

Afghan Shia Fighters in the Syrian Conflict

*An empirical study on Fatamiyyon Corps' rise and involvement in the
Syrian civil war*

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General Qasem Soleimani, the commander in chief of Islamic Republic's Quds forces, among the Fatamiyyon members in Syria. The description of the picture says: "Fatamiyyon Corps has reached to the Iraqi-Syrian border; a gratitude prayer with Haaj Qasem Soleimani."¹

¹ Rapporteuronline, "Fatamiyyon Corps has reached to the Iraqi-Syrian border; a gratitude prayer with Haaj Qasem Soleimani," *Rapporteuronline.com*, June 12th, year (not mentioned), <http://rapporteuronline.com/de/news-details/12181/>

Prologue

—Neither God, nor humans help us. Even the Islamic Republic which supposed to be Islamic and take care of the Muslims in need, does not care about us. We, Hazaras who suffered a lot of injustice, cruelty and oppression along our dark and painful history have always dreamed of a life of dignity and decency. A life, where everyone beyond their differences will equally enjoy justice, peace and prosperity. This is what God has promised Muslims in his holy book (Qur'an). I have always been an obedient housewife to my husband. I have fearfully carried out all my religious duties as a woman. For around 50 years ago, I was born and grew up in a remote and isolated small village named Waras at the heart of highlands of Hazarajat area². My father was a shepherd for a small flock of sheep which were owned by the whole village. Everyone in Waras was poor but we were the poorest because my father didn't own any piece of land. Our family did everything to survive, especially in those cold winters when heavy snowfall continued mercilessly in weeks. It threatened us to death every winter, we had only God to seek the help of.

For I don't know exactly how many years ago, I got married to Haji Gholam Ali, a goodhearted and pious man of God. Haji had dedicated his entire youth to study Islamic theology he was a devotee Muslim and had a special passion toward the holy Ahl-Albeit (the family of the prophet Mohammad). I have learned of him a lot about Islam. Two or three years after the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran, while the war against the Soviet was in its peak in Afghanistan, we made our way through the furious mountains and valleys to the border and crossed over to the land of Imam-e Zaman³. We settled in the holy city of Mashhad with no income or other financial sources. Our two sons were at school age and had to start school. We had neither the legal resident permit nor the network to help us enrol our children for the school. We knocked on every door and turned every stone in the search for help to get our two innocent children enrolled for the school. I don't know, God forbid, from that day I began to hesitate about those good things I have heard about an Islamic State, but I've never had the courage to express it to Haji. Anyway, Saddam Hussain had attacked Iran and Imam Khomeini was under an immense pressure.

² Hazarajat is the mountainous region in central Afghanistan which is predominantly inhabited by the Hazara ethnic group (Singh,2001).

³ Imam al-zaman (*The Imam of the period*) is referred to Imam Al-Mahdi (*Th guided one*) the twelfth Imam of the Shias who according to the Muslim's belief, lives in the great absence. Al-Mahdi is the last Caliph and he will appear and rule the Earth for around ten years and rid the world of the evil, before the *Yaum al-Qiyamah the judgement day or the Day of resurrection*. The term "Land of Imam al-zaman" has been used for the first time by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding father of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. He basically meant the main ruler of the Islamic Republic is the Imam al-Mahdi himself.

They continuously called upon new volunteers through the radio and television channels to join the front and save the Islamic revolution. Haji had newly got a day-labour job in a construction site, labour that Haji never did before. He had to do it to help us survive the harsh days of our lives in a new society. One evening he came home exhausted from work and asked me for my permission to join the front. He preached for nearly an hour about its both divinely and worldly benefits. Even though I didn't want him to be away from us for a second, but somehow, he persuaded me to say yes in silence. Because the fighters' and martyrs' families received certain material advantages. We who were immigrants and strangers with no roots in the ground needed those advantages more than anyone else.

After that Haji left home for the front in South Iran, our two kids got immediately enrolled in the school and I received the coupon booklet for getting the monthly food supplies which the fighter's families were entitled to. There were also rumours going around among the Afghan communities that the families of those who fight or being martyred in the fronts will be granted Iranian citizenship. After three months of service at the front, Haji returned home with a deep scar on his face under his right eye. I could have been killed if the bullet was hit some millimetre toward my nose, but I was saved by the divine forces, he said thankfully.

After one month staying with us, his leave was over, and he had to join the fight again for a new term of three months. This time the divine forces left him alone and he was killed for the sake of saving the revolution. In result of that, our name was moved to the category of *Martyr's Family* and we continued to receive material supplies for a while until the war was over. As the war ended, our social status gradually diminished and our material advantages rapidly declined. The authorities denied extending the validation of our coupon booklet. We were asked to pay for our kids to go to school because we were foreign citizens. As far as I remember, I have never been a citizen of any country, not even Afghanistan.

After thirty years, the same scenario repeated. Three years ago, my younger son was brainwashed and dispatched to Syria to protect the Holy Shrine. I don't understand why this heavy duty to protect Islam is put only on our fatigue shoulders, while there are hundreds of millions of other Muslims around the world?

They took my beautiful son and gave me back his pulseless body wrapped in a bloody coffin. We gave two lives for this country but still got nothing in return. We are still the 'foreign citizens' with no legal rights to do businesses, get an education, buy properties or move freely within Iran. After living for 35 years in this country, we still live in fear and anxiety. Every day

we are facing the danger of being deported to Afghanistan where we have nobody and no home to go to. Said Marzieh, 55 years old Hazara woman who have lost both her husband and her son in two major wars for the Islamic Republic⁴.

Summary

The Fatamiyyon Division, in Persian [لشکر فاطمیون] is an Iran-backed military force which has been involved in the Syrian war since 2013. It claims to be mobilized voluntarily to protect the holy sites of Shia Islam in Damascus. Syria is home to the shrines of Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Ruqayya, female members of Prophet Mohammad's family and highly revered by the Shias. These shrines are among the holiest in Shia Islam and are frequently visited by Shia pilgrims from around the world on their way to Karbala and Najaf in Iraq. It's difficult to estimate with precision how many Fatamiyyon members have been deployed to Syria. They are reportedly thousands and an estimate of between 15,000-20,000 fighters is likely to be true. Fatamiyyon draws its membership primarily from the Shia Afghan refugee communities in Iran and Afghanistan. Most of the recruits are young men in their twenties and thirties who are motivated basically by promises of material rewards, against a background of economic deprivation and vulnerabilities due to their migrant status in Iran and, to a lesser degree by religious sentiments and a sense of youthful military adventurism.

Afghan political and religious leaders have consistently opposed sending Shia Afghan youth to fight in Syria and have demanded Iranian authorities not to use Afghan youth in its proxy warfare. The Iranian authorities have always denied the accusations that they apply pressure on Afghan refugees to sign up as volunteer fighters. Instead, they pretended that the Fatamiyyon members fight in Syria due to their strong feelings of religious responsibilities and Iran has done nothing but to support them in fulfilling their religious duty.

Religious and political elites have expressed concern about the lack of economic opportunities for the Hazara communities in Afghanistan. Ethnic discrimination, political marginalization and a bad security situation in the Hazaras and Shias populated areas in Afghanistan are considered to be the factors which have led to largescale emigration of the Hazaras and their recruitment to militia groups such as Fatamiyyon. They are also concerned that the perpetuation of the current situation and lack of willingness to address the crisis facing

⁴ Marzieh, Akrami. (a housewife) in a conversation with Basil Nicobin through telephone, December 2018.

the Hazara communities on part of the Afghan government will contribute to future mobilization of armed Shia and Hazara groups from Afghanistan. Thousands of former Fatamiyyon fighter who have returned to Afghanistan, struggle to reintegrate and find a job to feed their families. They are living in fear of being arrested and imprisoned by the Afghan government.

Chapter 1

1.1 Background

The civil war in Syria can be traced back to demonstrations and protests that broke out as a result of public outrage against President Bashar Al-Assad's regime in early 2011. The protesters were inspired by the massive demonstrations in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt and which led to the collapse of several authoritarian regimes, and they hoped for the same outcome, democracy and regime change. Syrians took to the streets in the hope of putting an end to the authoritarian Assad regime which has ruled the country for decades. Contrary to several other Arab countries which were hit by the Arab Spring's revolts, President Assad remained in power and pursued a steadily more brutal crackdown of what was initially *peaceful* protests. The revolts in Syria soon took a different course and was transformed into long-lasting and brutal civil war and a devastating chaos of competing groups. As the civil war continued, the Syrian soil has turned to a battlefield for various rival states that compete to expand their geopolitical realms. Among those states, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as the two ideological adversaries, have been heavily involved in the Syrian war and ruthlessly fought each other through their proxies.

