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THE FATEMIYOUN DIVISION

AFGHAN FIGHTERS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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SUMMARY

Originally styled as a small detachment of volunteers and refugees mobilized to defend the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab outside Damascus, the Fatemiyoun formation's size and presence across Syria has slowly expanded throughout the war. At home, the IRGC began cultivating a narrative of Afghan "resistance" to transnational Sunni jihadism. Joining the Syrian jihad was increasingly promoted as a path to legal and social recognition within the Islamic Republic at a time when thousands of desperate young Hazaras were setting out to emigrate to Europe.

This paper analyzes the origins and expansion of the Fatemiyoun Division, its recent role in the Syrian civil war, and the impact its Syrian jihad has had on the Hazara community in Iran as well as transnational militancy in Afghanistan.

As the Syrian conflict winds down, the future of the Fatemiyoun as a fighting force remains unclear. But even if the formation were to be disbanded, the networks, narratives, and capabilities developed in Syria could help the IRGC raise a similar formation again in the future.



KEY POINTS

- * The Fatemiyoun Division is an Iranian-led Shi'i militia active in Syria composed primarily of ethnic Hazara residents in Iran. Founded in the early 1980s by Afghan devotees of Ayatollah Khomeini, the division and its precursors have fought in the Iran-Iraq War and Afghan civil war before recently re-emerging as part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' expeditionary force in Syria.
- * Recruited from among Iran's large and disenfranchised Afghan refugee population, potential fighters are often enticed to sign up with promises of generous pay, legal residency, and social status upon return. Others report being coerced into joining with threats of arrest and deportation.
- * Survivor accounts suggest Fatemiyoun fighters are often mentally and tactically unprepared for combat, leading to outsized casualty rates, as the division is deployed along the most dangerous front lines, operating heavy weapons such as tanks and artillery.
- * The Afghan government has outlawed the group at home due to concerns of spillover effects, but evidence suggests clandestine IRGC recruitment continues.

INTRODUCTION ORIGIN STORY

In the late fall of 2012, one year into the Syrian civil war, opposition activists appeared to be steadily losing their grip on reality. As they battled loyalists across the country, their explanations for why they still hadn't managed to dislodge the recalcitrant Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad grew ever more outlandish. Rebels reported seeing among their enemies all sorts of "mercenaries" including Egyptians, Yemenis, and—incidentally—Afghans. Eventually, one rebel group managed to capture a confused and disheveled-looking Afghan fighter with foreign features who identified himself to opposition cameras as Mortada Hussein.

Since then, Liwa al-Fatemiyoun, or the Fatemiyoun Division, an Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) affiliate composed almost entirely of Shi'i Afghans, has become a fixture on the Syrian battlefield. The group holds some of the most dangerous front lines, leading some of the most well-publicized war campaigns on behalf the Assad regime. They operate under orders of the Iranian leadership, represented by General Qassem Soleimani on the battlefield.

The conservative Iranian daily Kayhan published a semi-official history of the Fatemiyoun Division based on what it claims are interviews with veterans of the group.¹ The daily traces the division's origins to a small and fluctuating number of volunteers organized as the Muhammad Corps. The group first fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and later responded to the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's popular mass mobilization for the Iran-Iraq War, known as "The Imposed War" in Iranian regime parlance. Already then, Kayhan notes, at least one fighter received Iranian citizenship for his devotion to the Islamic Republic. The group returned to Afghanistan in the 1990s to fight the budding Taliban movement, but according to Kayhan, it was later forced to dissolve. Its fighters fled their homeland yet again following the 2001 invasion for fear of persecution by the new Afghan government and its American-led coalition backers.

According to the paper, when the Syrian conflict erupted, the group's commander Ali-Reza Tavassoli, known as Abu Hamed, and senior cleric Mohammad Baqir Alaoui petitioned the Iranian government for his then 22-25 fighters based around Mashhad to be sent to Syria to defend the shrine



Afghan officials inspect the site of a suicide bomb attack inside the Nabi Akram mosque in Afghanistan's western Herat province. *Mir Ahmad Firooz/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

of Sayyeda Zeinab. The request was swiftly approved in Tehran under the new umbrella of the "Fatemioun."

