ite foreign fighters (who do not belong to Hezbollah) according to their countries of origin:

Iraq

23. The largest number of Shi'ite foreign fighters (several thousand) come from Iraq.⁶ They were either **inspired or influenced by Iran to go to Syria, and received support from the Qods Force**. The influx of Shi'ite foreign fighters into Syria increased after Hezbollah's conquest of Al-Qusayr in the summer of 2013. At the same time, there was an influx of Sunni foreign fighters into the ranks of the rebel organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad. Iran and Syria established separate military formations for the Shi'ite foreign fighters (See below). **Most of the Iraqi foreign fighters belong to pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias established and**

⁶ Researcher Phillip Smyth estimated the number of Iraqi Shi'ite foreign fighters as between 800 and 2,000 (Jihadology.net, June 2013). In our assessment the number today is higher, and we estimate it at several thousand.

handled by the Qods Force during the fighting against the American army and its allies. When the Americans withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011 they found themselves "unemployed." However, their arrival in Syria reinforced the sectarian Sunni-Shi'ite aspect of the Syrian civil war.



Umran Abu Ali, aka Umran al-Shammar, an Iraqi Shi'ite, one of the founders of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade, seen here with former Iranian president Ahmadinejad. Umran al-Shammar was killed by sniper fire near the Damascus airport in July 2012. (Middle-east-online.com).

24. Prominent among the Shi'ite foreign fighters in Syria are those **belonging to three militias established by the Qods Force to fight the Americans:**

1) **The League of the Righteous** (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) – An Iraqi militia established by the Qods Force in 2006 and operating under its aegis. It was headed by **Qais al-Khazali**, a Shi'ite cleric from south Iraq, until he was captured by the Coalition forces in 2007 (along with Hezbollah operative **Ali Daqduq**, handled in Iraq by the Qods Force). **Qais al-Khazali** was released in January 2010 in return for the release of a British subject abducted along with his four bodyguards. In 2010 and 2011 the militia carried out various types of attacks on the American military forces and their allies, **including abducting hostages, firing rockets and planting IEDs** (the militia specialized in planting lethal explosively-formed projectiles (EFPs) along the routes customarily used by the American military forces).



The insignia of the League of the Righteous: an open book representing the Qur'an, on which is written, "They were young and believed [in Allah]" (Surah Al-Kahf, Verse 13)

League of the Righteous Operatives Who Died Fighting in Syria



Hatif Shayyal Janhit (Facebook.com)

Ja'far al-Fartusi, who fought against the Americans in Iraq (Facebook.com)



Ahmad Farhud Hashim al-Jirzawi, killed in compound of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, May 2, 2013 (Facebook.com)

Salih Mahdi 'Abd al-Amir al-Tamimi (Facebook.com)



Hamed Hamid Karim al-Bahadli, killed in August 2013 in the compound of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Alhulahaq-iq.com)

Samir al-Lami, killed in Syria in July 2013 (Forum.qawem.org)

2) **The Hezbollah Battalions** (Kata'ib Hezbollah) – A small, disciplined militia established in Iraq in 2007 by the Iranian Qods Force. In 2010 the Iranians encouraged the Hezbollah Battalions to increase their attacks against the American forces before they withdrew from Iraq. In 2011 their operation

activities included firing rockets and planting IEDs to attack British and American targets (among them vehicles, military bases and airfields). To attack the American army they used IRAMs (an acronym for "improvised rocket-assisted munitions," also called "flying IEDs"). The Hezbollah Battalions leader is **Jamal J'afar Muhammad**, aka **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandas** ("the engineer"). He is an Iraqi Shi'ite married to an Iranian woman who fled Saddam Hussein's regime and spent about 20 years in Iran (beginning in the 1980s). He also lived in Kuwait, where he was involved in a series of terrorist attacks against American, French and Kuwaiti targets.



The insignia of the Hezbollah Battalions. The inscription reads "...Fight the leaders of disbelief, for indeed, there are no oaths [sacred] to them..." (Surah At-Taubah, Verse 12)

Hezbollah Brigades Operatives Who Died Fighting in Syria



Arfad Muhsin al-Hamidawi, commander of the Hezbollah Battalions, from Al-Kazimiyah, buried in Najaf (Forum.qawem.org)

Ahmad Mahdi al-Shuwayli (Facebook.com)



Kazem 'Iydan Muhassar and Husein Azhar Muhaybas al-Khaffaji (Facebook.com)

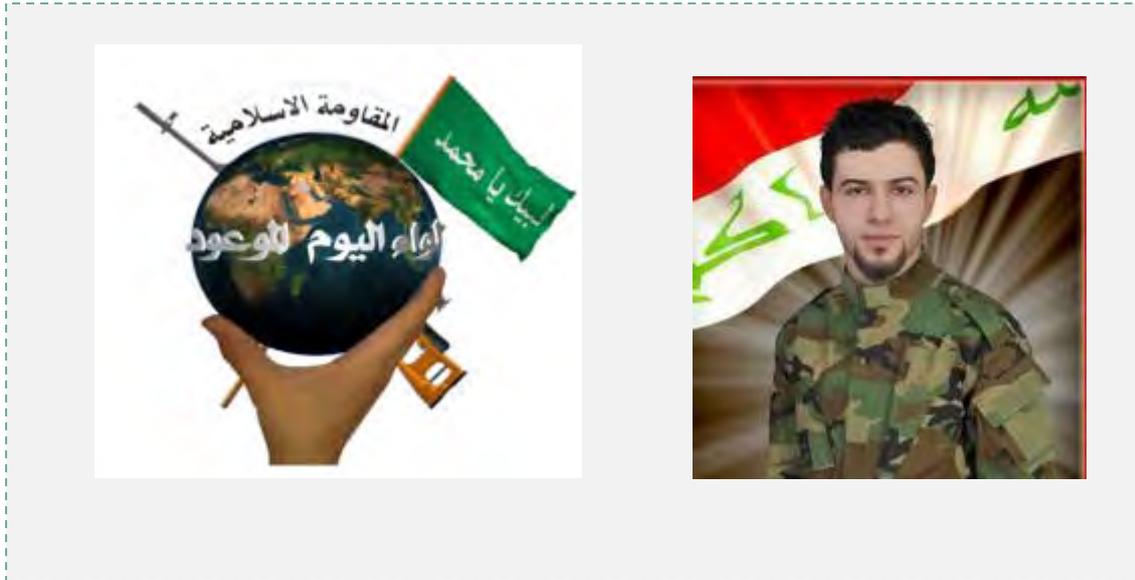
Haydar Ali al-Bahadili (Facebook.com)