The KSA has supported anti-Assad rebels seeking to overthrow the pro-Iranian Alawite regime and replace it with a KSA-friendly Sunni regime. Iran, on the contrary, has used all its power to keep the Assad regime on the throne, a policy which serves to secure Iran's goal of regional hegemony. As the war in Syria is now winding down for the benefit of President Assad and his allies, the question regarding how the various foreign Shia militia groups became involved in the war in Syria, and who has mobilized them, remains unclear. During years of heavy fighting on various fronts, the opposition forces scored many tactical successes, especially up to 2015, when Russia intervened to save the Assad regime from collapsing. Hence, the opposition forces ultimately failed to sufficiently undermine the Assad government

and weaken its territorial control over Syria's most populated areas. The opposition officials have consistently blamed their failure not only on the Russian military intervention, but also on the growing presence of pro-Assad foreign fighters who joined the war in favor of the Assad regime. The Syrian opposition has claimed that there are all sorts of outlandish mercenaries among the enemies, including, Lebanese, Yemenis, Egyptians, Iraqis Pakistanis, Afghans and so on⁵.

According to the Free Syrian Army's official website, there are around 25 Iran-backed Shia militia-groups of different sizes and different nationalities fighting the anti-Assad rebels in Syria.⁶ One of the largest and fast growing-in-size of these groups is the Fatamiyyon division (in Persian; *Lashkâr-e Fatamiyyon* لشکر فاطمیون). Lashkâr-e Fatamiyyon is an Afghan Shia Jihadi group which has been involved in the Syrian civil war since 2013.

Since then, the division has suffered heavy losses and casualties. According to BBC-Persian, more than 2,000 members of the Fatamiyyon division have been killed and more than 8000 others wounded.⁷ The estimates of Fatamiyyon's numerical strength during the conflict vary significantly depending on the source. According to sources affiliated to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) the number of the Fatamiyyon division is said to be in the "tens of thousands". These are "devotees who give their lives for the sake of their religious belief."⁸ The most often-cited figure of 20,000 fighters seems to originate Aljazeera-English⁹. Sources affiliated to Iran's IRGC claim that the Fatamiyyon division in 2012 began with a few people as 25 individuals and within a short period they rapidly grew in numbers and reached "thousands of Shia devotees who are willing to sacrifice their lives to protect the holy shrines".¹⁰

2.1 Introduction

This thesis seeks to explore the question: how should we understand the Liwa al-Fatamiyyon group in Syria? This question is followed by a bunch of sub-questions such as

how Fatamiyyon was formed, who were the engineers, and what are the motivational factors for the recruitment? Subsequently, what function do they have in the Syrian war theatre, which fronts do they fight and what role do they play for Iran in Syria? To conduct such a study, I will

⁵ Tobias Schneider, *The Fatemiyyon Division* (Middle East Institute, 2018-9)

⁶ FSA, *Map of Foreign Shia Jihadi Militia across Syria*: <http://fsaplatform.org/foreign-shia-militia-map>

⁷ BBC-Persian, "Fatemiyyon Division's spokesman in Iran: Afghan Forces have had 2000 casualties", January 6th, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-42590722>

⁸ Islamic HDTV, "Footprint of an Angel, A Story of Defending the Shrine Until the Last Breath/روایت دفاع از حرم تا آخرین نفس", YouTube, June, 15th 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kpd1MaAEtAg>

⁹ Moslih Hashmatullah, *Iran 'foreign legion' leans on Afghan Shia in Syria war* (Aljazeera.com-22-jan.2018)

¹⁰ Defapress, *the formation of Fatemiyyon's primary core* (Defapress, October 25, 2015)

need to explore through the socio-political and socioeconomic status of the Hazaras in the Afghan political and societal arena. It will include three periods which have played a significant role in the Hazaras current situation;

The first period is the period genocide and slavery which started in the late 19th century by the Afghan King Amir Abdul Rahman Khan [1889-1901] and the following 80 years of structural discrimination, social bullying combined with extreme poverty and deprivation, which pushed the Hazaras to the shadow of the Afghan society. The second period is the revolution and chaos period [1978-2001] starting with frequent military coups then furthered to Soviet invasion and so the civil war and the emergence of the Taliban. This period was vital for the Hazaras, they got chance to change their position in the Afghan society by joining the resistance movements against the invasion and then, the Taliban emerged and the Hazaras again lost their position and suffered persecutions and mass murder and emigration at a macro level during the Taliban [1996-2001].

The third period is the 'renaissance' period which began with the collapse of Taliban and the involvement of the international society in establishing a new democratic government and the grand project of rebuilding the country and the nation. This period is characterized by the mass migration of Hazaras from the districts to the big cities aiming access to school and education and participation in the politics, security forces and civil society. The insurgency activities by the Taliban and other armed groups increased followed by the withdrawal of the international peacekeeping forces in 2014 that resulted to increase of unemployment and security threats.

Additionally, the multiple suicide attacks targeted the Hazara populated areas and demonstrations rallies and killed and wounded hundreds of people, Hazaras began to emigrate from Afghanistan mainly to Iran because it's lingual, religious and cultural commonalities. As around 2 million Afghans predominantly Hazaras already lived in Iran, simultaneously Iran has suffered severe sanctions the chance to get a job and make a living for an undocumented Afghan who also feared deportation was almost impossible. Many of them who had financial ability made their way to Europe and Australia those who lacked economic capability to smuggle themselves out of Iran, remained in Iran and had to choose between deportation to Afghanistan, deployment to Syria and serve as proxy fighters and get material rewards, such monthly salary, and residence permit or, staying underground in Iran illegally and without any legal rights. I will benefit from the theory of proxy warfare to understand the patron-client relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and its Fatamiyyon proxy in Syria.

Chapter 2

1.2 Understanding Proxy Warfare: A theoretical framework

Competition and conflict are rarely a new phenomenon in human society. It has roots deep down in the history of mankind. From the time human became able to record the events, human history has been affected by conflicts and competitions to gaining wealth, territories and power. Great Empires have been emerged and collapsed as a result of persistent conflicts and competitions. But the support of a third party engaged in conflict with one's enemy is not an old phenomenon. It started with the emergence of the international system and the advent of modern technology. Simultaneously, as these two developed further, the phenomenon of 'proxy intervention' became more common. The phenomenon can be defined as a form of warfare by which the actual military action or intervention is subcontracted to a non-state actor (militia, rebel group, mercenary group, etc) and thereby avoiding a costly direct military confrontation with an [state].¹¹

After World War II, the use of proxy intervention has been preferred to traditional warfare by the great powers. Undoubtedly, it's a lesson which has been learned from the second World War, where direct confrontations have resulted in major destructions and unprecedented fatalities. Since the cold war, the advent of the new technology and the international system have made the proxy intervention a more logical replacement both in terms of human casualties and financial expenses. On numerous occasions, throughout the cold war, rival states have taken advantage of proxy war as low-cost warfare against their adversaries and to expand their political influences. In addition, both superpowers the United States and the Soviet Union were armed with nuclear weapons, a direct confrontation could have led to a devastating nuclear war. For that reason, both parts avoided direct conflict.

¹¹ Chris Loveman, "Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention," *Conflict, Security & Development* 2, no. 3 (2002): 29-48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800200590618>

2.2 Proxy warfare in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is one of the most prominent examples in the history of proxy warfare. In 1979 when 100,000 Soviet's Red Army entered Afghanistan attempting to shore up the newly-established pro-Soviet government in Kabul.¹² A rebellion under the name of 'Islamic Jihad' against the Soviet invasion spread throughout the country. Different guerrilla groups titled 'The Mujahedeen' were formed and they gradually began receiving huge amounts of equipment and material support from a variety of external powers, primarily Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States. The Soviet opponents grabbed the opportunity and intervened in the battle by backing various, and often competing, Afghan Mujahedeen factions.

They provided all sorts of support needed such as military training, military equipment food supplies and ideological augmentation. Soon, Afghanistan became a battleground for the proxies. After ten years of bloody battle in Afghanistan which resulted in vast destructions of the country's infrastructure, the loss of around 1,1 million Afghan lives and around 15,000 Soviet soldiers, Soviet troops finally pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989. The above-mentioned anti-Communist states proudly celebrated their victory, while Afghanistan entered a new bloody era of the intra-Mujahedeen civil war. The answer to the question of 'who won the war?' is not so obvious, however. Even though one of the Mujahedeen's patron, the United States and its anti-Communist allies defeated their greatest enemy in a low-cost manner and the cold war between the two political ideologies which has lasted for decades came finally to an end, the Afghanistan war gave rise to the al-Qaida network which subsequently became the U.S. greatest security challenge in the early 21th century. This is one of the most well-known examples of proxy warfare and its dangerous long-term ramifications. It shows how the western block won the war against its greatest enemy without direct confrontation and without being affected by tremendous destruction and loss of lives to its own people.