In its earlier days, the group was said to have collaborated closely with the Iraqi militia Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, a splinter faction of Kataeb Hezbollah active in Syria since the summer of 2013,² and other formations including Lebanese Hezbollah. According to the history, Tavassoli's leadership and the sacrifices committed by his group managed to quickly mobilize thousands of Afghans. Some Afghans already resided in Damascus and others lived in Iran. Two other groups of 15 and 22 members each, all with similar personal backgrounds, quickly joined the fight. While still closely cooperating with other IRGC groups, the Kayhan article notes, the Fatemioun grew in size to the point where they constituted their own formal militia, brigade, and eventually division.

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

While obviously highly embellished for propaganda purposes, Kayhan's historical account appears to correspond to the individual biographies of senior Fatemiyoun commanders who were killed in battle and whose exploits could be recounted. According to his biography, for example, the formation's founder and first leader, Ali Reza Tavassoli,³ moved from Afghanistan to Iran in the 1980s. He joined the Abouzar Brigade, an early subdivision of the IRGC composed predominantly of Afghan Shi'i fighters dedicated to the Islamic Revolution proclaimed by Khomeini. The Abouzar Brigade was based in the Ramazan Garrison in Iranian Kurdistan and was engaged in confronting Saddam Hussein's invasion as well as Kurdish separatists. According to reports, official Iranian figures account for 2,000 members of the brigade who perished over the course of the conflict with Iraq.⁴ In the 1990s, Tavassoli reportedly returned to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban movement. Other Fatemiyoun commanders of his generation, such as Sayyed Hakim, Hossein Fadaei Abdarchaya,⁵ Reza Khavari, Seyyed Ibrahim, and others share similar biographies of early service in the "Sacred Defense," as the Islamic Republic refers to the Iran-Iraq War, as well as battles against the Taliban in the 1990s.⁶ According to Iranian Defa Press, Sayyed Hakim, killed in Syria in 2016, was the last surviving veteran Fatemiyoun commander of that generation.⁷



Syrians pray during Ramadan's "Laylat al-Qadr" (Night of Destiny) outside the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab in Damascus. *STRINGER/AFP/Getty Images*

However, beyond the personal motivations and backgrounds of individuals, narrative and history quickly begin to diverge. The IRGC began to cultivate a narrative of “indigenous resistance” in Syria in an early attempt to legitimize the presence of foreign fighters and to deflect attention from its increasingly heavy-handed recruitment methods. In the IRGC narrative, Afghans volunteered not only to defend the Shi'i shrines in Damascus but also to protect the small community of Hazara refugees that had settled around the holy Sayyeda Zeinab mosque since the 1990s after assaults by radical Sunni groups. In this version of events, Iran, which continues to insist its mission in Syria is purely advisory, was merely assisting dedicated Afghan volunteers in their efforts to reach Damascus until the organization would be large enough to manage its own affairs and logistics.

In reality, the Afghan community of Sayyeda Zeinab had been very minor prior to the outbreak of conflict in Syria, numbering no more than 2,000 individuals, many of whom had been displaced again or attempted to flee Syria by 2013.⁸ It also did not provide any significant contribution to the early or later versions of the Fatemiyoun Division, which swiftly emerged as an ideological and institutional appendage of the IRGC. Indeed, as Ahmad Shuja

points out, Fatemiyoun members were usually allowed only scheduled visits to the shrine at the bookends of their deployments to Syria.⁹ Members were also prohibited from interacting with Afghan residents. While some recruitment efforts coordinated by official Iranian representatives reached into Afghanistan, the majority of recruits were drawn from the large Afghan migrant and refugee underclass within Iran itself. Thus, when Tavassoli died in battle in Syria's southern Daraa governorate in early 2015, his body was returned and interred in Iran, not Afghanistan—just like the other nearly 900 confirmed dead Fatemiyoun fighters documented by researcher Ali Alfoneh.^{10,11} Indeed, Tavassoli's deputy Reza Bakhshi, who perished just ten days before his commander, had been born and raised entirely in Iran.¹² After both were killed in Syria, the Fatemiyoun formation was reportedly placed entirely under the direct command of IRGC officers.

