

THE RISE OF SHI'ITE MILITIAS AND THE POST-ARAB SPRING SECTARIAN THREAT

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ABSTRACT

Part I of this report aims to provide an overview of the growing phenomenon of politicized sectarianism in the Arab world post-Arab Spring, with a particular focus on political Shi'ism. It will examine the role of the current Syrian Civil War in furthering the Sunni-Shi'a divide, and will detail the expansion of the Iranian policy of promoting Shi'ite militancy as part of Iran's Syria strategy. Part II of the report examines each of the known Iran-sponsored Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi Shi'ite militia groups operating in the Syrian conflict, with Part III considering the future implications of this policy for sectarian tensions in Syria and the greater Middle East.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)

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PART I - SECTARIANISM, SYRIA AND IRANIAN POLICY- AN OVERVIEW

Political Shi'ism

The development and increasing strength of politicized religiosity among Shi'ites should be viewed as the result of several important socio-political trends taking place in the contemporary Arab World, chiefly among them the rise of sectarian identity in the wake of the failure of ideologies such as communism, secularism and pan-Arab nationalism. The Arab Spring has ushered in a new era of turmoil, violence and political instability in the Middle East, and the overthrow of secular-nationalist dictatorial regimes, such as that of Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt, has resulted in the ultimate weakening of notions of territorial sovereignty in much of the Arab World, and with it nationalist identities. A dangerous unintended consequence of the revolutions and protest movements which erupted following the fall of Tunisia's Ben Ali in December 2010 has been the rise of sectarianism as the prime political driver in the region. This trend has been particularly striking among the historically downtrodden Shi'ite communities of the Arab World. Disillusioned by notions of nationalism which only further entrenched the status quo of Shi'ites as second-class participants in the national projects of countries such as Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain, the Arab Spring has driven Shi'ite communities to "fashion organizational-political mechanisms that manipulate primordial solidarities as a means for social and political change."¹

An important component in the development of Shi'ite political-sectarian identity has been the centrality of the theme of persecution and marginalization in Shi'ite religious doctrine and practice, embodied by the martyrdom of Husayn at Karbala in 680CE and re-lived by Shi'ites through the annual 'Ashura rituals. The martyrdom of Husayn, depicted as a brave soldier who sacrificed his life for Islam in the struggle against tyranny, functions as a metaphor for the Shi'ite community's identity as a persecuted minority within the Sunni-Arab World, with the 'Ashura rituals assuming a centrality and relevance not only to contemporary Shi'ite religiosity but also in

¹Hazran, Yusri., 'The Rise of Politicized Shi'ite Religiosity and the Territorial State in Iraq and Lebanon'. *The Middle East Journal*, Volume 64, Number 4, Autumn 2010 P.540-1

the social and political spheres.² Indeed, the development of Shi'ite theology and religious doctrine should be considered in the context of their historical marginalization as a minority community. At times harshly persecuted as heretics by Sunni Muslim rulers, and denied political expression or civil empowerment, the Shi'ite community abandoned temporal political goals in the time of the Sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq,³ and increasingly came to view itself from the perspective of a 'minority vs. majority' dichotomy. Despite two notable cases of Shi'ite political expression in the Middle Ages, being the Fatimid and Safavid Empires of North Africa and Greater Persia respectively, it was not until modern times that Shi'ism emerged as a political driving force in the Middle East, a development which ultimately pushed the Muslim sectarian split from the religious to the political sphere.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is of course the event which propelled Shi'ism into the realm of an all-encompassing political ideology- radically reworking Twelver Shi'ite theology in the process; building on the theological justifications for clerical rule established in Iran centuries earlier by the Safavid Shahs. Iran, long a majority-Shi'ite state, became both an example and a patron to Shi'ite communities in the Arab world still denied a political voice by ostensibly nationalist Sunni governments and regimes. Despite the Ayatollahs' stated policy of 'Exporting the Revolution,' it was not until the uprisings of the Arab Spring some thirty years later that Shi'ite communities began to rally in large numbers for greater political power and rights. What began as a regional protest movement often uniting both Sunni and Shi'a against oppressive governance, economic failings and large-scale violations of civil rights has developed into bitter sectarian divisions, amplified by the 'Cold War' between Saudi Arabia and Iran⁴ and 'divide and rule' tactics employed by embattled rulers seeking to cling to power in states such as Syria, Yemen and Bahrain.⁵

² Ibid P.528

³ Hunter, Shireen., 'Sunni –Shia Tensions Are More About Politics, Power and Privilege than Theology.' *ACMCU Georgetown University* <http://acmcu.georgetown.edu/135390.html> [Accessed 19/09/13]

⁴ Gause, F. Gregory III. 'Iran's Incoming President and the New Middle East Cold War.' *Brookings* 08/07/13 <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2013/07/08-iran-saudi-middle-east-cold-war> [Accessed 06/10/13]

⁵ 'Sunnis v Shias, here and there.' *The Economist* 29/06/13 <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21580162-sectarian-rivalry-reverberating-region-making-many-muslims> [Accessed 19/09/13]

Most worrying has been the intersection of this trend of pronounced sectarianism with the other trend currently reshaping the Middle East- Islamic extremism. Fundamentalist religious doctrine is increasingly being combined with sectarian rhetoric in the political sphere, with its epicenter being the Civil War in Syria. The extent of the development of this extremist bent is illustrated by a recent survey of the Sunni Arab world conducted by the Washington-based Pew Forum, which revealed that in many Arab countries, such as Egypt, Morocco and Jordan, "at least 40% of Sunnis do not accept Shias as fellow Muslims."⁶ Arab Political Shi'ism differs from that of Iran due to its interaction with this sectarian element, driven by centuries of political and social marginalization which Iran, long majority Shi'ite in terms of both demographics and the religious affiliations of its ruling class, did not have to contend with. Sectarianism is hence a crucial ingredient to Political Shi'ism in the Arab World, where Shi'ite religious affiliation, discourse and ritual are increasingly relied upon to legitimize political authority, operating within a wider sectarian milieu where Shi'ite political expression is often defined *ipso facto* in opposition to that of the long-dominant Sunnis.

The Development of Sectarian Ideology

Many contemporary studies report that sectarian identity has become the most relevant and accessible instrument of change in the political life of the Middle East.⁷ This can be attributed to several factors, the first being the territorial state's erosion of legitimacy which developed due to the failure of Arab nationalism to trump more traditional societal allegiances, such as that of sect and tribe, in the wake of the colonial carving up of the region into nation states in the early 20th Century. Hazran mentions three sub-state models of allegiance and identity which have contributed to the fragmentation of Arab society within the nation state- community, clan and family.⁸ As grand ideological ideas such as pan-Arab nationalism, embodied by the United Arab Republic (a short-lived union between Egypt and Syria), communism and secularism became weakened, the territorial nation-state was unable to fill the gap, as religious and sectarian modes

⁶ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 'The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity,' *Pew Research Centre*, August 9, 2012 <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/> [Accessed 01/10/13]

⁷ For example, see Hazran, Yusri., Op.Cit P.521

⁸ Ibid. P.541

of identity proved to be stronger than any shallow-rooted and largely artificially constructed nationalist identity. Indeed there appears to be a direct equivalence between the strength of sectarian trends and the power of the nation-state. In countries such as Lebanon and Yemen, where state sovereignty has always been weak, citizens look to their tribal or sectarian communities to provide basic services such as policing and security instead of to the state, emphasizing the power of such allegiances over other notions of identity like nationalism.⁹ This is particularly relevant for Shi'ites, whose disillusionment with Arab nationalism and the nation-state has its roots in the failure of such entities to right historic injustices, and in the maintenance of their position as a disadvantaged minority, even in states such as Iraq and Bahrain in which Shi'ites make up a demographic majority.

The following three factors are responsible for driving sectarianism in the post-Arab Spring Middle East:¹⁰

- 1) The disruption of the established political order in the Middle East. Sunni civil empowerment following the collapse of authoritarian rule in states such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen has led to Shi'ites feeling threatened by the increasingly Islamist rhetoric of groups which are finding their political voice and participating in the democratic process. Political parties ranging from the relatively moderate Islamist Ennahda Movement in Tunisia to the more extreme Salafist groups winning votes, such as Egypt's Al-Nour party, are promoting a worldview which is perceived of as increasingly threatening to Shi'ites. Similarly, in states such as Bahrain, where Shi'ites make up 70% of the population, the prospect of democracy threatens Sunnis, who increasingly view greater democratic freedoms as a tool through which marginalised Shi'ites would be able to seek power at the expense of the ruling Sunni elite.

⁹ Gause, F. Gregory III. 'Sectarianism and the Politics of the New Middle East' *Brookings* 08/06/13 <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2013/06/08-sectarianism-politics-new-middle-east-gause> [Accessed 16/08/13]

¹⁰ Abdo, Geneive. 'The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide.' *The Saban Centre for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution* April 2013. P.5

- 2) The Syrian Civil War. What began as a peaceful protest movement demanding greater civil freedoms has developed into a bitter civil war with extensive foreign involvement, fiercely divided along sectarian lines. This war has had an intense polarising effect on sectarian sentiments in the region, and is increasingly destabilising neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, threatening an escalation of sectarian fighting there as well.
- 3) The intensification of a proxy war between Shi'ite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, fuelled by the conflict in Syria, and real or perceived Iranian interference in other regions with sizeable Shi'ite populations, such as Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen.