3.2 The Use of Proxy Warfare in Other Conflicts

After 1991 proxy warfare as a tool of state policy has been used in several conflict theatres like in the Balkan countries in Eastern Europe, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in central Africa and in Kashmir in South Asia, where states have employed proxies as a means of executing campaign against rivals. Giving a comprehensive definition of 'proxy

¹² Cordovez and Harrison, "Out of Afghanistan: The Inside of the Soviet Withdrawal."

warfare' is far from straightforward. A simple description is that proxy war occurs 'when State A encourages the people State C to take up arms against State B, which happens to be its own adversary.'¹³ According to this definition, one State uses another state or rebel groups or para-state, to fight an enemy, supplying its ally with political, military and/or economic assistance.

4.2 Iran's Proxy Warfare in Syria

In Iran's case, this simple definition of proxy war suits Iran's involvement in the Syrian war through its Shia paramilitary groups who fought the anti-Assad rebels. Loveman too agrees with this description of proxy war on one level, but he considers it as a misleading description on the other level when he discusses the war as a local affair which deals with local concerns. Those types of proxy warfare rely on using a local conflict to distance themselves from their action or to distort its people's attention. There are numerous definitions of the phenomenon of proxy intervention.

Chapter 3

1.3 Research Methodology

Conducting research on a little-known militia group operating in a distant warzone is a demanding task. Liwa al-Fatamiyyon, also called Fatamiyyon Division an Afghan Shia militia group fighting in the Syrian war in favour of president Assad, has only attracted limited media's attention in recent years. As I study Middle East Studies and chose additional topics in Persian Studies, the story of the Fatamiyyon captured my interest early on and made me dedicate my master dissertation to this topic, and more precisely, the question of why Afghan Shias fighting in Syria. Since there are very few academic works available about them, an exploratory and qualitative research method suits best. I chose therefore, qualitative research methodology to collect information about Fatamiyyon's history, its organization, its patterns of recruitment and role in the Syrian civil war.

¹³ Chris Loveman, "Assessing ,"

2.3 Collection of Data

The data I have collected come from a variety of mostly written sources as demonstrates below. I have also done a limited number of interviews ethnic background, personal profiles. The amount of data that I have collected in form of interviews and personal stories indicates that the deployment of the Shia Afghans to the Syrian war is based on different motivations. Above all, the socioeconomic situation of Shia Hazaras in Afghanistan, unemployment and the fragility of their residence status in Iran are the two highlighting factors that push the young Afghan Shias to fight in Syria.

3.3 Qualitative Research Method

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research which provides a mean of accessing unquantifiable about the actual people researchers observe or talk to or people presented by their personal traces (such as letters, videos, photographs, newspaper accounts, diaries, and so on).¹⁴ In general terms, scientific research consists of an investigation that:

- Seek answer/s to a question
- Systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question
- Collect evidence/information
- Produce findings that were not determined in advance
- Produce findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of study

These are the five main principals that I used to carry out my research to provide a comprehensive outlook around the research question. ‘Conversation with people’ is the core definition of the qualitative research methodology. To provide an extensive grasp of what qualitative research methodology is, we need to simplify it as the daily, often one-to-one conversations between individuals on certain issues about the events and incidents happening in their social scope. The way they understand and interpret a situation which is taking place around them or in a distant point, produce a non-numerical data. To use qualitative research methodology, the researcher needs to interact with people directly or through observation over a long period of time. Then, the data which is collected in form of interviews and conversations should be analysed and it’s also time consuming.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for The Social Sciences* (California State University, Long Beach, 2009) 7-8.

¹⁵ Manu Bhatia, “The 3 Qualitative Research Methods You Should Know”, Socialcops.com, (March 26th, 2018).
<https://blog.socialcops.com/academy/resources/3-qualitative-research-methods/>

4.3 Different Sources

In my research I have benefited from a variety of methodological tools to acquire the information and data needed for my work. Firstly, I searched for primary sources such as news articles, visual news bulletin from various news agencies and TV-channels, YouTube videos, blogs and social media updates, field reports provided by organizations and interviews with Afghan politicians in exile and with some Afghan refugees live in Europe. Most of the written, visual and oral primary sources I have accessed were in Persian and consisted of both pro-Iran and Fatamiyyon and anti-Iran and Fatamiyyon point of views depending on who is talking. Sources affiliated to Iran regime admiring the *bravery* and sacrifice of the Afghan Shia fighters to protect the holy shrines in Syria, while sources not affiliated to Iran regime condemning the Iranian regime for abusing human rights of the Afghan refugees and benefiting from their miserable situation in favour of the Islamic Republic's politics. The contrasting perspectives helped me to better verify information by comparing accounts from supporters and detractors of the Iranian regime.

Secondly, in order to better situate my own empirical findings in a broader analytical perspective I searched for secondary sources such as articles written by academic scholars and research reports by academic centres. These sources discuss the reasons for why the Islamic Republic conducting proxy wars as a mean of geopolitical strategy and why the Afghan Shia refugees appear to have become the mercenaries for the Islamic Republic? Is it only because of religious reasons or, material advantages are also involved? Reading and reviewing both sources and simultaneously interviewing people who have been members of Fatamiyyon and the family members and relatives of the Fatamiyyon member through telephone and internet calls enriched my work and helped me form this paper. I have also interviewed Afghan scholars, historians, authors and political analysts who live in Europe and the U.S. to acquire a comprehensive picture around my research theme.

5.3 Security Measures and Research Ethics

During my interviews, I made sure that the interviewees have clearly given their consent. All of them have been anonymized and given pseudonyms in the thesis to protect them from possible harm. Data containing personal information about the interviewees have been stored securely and will be destroyed upon the completion of this MA-Thesis. Since the story of Fatamiyyon is a politically sensitive subject, I have done some preventive efforts to minimize the possibility of any mistake. Firstly, I have instructed the mediator to make the interviewee aware of that we never say the word Fatamiyyon through our entire conversation. Instead of

Fatamiyyon we say only ‘Kolordu’ which is a Turkish equivalent for the Persian ‘Lashkar and the English Corps’ and we used the synonym ‘Mazar’ for the Persian ‘Harem’ and the English ‘Shrine’ and so on.

Secondly, I asked the interviewee not to use their permanent numbers, they can buy a prepaid SIM card which does not need to be registered. For some of the interviewees, like the ones in Syria, security was a big concern, while for some others living in Iran and in Afghanistan, the security issue was not the biggest concern. As Hussein from Kabul said: “the risk of being killed in a bomb blast in Afghanistan is much higher than to be arrested by the security forces. It will be OK as far as you don’t use my full name, my resident address and my picture.” I received different answers from the interviewees relating to the question of their identity security. Regardless of what answers they gave me, I followed the ethical framework and anonymized all of them. Instead of recording or typing on a word document, I took notes on paper, in order to make sure that it would not leak to social media or internet in case of losing my laptop or my cell phone. I think my interviews will not put my interviewees’ life on jeopardy, because I never used specific personal details such as their full name, father’s name, or residence address. After that the interview was done, I asked the interviewee to delete the conversation.

Chapter 4

1.4 Typology of Proxies

As I mentioned previously, the use of proxies as a low-cost form of warfare is barely a new phenomenon. One can even trace the roots of proxy warfare in the 1900 rivalries in the Great Game between the great Empires like the Russian and the British Empires over Afghanistan and surrounding territories in South and Central Asia. On some occasions like in Afghanistan, the rival Empires mobilized the native forces to stem each other’s territorial expansion.

Thus, Syria’s experience is not uncommon. Certainly, it is surely an exaggeration to claim that many current civil wars are basically proxy wars. In the conflicts of Ukraine, Russia backs the anti-government rebels who proclaim the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic. These rebels seemingly fight for their own ideals and claim of independence, but its immediate results benefit the Russian’s geopolitical interests by undermining the anti-Russian

and pro-western government of Ukraine. In contrast, some western governments support the Ukrainian government to maintain its power.

2.4 Adversaries' collaboration on common interest

On some occasions, when interests so require, enemies temporarily ally with former adversaries to fight a common foe. In Libya, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have provided support to the militia group led by Khalifa Haftar who seeks to capture all of Libya, while the United States nominally recognizes the rival government in Tripoli and simultaneously co-operate with militia groups to fight the Islamic States in the countryside.¹⁶

In Syria, when the Islamic States was on the rise and captured more territories, the United States and Iran cooperatively fought the Islamic State.¹⁷ In a similar occasion in 2001, when the United States Army invaded Afghanistan to dismantle the Taliban government and eliminate al-Qaida sanctuary in the country, Iran facilitated the passage of U.S. military convoy through its southern border. Although, US-Iran relations have been mostly very hostile since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the hostage-taking of the US-Embassy staff in 1979, the existence of Taliban and al-Qaida as two Sunni militant groups adhered to an extreme version of Islamic ideology in Iran's neighbourhood was seen as a dangerous and immediate threat to the Islamic Republic.

