

THE THREAT OF THE NEW SHIITE “AFGHAN ALUMNI”

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As the tension between Iran and the U.S and its allies in Middle East are on the rise, Iran has launched a campaign of violent covert operations, after years of relative restraint. The US deployed the Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier strike group and B-52 bombers to the region on May 4, 2019; in response to what it said was an “escalated threat” from Iran. US national security advisor John Bolton has said Washington's military buildup was "a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime.

On May 12, 2019, four commercial vessels, the Saudi oil tankers Al-Marzoqah and Amjad were attacked off the emirate of Fujairah along with the Norwegian tanker Andrea Victory and a UAE ship, the A. Michel. The US, Saudi Arabia and UAE claimed that Iran targeted the commercial vessels. Two days later two oil-pumping stations for the East-West Aramco pipeline had been hit by Houthi explosive-laden drones.¹

Iran has long experience of organizing and operating armed militias to promote the Iranian interests. During the years of the war in Bosnia in the 1990s, thousands of Afghani “alumni” (Mujahideen) arrived to Bosnia to help the local Muslims. One of the first units to be established in Bosnia was the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Brigade (number 7), which was called a "Mujahideen unit "and was composed of commanders of IRGC and Islamic volunteers, many of whom were Afghani “alumni” and members of radical Sunni Islamic terror organizations such as Al Qaeda, the Egyptian Jamaah al Islamiyah, the Algerian GIA and others.

During the years of the civil war in Syria, Iran ran an extensive drive to create a network of militias to help save Assad from the uprising against his rule. Iran asked Hezbollah to take part in the war and organized, trained and sent to Syria allied militias of Shiite Pakistanis, Iraqis and Afghans.² As war in Syria winding down, Iran has several well trained and war hardened Shiite militias that it can operate in overt or covert operations around the world.

The Fatimioun Brigade



The largest militia was the force made up of Afghans, known as the Fatimioun Brigade, which experts have estimated numbered up to 12,000 -15,000 fighters at any one time. Over the years, tens of thousands of Afghans were trained and fought in the ranks of the Fatimioun Brigade.³

The official purpose of the Fatemioun's formation was to defend the Shia shrines in Syria. Two of the holiest shrines in Shia faith are the Sayyeda Zeinab and the Sayyeda Ruqayya, revered religious figures from the family of Imam Ali, one of the four caliphs of Islam and the first Shia Imam.

The Fatemioun Brigade was established in 2014 by the IRGC and the Fatemioun's command and management are in the hands of IRGC, while the fighters are mainly Afghan refugees and immigrants recruited from Iran.⁴

Most of those who joined the Fatimioun Brigade were from Afghanistan's ethnic Hazara minority, who are among the country's poorest. Its operatives are mainly Shiite refugees who fled to Iran from Afghanistan. The Iranian government uses coercion and incentives to exploit the Afghans' vulnerable legal status in Iran and threats of deportation were coupled with high salaries for fighters and permanent residency for their families.⁵

The Afghan recruits were driven mainly by hopelessness and poverty and the religious motivator to protect the Shiite community and its shrines in Syria.⁶

The recruitment and training⁷

The Afghan recruits underwent about 30 days of training under the IRGC in Iran's southern Yazd province. When it was over, they were flown to Damascus.

In Damascus, the recruits opened bank accounts where their salary would be deposited. As fighters for Iran, they could earn the equivalent of \$900 a month.

They were taken to the shrine of Sayeda Zeinab, a site outside Damascus revered by Shiites, for final blessings before battle. Then they were taken to the front.

At the end of their service in Syria, they are recalled from the battlefield and allowed a farewell visit the shrine before their flight to Iran.

The Fatemiyoun were part of most major battles in Syria, including the retaking of Palmyra, the battle to liberate Deir al-Zour, Abukamal and the offensive to liberate Aleppo. Thousands died in the war and hundreds of fighters wounded in the fighting in Syria were treated in Iranian hospitals.

The new Shiite "Afghani alumni"

After the Iranian declaration of victory in the war in Syria, the Fatemiyoun Brigade released a letter to Al Quds commander, Qasem Soleimani. After expressing readiness to fight Israel, the letter said: "After the complete cleansing of Syria from the presence of Takfiri terrorists and ensuring the complete security of the shrine of Zainab and Ruqayya, we hereby announce that, upon orders of Imam Khamenei and under the leadership of Your Excellency, we are ready to step in to support the downtrodden in any corner of the world from where the voice of the oppressed is heard ".⁸

As war in Syria winding down, the question is what will Iran do with those well-trained, well-armed and war hardened forces?

The "Afghan veterans" as potential global terror network – during the years of the war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan tens of thousands of Afghan refugees entered Europe. Some of them could be veterans of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, sent by Iran establish terror networks in Europe and elsewhere. The IRGC and the Iranian intelligence can send more of them as refugees or asylum seekers to Europe and operate them to collect intelligence and to carry out terror attacks.