Mahmud Sabhan Sakhy al-Ka'bi
(Facebook.com)

Rafi' Nafi' Khammas al-Shammari, Qasem
Salim Shabut al-Darraji, Nasir Muzaffar
Jabbar al-Sharifi, killed in early November
2013 (Facebook.com)

3) **The Battalion of the Promised Day** [i.e., Judgment Day] (**Liwa' al-Yawm al-Maw'ud**) – An Iraqi militia established in 2008 as an Iranian subcontractor for terrorist and guerilla attacks, following the freeze on the military actions of the **Army of the Mahdi** (a Shi'ite militia operating under the aegis of the Qods Force and headed by Muqtada Sadr). According to American sources, the militia received limited independence from the Qods Force. It kept a low profile before the withdrawal of the American forces. Its operatives collaborated with the League of the Righteous and the Hezbollah Battalions until the Americans left Iraq (planting IEDs, firing rockets, etc.)



The insignia of the Battalion of the Promised Day. The inscription on the globe reads "The Battalion of the Promised Day;" above it the inscription reads "The Islamic resistance."

Shajja' al-Yasiri, Battalion of the Promised Day operative, killed in Syria (Facebook.com)

Enlisting Shi'ite Foreign Fighters in Iraq

25. After the American army withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011, Iraqi militia operatives who had fought the Americans drifted towards the fighting in Syria. A prominent Shi'ite cleric named **Qassim al-Ta'i** called on the Shi'ites in Iraq to fight in Syria to defend the Shi'ite holy sites. Following his appeal, recruiting offices were opened in Baghdad (Akhlal-alkhaleej.com). **Recruitment accelerated in May 2013** during the battle for Al-Qusayr (which turned into a Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian confrontation). One of the Iraqi recruiters, who was interviewed by the BBC, **claimed that thousands of Iraqis were enlisting to fight in Syria** (BBC.co.uk, May 20, 2013).



Iraq cleric Qassim al-Ta'i hosts wounded Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade operatives in Najaf (Kassimaltaai.org)

26. The Iraqi foreign fighter's **main motive** for enlisting to fight in Syria is **religious-sectarian**. An extensive preaching campaign is carried out **to convince Iraqis that it is vital to defend the Shi'ite holy sites in Syria** (a powerful message also sent by Hezbollah in Lebanon). The preaching is waged on the social networks, especially Facebook, where pages have been created to commemorate and glorify Shi'ite foreign fighters killed in Syria (the same is true for the Sunnis fighting in Syria in the ranks of organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad).

27. The **fatwas** of Iranian and Iraqi Shi'ite clerics **are particularly influential** in encouraging Iraqis to go to Syria to fight. Inspiration (and instructions) come from the **leading clerics in Iran, especially Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei**, who urge Shi'ites around the globe to go to Syria to fight. Many Iraqi clerics have also called on their followers to go to Syria to defend the Shi'ite holy sites. Prominent among them is **Qassim al-Ta'i**, who not only preaches but also enlists and sends Iraqi fighters to Syria.

28. Other Iraqi Shi'ite clerics, led by **Muhammad al-Ya'qubi** and **Sadiq al-Husayni al-Shirazi**, joined the call for Iraqis to go to Syria, but **conditioned it on their fighting to defend the Shi'ite holy sites, such as the grave of Al-Set Zaynab and Al-Sayyida Ruqayya**. For example, **Kazem Husayni al-Ha'iri** is a Shi'ite cleric from Najaf who resides in Qom, Iran, and many of his followers joined the ranks of the Companions of the Men of Truth. One of his followers asked what his position was on joining the fighting in Syria to defend the Shi'ite holy sites, and **Kazem Husayni al-Ha'iri** answered that it was not merely a question of the holy sites, but the duty to fight

"infidels" in general. He added, however, that **in every issue the authority of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had to be respected** (Alshiraz.com; Al-Ra'i, Kuwait, December 4, 2013). **The fatwas contributed greatly to the rise in the number of Iraqi Shi'ite foreign fighters who went to Syria.**



Kazem Husayni al-Ha'iri's answer to the question asked by one of his followers about joining the fighting in Syria (Alraimedia.com)

29. In addition to religious motivation, there is **generous pay**. According to the Iraqi media, every foreign fighter receives \$12,000 when he enlists and \$50 for every day he fights in Syria, that is, \$1,500 a month. A report issued in November 2013, based on official Iraqi sources, stated that the monthly stipend had risen to \$2,500, apparently because of the rise in the demand for fighters (Almustaqbar.com, November 17, 2013). In our assessment, for the Iraqi militiamen "unemployed" since the withdrawal of the American forces, fighting in Syria is a good source of income. In all probability, **the funds they receive come from Iran**, and possibly from donations from the Shi'ite communities in Iraq and other locations around the globe.



The Facebook page commemorating the Shi'ite foreign fighters killed in Syria (Facebook.com)

The Policy of the Iraqi Regime

30. Al-Maliki's Shi'ite Iraqi regime **has avoided openly confronting the issue of the recruiting of Shi'ite Iraqi foreign fighters**. In fact, it may even encourage recruitment or at least allow it to continue. In our assessment, the regime's motivation is both religious and strategic, in **that it has strengthened its ties to Iran** since the American withdrawal from Iraq. Nevertheless, in February 2013, al-Maliki's allies called on him to withdraw the Iraqi Shi'ite militiamen from Syria.



