

Iranian-Affiliated Militias in Syria (2) ... Roles and Areas of Influence Analytical Paper Summary

Iran recruited a large number of fighters in Syria between 2012 and 2017. Their numbers have been estimated at one hundred thousand fighters, between local Syrian militias and foreign militias of Iranian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghani origins. They have manifested their clear sectarian affiliation through their slogans and motivations for combat, as they came to Syria first with the justification of “protecting shrines,” and then “fighting terrorism,” as was shown in the first report of this series produced by the Syrian Dialogue Center on Iranian militias in Syria.

Iran used the great military power of these militias on the ground and threw them into fierce battle spread throughout most of Syria, benefiting from the air cover given by the Russian air forces. Iran was able to use it to influence the balance of military power for the benefit of the Assad regime and control the wide spread of land formerly under the control of the Syrian armed opposition.

Despite the existence of Iranian militias in Syria who came for the specific purpose to support the Assad regime and prevent its fall, those militias brought about clear transformations in the roles assigned to them from military to other forms which call for study and research, especially since those transformations clearly pointed to those militias possessing great influence, which could have a clear effect on Syria in the future.

This paper aims to study the declared military role for those militias’ existence and to shed light on the most important military battles in which their influence and participation was clear, whether through managing battles or through their high number, both of which were crucial in determining combat to be in the favor of the Assad regimes and its supporting states.

Some of the most important of these battles were the determining battles in the two regions of “Al-Qusair and Talkalakh”, as well as the battles of the old city of Homs, Darya, Western Qalamoun, Al Zabadani, Madaya, Aleppo, and Eastern Ghouta. In all of these militias demonstrated similar military strategies through which they were able to determine the battle and end combat with local or political agreements that not only ended the presence of the military factions of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as a source of

danger (from the regime's perspective), but concentrated on restructuring the region to serve the Iranian project.

In these battles, the militias used diverse means, some which would fall under war crimes and violations, in addition to using a sharp sectarian language which contributed to Syrian social disintegration; with a sectarian structure suddenly emerging where it was not previously present.

The international silence, turning a blind eye and weak reactions helped Iran and its affiliated militias to arrive to this victory, as there was no international desire to take a practical step to stop this military intervention and its repercussions.

Iran and its militias also benefited from the emergence of extremist organizations in Syria and took great advantage of them to legitimate its military intervention, using the international sensitivity towards terrorist organizations to give it more negotiating cards and make it an essential player in neutralizing any Syrian political solution.

These militias tried to trick the international pressure aiming to take them out of Syria by systematically invading positions in the Syrian army and turning their militias into systematic military powers.

Through the past few years, Iranian-affiliated militias have oriented towards stability and repositioning in Syria, through centering in military bases and spreading to new bases, in addition to intensifying their influence in strategic regions. This demonstrated their desire to solidify and invest in a military victory that would serve their goal, for which they sacrificed great human losses, including that of commanding elite from different nationalities.

On the other hand, these militias started practicing many non-combat roles through which they aimed to obtain more gains and advantages, through changing the structure of Syrian society and solidifying their selves in key positions in the state in order to protect their interests, to prevent later being forced out of Syria.

Of the most prominent roles, its ambition to recruit more civilians among its ranks under the cover of civil activities, despite the shrinking geography of battles and its concentration in a small area, in addition to its support for Shia organizations, which have made a clear increase over the past few years, sometimes indirectly and sometimes directly through brute force.

These militias have also shown a clear role in contributing to the demographic change Iran is aiming towards in Syria, whether through its involvement in

and responsibility for crimes of forced displacement, or through its practices against local residents in the areas under its control, or the policy of naturalization which they have benefited from. All of these are practices which aim to solidify this demographic change and force it as a reality on the ground. Those militias also organized themselves in economic activities, some legitimate, such as real estate, and some illegitimate, such as smuggling and selling weapons and drugs, as part of their desire to turn their military gains into material gains which they can invest in Syria long-term.

Despite this transformation in roles, and expanse in areas of influence, these militias have shown a superficial structure which has recently clearly manifested in internal conflicts and splits, some of which have developed into direct military conflicts temporarily contained.

This structural weakness and internal conflicts is due to several reasons, such as a difference over military tactics, conflicts over privileges in local or foreign militias, conflict in internal interests and areas of influence, and previous conflicts in which Syria seems an appropriate field to eliminate.

It also causes Russian intervention at the expense of political cooperation, as it aims to minimize Iranian influence in Syria in many tensions, including the militias belonging to both sides, as a result of Russia's attempt to expand its power at the expense of Iran.

The above data shows that Iran, one way or another depending on the different circumstances, aims to repeat in Syria its experience of Shia mobilization in Iraq and experience of Hezbollah in Lebanon, through using foreign Shia militias which have proven more loyal than local Syrian militias, some of whom have moved their loyalties to the Russian side. Through doing so, Iran aims at independent interest and to continue its project in the region and force itself as a primary player to effect the course of the final political solution in Syria.