2.4 Iran-Taliban Relations

The relationship between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic has never been friendly during the six years periods (1996-2001), where the Taliban were in control of most of Afghanistan. It even worsened when the Taliban entered the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif in August 1998 and attacked Iran's consulate. They killed eight Iranian diplomats and one Iranian journalist. As a result of that assassinations the tension between Iran and the Taliban increased to a level where a war between Iran and the Taliban seemed imminent.

Iranian authorities perceived Taliban's anti-Iranian actions as an act of war and dispatched around 70,000 troops from the Revolutionary Guard to the border with Afghanistan and carried out military exercises. The tensions winded down when the Taliban's supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar announced that the Iranians had been killed by renegade forces who had acted without orders.¹⁸

¹⁶ Daniel Byman, "Why States Are Turning to Proxy War," *The National Interest* (August 26th, 2018).
<https://nationalinterest.org/print/feature/why-states-are-turning-proxy-war-29677>

¹⁷ Daniel Byman, "Why States ,"

¹⁸ Douglas Jehl, "Iran Holds Taliban Responsible for 9 Diplomats" *New York Times*. September 11th, 1998

3.4 Pakistan's Proxy Clients

In South Asia, Pakistan has decades of tradition of using proxy groups, on one hand, to undermine India's political and military influence in Jammu Kashmir and the support of Taliban to hinder the emerging of a strong and pro-Indian government in Afghanistan, on the other. Pakistan has supported the Afghan Taliban movement more or less consistently since the latter's rise in 1994. Pakistan was the first country to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, followed only by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]. After the collapse of the Taliban in late 2001 in the result of the US invasion, Pakistan hosted the Taliban's leadership and logistics bases after the US-forces expelled the Taliban from Afghanistan. Throughout its history, Pakistan has relied on militant groups alongside its conventional military forces as its core "grand strategic tools".

This reliance stems partly from Pakistan's weakness vis-à-vis its main rival India with a much more powerful army and larger nuclear arsenal. India's military superiority has pushed Pakistan's decision-makers toward a reliance on a network of Islamist militant groups. Throughout decades, these groups have been used offensively anywhere where Pakistan's conventional forces could not act without sparking escalation.¹⁹ Taliban²⁰ is one of these Islamist militant groups which emerged from within the many thousands of Madrassas²¹ operating in Pakistan. Since 2001, when U.S. forces overthrew the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Pakistan has used them as a double-edged sword to achieve its multiple objectives.

5.4 Pakistan's Double Play

In one hand, the Pakistani government receives billions of dollars annually from the United States to fight terrorism and Islamic militancy, on the other hand it support the Taliban to blow the flame of insurgency in Afghanistan to put pressure upon Washington and Kabul to over several issues: The U.S. military presence which can threaten Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and cover India's activities against Pakistan; The issue of the controversial international borderline [known as Durand Line] between Pakistan and Afghanistan which Afghanistan refuses to recognize; Commercial and transit access to Central Asian Trade Market; Limiting Indian presence in Afghanistan at least in the provinces near the borderline with Pakistan. Even

¹⁹ Afshoon Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War" *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 159-188, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862>

²⁰ The word [Taliban] is the plural form of the word [Talib] which means student in Arabic

²¹ A Muslim school, college or University that is often part of a mosque and teaches Islamic theology

though, there are no Indian troops in Afghanistan, but Pakistan claims that Indian aid and diplomatic missions provide cover for its intelligence operations in Afghanistan.²²

6.4 Afghan-Pakistani Stressful Relations

Undoubtedly, the conflicts in Afghanistan consist of different layers and several actors have been involved in the game. Pakistan has been steadily accused by the Afghan authorities for supporting the Taliban and providing their leaders' safe haven in Pakistan.²³ Therefore, the political relation between Pakistan and Afghanistan has often been full of tensions. Both the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai (2001-2014) and the current president Mohammad Ashraf Ghani (2014-) unceasingly asserted that the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) train and equip the Taliban in the free tribal areas alongside the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. On several occasions, even the US officials have called upon Pakistan to be clearer in its position in the war on terror. Concurrently, the Pakistani government has consistently denied all the accusations and emphasized on Pakistan's firmly determination in the war on terrorism as they also consider Pakistan itself as a victim of terrorism and violent religious extremism.²⁴

In some cases, but in a lesser extent Iran also has been accused of the support of the Taliban. The Iranian authorities have often remained silent and haven't responded to the accusations. In recent time while the peace talks between the Taliban and the United have been in process, Iranian authorities have claimed that they are in contact with Taliban and they are willing to provide the Taliban with a political office in Iran to facilitate the peace talks.²⁵

Chapter 5

1.5 The Significance of Militant Clients for State's Geopolitical Strategy

The use of militant groups for gaining geopolitical advantages in the international arena is vital for states like the Islamic Republic of Iran due to its relatively limited, low quality conventional military capabilities and unsophisticated military technology in comparison with its regional and international rivals like the United States and the State of Israel. In the case of Yemen, Iran lacks a navy or massive airlift capacity necessary to sustain large military forces in Yemen. Therefore, supporting the Houthis provides Iran major geopolitical advantages and

²² Burnett R. Rubin, "Everyone Wants a Piece of Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy* (March 15th, 2019)

²³ Stovar, "The Grand Strategy,"

²⁴ Shuja Nawas, « Countering Militancy and Terrorism in Pakistan,» *United States Institutes of Peace*. (October 2016).

²⁵ ToloNews, "US' Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad for Peace Negotiation Has Arrived in Kabul/ زلمی خلیلزاد نماینده ویژه ی آمریکا برای صلح به کابل آمد," *ToloNews*, October 7th, 2018,

help Iran to expand its influential realm in a proxy conflict with its regional rivals like the Saudi Arabian and United Arab Emirates [UAE].

To attain a comprehensive understanding of Iran's use of militant clients outside its border, we need a quick overview of Islamic Republic's recent history. It will help us understand why and how Iran deploy militant clients and how that behaviour impacts the regional and international security. The roots of Iran's patronage for militant groups as a strategic tool goes back to 1979's Islamic revolution in Iran and the discontinuation of political relations between Iran and the United States of America.²⁶ The Islamic revolution and the hostage-taking of the U.S. diplomats in Tehran in the same year turned the Iran-United States' relation from friendship and alliance to hostility and adversary.

2.5 Exporting the Islamic Revolution

Iran as a revolutionary hardliner was not only struggling against the Western hegemony in the region, but also against the Arab monarchical regimes who ruled in many of the Middle Eastern countries. Even though the Islamic revolution took place in Iran, but the revolutionary hardliners considered it as an emancipator for all the Muslim world. In the views of the founding father of the Islamic revolution Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic revolution in Iran was not only a Shia or a national movement which limited only to Iran. He considered the Islamic revolution as emancipator and healing for the old wound of all Islamic societies, who in his view suffered throughout the centuries after the stagnation of Islamic cultural and political authority. He wanted to export the revolution first the Islamic world and the then to the rest of the world. Supporting of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Badr Organization in Iraq under the rule of Saddam Hussain was of the first steps toward exporting the Islamic revolution.²⁷

Those positions put Iran at odds not only with the United States but also with U.S. allies in the region especially Israel, but also the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, its main security concern remained focused on the United States and its allies in the region.

The presence of US military in Bahrain and US maritime operations in the Persian Gulf just some miles away from Iran's soil and the military cooperation pacts between the United States, Israel and Arab countries, were deemed a threat to Iran and a source of concerns for the revolution's leaders in Iran. Simultaneously, the Western cultural influence as they named it in

²⁶ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy,"

²⁷ Shabaz Nakh'ei, "Iran's Return to the Mediterranean/ایران به مدیترانه" *Le Monde Diplomatique Persian* December 2018.

Persian *Hojoom-e Farhangi* [the cultural invasion] from democracy to secularism, all contradicted and challenged the core of Islamic political system and social values and were considered as an insidious form of soft warfare to be resisted. Likewise, in recent years, the emergence of the Sunni Islamist militant groups like al-Qaida, ISIS and numerous of other militant groups who operate in the region is seen by the Islamic Republic's leaders as a project sponsored by West, Israel and Saudi Arabia to destroy the Islamic Republic and its allies in the region. Iran's leaders have consistently accused Western powers, specifically the United States and its regional allies for the unrests in the region sometimes to deflect accusations against Iran for being a sponsor of terrorism.

On June 14th, 2014 Iran's supreme leader during a Friday prayer said "our external challenge is the troublemaking by the [Global] arrogance. Let's speak frankly; the troubles are caused by the United States." He simply presents the United States and its actual influence in the Middle East as a persistent and omnipresent challenge to the Islamic Republic.