Much of this sectarian struggle has been played out in, and fuelled by, the regions media. Indeed an increasingly vocal and polarized media has become a new conduit for airing sectarian grievances, with new battlefronts opening daily online and in social media, as well as through more traditional outlets such as print and television. The major players in this new arena are Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar. Each has its own distinctive political agenda to push, and increasingly also, religious-sectarian agenda. For example, Iranian media outlets depicted the protests in Syria as the rebellion of a terrorist group against the legitimate government of Assad, however portrayed the protests in Bahrain as the peaceful Shi'ite majority's attempt to rise up against authoritarian Sunni rule. In contrast, media outlets in Saudi Arabia and Qatar's *Al Jazeera* depict the Sunni opposition movement in Syria as a revolution against the brutal minority regime of Assad, and the protests in Bahrain as being planned and instigated by a meddling Iran, in an attempt to destabilize and assert influence over the Gulf region.¹¹

Shi'ite clerics have also played an influential role in the Shi'ite political awakening, as well as in both stoking and reducing sectarian tensions. The authority of the Shi'ite *mujtahid* (scholar) is without parallel in the Sunni world, and is based on the concept of *ijtihad*, which enables a *mujtahid* to make rational judgments on matters of Islamic jurisprudence, interpreting Islamic law using his own dynamic understanding of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Imams. Shi'ites

¹¹ Mamouri, Ali. 'Sectarianism Dominates Mideast Media Coverage of Syria, Bahrain.' *Al Monitor* 19/09/13 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/sectarianism-dominates-mideast-media.html> [Accessed 23/09/13]

regularly seek advice and guidance from *mujtahids* on all matters of daily life, and hence the scope of influence wielded by a Shi'ite cleric can be enormous. Keddie remarks that as a result of this doctrine, called *Usuliyya*, the living *mujtahids* "have a power beyond anything claimed by the Sunni ulama," with their rulings sanctioned "beyond anything merely decreed by the state."¹² The Shi'ite cleric, considered a representative of the Hidden Imam, hence operates outside of the legal authority of the secular nation state, and allegiance to his rulings are considered by pious Shi'ites as usurping government legislation. In this way, the elevated position of the Shi'ite cleric undermines the legitimacy of the nation-state, especially in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon where sizeable Shi'ite communities exist alongside other groups such as Sunnis or Kurds. The fact that Shi'ite political thought does not recognize the legitimacy of any higher authority except for the Imam¹³ has paved the way for the entry of the religious class into politics, most notably demonstrated by the ascendance of the Ayatollahs following the Iranian Revolution.

The concept of supreme clerical rule, such as that of Iran, is however not accepted universally throughout the Shi'ite world. The disagreement over direct clerical involvement in politics is centered on interpretations of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* (literally 'Guardianship of the Jurist'), which Ayatollah Khomeini used to justify his governing of Iran as Supreme Leader, advocating an interpretation of this concept as 'absolute guardianship.' Other powerful Shi'ite clerics, such as Iraq's Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali Sistani, reject the involvement of clerics in government, and promote a more quietist approach, advocating a 'limited guardianship' interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*, applying it only to religious matters, and claiming that some separation between politics and religion should be maintained until the return of the Imam.¹⁴ Tensions exist within the Shi'ite Arab world between followers of the Iranian clerical establishment and followers of Sistani and other prominent quietist Arab clerics. In 2012 Ayatollah Ali Fadlallah, son of the extremely influential Lebanon-based Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, stated in an interview that "Iran is trying to regain power over the Shi'a, but

¹² Keddie, Nikki R., 1978. *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East Since 1500*. University of California Press

¹³ Hazran, Op.Cit. P.529

¹⁴ *The Official Website of Grand Ayatollah al-Uzma Seyyid Ali al-Sistani*
<http://www.sistani.org/index.php?p=616687> [Accessed 02/10/13]

the Shi'a are not working for Iran."¹⁵ Millions of Shi'ites, particularly in Bahrain and Iraq, follow the rulings of these clerics, and it is reasonable to assume that the perceived expansion of Iranian influence in the region is troubling for those who oppose the Iranian interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*, especially as the Iranian regime is promoting itself as the exclusive guardian of Shi'ism.

The rise of Shi'ite militia groups following the civil war in Lebanon and the US invasion of Iraq has also presented theological problems for more moderate Shi'ite clerics, especially regarding the legitimacy of these group's claims to be engaged in *jihad*. The phenomenon of cleric-led militias is relatively new; however it is appealing in that a cleric's militant followers receive religious sanction for the violence they commit, regardless of whether the cause is aligned with mainstream religious principles. The first case of such a militia was the Fada'iyan-e Islam movement in pre-Revolution Iran;¹⁶ however prominent modern examples include Nasrallah's Lebanese Hezbollah and Muqtadr al-Sadr's Iraqi Mahdi Army. The Mahdi Army did not receive support from the Iraqi Shi'ite authorities, such as Sistani, in Najaf, and was even at times criticized by them. Al-Sadr was initially aligned with Iran, however he has since loosened their relationship and sought to promote his own independence, and is no longer Iran's preferred militia operating in Iraq. The Mahdi Army officially disbanded in 2007 and al-Sadr entered politics, however splinter militia groups are still active today, and are allegedly involved in both sectarian fighting in Iraq and the Civil War in Syria, a point which will be expanded on later.

The Shi'ite clerical position on the sectarian issue is by no means homogenous, as on the Sunni side; some clerics warn against the dangers of sectarianism whilst others attempt to fan its flames. For example, following the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, Iraq, home to the shrines of two of the Twelve Shi'a Imams, Sistani and two other Najaf-based Grand Ayatollahs explicitly forbade acts of revenge against Sunnis, and issued statements calling for their followers to shun violence, afraid of provoking sectarian civil war in Iraq.¹⁷ The now

¹⁵ In Abdo, Op.Cit. P.3

¹⁶ Mamouri, Ali. 'The Rise of 'Cleric Militias' in Iraq.' *Al Monitor* 23/07/13 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/shiite-cleric-militias-iraq-fears.html> [Accessed 24/09/13]

¹⁷ Anzalone, Christopher. 'Zaynab's Guardians: The Emergence of Shi'a Militias in Syria' *CTC Sentinel* 23/06/13 <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zaynabs-guardians-the-emergence-of-shia-militias-in-syria> [Accessed 16/08/13]

virulently sectarian war raging in Syria however has resulted in a worrying rise in clerical justification for sectarian-motivated violence. A *fatwa* issued in Najaf by the well-known cleric Abu al-Qasim al-Ta'ai has been credited with inspiring thousands of Iraqi Shi'ites to volunteer for pro-Assad militias in Syria, after he gave religious authorization to joining the *jihad* there.¹⁸

Sectarianism and the Syrian Civil War

More than any other event post-Arab Spring, the uprising and ensuing civil war in Syria has impacted the Middle East in such a devastating way that it has now become the most salient and emotive conflict in the region, eclipsing even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each new development in Syria reverberates across the region, provoking reaction and counter-reaction, and transcending its immediate geographic and political boundaries. Syria has truly become a transnational affair, and what started as a peaceful protest movement, similar to others across the Arab world which erupted in 2011, has quickly degenerated into an all-out sectarian war, pitting the Sunni rebels, supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States on one side, against the Assad regime, backed by Iran and an increasing number of militant Shi'ite organizations such as Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Iraqi groups Abu Fadl al-Abbas and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.

It is estimated that the Syria conflict made the transition from insurgency to civil war around the time of summer 2012.¹⁹ As the conflict progressed, Assad came to rely more and more on pro-regime militia groups, as tough conditions, relatively high casualty rates and large-scale military defections began to take their toll. In the autumn of 2012 reports began to circulate in the media of foreign Shi'ite fighters entering the war on the side of Assad. This was further corroborated by YouTube videos and postings on social media sites, suggesting in particular Iraqi Shi'ite involvement in Syria.²⁰ The surge in support of foreign Shi'ite volunteers is linked to reports of damage inflicted on several important Shi'ite mosques and shrines, chiefly among them being the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus. Other important religious sites allegedly damaged by Sunni

¹⁸ Mahmood, Mona & Chulov, Martin. 'Syrian War Widens Sunni-Shia Schism as Foreign Jihadis Join Fight for Shrines.' *The Guardian* 04/06/13 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers> [Accessed 16/08/13]

¹⁹ Holliday, Joseph. 'Middle East Security Report 8: The Assad Regime.' *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2013 <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf> [Accessed 27/09/13] P.7

²⁰ Anzalone, Op.Cit.

rebels include the shrines of Sakina Bint Husayn and Hojr Ibn Oday, also in the Damascus area.²¹ The damage to these shrines has had an important mobilizing effect on Shi'ites, both within Syria and abroad, inflaming public opinion and serving as a justification for foreign fighters' entry into Syria, claiming their presence will protect Shi'ite holy places against Sunni aggression. The sectarian discourse surrounding the defense of Sayyida Zaynab in particular has furnished the Iranian claim that the Syrian rebels are virulently anti-Shi'a with greater legitimacy in the Shi'ite world, and has served as a useful motif in the further recruitment of foreign fighters.