Ali Hussein Jabber al-Maliki, nephew of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was killed by the Free Syrian Army near the grave of Al-Set Zaynab in May 2013. He was apparently a senior commander in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade (Facebook.com). A picture of Khomeini appears to the left of the red inscription; Khomeini is at the right.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States

31. Shi'ite foreign fighters in Syria also come from **Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf countries**, among them **Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait and Bahrain**. We estimate their numbers at **several hundred, most of them from Yemen**. In June 2013 an Iraqi Shi'ite spokesman reported that nine Saudi Shi'ites, eight Bahraini Shi'ites and six Kuwaiti Shi'ites had been killed in Syria **defending the grave of Al-Set Zaynab**, and that they had been buried in Najaf (Iraqnetworknews.com, June 17, 2013). It was also reported that the first Saudi foreign fighter killed in Syria was **Ahmad Adnan al-Qar'ush**, from the Shi'ite region of Al-Qatif. He fought in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade and was killed in May 2013 (Syrianfreearmy.com).

32. The Arabic news channel **Al-Arabiya TV** reported that operatives from the Saudi terrorist organization **Hezbollah in Saudi Arabia** ("Hezbollah Hijaz") were currently in the region of Damascus and fighting in support of the Syrian regime. The organization was on the list issued by Saudi Arabia on March 7, 2014, of terrorist organizations. Al-Arabiya TV also reported that so far nine Saudi Shi'ite foreign fighters had been killed in Syria, the most prominent of whom was **Ahmad Adnan al-Qar'ush** (Alarabiya.net, March 7, 2014).



Ahmad Adnan al-Qar'ush, the first Shi'ite foreign fighter killed in Syria (Syrianfreearmy.com)



Sheikh Shaykh Ali al-Samahiji, a Bahraini Shi'ite, who holds Iranian citizenship (and was expelled from Bahrain by the local authorities, who held Iranian citizenship). He died at Al-Qusayr in May 2013 fighting in the ranks of a Hezbollah force. To his left is the Hezbollah insignia (Syrianfreearmy.com)

33. On August 8, 2013 the London-based Arabic newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat reported that **hundreds of Yemenis who belonged to the Iranian-affiliated Houthi rebel organization were fighting in support of the Assad regime in Syria** (Liveleak.com).⁷ On May 27, 2013 Yemeni newspapers reported that 200 Houthi operatives had left Yemen and joined the fighting in Syria in support of the regime (Almokhtsar.com). On June 22, 2013, it was reported that six Houthi operatives had been killed in the region of Daraa' in southern Syria, ambushed by the Free Syrian Army (Aksalser.com)

Afghanistan and Pakistan

34. Apparently there are **scores and perhaps hundreds of Shi'ite foreign fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan** in Syria. Both countries have Shi'ite communities in which Iran conducts religious and cultural activities, as well as, in our assessment, intelligence and subversive activities. Most of the Afghan and Pakistani foreign fighters **are in the ranks of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade** (See below).

⁷ For further information about Iranian support for the Houthi rebellion in Yemen, see the February 11, 2013 bulletin "Iranian subversion in Yemen: A ship with a cargo of arms originating in Iran and en route to the Shi'ite Houthi rebels in north Yemen, was recently intercepted."



Left: Two Afghan Shi'ite foreign fighters killed at the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Facebook.com).
Right: Afghan Shi'ite foreign fighters in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade in the region of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Facebook.com)



Two Afghans who died in Syria. Aziz Safar Muhammad (left), and Muhammad Ra'uf RUFAY'I (right) (Facebook.com)

Muhammad Husein Jawadi from Kabul, an Afghan killed in the fighting around the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. He belonged to the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade (Facebook.com)



Left: Muhammad Ali Shah al-Hysayni, an Afghan killed in the fighting around the grave of Al-Set Zaynab on January 5, 2013. Right: Ahmad Baqir Musa an Afghan killed in the fighting around the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. Both apparently belonged to the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade (Facebook.com)

Somalia

35. Apparently so far only **a few Somali foreign fighters** have gone to fight in Syria. The Facebook page in **Farsi** devoted to Shi'ite foreign fighters shows a picture of the commander of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade in the company of **two Somali Shi'ite foreign fighters**. The caption reads, "While Sunni and Wahhabi Muslims enlisted [to fight alongside the rebels], **Somali Shi'ites joined the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade to defend the grave of Al-Set Zaynab**" (Facebook.com). Another picture from the same Facebook page showed a Somali foreign fighter from the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade, possibly the same one as in the previous picture (Facebook.com).



The commander of Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade (second from right) in the company of two Somali foreign fighters (Facebook.com)



Group picture of foreign fighters in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade. The foreign fighter standing at the extreme left may be Somali. Wearing white at the center is Shi'ite cleric Qassim al-Ta'i (Facebook.com)

The Ivory Coast

36. A website posted pictures of **two Shi'ite foreign fighters from the Ivory Coast** participating in the fighting in support of the Syrian regime. One of them was killed (En.wikipedia.org). In June 2013 it was reported that foreign fighters from West Africa were **participating in the defense of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab** apparently in the ranks of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade.



A Somali foreign fighter holds a sign reading, "At your orders, Zaynab!! From Gagnoa – Ivory Coast [a city in the south of the country] to here – Damascus. Are they not the same? May 26, 2013" (Askquran.ir)



Muhammad Sulayman al-Kuni from the Ivory Coast, the first African to die in Syria. He was killed in the compound of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab on June 26,2013 (Abna.ir)

Section C – THE combat frameworks of the Shi'ite foreign fighters

Overview

37. Besides Hezbollah operatives, most of whom belong to the organization's organic units, there are **approximately 4,000 - 5,000 Shi'ite operatives** fighting in Syria, **most of them from Iraq**. Most of them, **about 2,000 – 3,000 fighters**, belong to a military framework called the **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade**. Other smaller military frameworks based on several hundred **Shi'ite operatives each and originating mainly from Iraq**, operate alongside the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. **The Qods Force**, which established, equipped and directed the Iraqi Shi'ite militias that fought against the Americans and their allies in Iraq, is responsible for handling these frameworks in Syria.

The Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade



The emblem of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade. The illustration shows the name of the brigade with a hand holding a gun above it, and above that a Verse from the Quran: “They are young people who believe in their Lord, we bestowed on them the guidance on the straight path” (Surat al-Kahf, Verse 13). Part of this Verse also appears in the logo of the League of the Righteous. A raised rifle with a Verse from the Quran above it is a symbol common to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shi'ite organizations established by them, including the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Overview

38. **The Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade is a professional military framework in which the majority of Shi'ite operatives serve**. Its members are well equipped (See photos), possess relatively high military qualifications, and maintain a hierarchical organizational structure and an orderly military command. They are also **skilled in**

guerrilla warfare tactics, acquired while fighting against US army and Western coalition forces in Iraq.

39. The brigade was probably established in late 2012 or early 2013 to protect the grave of **Al-Set Zaynab** compound. Al-Set Zaynab was the daughter of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, the founder of Shi'ite Islam, and the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. The grave, located in the heart of Sunni territory about 10 kilometers south of Damascus, is a pilgrimage site for Shi'ites from around the world.⁸ **Protecting the grave and other Shi'ite holy sites in Syria has become the main task of the military frameworks of foreign Shi'ite operatives** and an important task of the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Background of the establishment of the brigade

40. **Attacks on the grave of Al-Set Zaynab triggered the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade's founding.** The attacks, which began in the second half of 2012, were mostly initiated by organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad, mainly the Al-Nusra Front, which is fundamentally hostile to Shi'ites and is attempting to give the civil war a religious-sectarian character. In 2013, **attacks on the grave intensified** in the wake of calls by radical Salafist sheikhs to destroy it because, according to them, it is idolatry, forbidden by Islam. In the first half of 2013, the grave was attacked several times. In early April 2013, Al-Nusra Front operatives captured a neighborhood of the village nearby and took the commander of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade prisoner (he died in captivity).

41. **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas**, the man for whom the Brigade was named, was the son of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, who the Shi'ites' holiest and most revered figure. **He and his brother Husayn led the fighting in the battle of Karbala against the Omayyad dynasty (680 AD).** The battle, which culminated in the massacre of many members of the Ali family and their supporters, became an ethos of sacrifice for the Shi'ites. **Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas became a symbol of heroism among the Shi'ites.**

⁸ For more information about the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, see the June 4, 2013, bulletin, "Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war in Syria."



Photograph of a meeting of senior Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade members at the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, posted on Facebook in May 2013. The photograph shows 1. Hussein Alawi, an Iraqi and one of the first to join the brigade. 2. Qassim al-Ta'i, an Iraqi cleric who preaches and sends operatives to fight in Syria. 3. Sayyid Hussein al-Mariani al-Mussawi, an Iraqi Shi'ite cleric from the rural area of Baghdad. 4. Maher Ajib Jazza, aka Abu Ajib, former commander of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade, who was taken prisoner by the Al-Nusra Front and apparently died in captivity.

The central mission: protecting Shi'ite holy places

42. The central mission of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade is to defend the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, mainly from organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the global jihad (“takfir groups”). In addition, in the vicinity of the grave and the nearby town there is a force numbering **several hundred Hezbollah operatives who also defend the area**. In 2013, the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade and Hezbollah operatives waged fierce battles against Salafist-jihadi fighters and prevented them from entering the grave compound.

43. In our assessment, **a few hundred operatives of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade died** defending the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. Even Hezbollah, which operates in the area, suffered **over 80 losses** (according to an analysis of most of the names of Hezbollah operatives killed in Syria) **out of the nearly 350 fighters who died in Syria** (estimate at the end of February 2014).

44. **Hezbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah attach great importance to defending the grave of Al-Set Zaynab and glorify the image of the fighters who fell there**. Protecting the Shi'ite grave is **Nasrallah's most important religious justification for Hezbollah's military involvement in Syria** and the excuse for promoting the interests of Iran and Hezbollah, which have nothing to do with protecting Shi'ite holy places. For example, in an interview with Hassan Nasrallah on the Lebanese channel OTV on December 3, 2013, Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah's

military involvement in Syria began with the need to defend the grave, which was left isolated after most of rural Damascus fell in the hands of the rebels. He added that **in consequence, Hezbollah sent 40-50 operatives to the area of the grave in order to prevent it from falling into the hands of the “armed groups”** (Note: Since then there has been an increase in the number of Hezbollah operatives defending the grave and fighting in other battle zones in Syria. As usual, Hassan Nasrallah refrained from citing figures).

45. While their main task is to defend the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, operatives of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade and other Shi'ite military frameworks **also protect other Shi'ite holy places in Syria** (of lesser religious importance). **Two of them are:**

A. The grave of Al-Sayyida Ruqayya: She was the daughter of Husayn bin Ali, who was killed in the battle of Karbala. She died of sorrow at the age of five, because of the death of her father, and is an exemplary figure in Shi'ite Islam. **Her grave is located in rural Aleppo.** It was the site of fierce battles between rebel forces and the forces of the Assad regime, during which the grave and its dome were damaged.



The grave of Al-Sayyida Ruqayya: the interior of the building and the grave (Youtube.com)



The grave of Al-Sayyida Ruqayya: view from outside (Youtube.com)



A picture from a video posted on the Internet, showing Iranian fighters in the vicinity of the grave of Al-Sayyida Ruqayya in Aleppo. One of the fighters holds a laptop and talks with his counterpart in Farsi (Youtube.com, October 4, 2013).

B. The grave of Al-Sayyida Sakinah: She was the daughter of Husayn bin Ali, who was killed in the battle of Karbala. She died in Damascus at the age of four and was buried in Daraya, **a suburb of Damascus**. The grave is considered by Shi'ites as the third most important holy site in Syria, after the shrines of Al-Sayyida Zaynab and Al-Sayyida Ruqayya.



Hajj Ali Jamal al-Jashi, a Hezbollah commander who was killed in the vicinity of the grave of Al-Sayyida Sakinah compound on April 3, 2013. He is shown alongside a Kornet rocket launcher, standing in front of a Syrian army tank (Facebook.com).



Hajj Ali Jamal al-Jashi, aka Haydar, who was killed defending the grave of Al-Sayyida Sakinah (Facebook.com).



