



## Hezbollah and Iran-handled Shi'ite militias are integrated into the Syrian army in its campaign to take control of south Syria

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### Overview

**Shi'ite forces, handled by Iran**, are being integrated into the campaign currently waged by the Syrian army in south Syria. There are at least **two Iraqi-Shi'ite forces** (the Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade and the Abu F-al-Abbas Brigade). There are also **Afghan Shi'ite fighters in the Fatemiyoun Brigade**. In addition, it was reported that **Hezbollah operatives** also participate in the fighting, including operatives from its **elite al-Radwan unit**, who were sent from Lebanon. Other Iran-handled Shi'ite militias may also be involved in south Syria, although the ITIC has no information about them. It can be assumed (judging by past experience) that **the Shi'ite forces have Iranian officers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)**.

► So far the Hezbollah operatives and Shi'ite militias **have fought mainly in the Dara'a region**, where they help the Syrian army take control of villages and rebel strongholds and to reach the Jordan-Syria border. The Syrian army is expected to later focus its attempts on a takeover of **the Syrian Golan Heights**. In ITIC assessment **the Iranians strive to have Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias under their control participate in a Syrian move to take over the Golan Heights, while concealing their involvement**.

► According to ITIC information, **Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias** (some or all) **have been integrated into the various Syrian army units and do not operate as independent forces**. Pictures show **Shi'ite militiamen wearing Syrian army uniforms, and it is difficult to distinguish them from Syrian soldiers**. In ITIC assessment, if they are integrated into the Syrian forces attacking the Golan Heights **it will be difficult to identify them, and easy for the Syrian regime to deny** the involvement of Hezbollah operatives and Shi'ite militiamen in the fighting.

## The Iran-handled Shi'ite militias in the campaign in south Syria

### Overview

in the fighting in south Syria, forces from **at least two Iraqi Shi'ite brigades and an Iran-handled Afghan Shi'ite brigade participate in the fighting**. They fight in various arenas **as auxiliary forces in support of the Syrian army and are integrated into the Syrian units**. According to the Syrian media, **the militias fought in the area east of Dara'a**. It can be assumed that in the future some of them may be integrated into **the Syrian move to take control of the Golan Heights**.

### The Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade

► An Iraqi Shi'ite militia force called Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade<sup>1</sup> fought with the Syrian army in its attack on the rebel enclave northeast of Dara'a (Shabakat Sham, July 3, 2018). The force also participated in the important attack to cut off the eastern rebel enclave by **occupying the village of Buser al-Harir**. At the end of June 2018<sup>2</sup> the Shi'ite force made public its participation by posting pictures on its Facebook page.



**Right: Operatives from the Brigade post for a victory picture in Buser al-Harir. Left: Syrian army soldiers and Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade fighters in the Buser region (Facebook page of the Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade June 26, 2018).**

<sup>1</sup> The **Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade** is another name for a double-edged sword. According to the tradition such a sword was given to the Imam Ali bin Abu Talib by the prophet Muhammad.

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see the June 21-27, 2018, Spotlight on the Global Jihad.



**Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade commander, Abu Shahd al-Jubouri, near the fighting in Dara'a (Facebook page of the Brigade, July 4, 2018).**

**Background information:** The Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade is an **Iraqi Shi'ite military force handled by the Iranians**. It was established in June 2013 to support the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Iraqi Shi'ite brigade in defending the shrine of al-Set Zaynab south of Damascus.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards it was handled by Iran and the Syrian army in other fighting zones. Apparently, since its establishment it has been headed by **Abu Shahd al-Jubouri**. The brigade is composed mainly of Iraqis from Iranian-handled militias, such as the League of the Righteous, the Hezbollah Battalions and the Promised Day Brigade. Apparently most of its commanders were recruited from officers of the Abu Fadl al-Abbas brigade (see below).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> **Al-Set Zaynab** was the daughter of the Imam Ali bin Abu Talib, the founder of Shi'a, and the granddaughter of the prophet Muhammad. Her grave is a shrine and a site for Shi'ite pilgrimages from around the globe.

<sup>4</sup> For further information, see the March 18, 2014 bulletin about the Shi'ite militias handled by Iran, "Shi'ite Foreign Fighters in Syria," and the July 20, 2017 bulletin, "Iran's interests and intent in Iraq and Syria reflected in statements by senior commanders of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq handled by the Iranian Qods Force."



Logo of the Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade, showing two swords protecting the shrine of al-Set Zaynab. Defense of the shrine served as Hezbollah and Shi'ite militia religious justification for their intervention in the Syrian civil war (facebook.com).