ESTIMATING NUMBERS

The initial handful of veterans from battles with Iraq and with the Taliban in Afghanistan has grown today's Fatemiyoun movement. In his interview with Raja News, Hosseini Tavassoli said the first volunteer group was 22 people who arrived in Syria in late 2012. This was apparently followed by a second group of 15, and a third of another 22 volunteers, including himself. The fifth batch, according to Tavassoli, was already five times the initial size—a 100 men. Within a span of three years, the formation would grow to several thousand.¹³

Estimates of the numerical strength of the Fatemiyoun throughout the conflict vary significantly depending on sources. The most often-cited count of 20,000 appears to originate with a report by the IRGC-affiliated Mashregh News. Al Jazeera English deemed the same number credible, after confirming with other military officials and speaking to retired IRGC colonel and centrist Member of Parliament Hussain Kanani Moghdam.¹⁴ He estimated Fatemiyoun strength to be “in the tens of thousands,” though he also misattributed the group's origins to Afghanistan proper. The aforementioned fallen Fatemiyoun commander Mohammad Hassan Hosseini put the total count at a more realistic peak of 12,000-14,000, acknowledging fluctuations due to rotations, availability of logistics, and need for specific skills in-theater.¹⁵ The reported 2015 elevation of the Fatemiyoun from brigade to division



A 15-year-old Afghan boy stands with other children in a tiny workshop. Many are refugees that fled violence in Afghanistan. ROMEO GACAD/AFP/Getty Images

status is similarly said by Iran's Alef News Agency to suggest a minimum strength of 10,000 men.¹⁶

Such estimates can be considered credible if Iranian and Fatemiyoun sources include within their count individuals off rotation or those busy in the formation's cultural and support units. Opposition officials are prone to inflating the Iranian-sponsored threat and generally speak of much lower numbers ranging from 4,000-8,000 fighters deployed at any given time.¹⁷ Such estimates match reports by defectors and captives, such as Hamid Ali, who told Human Rights Watch that between its military bases in Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, Damascus, and Homs, the Fatemiyoun fielded 3,000-4,000 fighters. Ali's description of roughly 400 fighters per sector also matches propaganda released by the Fatemiyoun's media offices, which usually show no more than one or two IRGC companies, roughly 200-250 men each, in a single frame. Even larger battles, such as the capture of Palmyra from ISIS forces in 2015, were fought at similar manpower levels.

RECRUITMENT

In their testimonies to journalists and human rights activists, survivors, and deserters of the Fatemiyoun paint a disturbing picture of recruitment, as well as of life and service in the purported volunteer division. These individuals consistently and independently from one another reported being coerced or bribed into joining; being funneled onto battlefields with little or no preparation; not understanding the context of the war they were fighting; and finally, being expended as cannon fodder in some of the most intense battles of the Syrian war.^{18,19}

The approximately 3 million Afghan refugees and migrants residing in Iran from which the Fatemiyoun draws its manpower face extraordinary economic hardship as well as xenophobic and bureaucratic discrimination. Witnessing Iran's ethnically and religiously persecuted Shi'i Hazara minority, Afghan refugees are fearful of potentially being delivered back across the border into the arms of the Taliban or other Sunni extremist movements rampant in their war-ravaged home country. Caught between a rock and a hard place,²⁰ they live in regular fear of Iranian authorities²¹ and struggle to make a living, often operating on the margins of Iranian society as builders, domestic



Soldiers and members of the Revolutionary Guard are among several thousand Iranians attending Friday prayers in Tehran, Iran. *Scott Peterson/Getty Images*

staff, or street vendors.²² After Syrians, Afghan Hazaras from Iran and Afghanistan make up a disproportionate share of refugee arrivals on European shores.²³

A number of former fighters interviewed in international media report being arrested by Iranian security forces—generally for residency or drug-related charges—and offered the stark choice of prison, deportation, or service in Syria.²⁴ In an extensive report from January 2016, Human Rights Watch (HRW) corroborated these accounts after speaking with two dozen former Fatemiyoun fighters.²⁵ Next to regularizing their residency status, other interviewees note the appeal of monthly salaries of between \$450²⁶-\$800^{27,28} being offered by recruiters. Such an amount is a veritable fortune for many Afghans scraping the bottom of an economy that struggles to provide sufficient opportunity for its own nationals.