The funeral of Hajj Ali Jamal al-Jashi in the village of Jawiyya, southern Lebanon (South Lebanon Facebook page, April 3, 2013, and the Radio Sawt Al-Farah website, Tyre, April 6, 2013)

The operating methods of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade

46. The Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade and other Shi'ite military frameworks operate semi-independently and are not an organic part of the Syrian Army or Syrian security forces. However, they are subject to the Syrian army, operated by it and incorporated into Iran's overall strategy (which, in our assessment, serves as a type of supreme coordinator between the Shi'ite militias and the Iranian regime).

47. One of the Shi'ite foreign fighters in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade described his ties with the Syrian Army and the Syrian regime as follows: **"The moment you join the Brigade you have to join the Syrian government army. You have to fight [on the side of] President Bashar al-Assad before you fight for [the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade].** The Syrian army will tell you that you have to know that you are protecting Syria, not only the grave [Al-Set Zaynab]" (The Guardian, June 4, 2013).

48. In our assessment the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade operatives, as well as operatives in other Shi'ite military frameworks, **are deployed mainly in defending Shi'ite holy places, especially the grave of Al-Set Zaynab.** They also have initiated local attacks of tactical significance to improve the defensive capability of the places that they defend. This enables the Syrian army and security forces to direct their troops to other fronts for offensive missions requiring greater military skill.

49. The Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade operatives are stationed in buildings in the Al-Set Zaynab compound (and other holy places). They are assisted by Hezbollah operatives and the Syrian regime's militias (the Shabiha). Together they defend the

sites and repel occasional attacks by rebel organizations, mainly the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations affiliated with the global jihad. According to videos posted on the Internet, they use sniper rifles, assault rifles, machine guns and RPG launchers.

Operatives from the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade



Firing an RPG launcher (Youtube.com)



Ahmad Gharawi, an Iraqi killed in Syria (Facebook.com)



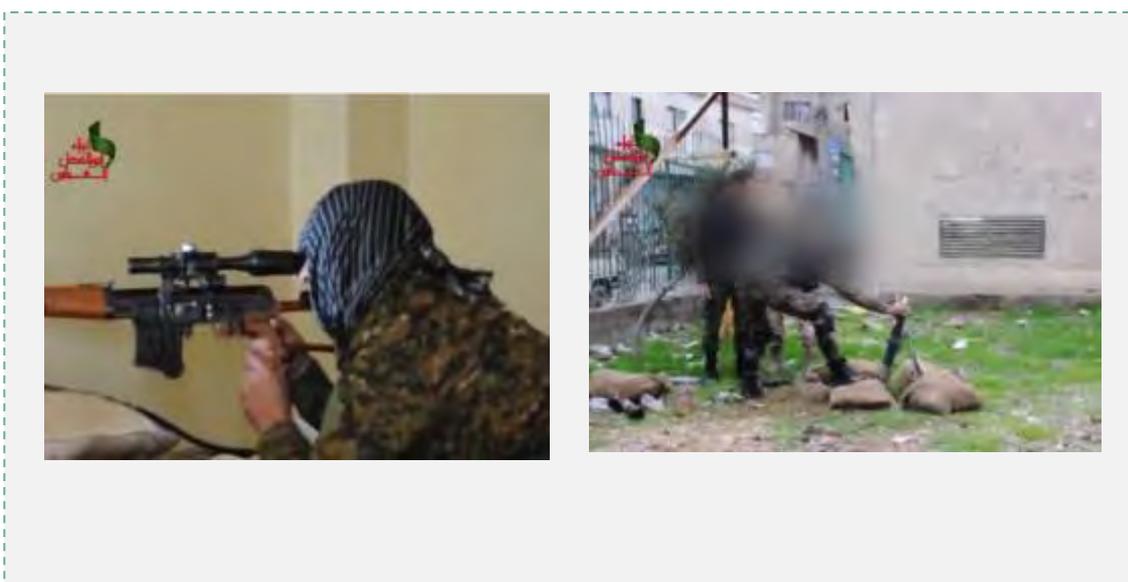
An operative holds an RPG launcher and leans on a Syrian army tank (Youtube.com)

Operatives from the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade. Two of them hold RPG launchers (Youtube.com).



The equipment of an Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade operative (Facebook.com)

Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade operative operates a mortar (Youtube.com)



Pictures from a video documenting the ongoing operational activities of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade: mortar fire, sniper fire, patrols and RPG fire (Youtube.com)



Pictures from a video documenting the ongoing operational activities of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade: mortar fire, sniper fire, patrols and RPG fire (Youtube.com)

Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade operatives killed defending the grave of Al-Set Zaynab



Ahmad Kayara is described on various websites as one of the founders of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade and one of its senior commanders. He was killed in Syria and buried in Najaf, Iraq, in February 2013 (Facebook.com).



Dargham al-Sa'di, killed in May 2013 (Facebook.com)



Burhan Mamita, killed in March 2013 (Youtube.com)



Ahmad al-Hajji al-Sa'di, an Iraqi who served as commander of the Emergency Force of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade. He is shown with a picture of Muqtada al-Sadr on his chest (Plus.google.com).



Umran Kazem Musa in a video posted online, sends his regards to "friends who are in Iran" (Youtube.com).



Abu Ali al-Mandalawi (Facebook.com)

Other military frameworks

50. Shi'ite operatives fighting in Syria, particularly those from Iraq, are organized in other military frameworks named after people and events from Shi'ite Islam and history. Some of their emblems include a picture of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. **The activity of the frameworks is integrated into that of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade, which operates at least some of them.** Although the frameworks are called “brigades” or “battalions,” they are not necessarily brigades and battalions as is customary in armies, but rather semi-organized quasi-militia forces. In our assessment, most of these frameworks number **several hundred operatives each**. They are deployed mainly for defending the grave of Al-Set Zaynab and other Shi'ite holy places.

