

How the Return of Iranian-Backed Militias From Syria Complicates U.S. Strategy

Candace Rondeaux | Friday, May 24, 2019

In the high-stakes game between Tehran and Washington, it is often hard to tell who is really bluffing. This week, President Donald Trump threatened that a war would be “the official end of Iran (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48329852>),” responding in part to reports that Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ elite Quds Force, had urged leaders of Iranian-backed militias across the Middle East to “prepare for proxy war (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/16/iran-tells-middle-east-militias-prepare-for-proxy-war>).” For those counting cards, however, Iran may already have tipped its hand.



Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, center, attends a meeting with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Revolutionary Guard commanders in Tehran, Iran, Sept. 18, 2016 (Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader via AP Images).

The recent return to Iran of a wave of fighters from Liwa Fatemiyoun, an Iranian-backed militia made up of ethnic Afghan Hazaras that has been fighting in Syria since the civil war’s early days, suggests Tehran may be anticipating a different kind of proxy war altogether. With deep roots in Afghanistan’s small minority Shiite community, the Afghan Hazaras that make up the bulk of Liwa Fatemiyoun’s forces have historically punched well above their weight. While much of the focus on the fallout from Syria’s war has been on the risks posed by fighters from the Islamic State returning home, the implications of thousands of Iranian proxies leaving the Syrian front for their home turf has been overlooked.

Estimates vary as to the number of Liwa Fatemiyoun fighters who are in Syria and have fought to defend President Bashar al-Assad’s regime on behalf of Tehran. One Afghan researcher, Ahmad Shuja Jamal, suggested in a report (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/03/fatemiyoun-army-reintegration-afghan-society>) for the U.S. Institute of Peace that up to 50,000 may have taken up arms there. Many signed up willingly, attracted by high-paying salaries and the promise of citizenship or residency status in Iran upon their return from Syria. Some were pressed into service after falling on hard economic times that ended in scrapes with the law. Hundreds, if not thousands, have reportedly (<https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghans-returning-home-after-fighting-syrian-war>) returned to Iran and Afghanistan over the past few years. Whether these fighters truly pose a threat to security in the region or to U.S. interests remains to be seen. But their trend lines bear watching as talk of proxy warfare between the U.S. and Iran heats up.

Over the past three months, hundreds of fighters affiliated with Iran's proxy militias in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon have been streaming into Iran (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/following-iraqi-shiite-militias-hezbollah-shows-up-in-iran-for-flood-relief-/29885674.html>) in response to a call for assistance (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/434648/Resistance-groups-help-flood-victims-in-Iran>) with flood relief from Soleimani and the Quds Force. The massive deluge started in March, laying waste to large swaths of land across 25 of Iran's 31 provinces and racking up an estimated \$2.5 billion in damages and counting. Iraqi fighters with the Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces, were among the first to answer the call for assistance. But Afghan fighters with Liwa Fatemiyoun soon followed.

This week, Liwa Fatemiyoun's Twitter account proudly showcased photos (<https://twitter.com/Fatemiyoun1434/status/1120586369410260992>) of the Afghan brigade providing relief and reconstruction assistance in flood-stricken Lorestan, in western Iran. It was quite a contrast from the kind of material the militia has promoted online in recent years, including photos and images praising its fighters' sacrifices in Syria and drawing hundreds of "likes" from Iranians. At the peak of Iran's involvement in Syria's war, thousands of Iranians often gathered to memorialize ethnic Afghan Hazara fighters killed on the battlefield. Unlike Moscow's treatment (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/16/russian-mercenaries-in-syria-buried-quietly-and-forgotten>) of Russian mercenaries in Syria whose bodies have been secretly returned to their families for quiet burials, war shrines to fighters from Liwa Fatemiyoun festoon the Iranian capital.

Far from eliciting uniform praise from the Iranian public, however, the steady influx of Iranian proxy militias deep into Iran in recent weeks has apparently provoked a backlash. With protests over economic hardships in 2018 in eastern Iran still fresh in many people's minds, some are worried that the return of Iranian proxies to the domestic front might signal uneasiness in Tehran over the increasing potential for regime change.