From the beginning of the conflict in Syria pro-Assad Syria-based militias have enjoyed support from Iran, as has the Syrian army itself. However as the conflict transitioned into civil war, Iranian proxies located outside Syria also began to take a more active role in propping up the Assad regime. The most prominent of them of course is Lebanon's Hezbollah. Hezbollah had been working with Iran to ensure the flow of arms to Assad's forces since the beginning of the conflict, and reports of Hezbollah involvement on the ground in Syria started circulating mid-2012. After months of denials, Hassan Nasrallah confirmed Hezbollah's active military involvement in the Syrian Civil War in a live television broadcast on May 25th 2013.²² This came after the large-scale deployment of Hezbollah fighters alongside the Syrian army and other militia groups in April, in the battle for the strategic town of Quasyr. Following Assad's success in this battle Hezbollah reportedly took control of at least eight Syrian villages close to the Lebanese border in order to secure its supply lines.²³ Hezbollah's involvement will be discussed in greater depth later in Part II of this article.

There have been reports of foreign Shi'ite fighters entering Syria from Afghanistan, Pakistan and even as far afield as the Ivory Coast,²⁴ however by far the largest numbers have come from Iraq.

²¹ Al-Salhy, Suadad 'Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens.' *Reuters*. 19/06/13
<http://news.yahoo.com/iraqi-shiites-flock-assads-side-sectarian-split-widens-160318017.html> [Accessed 16/08/13]

²² Mroue, Bassem. 'Hezbollah chief says group is fighting in Syria.' *Associated Press* 25/05/13
<http://news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-chief-says-group-fighting-syria-162721809.html> [Accessed 03/10/13]

²³ Fulton, Will, Holliday, Joseph & Wyer, Sam. 'Iranian Strategy In Syria.' *Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project*, May 2013. P.23

²⁴ Smyth, Philip. 'From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias.' *CTC Sentinel* 07/08/13
<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/from-karbala-to-sayyida-zaynab-iraqi-fighters-in-syrias-shia-militias> [Accessed 26/09/13]

Convoys of buses crossing into Syria from Iraq, ostensibly containing pilgrims, have been reported as instead being filled with fighters and military supplies headed for the front to support Assad's troops.²⁵ According to militants, around 50 Shi'ite volunteers arrive by plane into Damascus each week from Iraq,²⁶ whilst the Shi'ite-led Iraqi government looks the other way.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari told Reuters in August that "these volunteers have gone there (Syria) without any sanction or approval or support from the government or the Iraqi regime or the political leaders,"²⁷ however evidence suggests that the Iraqi government is at best turning a blind eye to the recruitment of local Shi'ites for the war in Syria, and is at worst covertly facilitating the flow of fighters into Syria. The Iraqi government has radically improved ties with Iran following the US invasion in 2003, and many Shi'ite political parties are closely aligned with Iran, and promote Iranian interests. Iraq has been accused of allowing Iranian planes loaded with weapons bound for the front in Syria to use Iraqi airspace unfettered. Only a handful of seemingly staged inspections have been carried out, wherein all Iranian planes were found to be carrying humanitarian supplies only. A U.S. intelligence report has indicated that air shipments from Iran to Syria via Iraq were occurring almost daily, and accused Iraqi Transport Minister Hadi al-Amiri of colluding with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the facilitation of this.²⁸ The Iraqi government however has its own Sunni insurgency to worry about, and there are fears that the polarization of the war in Syria will further stoke sectarian tensions in Iraq, with one adviser to Prime Minister Maliki commenting that "Shi'ite politicians believe the best way to keep Sunni extremist fighters out of Iraq is by keeping them busy in Syria."²⁹

There is also an important ideological element behind the mobilization of Iraqi Shi'ite volunteers fighting in Syria, which are estimated to be around 2000- 3000 in number.³⁰ Every Iraqi Shi'ite militant group operating in Syria, with the exception of some of the loose consortment of fighters

²⁵ Anzalone, Op.Cit.

²⁶ Al-Salhy 19/06 Op.Cit

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.17

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Blanford, Nicholas. 'Leaked video: Iran guiding thousands of Shiite fighters to Syria.' *CSW Security Watch* 23/09/13 <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2013/0923/Leaked-video-Iran-guiding-thousands-of-Shiite-fighters-to-Syria> [Accessed 27/09/13]

affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr's now disbanded Mahdi Army, have identified themselves as followers of Ayatollah Khomeini's absolutist interpretation of *vilayat al-faqih*, as previously discussed. Iraqi militants, who align themselves with the religious authorities in Iran, rather than those in Iraq such as al-Sistani, claim that they have a duty to defend the Assad regime out of a sense of loyalty to the Iranian Supreme leader, and by extension, Iranian interests.³¹ In fact, it has been reported by members of Lebanese Hezbollah that Ayatollah Khamenei had issued the group a religious order, called a *taklif shar'i*, commanding them to take part in the battle of Qusayr. Disobeying such an order would be considered akin to disobeying an order from God.³²

The strong sectarian and religious undertones of the Shi'ite struggle to support the Assad regime are especially interesting, in that Assad's Alawite minority is not technically considered to be Shi'ite in the strictest religious sense. The Alawites are a mystical sect which share some of the beliefs and practices of Twelver Shi'ism, but are heterodox in terms of their theology, doctrine and practice. Many Sunni groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have classified the Alawites as non-Muslims, denouncing them as pagans.³³ Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez sought to have the Alawite sect recognized as Muslims, and in 1973 obtained a *fatwa* from Musa al-Sadr, at the time the leading Shi'ite cleric in Lebanon, decreeing that the Alawites were part of Shi'a Islam.³⁴ The controversial nature of the Alawite's status as Shi'ite Muslims only serves to further highlight the political nature of the sectarian trend emerging in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. Iranian and Arab-Shi'ite support for Assad appears to be based primarily on political-sectarian considerations, rather than religious-confessional ones, prompted more by the fear of a Sunni-led government in Damascus, and a resulting loss of influence, than a desire to defend an attack on the Shi'a faith.

Shi'ite Militias and Iranian Policy

Iran is deeply involved in the Syrian Civil War, and is investing heavily in the conventional Syrian army as well as in supporting existing militant groups aligned with the Assad regime.

³¹ Al-Salhy 19/06 Op.Cit

³² Smyth, Op.Cit.

³³ Abdo, Op.Cit. P.2

³⁴ Ibid. P.38

With the help of its flagship proxy group Hezbollah, Iran is also busy establishing new militias based largely around foreign volunteers, with the aim of protecting and promoting Iranian interests, not only in Syria but throughout the Middle East. The existence of loyal, extra-governmental Shi'ite militias is crucial to Iranian ambitions in the region, and has only increased in importance following the turmoil of the Arab Spring. The weakening of many Arab states undergoing the transition from strongman rule to nominal democracy has both enhanced the potential of non-state militant actors to influence events, as well as prompted a growth in sectarian tensions, which Iran is attempting to use to its advantage in recruiting militants and generating support in the Shi'ite world for its policies. Syria has been for several decades Iran's closest Arab ally, and functioned as a crucial link in the supply of weapons and finance to Hezbollah in Lebanon. As the Syrian state apparatus continues to deteriorate, and the likelihood of Assad's ever winning back full control of Syrian territory further diminishes, Iran is busy crafting its contingency plan for a post-Assad Syria. The Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias operating in Syria form a crucial component of Iran's 'Plan B,' and will enable Iran to continue to exert influence over Syria in the event of regime collapse.³⁵

In addition to Iranian-sponsored militia groups, there is also a significant body of evidence which suggests that Iran is directly involved in day to day operations on the ground in Syria. In August 2012 48 Iranian nationals were kidnapped in the Damascus area, revealed to be members of both the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, usually responsible for external operations, and interestingly the Revolutionary Guards Ground Forces, whose missions are usually of an internal nature. The presence of these elite Iranian units in Syria represents "a notable expansion of Iran's ability to project its influence and military force well beyond its borders and immediate neighbors."³⁶ It is probable that these individuals were in Syria for advisory purposes and were not engaged in direct combat. In February 2013 a high ranking Quds Force commander, Brigadier General Hassan Shateri, was assassinated by rebels outside of Damascus, en route to Beirut, after having visited the Syrian city of Aleppo.³⁷ Shateri has allegedly been conducting covert operations in Lebanon since 2006, and the presence of such a senior Iranian military

³⁵ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.10

³⁶ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.11

³⁷ Ibid. P.10-11

figure in Syria highlights the importance of Syria to Iranian policy, as well as the extent to which Iran is investing in propping up the Assad regime.

Foreign recruits volunteering to fight in the various Shi'ite militias operating in Syria often undertake training in Iran before being sent into battle. Numerous interviews with Shi'ite fighters published in the media document this phenomenon, which seems designed to enable fighting units to develop a specialization in weaponry and tactics which can then be employed on the battlefield. One fighter told Reuters: "You have to enroll on a 45-day training course in Iran to be specialized in using a specific weapon like rocket launchers, Kalashnikov, sniper rifle or RPGs."