3.5 Iran's Cold War

Iran is surrounded by US military bases and pro-US countries. These challenges fuelled Iran's strategic behaviour and have led Iran into enduring cold war with the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia and added suspicion, tension and antagonism to almost all its relationship with its more pro-US neighbours such as Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates [UAE], Bahrain and Qatar.

The retired US diplomat William J. Burns describes Iran in his newly published book titled *The Back Channel* as follow: *Iran is a formidable adversary... but it is not ten feet tall. Its economy is badly mismanaged, with rising rates of unemployment and inflation. It is vulnerable to the ongoing sharp decline in oil prices, and to its dependence on refined petroleum product. It has no real friends in the neighbourhood, distrusted by the Arabs and the Turks, patronized by the Russians, and suspicious of the Afghans.*²⁸

Hence, there are enormous external threats that Iran should deal with. Iran has invested in three main segments of defence and deterrence (it's not including its nuclear program). Firstly, its ballistic missiles program, that includes long-range rockets that can hit targets in the neighbouring countries and Israel. This competence has provided Iran with a stand-off capability. Secondly, Iran has also invested in cyberwarfare capabilities which have been used

²⁸ William J. Burns, *The Back Channel* (New York: Random House, 2019).

to target its adversaries' economic interests, infrastructures and government websites. Thirdly and the most important one is the cultivation of the foreign militant clients.

Unlike the missile deterrence and cyber warfare, militant clients are the only tool that gives Iran the opportunity to extend its strategic footprint and directly counter its adversaries through armed action. That is the main reason why Iran is dependent on militant clients and they have become a centrepiece of Iran's grand strategy and an investment Tehran will not easily abandon. Hence, although, Iran's military technologically is weak compared to those of neighbouring countries, these militant clients provide Iran with a powerful tool.

The enduring sanctions have prohibited Iran to purchase advanced weaponry in the open market. For those reasons, Iran's military capabilities have long lagged behind those of its neighbouring countries. According to the data collected by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], Iran spends far less on defence than its rivals. Its annual military budget has been decreased from 2.7 per cent of GDP from 2000-2014 to 2.35 of GDP in 2014. Even though, after 2014 due to conflicts in Syria and Yemen gradually increased, but it lies far behind its rival countries in the region such as Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United Arab Emirates.²⁹

4.5 The Significance of Proxies to Iran

Giving the above-mentioned challenges that Iran is facing, the use of militant clients or proxy groups beyond its border is seen as an inevitable and vital effort for Iran to survive in a harsh regional and geopolitical environment. The amount of support which Iran provides to its proxies like the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Yemeni Houthis and numerous of other militant clients in Syria and Iraq is yet unknown. The militant clients have provided Iran with multiple advantages. First, it has given Iran the ability to strike against its opponents anywhere in the region through its proxies. Hezbollah in Lebanon has targeted Israel by rocket attacks. Shia militia groups in Iraq have regularly attacked US troops in Iraq before the withdrawal of the US military combat units in 2011.

In some cases, shreds of evidence published by the media in Afghanistan, shown that Iran provided weapon and military training of a faction of the Taliban to attack the US troops in Afghanistan. A high-ranked general from the Afghan National Army in an interview with

²⁹ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy,"

BBC-Persian has asserted he possesses documents that indicate Iran provide military equipment for Taliban.³⁰

The Yemeni Houthis have attacked Saudi Arabia both in land and sea through ballistic missiles. Iran's ability to strike at its rivals through its proxies provides a mechanism of retaliation that can have a deterrent effect. Secondly, the clients help Iran to gain political influences. In Lebanon and in Iraq for instance, Iran's militant clients have gained significant political power. Following the Iran-Iraq war where almost all the Arab countries except Syria and Libya supported Saddam Hussein in his war against the Islamic Republic, the relationship between Iran and the Arab countries have remained mostly unfriendly. For that reason, Iran has few other options but to invest in proxy militants to sustain and expands its influence in the region.³¹

The Islamic Republic is the only Shia State in the world. The fact that most Shia population are minorities in the Muslim world who often suffered vast discrimination by the Sunni majority has made the non-Iranian Shia population a potential force to be mobilized for militant activities. The Iraqi Shias have suffered discrimination and oppression under the rule of Saddam Hussein. Similarly, the minority Shia population in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Yemen, the UAE, the Pakistani Shias have suffered from discrimination, especially Afghan Shias with lingual and cultural commonalities with Iranian people, have suffered a long-lasting racism, structural discrimination and mass-killings despite their devastating poverty. This has made them a potential force for the Islamic Republic's who recruit volunteers with promises of justice and equality.

The story of Marzieh (see prologue) who has lost both her husband and her younger son in two wars for the support of the Islamic Republic and in exchange for some material goods and legal advantages is a descriptive example for how the Islamic Republic has abundantly access to cheap none-Iranian Shia civilians who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the Islamic Republic.

³⁰ BBC-Persian, "Afghan Chief of Army: Iran Provides Military Supplies to Taliban in Afghanistan/ رئیس ارتش افغانستان: ایران به طالبان تجهیزات نظامی می‌دهند" *BBC-Persian*, September 6th, 2017.

³¹ Ostovar, "The Grand Strategy,".

Chapter 6

1.6 The Hazaras, An Historical lookback

The Hazaras are one of the several ethnic groups inhabiting Afghanistan. According to CIA-Factbook, the Hazaras are the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and make up roughly 10-19% of the total population following by the Pashtuns (42%) and the Tajiks (27%).³² The Hazaras differ from other minorities in Afghanistan in that they are both an ethnic and religious minority as they are also followers of Shia Islam in a country where more than 80% of its population are Sunni Muslims. The main difference between the two faction of Islam, Sunni and Shia explained plainly, concerns the identity of the Prophet Mohammad's legitimate successor. The Shias believe that Ali ibn-e Abu-Talib, Prophet's son-in-law is the righteous and legitimate successor, while the Sunnis believe in legitimacy of the Prophet's elected successor, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq.³³

The Hazaras are easily distinguishable from the other minorities due to their East Asian features. Some of researchers who have studied Hazaras, believe that Hazaras are descendants of Genghis Khan's invading armies of the 13th century.³⁴ Their identifiable appearance combined with their religious affiliation to Shia Islam has made them the target for persecution for centuries, not only institutional racism and abuse, but, at its most extreme, ethnic cleansing, genocide, and social exclusion as a servant underclass. This racist and bigoted behaviour against the Hazaras, drove them to margin of the Afghan society.

Today Hazaras may be found living in different provinces across Afghanistan, although the majority of the Hazara people originate from the mountainous highlands of central Afghanistan known as "Hazarajat", a (somewhat pejorative) name given by the Pashtun rulers.³⁵ In terms of geographical boundary, the map of Afghanistan does not illuminate any particular area named Hazarajat or Hazaristan. Generally, the Hazarajat is considered to include mainly the three provinces in central Afghanistan: Bamiyan, Uruzgan and Ghur [sometimes spelled as Ghòr/غور], but it also covers some parts of the neighbouring provinces such as Herat and Farah in the west, Qandahar and Zabul in the south, Ghazni, Parwan and Baghlan in the East and Badghis and Balkh in the north. This mountainous region is mostly infertile and somehow

³² Estimates vary, with different sources citing percentages.

³³ Matlabak.ir, "What are the main differences between Shia and Sunni?/؟ چیست؟".

³⁴ Yaroslav Trofimov, "Afghan Minority Savors its Pivotal Role in Runoff," *The Wall Street Journal*. (October 2009).

³⁵ Many Hazaras consider the concept of "Hazarajat" offensive to the Hazaras. In terms of terminology the word "jat" is used only for describing none-human and uncountable substances such as *Sabzijat* [Vegetables]. The Hazaras themselves prefer to call the area as "Hazaristan" which in Persian means *the land of Hazaras*.

isolated from the rest of the country due to poverty, lack of secure and proper roads and severe winter climate.

The Hazarajat or Hazaristan region has been and still is one of the poorest regions in Afghanistan, where lack of social, political and economic prospects together with bad security situation have resulted in the emigration of millions of Hazaras both nationally [known as internally displaced, IDP] and internationally to Pakistan and Iran and also to other continents such as Europe, Australia and America.

2.6 The great massacre of Hazaras by Afghan King

In an attempt to establish a strong and modern state, Afghan king Amir Abdul Rahman Khan (1888-1901) sent a letter to all tribal chiefs demanding to submit themselves to central administration. Some of the Hazara Mirs [tribal chiefs] mobilized and revolted against the King and a bloody war sparked between the Hazaras and the King in 1890. The Hazara forces who were familiar in the area, managed tactically to defeat the King's army by ambushing them in different locations and pushed them away from the Hazarajat borders in the first round. The King had to retreat tactically and change his strategy. He turned to the religious leaders and made them issue a *Fatwa* confirming Hazaras infidelity (kufr). Having the *Fatwa* in his hand, he turned the battle to a religious war and mobilized all Pashtun tribal chiefs to fight the *Infidel* Hazaras. The King's terms were simple "*The heads are mine and the trophies are yours.*" At the same time, he managed to infiltrate among the Hazara Mirs, divided them and then killed them all one by one. The war was horribly devastating for the Hazaras, where over 62% of the Hazara population were eliminated by King's army and hundreds of thousands young boys and girls were taken hostages and then sold as slaves in then-time India and other central Asian slave markets.