### The Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade<sup>5</sup>

► At the beginning of June 2018 fighters belonging to the **Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade**, another Iranian-handled Iraqi Shi'ite militia, **were identified** in the **Quneitra and Dara'a areas**. They were seen **wearing Syrian army uniforms**, along with their commander, Maher Ajeeb Jazza, aka Abu Ajeeb (Syrian Institute for Strategic Studies Nours, June 6; Enab Baladi, June 7, 2018). The pictures were taken during **Syrian army preparations for occupying the southern part of the country**.



Maher Ajeeb with Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade fighters in the region of Quneitra (Syrian Institute for Strategic Studies Nours, June 6, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> **Abu Fadl al-Abbas**, for whom the brigade was named, was the son of the Imam Ali bin Abu Talib, a holy figure in Shi'a Islam. He and his brother Hussein led the fighting at Karbala against the Umayyads in 680 AD. The battle ended with the slaughter of many of Abu Talib's family and supporters, and became the Shi'ite battle sacrifice. Abu Fadl al-Abbas became a symbol of Shi'ite heroism.

► At the beginning of July 2018 pictures were published of Abu Ajeeb with other Abu Fadl al-Abbas fighters in **the region of Dara'a** (unclear exactly where). One picture shows him with Syrian officers. Others show him on a background of marching soldiers. The soldiers' identities cannot be determined **because they are all wearing Syrian army uniforms** (Shabakat Sham, July 3, 2018).

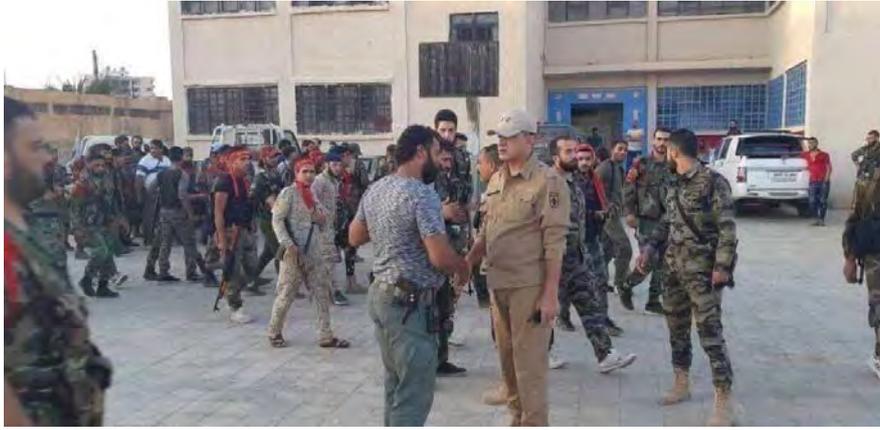


**Right: Abu Ajeeb (right) with Syrian army officers. Left: Abu Ajeeb (center) standing near a tank. Soldiers march in formation in the background. Their identities cannot be verified because militia fighters wear Syrian army uniforms.**



**Right: Abu Ajeeb with Syrian army officers (Shabakat Sham, July 3, 2018). Left: Abu Ajeeb with Syrian army officers and soldiers, and fighters from the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. The picture was taken in the region of Dara'a (al-R'ai, July 3, 2018).**

► On July 3, 2018, a picture was posted to the social networks showing him with **Fadl al-Abbas fighters in Da'el, a village about 15 kilometers (about 9 miles) north of Dara'a**. According to the social networks, the man shaking the hand of brigade commander Abu Ajeeb is a Russian officer (right). (Twitter account of AboSdam, July 3; Enab Baladi, July 4, 2018). The ITIC cannot verify the identification.



A picture that went viral on July 3, 2018, of Abu Ajeeb shaking hands with a man claimed to be a Russian army officer (right) (Twitter account of AbuSDam3@, 2018).

**Background information:** The Abu Fadl al-Abbas brigade is an **Iraqi Shi'ite military force operating in Syria**. The brigade is subordinate to the Syrian army and handled by Iran. It has apparently been headed, since its establishment, by Maher Ajeeb Jazza (Abu Ajeeb). The military competence of the force is relatively high. Its operatives are trained in guerrilla warfare tactics, which they acquired fighting the American army and the coalition countries in Iraq. The brigade was apparently founded at the end of 2012 or the beginning of 2013. Its first mission was to defend the shrine of al-Set Zaynab from jihadist attacks, but during the Syrian civil war it received additional missions.



The logo of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. Over its name is a hand holding a rifle, above which is the Qur'an verse, "They were young men who believed in their lord, and we gave them guidance in their current path" [Surah al-Khaf, verse 13]. Some of the Surah is part of the logo of the League of the Righteous, another Iraqi Shi'ite militia handled by Iran. Holding a rifle aloft with a Qur'an verse is also part of the logo of the IRGC and the Shi'ite organizations established by them, including Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### The Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade

► Apparently **fighters from the Afghan Shi'ite Fatemiyoun Brigade are also integrated into the campaign to take over south Syria**. A Syrian opposition source published pictures

taken secretly of tanks at the al-Tha'la airport (west of the city of al-Sweida). **One of the tanks was flying a Fatemiyoun flag.** According to the photographer, **the forces had come to fight in the Dara'a region** (Nida' Syria, Syrian opposition website, June 21, 2018).