The brigade is still operating in Syria - the war is almost over in Syria but Iran's interests in Syria will continue to require some form of military engagement:

- The Quds Force and its proxy militias will continue to have a role because of the inability of Assad's forces to secure the country on their own.
- Iran has an interest in maintaining its "land bridge" to Lebanon. The land route starts from Iran's border with Iraq through Syria to reach Lebanon, allowing Iran more easily supply and equip its regional allies — Assad in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- The presence of multiple competing hostile forces including the Syrian Democratic Forces, al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham that could threaten Iran's land corridor to Lebanon.

These suggest a continued need for the Fatemiyoun, to protect the achievements and the interests of Iran in Syria.

The Afghan veterans in new theaters of war - the Fatemiyoun Brigade or sub units of the brigade would be deployed to support the Iranian allies in other theaters such as Yemen, to support the Houthi rebels.

The returnees to Afghanistan - roughly 10,000 veterans of the Fatimiyoun brigade have returned to Afghanistan. The Shiite mercenaries from Afghanistan's impoverished Hazara communities are returning to their homeland, where they are met with suspicion and they

face arrest by security agencies that view them as traitors. Afghan security officials believe Iran is still organizing them and could mobilize these ex-fighters once more to assert its influence in Afghanistan. ⁹

The returnees to Iran - Iran is downsizing the contingent of Afghan fighters in Syria, sending them back to Iran where their families, mostly refugees or undocumented immigrants, have been promised permanent residency. This gives the fighters' families a secure future, but Iran could transform these ex-fighters into a paramilitary unit that could be activated and deployed when and where needed. ¹⁰

Summary and conclusions

Tens of thousands of Afghans were recruited, paid and trained by Iran to fight in support of Tehran's ally, Bashar Assad. On November 21, 2017, Iran declared victory against the Islamic state (IS) in Syria. Since Iran's declaration of victory, there are indications that Fatemiyoun recruitment has stopped and some fighters are being returned to Iran and Afghanistan.

It is not clear if Iran will disband the Fatemiyoun brigade entirely, however, it may perhaps opt to preserve it in some form. But Iran can easily expand the Fatemiyoun as needed since it can recruit from the millions of desperate and legally vulnerable Afghan refugees and immigrants living in Iran.

As it appears from the various Iranian and Hezbollah terrorist plots on European soil in last years, their apparatuses use a wide range of militants of Iranian, Lebanese origin or others, as well as asylum seekers, for intelligence missions or as terrorist infrastructure.

There are hundreds of Iranian al - Qods Force, MOIS and Hezbollah members within EU borders and elsewhere, many of whom could be activated should Iran or Hezbollah decide to operate against EU, U.S or Israeli targets on European soil.

The veterans of the Fatemiyoun brigade wrote in the letter to the Al Quds commander, Qasem Solleimani that "we are ready to step in to support the downtrodden in any corner of the world from where the voice of the oppressed is heard." The IRGC is aware to the potential of Afghan veterans and should use them to carry out terror attacks in Europe and elsewhere.

The European countries must be aware to the potential threat from Shiite jihadists and the radicalization of European Muslim youths, by the Iranian Shia revolutionary doctrine. Iran and Hezbollah are the main potential threats to the U.S, Israel and EU interests. This is something not yet realized by Western governments. The European Union and its member states must understand the need to prevent the Iranian threat to their security and interests and take the necessary tough measures against the Iranian regime and its proxies.

The Iranian terror campaign that was foiled in Europe in 2018 – 2019 and the last attacks against the oil tankers in UAE and Saudi oil industry highlighted the need for the international community to act decisively to confront Iran and all terrorist organizations that are supported by Iran, in order to maintain regional and international peace and security.

Notes:

¹ Barnini Chakraborty, Saudi Arabia shuts down pipeline following drone attack by Yemen Houthi rebels, Fox news, May 14, 2019.

² Trump has labeled Iran's Revolutionary Guard as terrorists — here's what you need to know about the shadowy group's long reach, AP, April 8, 2019.

³ Concerns over Iran Secret Army Spreading Influence in Afghanistan, Asharq Al-Awsat, April 1, 2019.

⁴ Ahmad Shuja Jamal , Mission accomplished? What's next for Iran's Afghan fighters in Syria, War on the rocks, February 13, 2018.

⁵ Iran Backed Fighters a Threat to Afghanistan, Iran focus, April 10, 2019.

⁶ Returning from Syria, Iranian-Backed Afghan Fighters Could Pose Threat , VOA, April 18, 2019.

⁷ Back home, Afghan veterans of Syria war seen as Iran's pawns, The public radio, March 31, 2019.

⁸ Ahmad Shuja Jamal, Mission accomplished? What's next for Iran's Afghan fighters in Syria, War on the rocks, February 13, 2018?

⁹ Iran Backed Fighters a Threat to Afghanistan, Iran focus, April 10, 2019.

¹⁰ Concerns over Iran Secret Army Spreading Influence in Afghanistan, Asharq Al-Awsat, April 1, 2019.