3.6 Forced Displacement of the Hazaras

Most of their fertile land were confiscated and given to the Pashtuns he transferred from the tribal areas in Pakistan. The remains of the Hazara population were forced into the narrow valleys of Hazarajat surrounding by high mountains, harsh nature with very limited fertile land and natural resources, isolated from the rest of the country. Due to its location, it spends half of the year under a thick blanket of snow which blocks the unsecure dirt roads and entirely isolates

the region from the rest of the country.³⁶ As Marzieh [in the prologue] has also mentioned in her story, the life in Hazarajat is unbearably harsh and especially in the winters. Despite multiple political upheavals in the Afghanistan, the situation of Hazarajat in terms of social, economic and political prospects remained unchanged.

Since the massive massacre of the Hazaras by the King Rahman in 1893, the Hazaras have been one of the most neglected and segregated ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Even though they had no share of the national budget, but they continued to pay taxes and serve in the Afghan army with no right to military grade promotion. Most of the Hazara youth who served in the military, served as personal servants for the Pashtun army officers at their homes. Hazaras were subjected for racism and ethnic discrimination for nearly one hundred years after the crackdown by the King Abul Rahman. The hundred years long oppression and violation against the Hazaras created a psychological trauma for the Hazaras. The pit of distrust and animosity between the Pashtun rulers and the Hazaras have steadily widened and deepened.³⁷

The lack of development and improvement in Hazarajat combined with Hazaras' continually persecution throughout the 20th century, have led to mass emigration of Hazaras from Hazarajat. Historically, Hazaras settled in the city of Quetta the provincial capital of Baluchistan in Pakistan and Mashhad in Iran. Millions of Hazaras spread out within Afghanistan to the major cities such as Kabul, Mazare-Sharif and Herat in pursuit of work to feed their families. They carried out hard labour for the lowest wage and lived under a bad socioeconomic condition. The socioeconomic situation of the Hazaras has never been a political issue to be discussed for none of the Kings and presidents. The very first government official who brought up the issue of Hazaras' bad socioeconomic condition was President Najibullah Ahmadzai, the last communist president who lost the battle to the Islamist Mujahedeen in 1992. He summed up the socioeconomic condition of the Hazaras in Afghanistan as: *"The condition of the Hazaras in the Afghan society is critical, they carry out the most difficult and lowest-paid jobs and they suffer intensively from poverty, illiteracy, and social and nationalist discrimination"*.³⁸

³⁶ Bamiyan TV, "Heavy snowfall and blockage of all routes to Hazarajat, live report from Hajigag valley". Filmed [February 2019]. YouTube video, duration. 4:40. Posted February 19th, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zshKgEZeGmM>

³⁷ Kazim Yazdani, a Hazara Historian who lives in Norway in conversation with Basil Nicobin, March 15th, 2019.

³⁸ Denise Philips, "Hazaras' Persecution Worsens: Will the New Government show Leadership by lifting the Suspension on Afghani Asylum Claims?" Australian Policy and History, June 28th, 2010, <http://aph.org.au/hazaras-persecution-worsens-will-the-new-government-show-leadership-by-lifting-the-suspension-on-afghani-asylum-claims/>

4.6 The Structural Discrimination Against the Hazaras

The socioeconomic discrimination against the Hazaras has not just forced on them from above in form of governments policy but also reinforced by the society, as they considered as donkey-slaves and second-class citizens who shared only the civil duties but deprived from civil rights. Hazaras who lived in the cities mixed with a majority of other ethnic groups, mainly Pashtuns and Tajiks, suffered from stereotypes and endured bullying and ethnic discrimination. According to Dawood Jafari a 50 years old Norwegian Hazara who was borne and grown up in Kabul under the reign of last King, Zahir Shah and the first president Mohammad Daoud Khan who took over the power through a coup and overthrew the long-lasting monarchy, Hazara kids who went to schools had to pay lots of money to their Tajik neighbours to forge national ID-cards in order to escape bullying and discrimination at school. The transformation of the political system from monarchy to the republic made no change in the situation for the Hazaras, many Hazaras consider the reign of Daoud Khan as one of the darkest periods for the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

The plight of the Hazaras and the way they discrimination against them is entrenched in the Afghan society was brought to the attention of the world for the first time by the Afghan-American writer Khaled Hussein through his famous novel *The Kite Runner*. The book illustrates numerous forms of discrimination the Hazaras are facing to in the Afghan society, such as being called “mice eaters/هزاره موشخور, flat-nosed/هزاره بینی پوچوق, and load-carrying donkeys/هزاره جوالی”.³⁹ Even though, after 2001 and the establishment of the new democratic government the situation has slightly changed for good, but the nature of ethnic discrimination against the Hazaras and the general up-down look of the society toward the Hazaras is still robust, its less expressed in words at least to their faces.

5.6 The Hazaras in the last three decades

The Soviet Union completed the withdrawal of its troops from in Afghanistan in February 1989. They gave up a war in Afghanistan that lasted for a decade and the Soviet failed to achieve its goal to wipe out the Mujahedeen and establish a strong communist state in Afghanistan. The Mujahedeen militants who made the resistance movement were a composition of multiple jihadist factions with different ethnic groups with one common cause; To overthrow the communist regime and establish an Islamic government with a constitution

³⁹ Khaled Hussein, *The Kite Runner* Riverhead Books, 2003.

based on the Islamic Shari'a law which is the right of the people of Afghanistan who are 99% Muslims. Each ethnic group had several jihadist parties who jointly fought against the Soviet invasion and Soviet-backed government of Dr Najibullah. When Najibullah's government surrendered to Mujahedeen in April 1992, the Mujahedeen factions entered the capital Kabul to claim their share of power in the new Islamic government that was promised to establish. Hazaras' Hezb-e Wahdat [Unity Party] led by Abdul Ali Mazari which was also a part of the Northern Alliance, also called United Front followed by Tajik's Shora-e Nezar led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masood along with Uzbek's Jonbesh-Melli forces led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum entered the capital Kabul.

These three groups which were allied in the battle against the communists, soon turned guns against each other when the newly-formed Islamic Government led by Burhanuddin Rabbani (Tajik) as the president and Ahmad Shah Masood (Tajik) as the minister of defence. Abdul Ali Mazari felt discriminated and marginalized. The Hazaras' Hezb-e Wahdat [Unity Party] settled in the Hazara populated area in west Kabul known as Dasht-e Barchi and Afshar. The unfair distribution of power sparked fierce battles between the Hazaras and ISA's forces in Kabul. One year later, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's (IRA) forces in a crackdown attempt launched a massive assault against Hezbe-Wahdat's headquarter in Afshar district in west Kabul. The battle continued in several days as the Wahdat's forces fought back. As breaking the frontline was difficult for IRA forces, they turned against the Hazara civilians and a frenzy of looting, raping, mass executions followed.

According to Human Rights Watch a huge number of Hazara civilians including women and children were mercilessly slaughtered. The exact number of victims vary, but many sources refer to around 750 people were massacred. The battle called 'Afshar Massacre' some of Hazara civil rights activist each year mourn the anniversary of the 'Afshar Massacre' by holding seminars and lighting up candles in the memory of the victims. They want also to attract the attention of the United Nations and the world's politicians to the issue of Hazaras. During the four years of chaos and lawlessness in the absence of a government, the different Mujahedeen warlords had their own realm of governance and were often in conflict with other groups. Many of the Mujahedeen factions are accused of human rights violations, the Hazara Hezb-e Wahdat [Unity Party] is one of them who are accused of abuse and violation of human rights during the conflicts in Kabul and also in the Hazarajat.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Annika Frantzell, "Human Security, Peacebuilding, and the Hazara Minority of Afghanistan," (Master diss., Lund Universitet, 2011).

6.6 The Hazaras in the Time of Taliban (1994-2001)

تاجیکها به تاجکستان، اوزبیکها به اوزبکستان، ترکمنها به ترکمنستان و هزاره ها به ایران یا به گورستان بروند، اینجا افغانستان است.

Tajiks must return to Tajikistan, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, Turkmen to Turkmenistan, and Hazaras must go either to Iran or to the graveyard— This is Afghanistan.

- A Taliban saying which none-Pashtun Afghans are familiar with.

“Hazaras are not Muslim. You can kill them. It’s not a sin.”

- Mulla Abdul Mannan Niazi, Taliban a high-ranked commander who later was killed in a drone attack by the US forces in Helmand province in South Afghanistan.