³⁸ One militant described his training in Iran in terms of a 'boot camp,' and suggested that some form of vetting process existed, claiming that each volunteer had to first register with the office of a Shi'ite militia in his home country, before being flown to Iran and afterwards "being handed over to an Iranian middleman who will take you to Syria."³⁹

Iran's activities in training and supporting proxy militant groups operating in Syria enables them to develop a framework which will survive and continue to serve Iranian interests in the event of Assad's fall. This policy is an extension of Iran's longstanding efforts to build influence in Lebanon and post-Saddam Iraq through the patronage of Shi'ite militia groups which serve its interests rather than those of the Lebanese and Iraqi governments. Rather than co-opting existing forces of resistance, Iran is now building its Syria-based militias from the ground up, ensuring that their member's loyalty is absolute. As the conflict becomes more and more divided along sectarian lines, the Shi'ite Arab world is increasingly becoming a fertile recruiting ground for ideologically-motivated volunteers prepared to facilitate Iranian policy on the grounds of promoting pan-Shi'ite interests.

³⁸ Al-Salhy, 19/06 Op.Cit.

³⁹ Mahmood et al, Op.Cit.

PART II - SHI'ITE MILITIAS OPERATING IN SYRIA

Syrian Militias

Jaysh al-Sha'bi

'The People's Army' is made up of Syrian fighters of both Shi'ite and Alawite extraction.⁴⁰ Unlike many other Shi'ite militant groups operating in Syria, the Jaysh al-Sha'bi was not created by Iran, nor modeled on the notorious Iranian Basij militia. The Jaysh al-Sha'bi has maintained a presence in Syria since the Ba'ath party took power in 1963, and played a prominent role in Hafez al-Assad's efforts to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the early 1980's. The Syrian Ba'ath party's paramilitary forces were initially referred to as *Munazzamat Sha'biya* or 'Popular Organizations,' and only came to be known as the Jaysh al-Sha'bi in the mid 1980's.⁴¹ During the rule of Bashar al-Assad in particular, both Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah came to invest in this militia group, facilitating its expansion. It is estimated that by the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 the Jaysh al-Sha'bi boasted between 50,000 and 100,000 militant members.⁴²

Several reports list the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force as being the primary sponsor of Jaysh al-Sha'bi in the current conflict, along with the Assad regime. In December 2012 the US Government Department of Treasury sanctioned Jaysh al-Sha'bi, stating that Iran and Hezbollah "have provided training, advice, and weapons and equipment... Iran has also provided routine funding worth millions of dollars to the militia."⁴³ Jaysh al-Sha'bi operates throughout Syria and has been particularly active in Aleppo and Damascus, reinforcing the Assad regime's policy of prioritizing the control over urban areas at the expense of regional ones. The US Government report also notes that Jaysh al-Sha'bi conducts "unilateral and joint operations with the Syrian military" and its forces are used to supplement Assad's regular army when needed.

⁴⁰ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.19

⁴¹ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.16

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *US Department of State Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leaders, Militia Groups in Syria.* 11/12/12 <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/article/2012/12/20121211139861.html#axzz2GxiqHxql> [Accessed 04/10/13]

In September 2012 an important Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari used a news conference to deny direct Iranian military involvement in Syria, claiming such involvement was unnecessary due to the presence of Jaysh al-Sha'bi: "It is our assessment that there is no need for external support in order to preserve the security in Syria, since 50,000 popular forces called Jaysh al-Sha'bi are fighting alongside the Syrian military." Jafari insisted that the Revolutionary Guards provided "intellectual and even economic support"⁴⁴ but denied that Iran was giving military assistance to militant groups in Syria.

Quwat al-Difa'a al-Watani

This loosely aligned militia group is more locally-oriented, and began as a network of *Lijan Sha'biya* or 'Popular Committees,' more similar to the aforementioned 'Popular Organizations' operating under Hafez al-Assad.⁴⁵ These Popular Committees are largely made up of pro-Assad minority groups, such as Alawites, Druze and Christians, who have taken up arms to protect their local communities from attacks by rebel fighters. They often co-ordinate with the Assad regime in manning neighborhood checkpoints and crucially free-up manpower for Assad's conventional military forces to concentrate on fighting the opposition instead of also having to invest in defending pro-regime populations.⁴⁶

Many members of these Popular Committees continue to be paid salaries by the government, despite having left their previous jobs to join the militia. It has also been reported that the regime provides the Popular Committee militias with weapons.⁴⁷ At the beginning of 2013 the Popular Committees were transformed into a more professional militia organization with a clearer hierarchical structure called *Quwat al-Difa'a al-Watani*, or the 'National Defense Forces.' Iran and Hezbollah have allegedly provided financial support for the creation of this new militia group, as well as supplying them with better equipment and training.⁴⁸ Because this group's primary goal remains providing security for pro-Assad towns and neighborhoods they have been

⁴⁴ Alfoneh, Ali & Majidiyar, Ahmad., 'Iran News Round Up' *AEI Iran Tracker*, 17/09/12
<http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-september-17-2012> [Accessed 04/10/13]

⁴⁵ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.16

⁴⁶ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.20

⁴⁷ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.19

⁴⁸ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.20

less involved in directly fighting the Sunni rebels. Despite this, it was recently reported that the violence in the prominent Christian village of Maaloula in September 2013 was caused by the setting up of a pro-regime checkpoint at the entrance of the village by National Defense Force militants.⁴⁹

The Shabiha

Another loose association of paramilitary groups which pre-date the current Syria conflict and whose role has been transformed by Iranian patronage is the Shabiha. The Shabiha started off as a criminal network of mostly Alawite smugglers operating in the Syrian-Lebanese border areas, particularly in Latakia and Tartous, dominated by members of the Assad family, including Hafez al-Assad's nephews Fawaz and Mudhir al-Assad. The Assad regime tolerated the Shabiha's smuggling activities and sometimes even profited from them, however was never able to exert its full control over their operations, and at times clashed with them, even sending some Shabiha members to prison.⁵⁰

When protests broke out against the Assad regime in 2011 the Shabiha took a leading role in suppressing the initially peaceful opposition movement. According to US Government sanctions, "since the beginning of the unrest, the Shabiha have fired into crowds of peaceful Syrian demonstrators, shot and killed Syrian demonstrators, arbitrarily detained Syrian civilians, and shot Syrian soldiers who refused to fire on peaceful demonstrators."⁵¹ The Shabiha have also been accused of perpetrating some of the worst atrocities of the Syrian conflict, including the Houla massacre in May 2012, wherein 108 civilians were executed in cold blood, more than half of them women and children.⁵²

The Shabiha are reportedly in close contact with the regime, and benefit from the support of both Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Recruits are often sourced from the lower

⁴⁹ Sinja, Lina., 'Christian Villagers Cast Doubt on Syria Jihadist 'Threat'.' *BBC News* 18/09/13
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24148322> [Accessed 19/09/13]

⁵⁰ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.17

⁵¹ *US Department of State* website, Op.Cit.

⁵² Nebehay, Stephanie. 'Most Houla Victims Killed in Summary Executions: U.N.' *Reuters* 29/05/12
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/29/us-syria-un-idUSBRE84S10020120529> [Accessed 04/10/13]

socio-economic sectors of society, including criminals who gain an early release in exchange for fighting for the regime.⁵³ Interestingly, Holliday reports that Sunni criminal elements are also aligning themselves with Shabiha militias, such as the Aleppo-based Berri family, which is involved in drugs and arms smuggling and has close ties with the government. Shabiha militants in the towns of Deir ez-Zor and Dera'a are allegedly also made up of Sunnis who support the Assad regime.⁵⁴

As the conflict progresses, divisions have emerged between the largely Alawite Syrian Shabiha militants and foreign Shi'ite militant groups also operating in Syria under Iran's patronage. Initially, foreign fighters wishing to come to Syria and join one of the pro-Assad militant organizations such as the Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas Brigade, were forced to fight under the command of Shabiha loyalists, one of the conditions placed on their participation by the Assad regime. Many of the Iraq-based Shi'ite militia groups in Syria criticized the lack of military discipline demonstrated by the Shabiha, and a split emerged between Syrian and Iraqi fighters. This disagreement came to a head mid-2013 when a gun battle erupted near the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus between Iraqi fighters of the Asa'ib al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah militias and Syrian fighters aligned with the Shabiha. According to witnesses, two Iraqis and three Syrians died in the clash.⁵⁵ In spite of Iranian attempts at reconciliation, Iraqi militia groups have since refused to fight under Shabiha command.⁵⁶

"Of the paramilitary forces fighting for Assad, the Syrian Shabiha have the most to lose,"⁵⁷ and are hence the most likely force to continue fighting in an insurgent capacity if the regime should collapse. The Alawite Shabiha appear to be motivated not only by loyalty to their own sect and the Assad family, but also by fear of collective reprisals should the Sunni opposition take control of the government. Fulton et al quote an interview with an Alawite Shabiha fighter: "I know the Sunnis will take revenge for what we have done. I am fighting to guarantee a good future for my

⁵³ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.18

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Al-Salhy 19/06 Op.Cit.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.26

sons and grandsons. So this is the final battle: Win, or die. There's no third choice."⁵⁸ Because of this, the Shabiha feature prominently in Iran's contingency plan for a post-Assad Syria. If the regime contracts into a coastal Alawite enclave the Shabiha would act to defend the Alawite heartland and could be relied upon to conduct insurgency operations in Sunni-controlled areas. The Shabiha's increasing reliance on Iranian support would ensure that Iran maintains significant leverage over the Syrian political situation, even in the event of Assad's fall.