BBC Persia visited a Fatemiyoun recruitment office in Mashhad and spoke to migrants in Europe who reported that promises of amnesty or financial rewards were not always honored. One refugee arrived in the Greek port of Mytilene and signed up in order to avoid a lengthy prison sentence or deportation. He said he served 12 months in Syria only to be offered a 30-day temporary residency card upon his return to Iran. Disappointed, he decided to escape to Europe.²⁹

In a separate report, HRW found evidence of child recruitment, forbidden under the Optional Protocol of the Rome Statute. HRW identified at least 14 individual Afghan minors, aged 14-17 years old, who had fought and died in Syria under Fatemiyoun command.³⁰

In recent years, as word of the fighters' fates travelled back to Iran, the Islamic Republic has begun pushing back against such reports.

State authorities allege that former fighters embellished horror stories in the hope of receiving asylum in Europe, or in the case of those captured and interviewed by Syrian rebel groups, were coerced into making derogatory statements. Following a prisoner exchange in 2016, the IRGC put on a press conference with two survivors who recanted the statements they had made to opposition television stations,³¹ and who instead professed their religious devotion to the defense of the shrine of Zeinab.

A COMMUNITY CAUGHT BETWEEN STARK CHOICES

In a more free-flowing interview with the ultra-conservative Raja News,³² now-deceased Fatemiyoun commander Mohammad Hassan Hosseini, known as Sayyed Hakim, tackled some of these issues, acknowledging the hardships of refugee life, the difficulties of obtaining residency status, and the many who have crossed to Europe. At the same time, he sold jihad in Syria not merely as a means of achieving residency, but as a pursuit of dignity, self-reliance, and salvation. The vanguard status of the Fatemiyoun to him was a point of pride. At one point he even suggested that the Fatemiyoun had attracted returnees from the West.

Indeed, the motivations of fighters are impossible to understand outside the political and socioeconomic context of the Hazara community of Iran. All forced impressment, especially of minors, is reprehensible. Due to the stark choices at their disposal, Iran-based Afghan refugees may see fighting in Syria, whether coerced or

voluntary, as an opportunity to find religious, personal, or financial fulfillment. Motivations for joining the Fatemiyoun could be complex and multi-layered. On a research trip across Iran in early 2016, this author interviewed a number of young Afghan men in Tehran, Qom, and Mashhad who related their personal dilemmas. Many spoke of choosing between paying smugglers to take them on the perilous road to Europe or being paid by the IRGC to go to Syria. They hoped for a more dignified existence for themselves and their families in this life or the next.

RISING PROFILE

In a wide-ranging interview with the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency, the purportedly retired Iranian Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Falaki, who led Fatemiyoun forces in Syria, acknowledges these tensions as well.³³ He extolled the extraordinary sacrifice and bemoaned prejudice against Afghan migrants in Iran, stating: "We in Iran have sometimes looked at [Afghans] as drug-dealing criminals, trouble-makers, or construction workers. ... Their blood has proven to us that there are 2.5 million Afghans in [Iran] and we must have a positive view towards them."

Framing the issue in ideological and historical terms, Falaki noted the significance of the Fatemiyoun next to other foreign Shi'i fighting groups in Syria. He highlighted the Iraqi division (Hayderiyoun) and the Pakistani division (Zeinabiyoun) as part of a combined Khomeinist vanguard force that transcends national and tribal identities. He related his experience of the Iran-Iraq War, when, under pressure by Iraq, they had to quickly organize various groups for the

fight, even Sunnis. Included in this effort was the Abouzar Brigade, in which many of the original Fatemiyoun had served.