Amidst a chaos and brutality of the civil war, a new group of militants emerged. The Taliban, the religious students uniformed in black or white turbans promising the salvage of the Afghan people from war and all miseries resulting from lawlessness and chaos. All the Afghan people longed to live a life with dignity and prosperity under the rule of a true Islamic Shari’a law. The despairing people of Afghanistan who had suffered so much from the insecurity and brutality of the war, welcomed the Taliban with opened arms.

It is believed that the idea of Taliban as a militant group was first found amongst the Afghan religious students at the Madrassas⁴¹ in the Pakistani side of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many of the Pashtun Mujahedeen factions who controlled the southern provinces such as Kandahar and Helmand surrendered and integrated their forces into the Taliban. They had a piacular pace of progression in taking control over new territories without facing any serious resistance from the opponents. Within slightly over a year they entered the capital Kabul while the several Mujahedeen factions were in an immense war against each other.

The Taliban kept on their promise for a safe and egalitarian society under the flag of Islam until they entered Kabul. They practiced the Islamic Shari’a law by carrying out executions, amputations and torturing the suspects in public to bring order in the Afghan society. Although all the Taliban were ethnic Pashtuns and did not share power with other ethnic groups, the non-Pashtuns still did not give up their hopes for a just and lawful Islamic government. After entering Kabul, they required all the armed Mujahedeen including the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to put down their arms and surrender themselves to the Islamic Emirate of

⁴¹ A Madrasa a Muslim school, college, or university that is often part of a mosque

Afghanistan. Some of the Pashtun factions of the Mujahedeen joined the Taliban while non-Pashtun groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks refused and declared war against the Taliban. The Hazara leader of Hezb-e Wahdat-e Islami [The Islamic Unity Party] who had just suffered a massacre by the IRA forces in Afshar, considered the request from the Taliban as an opportunity to take a strategic move against the IRA.

The Hezb-e Wahdat leader Abdul Ali Mazari signalled his willingness for negotiation with the Taliban in Kabul.⁴² In the late winter of 1994, he accompanied with a team consisted of his eminent commanders such as Abuzar-e Ghaznavi, commander Ikhlas and General Abbasi and many others crossed the frontline to the Taliban side and then to be escorted further to Kandahar which served as the headquarter for Taliban and where Taliban's supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar resided.⁴³

The Taliban arrested Mazari and all his team, however. After days of torture in detention, they killed all the Hazara representatives. It was a critical historical turning point for the Hazaras, since Mazari was their only leader who had managed to unite many of Hazara Mujahedeen groups under one administration and gave hope to the Hazara people for a better future. The fate of Hazaras was again at stake, who is going to take over the leadership of the Hazaras, was a concerning question for the Hazaras. Mohammad Karim Khalili, Mazari's deputy took over the leadership, but he did not enjoy Mazari's charisma and popularity.

After the death of Mazari, Khalili moved party's headquarter to Bamiyan and withdrew all its forces from Kabul and divided them into other positions in Mazar-e Sharif, Ghazni and Bamiyan. The trinity of Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara formed again an alliance against the Taliban in the North and named it the United Front of the North or Northern Alliance. After some months of battle in Kabul the IRA left Kabul and moved the government's administration capital to Taloqan in the north. The Taliban continued to chase the IRA forces toward the north.

Many battles took place and Taliban suffered heavy losses. Two years later in 1996 the Taliban entered the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif and took control over the city. As the Taliban forces were not familiar with the city, the United Front launched a massive retaliation raid against the Taliban at night and took the city back from them. More than 2,000 Taliban forces were caught and massacred and hundreds of them were taken hostages and then summarily executed, their bodies dumped in wells or left in remote deserts to rot. Northern

⁴² Mohammad Eshaq Fayyaz, *The memoir of Martyred Mazari/ رهبر شهید مجموعه خاطرات از* (Kabul:Roohan Press, 2017) 661-685.

⁴³ There are several different stories about the assassination of Abul Ali Mazari and his commanders, the one mentioned in this paper is based on a common belief which is shared of many people.

Alliance forces blamed the Uzbek commander Rasul Pahlawan for this massacre, but by all accounts, all the Northern Alliance forces including Hezb-e Wahdat militia, took part in it.⁴⁴ The Taliban blamed the Hazaras and in retaliation to that, they imposed a blockade on southern Hazarajat which was under the control of Hezb-e Wahdat, the northern Hazarajat was virtually cut off because of the ongoing fighting in the neighbouring provinces and the blockade disconnected the southern Hazarajat from the rest of Afghanistan.

7.6 The Fall of Hazarajat

The Hazarajat region was surrounded, and all the transportation routes to Hazarajat were blocked by the Taliban. They did not let any food, medicine or any humanitarian assistance to reach the Hazarajat. The Hazarajat became a prison to the Hazaras. They suffered shortage of food and lack of medicine for over two years. Those who tried to flee should pass through the Taliban checkpoints, they were either killed or captured and put in the prison. After one year and eight months from the defeat, the Taliban remobilized to recapture the city of Mazar-e Sharif.

They launched an immense strike on the city and after a bloody conflict with Northern Alliance forces, the Taliban managed to retake the control over Mazar-e Sharif. Mulla Abdul Mannan Niazi who then was the commander for the Taliban forces justified Hazara-killing before the Taliban forces entered the city. He declared to his soldiers to show no mercy on Hazaras and kill them all. "The Hazaras are not Muslim, you can kill them, it is not a sin, they should either convert to Sunni or leave Afghanistan if they want to avoid death" he stated.

The Hazaras because of the central Asian feature are easy distinguishable, could not escape the bullet of Taliban. The Taliban showed no mercy on those who looked like a Hazara, no matter if the person was an old man, a woman or a child. They massacred over 2,000 people most of whom were Hazara civilians. After taking control over the city and killing as many as they could, they conducted house-to-house searches looking for Hazaras, killing many in front of their families.⁴⁵ Relatives who tried to retrieve their dead bodies were hindered by the Taliban, who said that the bodies had to lie in the streets until they are consumed by the dogs, as it had happened to the massacred Taliban forces in Mazar-e Sharif a year earlier. In addition

⁴⁴ Iesha Singh, "Exploring issues of violence within the recent context of the Hazarajat, Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey*, 2001.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Armed Conflict poses risk of further ethnic violence," October 7th, 2001.

to 2,000 dead, more than 4,500 Hazara men were rounded up and incarcerated for months, while hundreds fled the violence south towards Hazarajat under the rain of rocket fire and aerial bombardment.⁴⁶

One month later, the entire Hazarajat region too fell to the Taliban and the Hezb-e Wahdat leaders escaped to Iran. The Taliban captured Bamiyan and the Kuchi⁴⁷ nomads returned to Hazarajat and exacted revenge on them, beating, killing and torturing them for denying them access to Hazarajat in the past 12 years. The Taliban disarmed the Hazaras, confiscated their livestock and crops, and forced them to pay the sharecropping debts they had not paid for the past twelve years. The Hazara who remained in Hazarajat were under severe pressure and experienced traumatic situation. Two years later, in summer 2000, another severe massacre of Hazara civilians took place in near Robatak pass north of Bamiyan province. Many of Hazara immigrants who were being deported from Iran, captured by the Taliban, killed or put in the prison for years. There are parents, spouses, and children who still hope that their loved one who disappeared during 1996-2001 would return to them.

8.6 Post 2001: The socioeconomic situation of Hazaras

The terror attack on the twin towers of New York on September 11th, 2001, followed by the US invasion of Afghanistan a month later, turned a new page in the history of Hazaras and sown the seed of hope in the minds of Hazaras who lived in fear of further ethnic cleansing. They welcomed the invasion of Afghanistan and considered it as the beginning of a new era which bears a fundamental change in their fate, and they could escape their historic persecution and rise to a level of equality with other ethnic groups. Hundreds of thousands of Hazara refugees who lived for years in Iran and Pakistan and suffered from lack of legal residency papers and humiliating living conditions repatriated to their homeland to start again a life of dignity and equality under the new democratic constitution which bans all kinds of ethnic or religious discrimination. Afghanistan's constitution in its 22th article, recognizes all the Afghan citizens entitled to be treated respectfully and all the citizens are equal before the law and

⁴⁶ Hazarapeople.com, "Hazara Massacre in Mazar-e Sharif/ هلاکت عام هزاره ها در مزار شریف," August 8th, 2014. <http://www.hazarapeople.com/fa/?p=7734>

⁴⁷ 'Kuchi', an Afghan Persian word meaning 'those who go on migrations', is the common generic term, used by both Afghans and foreigners, for the nomads of Afghanistan, as it has been for many decades. The Kuchis in Afghanistan are ethnically and culturally Pashtun. They speak Pashtu and are Sunni Muslims in faith. The Persian word of 'Kuchi' comes from the word 'Kuch' which means 'move/migration', the called 'Kuchis' because they are always on the move. They live in tents and own flocks of sheep and camels and other animals (Rechard Tapper, 2008).

everyone beyond their ethnic or religious affiliation could be elect or be elected through a democratic process.⁴⁸

However, the Hazara populated areas did not attract intention of the international society, and they did not invest on the Hazara areas adequately. Even though the Hazarajat region was quickly liberated from Taliban control, the situation was remained dire. Many years of constant war and Taliban persecution followed by drought had further impoverished this traditionally poor region and destroyed its basic infrastructures and economic activities. Hazara-dominated areas across the country have suffered from a lack of proper sanitation drainage system, health care facilities, proper school buildings where classes could be held throughout a year, school supplies such pens, notebooks, books etc. and trained teachers, clean water, jobs, and proper roads. Almost all the Hazara populated areas in both provincial and district level have been deprived from the national budget and in the international aid for development.