**Tanks at the al-Tha'la airport in the al-Sweida region. One of them is flying the Fatemiyoun Brigade flag (Nida' Syria, June 21, 2018).**

► The Washington Institute for Near East Policy published an article about Iran's deploying Hezbollah and Shi'ite militia forces to south Syria. According to the article, Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters are integrated into the forces of and wear the uniforms of Suheil Hassan ("the tiger") (Hanin Ghaddar and Philip Smyth, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 29, 2018). The Syrian media also reported that fighters from **the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Pakistani Zeynabiyoun Brigade were integrated into "the tiger's" forces** (Nida' Syria, June 21, 2018).

**Background information:** The Fatemiyoun Brigade was established in 2014 by the IRGC, which handles Fatemiyoun fighting in Syria. Its operatives are mainly **Shi'ite refugees who fled to Iran from Afghanistan**. Refugees who enlist in the brigade receive substantial benefits (including salaries, a promise of Iranian citizenship, residence permits and work permits). There are apparently **between 3,000 and 3,500 fighters in the brigade and IRGC officers are stationed with them in various command and consulting positions**. The Fatemiyoun operatives participate in the fighting **in two main zones: in south Syria and Albukamal**,<sup>6</sup> which they secure the areas against ISIS attacks (along with other Iraqi Shi'ite militias).<sup>7</sup>



**The Fatemiyoun Brigade flag displayed next to two wounded Fatemiyoun fighters at a ceremony held in Iran to honor the wounded (The information office of the Syrian revolutionary force, April 24, 2018). Hundreds of fighters wounded in the fighting in Syria were treated in Iranian hospitals.**

<sup>6</sup> The overland route between Iraq and Syria passes through the Albukamal region, and securing an important Iranian strategic interest.

<sup>7</sup> In the Albukamal region under ISIS's regime, during the first half of June 2018 fighters from the Fatemiyoun Brigade were killed. In addition, during the same period an IRGC officer and fighter were also killed. For further information, see the June 19, 2018 bulletin, "Officer and fighter in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, senior Hezbollah officer, and Shiite militia operatives killed in ISIS attacks in Albukamal. The Albukamal border crossing is of major importance to Iran since a route promoting Iran's strategic interests in Syria and Lebanon passes through it."



**Right: Al-Fatemioun fighters in the Albukamal region (Facebook page of the Friends of the Assad Syria, June 10, 2018). Left: Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, during a visit to eastern Syria. He is shown with Fatemioun fighters who fought against ISIS and suffered heavy losses, (Fatemioun Brigade Telegram channel, June 10, 2018).**

### Hezbollah participation in Syrian attacks in south Syria

**Hezbollah forces, among them apparently also operatives from its elite unit, have been integrated into the campaign for the occupation of south Syria.** As opposed to the Iraqi Shi'ite militias, **Hezbollah is careful to keep a low media profile regarding all the aspects of its participation in the campaign.** In ITIC assessment, that is **to prevent Israeli responses, which are liable to embarrass the Syrian regime (and Russia).**

► The Syrian media outlets, mainly those affiliated with the opposition, also reported **the presence and activity of Hezbollah operatives in various war zones of Dara'a and the Golan Heights.** For example, it was reported that Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias took control of the town of Saida (in the eastern rebel enclave, north of the al-Naseeb Syria-Jordan border crossing) (Al-Jazeera, July 5, 2018). In addition, pictures were posted on the social networks showing a Hezbollah operative who had been killed in the region of the Lajah (in ITIC assessment that may indicate the involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian army's fighting against the ISIS enclave northeast of al-Sweida).



**Hezbollah operative killed in the Lajah region. The hand is pointing at a Hezbollah emblem (Twitter account of HadiAlabdallah, June 22, 2018).**

► On June 29, 2018, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy published an article stating that Hezbollah sent its elite al-Radwan unit to Syria. According to the article, when the unit is sent to fight, it is expected that its forces will be heavily involved (as in al-Qusayr, Aleppo and Deir al-Zor). The article quotes sources on the ground stating **that Iran has been deploying its Shi'ite militia forces as proxies to fight in south Syria in al-Sweida, Dara'a and Quneitra since April 2018. According to the article, Hezbollah units have been integrated into the forces of Division 4 and into the forces of the Syrian army's Republican Guard.**

► A Syrian opposition site (Syria.net) reported on July 5, 2018 that **a source supporting the Syrian regime stated that Hezbollah is its main partner in the campaign when it came to the planning, management and direction of the Syrian army.** According to the website, **Hezbollah deployed its elite forces in the region and they were fighting under the cover of the regime so as not to embarrass Syria.**