Lebanese Militias

Hezbollah

Hezbollah ('Party of God') emerged in the mid-1980's during the Lebanese Civil War, and was founded by former members of the more secular-oriented Shi'ite militia group Amal, who broke away to form a religious Shi'ite movement inspired by the Iranian Revolution. Hezbollah and Amal fought several bitter battles over control of the majority Shi'ite areas of southern Lebanon and Beirut during the civil war, from which Hezbollah ultimately emerged triumphant.⁵⁹ At the end of the civil war many Amal militants joined the Lebanese army, and the movement continues to this day as a more minor political party in the Lebanese coalition government, over which Hezbollah's political wing calls the shots. From its infancy Hezbollah received training and funding from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and pledged its loyalty to Ayatollah Khomeini.⁶⁰ Due to the closeness in this mutually-beneficial relationship between sponsor and proxy, it is perhaps not such a surprise that Hezbollah has, at Iran's behest, entered the war in Syria on the side of Assad.

Hezbollah had been working with Iran to ensure the flow of arms to Assad's forces since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, with reports of direct Hezbollah involvement on the ground beginning to circulate mid-2012. Initially, Hezbollah provided advice and training to both the Syrian army and the various Shi'ite militia groups operating in Syria, which they were better predisposed to do because of their native Arabic language and experience in guerilla tactics and

⁵⁸ Ibid. P.20

⁵⁹ Norton, Augustus R., 2007. *Hezbollah, A Short History*. Princeton University Press, P.34

⁶⁰ Masters, Jonathan., 'Hezbollah (a.k.a. Hizbollah, Hizbu'llah)' *Council on Foreign Relations* <http://www.cfr.org/lebanon/hezbollah-k-hizbollah-hizbullah/p9155> [Accessed 13/10/13]

insurgency methods, practiced during their numerous clashes with Israel.⁶¹ Hezbollah then became involved in more direct combat activities, such as sniper and counter-sniper operations and the protection of supply routes and facilities within Syria.

Hezbollah militants are currently serving on numerous battlefronts, including Damascus, Dera'a in the south, Homs in central Syria and the Idlib Province in the north.⁶² After months of denying their involvement, Hassan Nasrallah confirmed that Hezbollah was active in the Syrian Civil War in a live television broadcast on May 25th 2013.⁶³ In June the French gauged that around 4,000 Hezbollah fighters were operating in Syria, and the Free Syrian Army estimates that this figure could be up to 10,000.⁶⁴ Hezbollah's presence in Syria has provided an important morale boost to the weary Syrian army, which on several occasions has come close to mutiny due to high casualty rates and in the facts that some units have been fighting for over a year without leave.⁶⁵ The deployment of Hezbollah has eased the pressure somewhat on Assad's regular forces, and their commitment has only grown over time- whilst initially only serving seven days stints inside Syria before returning to Lebanon, Hezbollah fighters had to serve 20 days on the frontlines during the battle of Qusayr, and now serve 30 days at a time.⁶⁶

The conflict in Syria however is putting Hezbollah in an increasingly precarious position domestically. The wave of support for Hezbollah which swept across the Sunni Muslim world in the wake of Hezbollah's self-proclaimed victory over Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War has now degenerated to such a degree that Bahrain became the first Arab state to list the group as a terrorist organization earlier this year.⁶⁷ Having built its reputation on protecting Lebanon against Israeli aggression, with a clever narrative of popular resistance winning support from across the Lebanese ethnic and religious spectrum, Hezbollah is now having a hard time explaining the

⁶¹ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.22

⁶² Blanford, Op.Cit.

⁶³ Mroue, Bassem. 'Hezbollah chief says group is fighting in Syria.' *Associated Press* 25/05/13
<http://news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-chief-says-group-fighting-syria-162721809.html> [Accessed 03/10/13]

⁶⁴ Blanford, Op.Cit.

⁶⁵ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.28

⁶⁶ Blanford, Op.Cit.

⁶⁷ *Al Arabiya*. 'Bahrain First Arab Country to Blacklist Hezbollah as Terrorist Organization.' 09/04/13
<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/09/Bahrain-first-Arab-country-to-blacklist-Hezbollah-as-terrorist-organization.html> [Accessed 04/10/13]

necessity of its involvement in Syria to its core constituency in Lebanon. The war in Syria has already had a dangerous polarizing effect on Lebanon's long-fragile and divided populace, and Lebanese Sunni groups aligned with the rebels in Syria have already launched several attacks against Hezbollah on Lebanese soil, including a car bomb which killed almost 30 people in the Hezbollah stronghold of southern Beirut in August 2013.⁶⁸ Sunni rebels in Syria have accused Hezbollah of launching "an open war against Syrian civilians"⁶⁹ and have threatened to retaliate against Hezbollah targets inside Lebanon, firing rockets into Hezbollah-controlled towns across the Lebanese border in May 2013.⁷⁰ These developments have the potential to dramatically alter the political situation in Lebanon. There is a distinct danger that sectarian tensions could further draw Lebanon into Syria's war, or that Hezbollah's involvement in Syria could lead to a second civil war between rival sects in neighboring Lebanon.

Hezbollah is terrified of an ascendant Sunni government in Damascus, which would be very unlikely to afford the same level of support to the militant group extended by the Assad regime, particularly in light of Hezbollah's current interference in Syria. Such an outcome would most likely cut off the crucial supply line which runs from Hezbollah's sponsors in Iran through Syria and into Lebanon. Hezbollah has hence found itself in a double-bind; it cannot afford to invest too heavily in Syria for fear of alienating its local support base and plunging Lebanon into a further spate of sectarian violence. However it also cannot afford for the Assad regime to fall to the rebels, which would deal a significant blow both to the Iranian-backed furtherance of its military capabilities and to its reputation as a legitimate resistance movement.

⁶⁸ Bassam, Laila. 'Car Bomb Kills 20 in Hezbollah's Beirut Stronghold.' *Reuters*, 15/08/13
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/15/us-lebanon-explosion-idUSBRE97E0S520130815> [Accessed 04/10/13]

⁶⁹ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.23

⁷⁰ Basil, Yousef. 'Syrian Rebels Target Hezbollah Militia, Fire Rockets into Lebanon.' *CNN News*, 21/05/13
<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/05/20/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html> [Accessed 04/10/13]

Iraqi Militias

The 'Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas Brigade

Smyth describes this militia as "the primary front group for Iranian-backed combatants and organizations based in Iraq."⁷¹ Al-Abbas Brigade fighters come from a variety of nationalities, and include Syrians, Lebanese and Afghans, however the majority are Iraqi Shi'ites who have splintered away from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, veterans of the insurgency in Iraq following the American invasion in 2003. The al-Abbas Brigade established a social media presence in autumn 2012 and also recorded several music videos aimed at stimulating support for its cause in Syria.⁷² In October 2012 an al-Abbas Brigade commander claimed the militia had 500 fighters at its disposal,⁷³ which is estimated to have increased to between 1000 and 1500 today.⁷⁴ The Brigade recognizes Ayatollah Khamenei as the supreme Shi'ite religious authority, and was allegedly formed in consultation with Khamenei's office in Damascus. Its stated aim is to protect the Sayyida Zeynab shrine, and the most common slogan chanted by Brigade members when going into battle is *Labayka Ya Zaynab!* ("We're here for you, O Zaynab!"), emphasizing the supposedly defensive nature of the militias mission in Syria.⁷⁵ Despite this, it is very likely that the al-Abbas Brigade is involved in fighting alongside the Syrian Army. Photos on social media sites aligned with the group show members of the militia posing with vehicles belonging to the Syrian Army and police, and a video was recently uploaded showing al-Abbas Brigade fighter operating heavy artillery belonging to the Syrian Army.⁷⁶ The neighborhood in which the Sayyida Zeynab shrine is located is also of great strategic importance to the regime's attempts to retain control over Damascus. Assad's maintaining control of Sayyida Zeynab prevents the rebels from encircling regime strongholds in western Damascus and guards against the capture of

⁷¹ Smyth, Op.Cit.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Anzalone, Op.Cit.

⁷⁴ Smyth, 07/08 Op.Cit.

⁷⁵ Smyth, Philip. 'Hizballah Cavalcade: What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (Lafa)?: Assessing Syria's Shia "International Brigade" Through Their Social Media Presence.' *Jihadology* 15/05/13

<http://jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence/> [Accessed 05/10/13]

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Damascus airport.⁷⁷ Controlling the neighborhood of Sayyida Zeynab is hence extremely important from a military perspective, and not only a religious one.

The al-Abbas Brigade is divided into smaller fighting units which are named after figures of reverence in Shi'ite history, such as the Twelve Imams, as well as contemporary martyrs like Ahmad Kayara, an al-Abbas Brigade member who died in Syria.⁷⁸ The Brigade's leader is a militant who goes by the name of Abu Ajeeb, however not much more is known about its hierarchy or chain of command.⁷⁹ The name of the Brigade itself refers to Abu al-Fadh'l al-Abbas, the brother of Imam Husayn and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who died together with him in the battle of Karbala, and who has since become a symbol of Shi'ite sacrifice.⁸⁰ This evocation of Karbala is significant, as the battle is seen by Shi'ites as representing a rejection of Sunni oppression, and parallels are clearly being drawn with the current conflict in Syria. This serves to further emphasize the sectarian motivations behind the al-Abbas Brigade's determination to defend the Assad regime against the Sunni rebels.

