SHI’I MILITIAS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA
By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi*

The following is a summary of a presentation given by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi on the proliferation of Shi‘i militias in Iraq and Syria, morphing from small foreign contingent deployments in the Syrian civil war in 2012 into what is currently a major cross-border phenomenon viewing Iraq and Syria as one battlefield. They are fueled and organized in no small part by Iran, whose overall regional influence is more powerful than ever with the rapid growth of Shi‘i militancy. It is part of a symposium entitled, “Regime Collapse and Sectarian War: Where is the Middle East Headed?” The symposium was held on March 15, 2015, to mark the launch of the newly named Rubin Center for International Affairs in honor of MERIA founder and former editor the late Prof. Barry Rubin. This summary has also incorporated more recent developments up to July 2015.

Editor’s Note: Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the world has witnessed the collapse of a number of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and the consequent opening of an ungoverned space. Two formerly strong states, Iraq and Syria, have ceased to exist. The result has been the emergence of a series of paramilitary and political organizations--most based on ethnic and sectarian identity--all competing for control on the ground of what were once those states. There has also been an attempt by existing and intact regional powers to move into that space to take advantage of it for themselves. The Islamic Republic of Iran now controls part--though not all--of Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, while Turkey is another contender. This symposium examines this issue from a number of different angles, including the role the West has played.
Assad Allah al-Ghalib Forces in Iraq and al-Sham: Originally Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib—a Shi‘i militia that evolved out of the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas in the Damascus area. It has active contingents today in both Iraq and Syria, treating the two countries as one battlefield.

From the first appearances of Shi‘i militiamen from Lebanese Hizballah and Iraq in Syria in 2012, the Shi‘i jihad embodied in the large number of Shi‘i militias operating in the Levant and Mesopotamia has today evolved into a cross-border mobilization and war effort drawing in recruits from as far afield as Afghan and Pakistani origin. These recruits are primarily bolstered and organized by Iran in the Islamic Republic’s bid to increase its influence regionally, in particular among Shi‘a populations.

The beginnings of the Shi‘i jihad focused on the notion of defending the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus (for Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali, the most important figure in Shi‘i Islam) from a perceived “takfiri” threat that would destroy the shrine if given the opportunity. From this concept came the familiar slogans such as “Labbayk ya Zaynab” (“At your service, oh Zaynab”) and “Lan tusba Zaynab thaniyatan” (“Zaynab won’t be captured twice” -- a reference to the Battle of Karbala in which she was taken prisoner). The first notable Shi‘i militia brand that emerged alongside Hizballah in Syria was the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, named after Abbas ibn Ali and presented as an international force for Shi‘a to defend Sayyida Zaynab. However, most of its recruits and commanders were Iraqis drawing on established Iranian proxy militias in Iraq that never disarmed, even after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. From this brand emerged a number of interlinked Iraqi Shi‘i militias over the course of 2013 in the Damascus area, including Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar, the Rapid Intervention Regiment, Liwa al-Imam al-Husayn, and Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib.

The former three of these four militias in particular have played up officially proclaimed loyalty to Muqtada al-Sadr. While there is something to this presentation in that many members of these militias were in Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi at some point, their deployment and efforts in Syria were never officially given
sanction by Sadr, and Iran would have an interest in supporting these groups in portraying the jihad in Syria as pan-Shi‘i in nature.

The motif of defense of Sayyida Zaynab also became looser in definition with the appearance of other Shi‘i militias in areas far beyond the Damascus area in 2013. The best examples of this are Asa‘ib Ahl al-Haq’s Liwa Kafil Zaynab and Harakat al-Nujaba’s Liwa Ammar ibn Yasir, both of which had deployments in the Aleppo area. The latter militia is one of the Iraqi formations that first emerged in Syria and are now well-established names within Iraq, such as Kata‘ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Saraya al-Khorasani. Unlike the militias that came out of the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas network, these groups’ ideological affinities and alignment with Iran are much more obvious, including the regular featuring of portraits of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamene‘i in their social media.

Beyond Iraqi and Lebanese fighters, 2013 also saw the first signs of ethnically Afghan Hazara Shi‘i fighters in Syria, though at that time the phenomenon seems to have been limited to the refugee population in Damascus. This would later be expanded into recruitment from the refugee population living in Iran—pointing to Tehran’s role in cultivating the internationalization of the Shi‘i jihad in Syria—in the form of a brigade called Liwa al-Fatimiyoun (Hizbollah Afghanistan). Together with the Pakistani Shi‘i militia Liwa Zaynibiyoun (also recruited from a population residing in Iran), this group has come to play a more important role as Iraqi fighters withdrew to fight on the home front with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), whose rapid ascendancy in Iraq in 2014 began with the seizure of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in the fallout of then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s attempt to dismantle the Ramadi protest camp.