51. **Following are the main Shi'ite military frameworks:**

- a. **The Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions (Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada')**⁹ is a force of several hundred Iraqi operatives. The operatives are deployed in coordination with the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade. Its name was first mentioned in the media in April 2013 in the city of Basra in Iraq. Its stated objective is to protect the Shi'ite holy places in Syria. The force comprises operatives who left the Hezbollah Brigades because of internal conflicts and were joined by **Abu Mustafa al-Shaybani**, who headed a logistic network handled by the Qods Force, which was used for smuggling weapons to Iraq for the Shi'ite militias

⁹ Sayyid al-Shuhada' is the nickname of Husayn bin Ali bin Abi Talib, who led the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD and was killed in battle. He has become a role model and a source of admiration among Shi'ites.

operated by Iran.¹⁰ On September 24, 2013, Syrian television announced that the commander of the Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions, **Abu Layth** or **Hamza bin Abd al-Muttalib** (apparently his real name), was killed in eastern rural Damascus.



Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions operatives (Facebook.com)

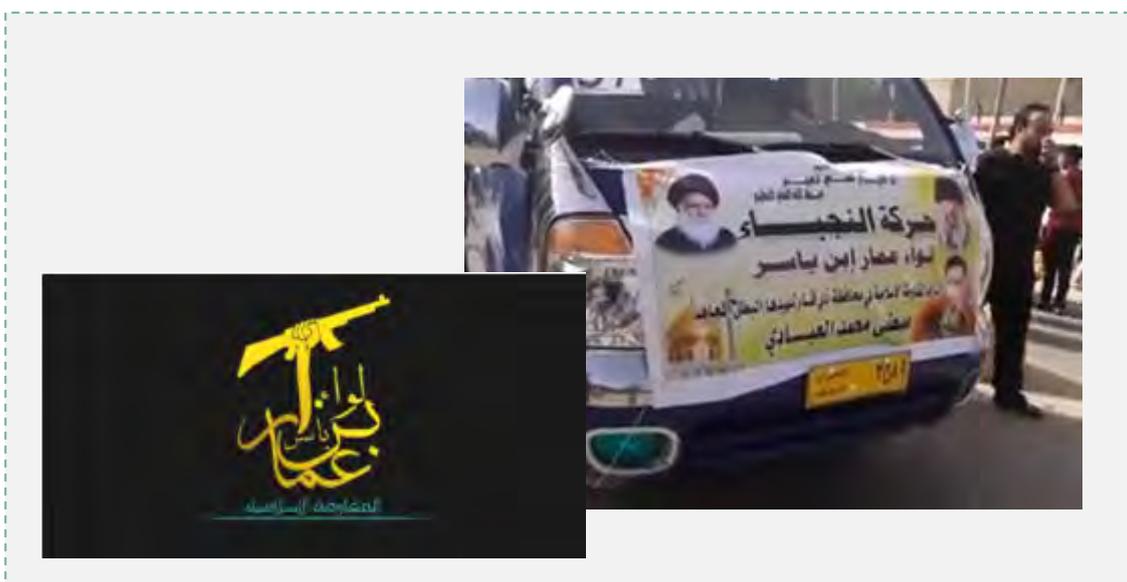
The emblem of the Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions, bearing the text “Victory from Allah and the conquest is near - the Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions – the Islamic Resistance in Iraq.” In the middle there is a drawing of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Facebook.com).



Left: Ali Sami al-Zubaydi, an operative from Iraq killed inside the Al-Set Zaynab compound while fighting with the Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions on August 20, 2013. He was a sniper and was known as the Sniper of Aleppo” (Facebook.com). Right: Sajjad al-Shaybani, an operative from Iraq killed inside the Al-Set Zaynab compound while fighting with the Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions on August 20, 2013 (Facebook.com).

¹⁰ The Al-Shaybani network was assisted by Lebanese Hezbollah operatives, who came to Iraq in 2006-2008 and trained militia operatives and operatives of Iraqi networks on behalf of the Qods Force.

- b. **The Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding (Harakat al-Nujaba’)**¹¹ is a Shi’ite military framework of several hundred operatives, former operatives of the Iraqi militias, the League of the Righteous and the Hezbollah Battalions. Most of them are stationed in the area of Damascus and a small number in the area of Aleppo. The force is organized in military frameworks known as “brigades:” **the Amar bin Yassir Brigade** (associate of Imam Ali, who is buried in the Al-Raqqa Governorate in Syria), which operates in the area of Aleppo; **the Al-Hamd Brigade** (“the Praise Brigade” - i.e., "praise be to Allah"); **the Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba Brigade** (Imam Al-Hassan bin Abi Talib, the second imam of Shi’ite Islam, known as Al-Mujtaba, i.e., the chosen one), which operates in the area of Damascus.



Left: The emblem of the Amar bin Yassir Brigade. The text reads “the Islamic Resistance”. The emblem is very similar to that of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Hezbollah (Jihadology.net). Right: The Amar bin Yassir Brigade, which belongs to the Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding. Photograph from the funeral of a movement operative held in southern Iraq. Flanking the announcement are pictures of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Iraqi Shi’ite cleric Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who was murdered on the orders of Saddam Hussein in 1999 (Facebook.com).

¹¹ The full name of the force is: Al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya – Harakat Hezbollah – Al-Nujaba’. Translation from the Arabic: “The Islamic Resistance – Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding.”



Left: Al-Hamd Brigade operatives (Jihadology.net). Right: the emblem of the Al-Hamd Brigade, which belongs to the Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding. The dome of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab appears in the background and a map of Iraq appears in the foreground, with a hand on it holding an assault rifle and the sword of Ali bin Abi Taleb on the other side. Above it there is a red flag, bearing the text “Oh Husayn” (this refers to Husayn bin Ali, a central role model in Shi’ite Islam) (Jihadology.net).



The emblem of the Imam al-Hassan al-Mujtaba Brigade, which belongs to the Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding (Jihadology.net).