Indeed, as the Fatemiyoun Division has grown in size and importance so too has its public outreach campaign.³⁴ Through the Fatemiyoun, the IRGC has recognized an opportunity to bridge the ethnic and socioeconomic divides that Hazaras face in Iran. The rise of the division led the IRGC to construct a more inclusive transnational jihadi ideology that ties the vulnerable and defensive minority community to the Islamic Republic's own state ideology. It also channels budding notions of Shi'i Hazara emancipation and self-defense into Iran's own established framework of resistance, thereby expanding this framework's reach and softening the sense of Tehran as simply a rising geopolitical hegemon.

The IRGC has made a concerted effort to raise the profile of the Fatemiyoun as a vanguard unit for both the Hazara community and transnational Shi'ism—both at home and abroad. In collaboration with the official Fatemiyoun media office, which operates its own social media channels and public outreach, Iranian film director Mortaza Fallahfar produced a series of short films introducing and extolling the division to a wider audience over the course of two years.^{35,36} The films blend personal stories of martial courage, religious exultation, and individual resilience with fast-paced, high-resolution footage filmed during embeds in some of the pivotal battles fought by the division. For example, one film centers around a Fatemiyoun fighter who spent 14 months in rebel captivity. The films were screened at IRGC-affiliated theaters and events throughout the country and were shared widely via Telegram and other social media channels with tens of

thousands of subscribers. They are meant to instill pride, devotion, and potential curiosity among Afghan youth to enlist themselves.

Next to visual and social media, more traditionally Shi'i modes to express reverence have also been used. A memorial service held for three Fatemiyoun fighters killed in August 2017 in the holy shrine city of Mashhad was attended by thousands of mourners.³⁷ Traditional lamentation and eulogy songs have been written and distributed. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly commended the sacrifice of Afghans sent to the Levant under his authority. He has visited the gravesites of Afghan martyrs and issued regular proclamations to those still fighting in the field. In a March 2016 audience, for example, he expressed pride for the relatives of Fatemiyoun fighters killed in the war, proclaiming that their “children have created a shield with their lives to protect the holy shrines from these evil [forces].”³⁸

TRAINING AND MATERIEL

After joining, Afghan recruits receive between two and four weeks of rudimentary infantry training administered by IRGC cadres in at least nine camps identified by U.S. intelligence inside Iran.³⁹ One has been identified as Padegan-e Shahid Pazouki near Qarchak outside Tehran,^{40,41} and another two reportedly near Shiraz and Yazd.⁴² Scarce visual evidence of these training camps show basic facilities and no more than a few hundred recruits, including Pakistanis and Arabs, present at any time.⁴³ Additional open source information suggests that once inside



A "cemetery" of old Soviet tanks at Herat Military Airport. There are still rows of old Soviet tanks that bear witness to Afghanistan's endless state of war. *Franz J. Marty/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images*

Syria, certain units may then receive additional training at IRGC bases scattered throughout the country. For example, propaganda material and social media posts released by the division and its affiliates show specialized combat units, such as reconnaissance and sniper formations, trained by what are claimed to be Lebanese Hezbollah instructors.⁴⁴ The training infrastructure is shared with other nationality-based groups, such as Iraqis and Pakistanis.

The division also operates a wide array of heavy weapons and tanks. As per an arrangement between the IRGC and the Syrian Arab Army, on top of their own imports, Iranian proxy forces have liberal access to the manpower-depleted Syrian Army's overflowing depots and facilities and have outfitted themselves accordingly.⁴⁵ As a result, Fatemiyoun fighters have been observed operating a wide array of Soviet-era heavy weapons, including field artillery pieces,

armored personnel carriers, anti-tank missiles, and tanks. Most notably, the Fatemiyoun have at multiple times been observed operating a Russian-delivered sophisticated T-90 model tank,⁴⁶ the most advanced main battle tank (MBT) operating in the Syrian theater. An entire series of the tank has apparently been transferred to—or fallen into the hands of—IRGC-backed groups. While the Fatemiyoun's connection with Syrian and Shi'i forces is relatively transparent, there remains some speculation regarding the precise relationship between IRGC formations and Russian supply chains and fighters. Afghan researcher Ahmad Shuja found one Fatemiyoun fighter apparently bragging about having received training on a BMP armored infantry fighting vehicle from Russian nationals.⁴⁷ Most likely, IRGC units have built working relationships with Russian Special Forces and Wagner mercenary units operating in their sectors.