At this point, the established proxies in Iraq began playing a role in the fighting in Anbar, relying at least partly on fighters who had redeployed from Syria to Iraq. Further, some new militia names began to appear, most notably a Kata‘ib Hizbollah front group called Saraya al-Difa al-Sha’abi (People’s Defense Brigades) and designed to recruit from the wider population. This would foreshadow the “Hashd Sha’abi” (“Popular Mobilization”) phenomenon that emerged in the wake of the fall of Mosul in June 2014 that saw the collapse of Iraq’s army divisions in the north of the country, prompting first a call from Maliki for the mobilization of a reserve army, and then a fatwa from Ayatollah Sistani. Though Sistani’s fatwa in particular was meant as a call for Iraqis to enlist in legitimate security force bodies to combat ISIS, the end result was the birth of dozens upon dozens of new Shi‘a militias, with the claim of adhering to the “call of the marja‘iya” in Najaf to take up arms against ISIS.

The militias in Iraq are by no means monolithic ideologically and in terms of political affiliation: For instance, there exists a distinct family of militias affiliated with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which over the years since the invasion of Iraq moved away from its prior name of Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) amid distrust of perceived closeness to Iran. In a similar vein, Sadr, who had turned to Iran for support with his Jaysh al-Mahdi in the years of the U.S. occupation, has revived his militia under the name of Saraya al-Salam (“The Peace Brigades”) and has evolved into an Iraqi nationalist by image, critical of Iranian influence. However, many other militias have appeared that are clearly aligned with Iran, including several imitation Hizbollah brands like Kata‘ib al-Imam al-Gha‘ib, Hizbollah al-Tha’irun, Hizbollah al-Akhyar, and Hizballah the Mujahidin in Iraq. Alongside the better established Iranian proxies, it seems these Iran-aligned groups play the most prominent role on the frontlines in the pushback against ISIS, which now declares itself to be the Caliphate or simply Islamic State.

Interestingly, as was the case with the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas group of militias, many of the militias display the phenomenon of overlap, whereby a member or commander might maintain positions in multiple groups simultaneously. Further, the militias that have
fought in Syria in particular tend to view the Syria-Iraq battlefield as one, and evidence increasingly suggests redeployments and interchange between Iraq and Syria. For example, the Sadrists shaykh Aws al-Khafaji, who supported the jihad in Syria, initially developed his own Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces militia brand in Iraq, but the insignia of this name and logo have also turned up more recently among Iraqi Shi’a fighters deployed in Syria associated with the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas network of militias: Indeed, Salam al-Safir, spokesman for Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar, has featured the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces logo as his profile picture on Facebook. More recently, Harakat al-Nujaba leader Akram al-Ka’abi paid a visit to his group’s contingent present in northern Syria, apparently gearing up to aid a regime offensive to retake Jisr al-Shughur from the rebels, reflecting an expansion of Harakat al-Nujaba’s role beyond the Aleppo area. It also appears that some Iraqi militia contingents have traveled to Qamishli airport to assist regime forces in pushing back the ISIS offensive to take Hasakah city, and so on and so forth.

Overall, on the battlefield, Shi’a militias have played a key part in assisting the Assad regime’s attempt to consolidate control over “western Syria,” most notably with Hizbullah’s role in capturing towns near the border with Lebanon (e.g. Qua’ayr, Yabroud, Rankous, and Nabk) and the impeding of rebel efforts in Damascus. In other respects though there have been considerable failures: for example, the unsuccessful 2015 Dar’a-Quneitra offensive that included Shi’a militias like Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Liwa al-Fatimiyoun. Further, Shi’i militia assistance failed to stop the fall of the important southern border town of Busra al-Sham to the rebels, and the regime is still unable to encircle rebel-held areas of Aleppo city, despite Shi’i militia help. Even so, the contributions of these militias to the survival of the regime have the potential to influence the political landscape of the regime’s rump state, most notably reflected in the emergence of native “Syrian Hizballah” brands like the National Ideological Resistance.

In Iraq also one finds a mixed bag of results: The main successes have come about when the militias have mobilized a huge numerical advantage in manpower in a small area, resulting in the expulsion of ISIS from all towns in Babil and Diyala provinces. Yet claims of gains have been routinely exaggerated: for instance, the never-ending reports of advances/victories against ISIS in al-Karma to the east of Fallujah, and the repeatedly announced retaking of Baiji from ISIS. In reality, fighting continues in both of these areas. In Tikrit, the militia strategy of mass mobilization and encirclement proved successful in retaking the areas surrounding the city, but only U.S. airstrikes proved decisive in the final push to take the actual urban area. Meanwhile, in Anbar, the fall of Ramadi city to ISIS has led to complete disarray with the emergence of different chains of command, with no coherent strategy on what the next step is, hence the conflicting reports in local media about whether the operations to “retake Anbar” or some such formulation have even begun yet.

Nonetheless, as with Syria, the same point about potential for influencing the political landscape applies, as factions like Badr and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq will undoubtedly play on strong support from the wider Shi’i population for the Hashd Sh’ab’i in the next parliamentary elections to tout themselves as national saviors. Already signs of agitation in the Shi’i southern areas of Iraq are emerging as more traditional factions like ISCI feel the pressure from the Iranian-backed factions, resulting in a dynamic of intra-Shi’a tension that is often overlooked. What the United States can do at this stage to compete with Iran short of direct ground deployments with a more proactive role than is politically acceptable in policy circles is questionable: the United States may be unable to do anything more than to hope for the success of more nationalist but anti-American Shi’i figures such as Sadr.

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