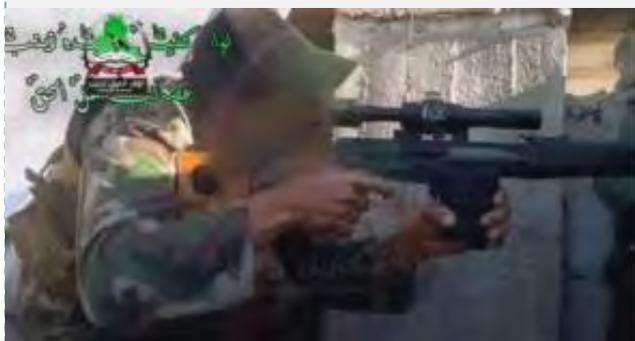
c. **The Al-Taff Brigade (Liwa’ Al-Taff)**¹² is a Shi’ite military framework, established in May 2013, based on Iraqi operatives. It is a force numbering several hundred operatives that supports the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade. Its operatives come from the Iraqi militias, the League of the Righteous and the Hezbollah Brigades. According to an article on an Iraqi-Shi’ite website, the Al-Taff

¹² Al-Taff is the place in southern Iraq where the Battle of Karbala took place in 680 AD, a formative event in the history of Shi’ite Islam. In the battle, supporters of Imam Ali were massacred by Yazid bin Muawiyah.

Brigade comprises three "battalions:" **the Habib bin Muzaher al-Asadi Battalion; the Badir bin Khudayr Battalion; and the Zuhayr Abu Laqin Battalion** (albasrah.net).

d. **The brigade that vouches for [the security of Al-Set] Zaynab (Liwa' al-Kafil Zaynab)** is a Shi'ite Iraqi military framework with several hundred operatives originating from the League of the Righteous. Their main activity is helping to defend the grave of Al-Set Zaynab, as their name indicates.

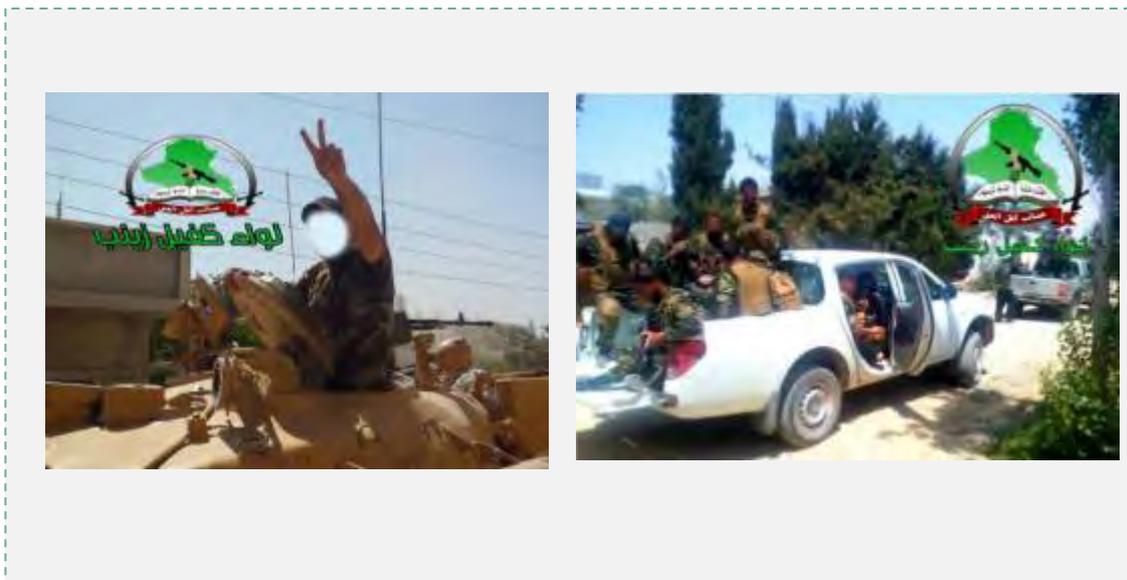
Operatives of the support force of [Al-Set] Zaynab



Left: Sniper in the brigade (Youtube.com). Right: The brigade emblem, which is the emblem of the League of the Righteous militias (Youtube.com).



Left: A Brigade operative loads a rocket (Azelin.files.wordpress.com). Right: Brigade operatives holding a Kalashnikov, RPG launcher, sniper rifle equipped with a telescopic sights, and a machine gun (Azelin.files.wordpress.com).



Left: A Brigade operative makes the victory sign while standing in a tank, apparently a Syrian Army tank (Azelin.files.wordpress.com). Right: Vehicles with brigade operatives (Azelin.files.wordpress.com).

- e. **The forces that vouch [for the security of Al-Set Zaynab's grave] (Afwaj al-Kafil)** is a Shi'ite Iraqi military framework that helps the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade defend the Al-Set Zaynab grave compound. It consists of several units, each of which is called a “**fawj**”, i.e., a group of forces (for example - “the Rapid Intervention Fawj”, “the Fawj of the Righteous”).
- f. **The Imam Al-Husayn Brigade (Liwa' Al-Imam al-Husayn)** is a military framework whose establishment was announced on June 30, 2013. It is based on Shi'ite Iraqi operatives but also has Syrian Shi'ites (according to a video produced by Iranian **Khabar** TV). Apparently most of the operatives come from the Battalion of the Promised Day, an Iraqi militia joined by operatives from the **Mahdi Army**, the militia of Shi'ite pro-Iranian cleric **Muqtada al-Sadr**. A significant portion of its operatives served in the Iraqi army and have military experience.



Left: second from the left is Abu Karrar, Commander of the Imam al-Husayn Brigade (Facebook.com). Right: video circulated by the Imam al-Husayn Brigade showing Muqtada al-Sadr (Youtube.com).

- g. **The Zu al-Fiqar Brigade (Liwa' Zu al-Fiqar)**¹³ is an Iraqi Shi'ite military framework established in early June or July 2013 to assist the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade in protecting the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. In our assessment it numbers several hundred operatives, including Iraqi operatives from the Leagues of the Righteous, the Hezbollah Battalions and the Battalion of the Promised Day. Shi'ite Lebanese and Iranian operatives also serve in it. Most of its commanders were recruited from among officers in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade.

¹³ Zu al-Fiqar is the name given to the sword of Ali bin Abi Talib, which he received, according to Muslim tradition, as a sign of respect from the Prophet Mohammed.



Left: Abu Ja'far al-Assad, an Iraqi, a senior commander in the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade, who was appointed senior commander in the Zu al-Fiqar Brigade (Facebook.com). Right: An operative in the Zu al-Fiqar Brigade (Facebook.com).