'Asa'ib 'Ahl al-Haq

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, or 'League of the Righteous,' formed in 2008 from a breakaway group of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. It was heavily involved in the insurgency against the US military in Iraq, and achieved notoriety due to several high-profile attacks on coalition army bases, including the kidnapping and execution of American soldiers and security contractors.⁸¹ After the US withdrew its troops from Iraq Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq moved into politics, however retained both its military wing and its weapons. The group's leader Qais al-Khazali was a student of Muqtada al-Sadr's father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, however is today viewed as a religious and political rival to Muqtada and his political party the Sadrist Movement,

⁷⁷ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.25

⁷⁸ Anzalone, Op.Cit.

⁷⁹ Smyth, 15/05 Op.Cit.

⁸⁰ Al-Salhy, Op.Cit.

⁸¹ Schreck, Adam & Abdul-Zahra, Qassim. 'Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, Iraq Shiite Militia, Will Reportedly Lay Down Arms.' *The Huffington Post* 01/06/12 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/06/asaib-ahl-al-haq-lay-down-arms_n_1189600.html [Accessed 24/09/13]

currently part of the Iraqi coalition government.⁸² Much bad blood exists between the two Shi'ite militant groups.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's spiritual leader is Grand Ayatollah Kazim al-Haeri, a cleric of Iraqi origin who lives in Qom, Iran and is close to the Iranian regime.⁸³ Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has publicly criticized Ali al-Sistani and the other quietist Shi'ite clerics in Najaf, and is a strong proponent of Khomeini's absolutist interpretation of *velayat-e faqih*. In August 2012 the group put up over 20,000 posters in Shi'ite neighborhoods in Baghdad and southern Iraq displaying the militia's logo and a photograph of Ayatollah Khomeini. This act left no doubt as to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's political and religious loyalties, and many locals reported being afraid to take the posters down for fear of retribution attacks.⁸⁴

One of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's stated objectives is "to promote the religious and political principles of the Iranian Revolution inside and beyond Iraq."⁸⁵ Much evidence exists to suggest that the group has been fighting in Syria at Iran's behest. Its first Syria-based militant was killed in Hama as far back as the beginning of 2012, with a large funeral held in Tahrir Square, Baghdad in his honor.⁸⁶ Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has suffered a relatively high number of losses compared with other militia groups operating in Syria, suggesting that it has a large number of fighters at its disposal. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is given around \$5 million in weapons and cash on a monthly basis from Iran, and reportedly receives training from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force.⁸⁷ It appears that Iran has tasked Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, along with Kata'ib Hezbollah, another Iraqi militant group which will be discussed shortly, with organizing the enlistment and transfer of Iraqi volunteers to the war in Syria. One Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq commander was quoted boasting to a

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Visser, Reidar. 'Religious Allegiances among Pro-Iranian Special Groups in Iraq.' *CTC Sentinel* 26/09/11 <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/religious-allegiances-among-pro-iranian-special-groups-in-iraq> [Accessed 24/09/13]

⁸⁴ Jakes, Lara & Abdul-Zahra, Qassim. 'Iran Ayatollah is Poster Boy for Influence in Iraq.' *Associated Press* 25/12/12 http://news.yahoo.com/iran-ayatollah-poster-boy-influence-iraq-062142717.html?_esi=1 [Accessed 05/10/13]

⁸⁵ Weyer, Sam. 'Middle East Security Report 7: The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq.' *Institute for the Study of War*. December 2012 <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ResurgenceofAAH.pdf> [Accessed 24/09/13] P.6

⁸⁶ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.24

⁸⁷ Schreck et al, Op.Cit.

journalist from the Associated Press in June 2013: “I personally get dozens of calls each day from people in the provinces and Baghdad who want to go...We send well-trained ideological fighters.”⁸⁸

At the top of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's hierarchical structure is a 'Board of Trustees' which oversees its activities. Its General Secretary and leader is the aforementioned Qais al-Khazali. Wyer suggests that al-Khazali's deputy is a militant called Mohammed al-Tabatabai, with Kazim al-Abadi the name of the likely third-in-command of the organization. Two others, Akram al-Kaabi and Laith al-Khazali, also sit on the Board. A militant called Hassan Salem is thought to be the head of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's military-wing.⁸⁹

Following its entry into Iraqi politics, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has attempted to model itself on Lebanese Hezbollah, rebranding itself as an Islamic Resistance organization and setting itself up as a charity to expand its outreach to socially disadvantaged Shi'ites and minority groups.⁹⁰ In 2011 it opened an office in Beirut, led by a sheikh called Ammar al-Delphi. Al-Delphi met with numerous leaders of Lebanese Hezbollah, the Lebanese government, Hamas and Shi'ite religious leaders in Lebanon throughout 2011,⁹¹ suggesting that Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is making an effort to further consolidate its activities with those of Hezbollah, perhaps at Iran's instance.

In July 2013 Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq announced that it had created a new sub-unit of the militia called Liwa Kafeel Zeynab, the 'Supporters of Zeynab Brigade.' The new unit's goal was the somewhat familiar theme of defending the Sayyida Zeynab shrine in Damascus against rebel attacks. Videos of this new unit uploaded to YouTube show fighters from Liwa Kafeel Zeynab working alongside those of Hezbollah, further emphasizing the closeness in co-operation between the two Iranian-backed militia groups.⁹²

⁸⁸ Quoted in Smyth, 27/08 Op.Cit.

⁸⁹ Wyer, Op.Cit. P.6

⁹⁰ Ibid. P.12

⁹¹ Ibid. P.7

⁹² Smyth, 27/08 Op.Cit.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is experienced in assassinations, kidnapping and targeted rocket and mortar attacks, however unlike Hezbollah, it "cannot currently be used as a stand-alone deployable force due to its relatively small size and lack of heavy weapons."⁹³ It is unclear as to whether Iran intends on further upgrading the group's military capabilities, or whether Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq will be required to instead invest in facilitating the activities of Hezbollah and other Iranian affiliated groups in Syria, continuing in its efforts to enlist Iraqi Shi'ite volunteers and providing Iran with a significant amount of leverage over Iraqi politics.

Kata'ib Hezbollah

The 'Party of God Brigades' was established in Iraq following the dissolution of Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, but unlike Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is not a splinter group at odds with al-Sadr's political movement. Kata'ib Hezbollah developed its reputation as an important militia group in the insurgency against American involvement in Iraq, and conducted operations such as attacking the Green Zone and UN employees as well as managing to hack into the encrypted video feed of a Predator drone operating above Iraq in 2009.⁹⁴ It is highly probable that Kata'ib Hezbollah has been receiving both funding and training from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah for some time, initially to facilitate their insurgency activities against the American forces in Iraq, and more recently to back their involvement in the civil war in Syria. Interestingly, there are reports of ties between Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Assad regime which pre-date the current war in Syria, with Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters using Syria as a transit point en route to Lebanon or Iran, with the full knowledge of officials in the Syrian government.⁹⁵

Kata'ib Hezbollah openly acknowledges its support for Iran, and its website proclaims its adherence to the Khomeini interpretation of *vilayat-e faqih*, referring to Ayatollah Khamenei as *Imam al-Qa'id*, the 'Leader-Imam'.⁹⁶ One of Kata'ib Hezbollah's aims is to establish a Shi'ite Islamic system of governance in Iraq, taking its lead from that of Iran. Following the US

⁹³ Wyer, Op.Cit. P.26

⁹⁴ 'Group Profile: Kata'ib Hezbollah.' *International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research* 05/03/10 <http://www.pvtr.org/pdf/GroupProfiles/Kata'ibHezbollah-05March10.pdf> [Accessed 26/09/13] P.4

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Visser, Op.Cit.

withdrawal the militant group refused to lay down its arms, and continued to promote its pro-Iranian agenda, including the targeting of Iranian dissidents within Iraq.⁹⁷

Very little information exists as to the nature of Kata'ib Hezbollah's leadership structure, however it has been reported that its leaders are militants by the names of Hashem Abu Alaa and Adnan al-Hamidawi.⁹⁸ Another individual often associated with Kata'ib Hezbollah is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis ('the Engineer') who also goes by the name of Jamal Ja'far Muhammad. Described as being close to Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, he achieved notoriety after being involved in Iranian-sponsored attempts to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait in 1985, as well as the 1983 embassy bombings in Kuwait City.⁹⁹ Al-Muhandis is said to have trained Kata'ib Hezbollah in various guerrilla techniques, his specialty being sniper-training. It appears that Al-Muhandis was also responsible for establishing networks for smuggling weapons and logistical equipment from Iran into Iraq, an operation carried out largely by Kata'ib Hezbollah operatives.¹⁰⁰

Social media and martyrdom announcements attest to the presence of Kata'ib Hezbollah militants fighting alongside the al-Abbas Brigade and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq in Syria. It is estimated that Kata'ib Hezbollah has sent around 400 experienced fighters to Syria from bases in Iraq. Many Kata'ib Hezbollah militants have spent time training in Lebanon alongside Lebanese Hezbollah before their deployment to Syria, in order to update their skills from those of the Iraq War insurgency (such as roadside bombs) to more conventional military techniques including urban warfare skills, required for battle in Syria.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Smyth, 27/08 Op.Cit.