OPERATIONS

Despite high access to training and materiel, former fighters have suggested that no other group has been as mentally and tactically unprepared for combat or kept in positions of social isolation as the Fatemiyoun. Many allege that, due to prejudice and a lack of local constituency, they have been unduly used as “cannon fodder.” Despite the fact that the group has developed nominally advanced capabilities for the Syrian battlefield, it continues to suffer extraordinary rates of attrition.

The Fatemiyoun are among the only formations in Syria whose absolute and relative casualty numbers have increased over the course of the conflict, even when compared to Iraqi and Lebanese sister formations under the IRGC umbrella. Data based on funerals shows a steady rise in Afghan combat fatalities, beginning with

initial reports in 2013 to unprecedented heights throughout 2016 and 2017, when the Fatemiyoun suffered especially heavy attrition—as many as 45 per month—in battles against rebels in Aleppo and multiple campaigns against ISIS across Syria's vast eastern regions.⁴⁸

Since their initial arrival on the Syrian battlefield, the Fatemiyoun have fought on every front of the war: Latakia, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo, Homs, Deir Ezzor, Damascus, and Daraa. Culturally and linguistically isolated and unaware of the context of any given battle, loyalist commanders concerned about issues like defection or corruption have instead relied on disoriented Fatemiyoun units to hold positions that Syrian forces might otherwise abandon. While most contemporary Syrian forces are locally raised and largely bound to their respective areas, the Fatemiyoun also offer flexibility.



A Syrian rebel fighter stands at an unknown location in the northern countryside of Idlib province. AAREF WATAD/AFP/Getty Images

RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan itself, the relationship between these Fatemiyoun fighters and the native Hazara community remains a highly contentious issue. In the largely conservative Sunni country, many consider the Fatemiyoun's participation in jihad against Sunnis abroad both a national and sectarian affront.⁴⁹ The Afghan government outlawed the group and worked to suppress it, largely in order to avoid further sectarian strife and proxy warfare in the war-ravaged country.⁵⁰ A number of individuals accused of association or recruitment on its behalf, including the representative of Iran's Supreme Leader in Kabul, Qurban Ghalambor, have been arrested by Afghan authorities.⁵¹ One Afghan official caused a stir in late 2017, when he participated in a Fatemiyoun gathering in Iran, praising the brigade and its leaders.⁵²

Nonetheless, journalists who pursued the story found that while IRGC recruitment for Syria may have gone underground, it has by no means disappeared and is still coordinated out of the Iranian embassy in Kabul.⁵³ Both the Afghan capital and Herat (the regional city closest to Iran) are reported to host active Fatemiyoun recruitment offices.^{54,55} Similar reports also continue to emerge about recruitment and mobilization efforts among Shi'i communities based along Pakistan's western frontier. The area is a principal recruitment ground for the Fatemiyoun's Urdu-speaking sister unit, the aforementioned Zeinabiyoun.

As the IRGC's outreach efforts continue inside Afghanistan, observers are rightly worried that Iran may eventually choose to reverse the flow of militancy and shift thousands of now battle-hardened Fatemiyoun from Syria back to Afghanistan. Indeed, some outside observers claim to have identified active Fatemiyoun returnee networks operating inside Afghanistan. In a brief for IHS Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor from July 2017, well-respected Afghanistan researcher Antonio Giustozzi reported on an active Shi'i Hazara militant network of up to 4,000 individuals led by returnees from Syria and funded by the IRGC with active branches in Hazarajat, Kabul, and Mazar-i Sharif. The author cited both Fatemiyoun and Afghan intelligence sources and suggested that the groups had already engaged in limited armed operations against anti-Hazara and anti-Iranian groups in Wardak province.⁵⁶

While on the face credible, there has been no independent corroboration of such reports. While many veterans of the Syrian fight have returned to Afghanistan, there is little evidence that they pose any direct threat to the country. In Washington Post report from July of 2018, Pamela Constable met a number of demobilized returnees in Herat trying to adjust to normal civilian lives in Afghanistan—others re-enlisting over and over again due to economic necessity.⁵⁷