Left: Abu Hajer (first on the right) in the company of Maher Ajib Jazza, commander of the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade (Facebook.com). Right: Abu Hajer, an Iraqi Shi'ite who served as deputy commander of the Zu al-Fiqar Brigade. According to the Iranian news agency Ahl al-Bayt from August 21, 2013, he visited Iran. In an interview with the Ahl al-Bayt news agency, Abu Hajer said: "We have established the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade and the Zu al-Fiqar with Iraqi and Syrian Shi'ites, and with Shi'ites from other countries" (Alarabiya.net). On September 18, 2013, the Ahl al-Bayt news agency announced that Abu Hajer was killed in the area of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab and that his real name was Fadel al-Subhi (Facebook.com).



Emblem of the Zu al-Fiqar Brigade: two swords protecting the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Facebook.com).

- h. **Al-Khurasani Spearhead Companies (Saraya Taliat Al-Khurasani)**¹⁴ is a small military framework composed of Iraqi Shi'ites. It was established by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Its establishment was announced on September 24, 2013. Its center of operations is at the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. Its leader is Ali al-Yasiri, probably a Shi'ite from southern Iraq.



The emblem of the Al-Khurasani Spearhead Companies bears its name and the words “Islamic Resistance” (above the rifle). The emblem includes the Qur'an Verse, “Those of us who struggled [can also be translated as: performed the duty of jihad] will receive our guidance.” Graphically the emblem is similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' emblem and the emblem of the Lebanese Hezbollah (Jihadology.net).

¹⁴ The framework is apparently named after Abu Muslim al-Khurasani, a military commander who helped topple the Omayyad Dynasty, the Shi'ites' mortal enemy, in the eighth century AD.



Ali al-Yassiri (on the right, commander of the Al-Khurasani Spearhead Companies. The photograph was taken at the grave of Al-Set Zaynab (Jihadology.net).

- i. **Badr – the military wing (Badr – Al-Jinah al-Askari)** is a Shi'ite Iraqi military framework, originating in an Iraqi militia, the **Badr Force (Faylaq Badr)** of the Supreme Islamic Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The Council was an Iraqi Shi'ite militia established **by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards** during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) as a Shi'ite opposition fighting against Saddam Hussein's regime. It operated in southern Iraq. In 2003, following the entry of the United States into Iraq, a freeze on its activity was announced. It has since become a civilian organization called **the Badr Organization** (Munazzamat Badr); its military wing apparently renewed its operations in the wake of the civil war in Syria. On July 13, 2003, the Badr Organization announced that it had sent more than 1,500 operatives of its military wing to Syria; in our assessment the figure is exaggerated.



Left: Badr Force operatives killed in Syria. They were also mentioned on the Internet as fallen fighters from the Sayyid al-Shuhada' Battalions. The text in the picture reads, "We are all your slaves, Zaynab! We will sacrifice our souls for you, Zaynab!" The fallen appear to the left of Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic revolution in Iran, and Ali Khamenei, the current leader of Iran (Facebook.com). Right: The emblem of the Badr Force - the military wing.



Left: A picture that appeared on the Facebook page associated with the Badr Force It shows operatives of the force positioned below Iranian Leader Ali Khamenei, under the legend "Badr – the military wing, the force of loyalty to the House of Ali" (Jihadology.net). Right: A picture distributed by the Abu al-Fadhel al-Abbas Brigade showing Badr Force operatives examining the map of Syria (Jihadology.net).

- j. **The Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Forces (Quwwat al-Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr)**¹⁵ is an Iraqi Shi'ite military framework identified with Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Apparently many of its

¹⁵ Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr is a pro-Iranian Shi'ite Iraqi cleric, one of the founders of the Shi'ite opposition to Saddam Hussein. He was assassinated on the orders of Saddam Hussein in 1980 because he called for an Iran-style Islamic revolution in Iraq.

operatives belong to the Battalion of the Promised Day and are supporters of pro-Iranian Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr (whose father was a cousin of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr). The force apparently has close ties with the Badr Force – the military wing, since they disseminate the same videos on the Internet.



The Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Forces (Facebook.com)



Left: A Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Forces operative carries an RPG launcher (Jihadology.net). Right: Qasim al-Darraji, killed in November 2013 in the region of the grave of Al-Set Zaynab. He belonged to the Shahid Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Forces (Twitter.com).

- k. **The Al-Mukhtar Army (Jaysh al-Mukhtar)¹⁶** is a Shi'ite Iraqi military framework whose establishment was announced on February 4, 2013. It

¹⁶ Named after Jaysh (army) Al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, which was established by commander Al-Mukhtar bin Abi 'Ubayd, nicknamed Al-Thaqafi. The army was established immediately after the Battle of Karbala, in vengeance for the death of Husayn bin Ali and his followers.

was established by **Wathiq al-Battat**, Secretary General of the Hezbollah Battalions militia in Iraq. Al-Battat announced that the Al-Mukhtar Army had been established to provide security for Iraqi civilians (i.e., to prevent terrorist attacks against Shi'ites often carried out by Al-Qaeda in Iraq). He added that that new framework would also operate outside Iraq (Arabic.farsnews.com, Youtube.com). According to one report, **Abu Karrar al-Hamidawi**, a senior officer in the Hezbollah Battalions, who was killed in Syria in April 2013, operated in the Al-Mukhtar Army. This may indicate that the Al-Mukhtar Army operatives operate within the framework of the Hezbollah Battalions.



Wathiq al-Battat announces the establishment of the Al-Mukhtar Army against a backdrop of Iraq and Hezbollah flags (Youtube.com). On August 29, 2013, Al-Battat threatened severe damage to American interests in Iraq if the United States attacked Syria. At the time, the US threatened to take action in Syria after the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians (Arabic.farsnews.com.) On January 2, 2014, it was reported that Al-Battat had been arrested in Baghdad after the Al-Mukhtar Army assumed responsibility for firing shells at Saudi Arabia, in the wake of reports of religious rulings (fatwas) hostile to Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia (Tunisien.tn).