⁹⁸ Weyer, Op.Cit. P.13

⁹⁹ Strouse, Thomas. 'Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Intricate Web of Iranian Military Involvement in Iraq' *The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor* 8:9, 04/03/10
http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36109&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=12d601e5bc#.UkQOgtJmiSo [Accessed 26/09/13]

¹⁰⁰ *International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research*, Op.Cit. P.7

¹⁰¹ Knights, Michael. 'Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria.' *The Washington Institute* 27/06/13 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria> [Accessed 05/10/13]

Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada

'The Brigades of the Prince of Martyrs' was established in May 2013 with the stated purpose of protecting Shi'ite holy sites internationally, including "liberating Jerusalem."¹⁰² Its existence was announced at the funerals of three of its fighters killed in Syria. The group claims it currently has 500 militants fighting in Syria, most in the Damascus area.¹⁰³ Ayatollah Khamenei features prominently in Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada posters and websites, and unlike other Iraqi militant groups, Iraqi religious leaders very rarely make an appearance in Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada propaganda material.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, some fighters have also been sent to Iran for training prior to their deployment in Syria. Some confusion exists as to who is leading the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia, it has been reported that a militant by the name of Falah al-Khazali is in charge, but this has been contradicted by other reports that the group is led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, who allegedly formed the group after breaking away from Kata'ib Hezbollah.¹⁰⁵

Smyth mentions the possibility that Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada could be in fact a front for the political Sayyid al-Shuhada Movement, based on their similar names and the fact that most of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada's fighters who died in Syria were originally from Basra, where the Sayyid al-Shuhada political party is also based.¹⁰⁶ More evidence however is required in order to be sure of the connection. It is also possible that Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada is affiliated with the Badr Organisation, another veteran Iraqi militia-cum-political party, which has published Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada death notices on its official Facebook page at a similar time to when it formally announced that its military wing was also sending fighters to Syria.¹⁰⁷

Much speculation has surrounded the possible involvement of the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militia in the widely-condemned chemical weapons attack on the Damascus suburb of East

¹⁰² Smyth 27/08, Op.Cit.

¹⁰³ Smyth, Phillip. 'Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada Emerges: Updates on the New Iraqi Shia Militia Supplying Fighters to Syria.' *Jihadology* 09/09/13 <http://jihadology.net/category/asaib-ahl-al-haq/> [Accessed 24/09/13]

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. P.40

¹⁰⁵ Smyth 27/08, Op.Cit.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Smyth 09/09, Op.Cit. P.43

Ghouta on August 21, 2013. Posts on Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada's Facebook page seem to confirm that the group was operating in East Ghouta on August 20th, with three fighters reported killed and a further five mentioned as missing. On August 24th official martyrdom announcements were made for eight Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada fighters killed in East Ghouta.¹⁰⁸ William Tucker, a chemical weapons expert at the American Military University, has speculated that Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada's role was to surround the area targeted by chemical weapons and attack any rebels who attempted to flee.¹⁰⁹ Smyth notes however that it is also possible that Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada were in East Ghouta to protect an important train station located there, which had come under attack by rebel forces on September 1st, soon after the East Ghouta chemical attack.¹¹⁰

The Imam Husayn Brigade

Not much is known about this small militant group which only announced itself publically on June 30th 2013, with a notice for residents of the Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood in Damascus that it would be organizing nightly meals during Ramadan.¹¹¹ It appears the group was formed in Syria of Iraqi volunteers, and unlike other Iraq-based militias has very little presence in Iraq itself. Interestingly, there is nothing to suggest that the group is the recipient of direct sponsorship from Iran, as images of Khamenei and Khomeini do not feature on their social networking sites. Instead, the group appears to be affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr, whose picture does appear in Imam Husayn Brigade imagery. A link to the Iraqi Army is also implied, as members are often photographed in Iraqi Army uniforms and insignia, including the group's alleged leader Majid Abu Dhiba. The Imam Husayn Brigade appears to be a small group as the largest number of militants to appear in any one photograph has been 16, although it is unlikely that this figure represents all the fighters at the Brigade's disposal.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Smyth 09/09, Op.Cit. P.12

¹⁰⁹ Smyth 09/09, Op.Cit. P.12

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Smyth 27/08, Op.Cit.

¹¹² Ibid.

The Zulfiqar Brigade

The Zulfiqar Brigade is another relatively new Syria-based militia group, whose fighters appear to be Iraqi Shi'ites operating largely in Damascus. Little is known about the Brigade's numbers and the nature of its military involvement. The Zulfiqar Brigade began posting material on Facebook on June 5 2013, including photographs and film clips which clearly show the Brigade's logo alongside Iraqi flag insignia.¹¹³ Like other Shi'ite militias, the Zulfiqar Brigade asserts that its primary goal is the protection of shrines such as Sayyida Zaynab. The Brigade takes its name from the mythical double-bladed Zulfiqar sword, believed to have been passed from the Prophet Muhammad to Imam Ali before Muhammad's death. Shi'ites attribute great symbolism to this act, which is seen as representing the transferal of Muhammad's role as leader to his son-in-law Ali, with the sword itself a symbol of Ali's status as a great warrior.¹¹⁴ Shi'ites believe that when the Mahdi returns he will bring the Zulfiqar with him to herald the coming of the messianic age. The Zulfiqar Brigade is hence drawing on powerful religious symbolism in promoting itself as a protector of Shi'ite holy sites and the Shi'ite community in Syria.

The Zulfiqar Brigade appears to be very closely connected to the much larger Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. Smyth speculates that Zulfiqar could perhaps be a propaganda wing of the al-Abbas Brigade, and not a separate entity at all.¹¹⁵ It is also possible that al-Abbas created Zulfiqar as an online presence in an attempt to damage rebel morale by making it seem that a greater number of Shi'ite militias and fighters were operating in Syria than really existed.¹¹⁶ Such speculation comes from Zulfiqar's social media sites, where most pictures posted of fighters appear to be old material from al-Abbas Brigade posts. Similarly, militants listed as Zulfiqar's commanders, going by the aliases of Abu Hajar and Abu Shaheed, and are known to be also members of the al-Abbas Brigade. One fighter, Abu Jafar al-Assad, features as a sniper in al-Abbas's propaganda material, however has also been named as a leading commander in the Zulfiqar Brigade.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Smyth, Philip. 'Liwa'a Zulfiqar: Birth of A New Shia Militia in Syria?' *Jihadology* 20/06/13
<http://jihadology.net/2013/06/20/hizballah-cavalcade/> [Accessed 26/09/13]

¹¹⁵ Smyth 20/06, Op.Cit.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Whilst it is possible that Zulfiqar is in fact a sub-unit of the al-Abbas Brigade, there is also the possibility that the Brigade formed as a separate entity due to infighting amongst the various Shi'ite militia groups. The aforementioned battle in June 2013 between Syrian Shabiha elements and members of Iraqi militia groups such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq allegedly resulted in the creation of a new Iraqi militia group, which Reuters reports as refusing to fight under Syrian command.¹¹⁸ As the Zulfiqar Brigade announced its presence on social media only weeks after the infighting, it is possible that it is in fact this new brigade mentioned by Reuters.

The 'Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade

The Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade announced its establishment through a Facebook page launched on May 27 2013, followed by a series of extravagant funerals and demonstrations in Iraq on June 4 2013 in honor of seven of its fighters killed in Syria.¹¹⁹ The group's complete name is the lengthy *Al-Muqawamah al-Islamiya fi Iraq Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir Hezbollah al-Nujaba* ('The Islamic Resistance in Iraq Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade Outstanding Army of God Movement').¹²⁰ The word *al-Nujaba*, which is in plural form meaning 'the Outstanding,' is sometimes used by Shi'ites to reference the return of the Mahdi.¹²¹ Its social media sites reveal a strong allegiance to Iranian religious ideology including a Khomeinist interpretation of *vilayat-e faqih*, and Ayatollah Khamenei is heavily praised.¹²² The Brigade takes part of its name from Ammar Ibn Yasir, a Shi'ite historical figure depicted as one of Imam 'Ali's most loyal companions. This could also refer to his tomb, which was located in the northern Syrian city of al-Raqqah, now under rebel control. Sunni members of the al-Qaeda aligned al-Nusra Front destroyed the tomb in March 2013, and the Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade could be referencing this act in an attempt to promote itself as a protector of Shi'ite religious sites.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Al-Salhy, 19/06 Op.Cit.

¹¹⁹ Smyth 07/08, Op.Cit.

¹²⁰ Smyth, Phillip. 'Hizballah Cavalcade: Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir: A New Shia Militia Operating In Aleppo, Syria.' *Jihadology* 20/07/13 <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/20/hizballah-cavalcade-liwaa-ammam-ibn-yasir-a-new-shia-militia-operating-in-aleppo-syria/> [Accessed 26/09/13]

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Smyth 20/07, Op.Cit.

