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Shi'ite militias in Syria and Iraq: Proliferating the sectarian conflict

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Synopsis

Shi'ite militias represent important stakeholders in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq who proliferate the sectarian bloodshed in the region. Despite their jihad narrative, their large fighter mobilization and massacring of Sunni civilians, they remain unnoticed and unaccountable.

Commentary

IN SYRIA, Shi'ite militias are fighting alongside Bashar alAssad's army, while in Iraq they represent the core of the force against ISIS. Whereas the militias in Iraq became prominent on the battlefield after the US-led invasion in 2003, the militias in Syria are a relatively new phenomenon which emerged after the civil war broke out in 2011. Most of militias are subgroups and splinters of major Shi'ite groups in Iraq and Lebanon or were founded by Iran's Quds Forces.

These militias represent a threat to the stability of the Middle East as they proliferate the sectarian conflict in the region. The war in Syria and the fight against ISIS initiated an unprecedented Shi'ite mobilization akin to the Sunni mobilization in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Militias recruit individuals based on a Shi'ite jihad narrative which has sectarian contours. Moreover, in both countries Shi'ite militias systematically massacre Sunni civilians. Unaccountable and ignored, these militias perpetuate the sectarian conflict in the Middle East.

The background of the Shi'ite militias

In Syria, apart from small indigenous groups, the bulk of Assad's Shi'ite militant auxiliaries, counting around 40,000 people, is drawn primarily from Iraq, Iran,

Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most of the groups are either subgroups or splinters of major Iraqi Shi'ite militias, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), the Badr Organization (BO), Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Promised Day Brigades (PDB), Iraqi Hezbollah etc. Lebanese Hezbollah and its subgroups are also fighting, as well as other smaller outfits whose creation was commanded by Iran's Quds Forces.

In Iraq, the Shi'ite militias are indigenous and resemble the Lebanese Hezbollah model, wherein they penetrated the Iraqi political and military establishments. Currently, most of the Shi'ite militias are a part of Hashd al-Shabi (PMU), an Iraqi army-affiliated unit specially created to combat ISIS. The Shi'ite militias in the PMU are either the "Shrine Militias" - the perceived guardians of the Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala - or the Iranian-backed militias that are associated with terrorist movements. The latter category includes the most powerful Shi'ite militias in the region, such as BO, AAH, KH, PDB etc.

In both Syria and Iraq, the imaginary battlecry employed by these militias is clearly sectarian. Sometimes they are directly led by clerics, such as Muqtada al-Sadr, the Iraqi cleric who formed his first militant group in 2003. Also, most of their names, banners and slogans have a distinctive Shi'ite character. There is a very close relation between the Shi'ite clergy and the Shi'ite militias, wherein the former are part of the recruitment channel, often visit the battlefields to boost the morale of the fighters and preach the necessity of a sectarian fight.

The narrative of Shi'ite jihad

In both countries, the justifications provided for the existence of such groups evolve around the narrative of Shi'ite jihad. Two recurrent motifs of the recruitment rhetoric represents the defence of shrines and the perceived humiliation of the Shi'ites at the hands of Sunnis. The most popular media of recruitment are slogans, posters and songs.

In Syria, the Sayyeda Zainab shrine located in Southern Damascus is fundamental to the recruitment. The slogan "Laybak ya Zainab" (At your service, O Zainab) and songs such as "Ya Zainab" were often heard on the battlefield or at funerals of Shi'ite fighters. In both countries, posters of shrines along with insignias of groups and telephone numbers have been widely posted online on websites and social media platforms. One popular recruitment-oriented song is "Ashat al-Muqawama" by singer Delfi, whose chorus reads "Ashat al-Muqawama, Shia al-Muqawama" (Long live the *resistance*, the Shi'ite *resistance*).

Over 60,000 Shi'ite fighters are reported to have been recruited to fight in Syria and Iraq. This situation is reminiscent of the Sunni mobilization in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Prominent Shi'ite clerical figures and politicians, such as Iranian cleric Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, play an important role in the recruitment as they publicly called upon Shi'ites to take up arms. This provides the mobilization an institutional status which is intended to normalise the phenomenon.

Most recruitment for the fighting in both Syria and Iraq is publicly carried out on the internet. Websites such as valiamr.com or ghobe.ir offer to enlist volunteers for

fighting in Syria and groups on social media widely advertise them. For instance, Lebanese Hezbollah posted on its Facebook page a picture with the dome of the Sayyeda Zainab shrine and the message “Zainab, we are all your Abbas”, embedding in the image a phone number and the website valiamr.com. The same recruitment techniques have been used by the AAH, the Badr Organization and Iran-affiliated groups which operate in Syria under the name of Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas.

Sectarian massacres

In both countries, Shi’ite militias set a trend consisting of systematically massacring Sunni civilians following every important Shi’ite victory on the battlefield. In most cases, the massacres included slaughtering, torturing and sexual violence.

In Syria, Shi’ite militias carried out their first massacre on 8 October 2013 in Ath-Thyabbya. The event, which lasted for 13 days, was deemed a sectarian cleansing campaign, and culminated with the killing and forced disappearance of 13 families. Other massacres were carried out in villages surrounding Aleppo such as Rasm an-Nafl, Al-Malkiya and Al-Mazr, which resulted in the killing of 192, 69 and 95 civilians respectively.

In Iraq, one example represents the Diyala Province-based village Barwana, where Shi’ite militias executed 77 Sunni villagers. Also, after recapturing Tikrit from ISIS in April 2015, Shi’ite militias abducted around 200 Sunni residents from Al-Dur, of which 160 remain unaccounted. The looting of Al-Dur was also marked by the demolishing and torching of 950 houses, and the damaging of 95 shops.

Unnoticed stakeholders

Shi’ite militias in both Syria and Iraq are one of the most important stakeholders in the current conflicts. However, unlike ISIS or the extremist Syrian opposition, these militias are not subject to public international attention or demands of accountability. Nevertheless, their recruitment narrative of jihad is sectarian in nature and they also engage in systematic massacres of Sunni civilians. No doubt, these militias play an equally important role in the proliferation of the sectarian conflict in the Middle East.

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