Identification of Afghan ethnic and religious communities with sectarian warfare in the Levant has the potential to further destabilize a fraught situation along the Hindu Kush. Already, radical Sunni groups on both sides of the border have targeted Shi'i communities in retribution for their supposed support for Iranian-backed militant activity in Syria and Iraq. After a bloody 2016 attack on Hazaras in Kabul that left 80 people

dead, a local ISIS leader told Reuters that “unless [the Hazaras] stop going to Syria and stop being slaves of Iran, we will definitely continue such attacks.” A similar justification was given for a December 2017 suicide bombing on the Shi’i Tabayan cultural center in Kabul, which ISIS claimed recruited young Afghans to fight in Syria that killed at least 40 people.⁵⁸

Afghan and coalition officials, therefore, remain rightly worried about the potential blowback from its citizens participating and returning from both the Shi’i and Sunni jihad in the Levant.⁵⁹

OUTLOOK

On Nov. 21, 2017, Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani declared that “with God’s guidance and the resistance of people in the region, we can say that this evil has either been lifted from the head of the people or has been reduced” and that the so-called caliphate had been destroyed.⁶⁰ Following months of operations across wide-open desert terrain, hundreds of miles from the shrines it was sworn to protect, the Fatemiyoun Division, as part of a multinational IRGC-led force consisting primarily of Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Afghan, and Pakistani Shi’i fighters, had zig-zagged across the border from Syria to Iraq and back toward al-Bukamal,⁶¹ threatening ISIS’s last territorial holdings and establishing an overland connection from Iran to Syria and Lebanon.

While Fatemiyoun fighters continue to fight and die on Syrian soil, especially in restive Deir Ezzor in the east, their principal mission has come to an end. Assad has retained power and fighting around the country is winding down, as rebel pocket after rebel pocket surrenders or evacuates.

Contrary to fears voiced by the opposition, there is no evidence that Afghans affiliated with the Fatemiyoun Division are made to—or even allowed to—settle in Syria as part of a sectarian re-engineering scheme. There are also no signs of an imminent redeployment to Yemen, the Golan, or any other tense conflict zone in which the IRGC has meddled in the past. While some officials such as deputy commander of the Quds Force Ismail Ghani have reaffirmed the Fatemiyoun’s dedication to the transnational militant cause, the next battle does not appear to have been chosen.

Instead, most early signals suggest that the IRGC has at least temporarily frozen recruitment for the Fatemiyoun, suggesting it plans to either maintain or slowly decrease troop levels over time. Meanwhile, senior officials and propaganda outlets affiliated with the groups have shifted in tone from military to ideological battle. As Ahmad Shuja noted, the division’s cultural deputy, Hojjat Ganabadinejad, announced via Telegram the end of military operations and the beginning of a “cultural, ideological and social front.” As the IRGC consolidates its military gains in Syria, it will seek to translate them into ideological and political currency at home, as well as across its non-Persian constituencies—including the many thousands who have come to identify with the Syrian jihad of the Fatemiyoun.

In the course of no more than three years, the IRGC was able to set up and mobilize a powerful militia, many thousand fighters strong, drawing on a dedicated but long-dormant core of militants for leadership and large vulnerable social strata for recruits. Even if it chooses to demobilize the Fatemiyoun, the emergence of a single, largely cohesive military

and ideological web from the Hindu Kush to the Mediterranean, anchored in Qom and Mashhad, means that if the Islamic Republic ever again feels similarly threatened in its interests it could likely re-create the experiment.



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Cover photo: Syrian fighters fire AK-47 rifles as they attend a mock battle in anticipation of an attack by the regime on Idlib province and the surrounding countryside. *OMAR HAJ KADOUR/AFP/Getty Images*

Photo 2: A Syrian rebel fighter sits holding a Kalashnikov assault rifle in a fortified area near the frontlines at a rebel-held area in the southern Syrian city of Daraa. *MOHAMAD ABAZEED/AFP/Getty Images*

Photo 3: Iranian armed forces march to display their state of military preparedness. *Kaveh Kazemi/Getty Images*



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