¹²³ Smyth 26/09, Op.Cit.

Interestingly, the Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade is clearly operating from Syria's second city of Aleppo, unlike other Shi'ite militant groups which base themselves in the Sayyida Zeynab neighborhood of Damascus, ostensibly in order to protect this important shrine. Despite this, Ammar Ibn Yasir continues the narrative of defending Sayyida Zeynab in its photographs and social media posts, despite being located hundreds of kilometers away from the shrine. This development represents an extension of the rhetoric employed by Shi'ite militant groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, the al-Abbas Brigade and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which justifies foreign Shi'ite participation in the Syrian war on the grounds of protecting Shi'ite religious sites.¹²⁴ The Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade is now able to claim that its activities fighting alongside Assad's army elsewhere are also contributing to the defense of the Sayyida Zaynab and other shrines by preserving the Assad regime's guardianship of them, and important rhetorical development.

Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba

'The Outstanding Army of God Movement' shares the latter part of its name with the aforementioned 'Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade, and was formed around a similar time in June 2013. Very little is known about this secretive group, which does not maintain a social media presence. It is possible that Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba is the Iraq-based supplier of Shi'ite volunteer fighters for 'Ammar Ibn Yasir in Syria.¹²⁵ Smyth claims that Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba is a front set up by Kata'ib Hizballah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and backed by Iran, whose main purpose is not active combat but facilitating the movement of fighters from Iraq to Syria.¹²⁶

The Badr Organization

The Badr Organisation is an Iraqi Shi'ite political group which recently split from the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq political party, which is part of Iraq's coalition government. It was originally a brigade developed with Iranian assistance in the 1980's to fight Saddam Hussein's regime, and for a long time it's leaders were based in exile in Iran.¹²⁷ The organization supports

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Smyth 07/08, Op.Cit

¹²⁶ Smyth, Philip. 'Liwa'a al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba: A Shia Militia Fighting in Rif Dimashq/Ghouta.' *Jihadology* 05/10/13 <http://jihadology.net/2013/10/05/hizballah-cavalcade-liwaa-al-imam-al-hasan-al-mujtaba-a-shia-militia-fighting-in-rif-dimashqghouta/> [Accessed 06/10/13]

¹²⁷ Anzalone, Op.Cit.

Iran's absolutist interpretation of *vilayat-e faqih*, and is said to have close links with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.¹²⁸

It has been reported that an unnamed senior figure within the Badr Organization's political party has been acting on behalf of Iran to co-ordinate and liaise between Assad's government and the various Iraqi militant groups operating in Syria.¹²⁹ In July 2013 the military wing of the Badr Organization openly declared its involvement in Syria, claiming on Facebook that it had sent over 1,500 fighters to the conflict, and holding public funerals, including one in Baghdad, for several militants killed in battle.¹³⁰

There is some evidence to suggest that Badr Organisation militants are fighting under a different name in Syria. Death announcements for Badr fighters killed in Syria sometimes claim they belonged to a brigade called Quwet Shahid al-Sadr ('Forces of the Martyr Sadr'), however it appears that rather than being a separate brigade, Quwet Shahid al-Sadr is the name of the military wing of the Badr Organisation conducting operations in Syria.¹³¹ There also appears to be a close relationship between the Badr Organisation in Syria and another Iraqi Shi'ite militant group previously discussed- Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The Badr Organization's Facebook page has in the past published martyrdom notices for the deaths of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada militants, and photographs suggest close co-operation between the two groups.¹³²

¹²⁸ Smyth 07/08, Op.Cit.

¹²⁹ Al-Salhy, Suadad. 'Iraqi Shi'ite militants fight for Syria's Assad.' *Reuters* 16/10/12 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/16/us-syria-crisis-iraq-militias-idUSBRE89F0PX20121016> [Accessed 26/09/13]

¹³⁰ Smyth, Philip. 'Hizballah Cavalcade: Breaking Badr, The New Season: Confirmation of the Badr Organization's Involvement in Syria.' *Jihadology* 12/08/13 <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/12/hizballah-cavalcade-breaking-badr-the-new-season-confirmation-of-the-badr-organizations-involvement-in-syria/> [Accessed 27/09/13]

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

PART III - SECTARIANISM, SYRIA AND IRANIAN POLICY- THE FUTURE

As the Syrian Civil War continues to rage on with no political or military end in sight, the importance of the contribution of Iran-backed Shi'ite militia groups to Assad's military capabilities is only increasing. Shi'ite militias now form an integral part of Assad's war effort, and feature heavily in Syrian Government operations and strategy. Due to the growing sectarian rift caused by the Syrian conflict it is reasonable to assume that there will be no shortage of foreign Shi'ite recruits willing to join the ever-expanding list of militia groups operating in Syria. As the conflict has progressed the Syrian Army has decentralized, with command and control decision-making now occurring amongst mid-level officers instead of at executive level.¹³³ This has given the Assad regime greater tactical flexibility, but has also further blurred the distinction between the Syrian Army and the pro-regime Shi'ite militias who fight alongside it. In the future this distinction will perhaps become irrelevant.

If the Assad regime should eventually collapse, which is by no means a given, it is likely that the Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite militia groups will wage an insurgent campaign against any Sunni-led government which emerges. Surviving remnants of Assad's Syrian Army would likely join with these militia groups. Pro-regime minority communities in Damascus, Homs, Hama and in the Alawite coastal region would provide bases of support for a Shi'ite insurgency, and would keep open supply lines to Lebanese Hezbollah. Although it is very unlikely that Bashar al-Assad will be able to win back control over all of Syrian territory, he is currently well positioned to continue fighting in the medium term and ensure that no player in Syria is able to win the war outright.

Despite Iran's success in maintaining the Assad regime's grip on power in Syria, and preventing for now the rise of a Sunni Syrian state, its political influence in the Levant is likely to wane in the long term. Any eventual political settlement in Syria, whether it includes Assad or not, would mean Iran would have to accept limitations on its access and supply chains to Lebanese Hezbollah, irrespective of whether Shi'ite-controlled enclaves remain in the post-war period. The Iranian promotion of sectarianism as a means of uniting the Shi'ite world behind Assad's Syria

¹³³ Holliday, Op.Cit. P.29

also has the potential to backfire, not in the least as it has made more likely the prospect of a hostile Sunni Islamist entity, possibly Salafist and virulently anti-Shi'a, emerging in its backyard. Arab Shi'ite clerics who do not subscribe to Khomeini's interpretation of *vilayat-e faqih* are becoming increasingly concerned about Iran's growing influence and Khomeini's claim to not only be the Supreme Leader of Iran but of the entire Shi'ite world. It is possible that other highly respected Shi'ite clerics, such as the Grand Ayatollahs of Najaf, who promote a more politically quietist agenda will reassert themselves, and parts of the Shi'ite Arab world will reject Iran's pretense to leadership.

In order to compensate for this decrease in regional 'soft power' influence, Iran may attempt to replicate its successful strategy of building extra-governmental proxy groups in new areas of the Muslim world. Iran has already expanded its sponsorship of Shi'ite militancy from that of its prototype, Lebanese Hezbollah, to the various Iraqi Shi'ite militant groups now deployed in Syria, who also have been advancing Iranian interests back home in Iraq. Iraq, already fragile and divided after many long years of civil war following the American invasion, is in an even more precarious position due to the war in Syria and the large contingent of Iraqi fighters operating there. If and when these militant groups return to Iraq they are likely to further complicate its delicate sectarian situation, and will enable Iran to increase its leverage over Iraqi policy. Evidence has also emerged of Iran's sending weapons shipments to Shi'ite Houthi rebels in Yemen,¹³⁴ a potentially new front for its proxy war with neighboring Saudi Arabia. Indeed Iran's deployment of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'ite militias in Syria to prop up the Assad regime, legitimized through sectarian rhetoric, establishes a worrying precedent and the possibility that such groups could be used to support Iranian interests elsewhere.¹³⁵

In the post-Arab Spring Middle East, sectarian tensions have emerged as the most powerful mobilizing force in the region, which coupled with the rise of political Islamism, could lead to an increase in regional instability as the territorial state is weakened at the expense of strengthening ethnic-religious affiliations. The civil war in Syria has now become the most salient and emotive

¹³⁴ Fulton et al, Op.Cit. P.27

¹³⁵ Smyth 07/08, Op.Cit.

conflict in a region which is increasingly divided along sectarian lines, and is developing into a proxy war between the two most dominant streams of Islam. The West has long ignored the impact of religion on Middle East politics, especially as pre-Arab Spring authoritarian rulers tended to promote their regimes as nationalist and secular. Political Islam is becoming increasingly sectarian and extremist views are becoming more mainstream, as major players in the region such as Iran are fanning the sectarian flames in an attempt to increase influence and leverage. In the short term this may benefit the West, as terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and Lebanese Hezbollah are more preoccupied with fighting each other than they are with attacking Western targets. However, the long term result of these developments will be an increasingly dangerous and polarized Middle East, featuring weakened states and powerful non-state actors, radicalized by wars such as that of Syria and deeply divided along sectarian lines. Such a Middle East would pose a serious threat to Western interests, and it is imperative that policy makers take sectarian considerations into account in their efforts to fight terror and extremism in the region.

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