Political tensions are rising between pro-regime hard-liners bent on challenging the U.S. and an Iranian public buckling under the pressure of unending domestic culture wars (<https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-iran-hard-liners-school-children-dancing-20190521-story.html>)— with conservative clerics trying to limit or cut off any Western influence altogether—and ever more severe economic sanctions. Iranians in flood-affected parts of the country and Iran's dissident intelligentsia have taken to Twitter and Facebook to vent their frustrations (<https://www.rferl.org/a/iranians-wary-iraqis-paramilitary-forces-sent-for-flood-relief-efforts/29884709.html>). They suspect that the authorities' call for reinforcements from proxies abroad is designed to tamp down potential unrest in Iran over the government's inadequate response to multiple mounting crises.

Far from eliciting uniform praise from the Iranian public, the steady influx of Iranian proxy militias deep into Iran in recent weeks has apparently provoked a backlash.

Meanwhile, the return of Liwa Fatemiyoun fighters to Afghanistan, mainly to villages in the west of the country near the Iranian border, has raised fears about the role they might play if and when the U.S. cuts a deal with the Taliban and pulls more American troops out of the country. In 2017, fears rose over rumors that members of Liwa Fatemiyoun in the northwestern province of Sar-e Pul were planning to attack Islamic State and Taliban fighters believed to be responsible for the massacre

(<https://www.toloneews.com/afghanistan/mass-graves-discovered-mirza-olang-following-massacre>) of more than 35 ethnic Hazaras in the village of Mirza Olang earlier that year.

Afghanistan's official and unofficial powerbrokers hardly agree on whether these returnees are a good thing or a bad thing. On the one hand, Afghan government security forces have aggressively gone after former Liwa Fatemiyoun fighters, spurred by fears that they may emerge as another source of instability. On the other, for Afghan Shiite elites outside government looking to defend their interests, having battle-hardened veterans from Syria's battlefields available to fight the Taliban, the Islamic State or other Sunni jihadist factions in the next phase of Afghanistan's forever war might be useful.

Take the case of Mohammed Mohaqeq, an influential Afghan Hazara who once led his own forces against the Soviets and is now running for vice president (<http://www.1tvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/37117-president-ghani-dismissed-mohammad-mohaqeq-as-deputy-chief-executive-of-afghanistan->) alongside presidential candidate and former Interior Minister Hanif Atmar against President Ashraf Ghani in elections set for September. Mohaqeq has said Liwa Fatemiyoun fighters should be left to their own devices. A one-time beneficiary of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' largesse during the 1990s and a former proxy fighter himself, Mohaqeq is somewhat honor-bound to say as much. If Afghan history is any guide, though, it is not hard to imagine how signaling neutrality on the fate of Liwa Fatemiyoun could be useful for anyone looking to take up arms in Afghanistan in the future.

Fighters from Liwa Fatemiyoun returning home to Iran may not be the most potent threat to stability in the region, and rumors of rebellion within their ranks during their campaign in Syria suggest they are not especially disciplined or unified, as some have pointed out (https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/21/how-do-irans-proxies-actually-work/?utm_term=.40fdcea489ba). But they certainly have shown their staying power. The militia's late leader, Ali Reza Tavassoli, cobbled together the band of Afghan migrants to fight in Syria in

2012 from the remnants of a force that fought in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Now, its fighters once again find themselves in the midst of geopolitical competition between the U.S. and Iran that has raised the prospect of another war in the Gulf region.

As Congress debates the credibility of White House claims of an imminent threat to U.S. interests from Iranian proxies, legislators and administration officials would do well to factor in the Quds Force decision to recall and redirect proxies like Liwa Fatemiyoun. Their repurposed mission certainly suggests that regime change in Iran won't come cheap or easy, and it could even have knock-on effects for the messy U.S. exit strategy in Afghanistan.

Candace Rondeaux has documented and analyzed political violence in South Asia and around the world for The Washington Post, International Crisis Group, U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan, the U.S. Institute of Peace and a host of international publications. She is a senior fellow and professor of practice with the Center on the Future of War, a joint initiative of New America and Arizona State University.

© 2019, World Politics Review LLC. All rights reserved.