According to Clayton Thomas' recent research on US' 18-years of engagement in Afghanistan, the United States alone has spent \$132 billion in Afghanistan for reconstruction purposes.⁴⁹ As most of the international societies' attention was focused on the major cities and districts the remote Hazara areas remained deprived from the foreign aids for development. The absence of proper roads, the lack of clinics, well-trained health personal, qualified teachers, school buildings and adequate school supplies presses the Hazara youth to emigrate to the cities in pursuit of labour and education. Due to their ethnic affiliation, often they face discrimination in the labour marked and from the non-Hazara government officials. Payam-e Aftab News Network which refers to an annual report from the U.S. secretary of state published in 2016, writes that the Hazaras as a minority group in Afghanistan suffer from ethnic discrimination in different levels.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ International Human Rights Commission-Afghanistan, "Set of constitutional laws/مجموعه قانون," April 2015.
<https://www.aihrc.org.af/media/files/Majmoa.pdf>

⁴⁹ Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy in Brief," *Congressional Research Service*. (February 26, 2019).
<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>

⁵⁰ Payam-e Aftab News Network, the Hazaras are still the victims of ethnic discrimination, "هزاره ها همچنان قربانی تبعیض قومی", (March 7th, 2017). <http://www.payam-aftab.com/fa/doc/news/66111>

Chapter 7

1.7 Understanding the Fatamiyyon Phenomenon

Even though the Fatamiyyon have been categorized as a mercenary group established, trained, equipped and funded by Iran's revolutionary guard corps (IRGC) aiming to protect Iran's political interests beyond its borders, but it distinguishes itself from the overall definition of 'proxy militarism'. One of the predominant distinctions which differentiate the Fatamiyyon from the other above-mentioned proxies is, the involvement of religious sentiment and the coercion of their socioeconomic condition. Many Fatamiyyon fighters who spoke to IRGC-linked medias, have denied the rumours spread out claiming that Fatamiyyon fighters gambling on their lives to gain mainly material rewards such as monthly payment, Iranian residence permit and so on. In a documentary film titled "A documentary film about the Fatamiyyon brigade in Syria" a Fatamiyyon commander named Mo'allem or the teacher, appears in front of the camera and tells the story of Fatamiyyon. He is an Afghan Shia, speaking in Iranian accent of Persian, wearing a military uniform marked with 'Ya Zaynab, O, Zaynab' and says, Mo'allem is his nickname:

Name, identity, nationality, ethnicity or profession means nothing here in the front. The only thing which matters here, is the passion and love toward the family of the Prophet. There people from around the world have come here to fight the 'takfiris' and protect the holy shrines. We never ask each other where we come from and, which language do we speak, we are all unified and fight for the same cause, and that is defend our belief. It doesn't matter whether its in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq or anywhere else.⁵¹

Mo'allem has seemingly devoted his entire life to the fight for his beliefs, there is no data available whether he survived or died in the war in Syria. In another documentary video titled 'Mostânade Fatehan-e Farda/ A Documentary about the Conquerors of Tomorrow' released on YouTube, a young Fatamiyyon fighter while he sheds tears says:

In the day of judgement, when we face with Imam Hussain, what should we answer him, if he asks us; you were there and, you were witnessing what happening to the shrines? We will be red-faced, embarrassed and will melt out of shame if we do nothing.⁵²

⁵¹ Bachehay-e Ghalam 3, "A documentary about the Fatamiyyon Brigade in Syria," YouTube Video, 23:46, June 26th, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQaBStetB6c>

⁵² Bachehay-e Ghalam 3, "A documentary about the Conquerors of Tomorrow," YouTube Video, 23:46, June 26th, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5G4Bo3eLBnM>

There are several sources which have conducted research on the Fatamiyyon, but there is no proportional distinction available illuminating the percentage of those fighters who joined the Fatamiyyon based on material interests and those who volunteered based on their religious beliefs. Many former members of the organization have spoken to medias, expressing their profound disappointment and blaming the Iranian regime for not keeping their promise on providing residence permit after accomplishing their mission in Syria.

The Fatamiyyon Corps as the biggest in-size Iran-backed militant group after the Lebanese Hezbollah consists of Shia Afghans who have been recruited predominantly from the over two million Afghan refugees residing legally/illegally in Iran. The emergence of Fatamiyyon therefore, differs from other mercenaries employed in the mercenary firms and those who share political aims with their patrons. The two mentioned types of mercenaries or proxies may have several options if the situation will not go according to their terms, they may go their own way, quit fighting or negotiate with another patron, like the Taliban in Afghanistan. Taliban as an insurgent group with a conservative religious ideology, enjoying multiple options and through years of insurgency, itself has been turned to an important player in the political theatre of Afghanistan. Even though the overall belief is based on patron-client relationship between Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI) and the Taliban, but in the recent years, the Taliban has demonstrated that they are able to act independently and negotiate their terms directly with the United States. They can interact with different patrons based on their own terms; they may not be dependent on only one patron.

There are multiple of Sunni Jihadi organizations such as al-Qaeda, Daesh and the Somali al-Shabab who operate internationally and the those like Hamas, Boko Haram and many other minor militant groups who operate locally. They have broader playground and, enjoy more independence to negotiate their terms with the patrons and act often as partner in the political game. Even though, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis as two Shia militant organization who receive military and financially support from the same patron as the Fatamiyyon does, are not comparable with Fatamiyyon. Both Hezbollah and the Houthis are two major political players and enjoy plenty of influence in the political arena of their home countries.

2.7 Th Nature of Fatamiyyon

The Fatamiyyon is a mixed of mercenary-Jihadi militant group with no political interests. Fatamiyyon is a spontaneous phenomenon the emerged out of a profound need for both the IRGC and the Fatamiyyon itself. When the war broke out in Syria in 2011, the IRGC needed

as many boots as possible on the ground to protect the pro-Iranian regime in Syria. Syria's strategic location plays a vital role for Iran's strategy to spread and maintain its influence in the Middle East. Losing Syria may deprive Iran from reaching its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon and furthering its anti-Israeli politics.

The Afghan Shia refugee population who lived in Iran for decades and suffered from marginalization, deprivation, social bullying and racism, needed an opportunity to gain respect, legal and financial rewards in the Iranian society. According to Ahmad Shuja and Afghan American scholar who studied Fatamiyyon, only few Fatamiyyon fighters have had military experience from Afghanistan, but the rest of the fighters who either born or lived most part of their lives in Iran have barely hold a gun. According to the interviewees, a vast majority of the Fatamiyyon members are manual labourers such as bricklayers, masons, painters and construction workers who have acquired a twenty to sixty days military training before they have been deployed to Syria. The lack of military experience has caused the Fatamiyyon a high rate of casualties where thousands of them killed and wounded. Fatamiyyon have been the cheapest mercenaries for Iran who give their lives in exchange to promises that barely have been materialized. Fatamiyyon have been reportedly used as 'canon fodder' in different fronts in Syria. They have been used to break the frontlines and recapture a position, leave to the Syrian Army and further chase the enemies to another position.⁵³ Even though the main purpose of the Fatamiyyon has been to protect to holy shrines which both located in Damascus, but evidences indicate that they have fought in distant fronts like in Tell Qarine in South Syria, Aleppo, Palmyra and Daraa which are hundreds of kilometres distant from the place where the shrines are located. One of the Iranian clerics in one of the videos linked above says: " They went (he refers to Fatamiyyon) to protect the holy shrines, but you find them in all fronts, they fight in Lebanon, the fight in Iraq, in Syria and they show up anywhere they needed."

3.7 The Emergence of Fatamiyyon Division

The question of how the Fatamiyyon division was founded is still ambiguous. Through my entire research period I tried to detect a clear answer about the establishment of Fatamiyyon Division. I have interviewed former Fatamiyyon members and I read plenty of online articles and sources.⁵⁴ I have never found a credible answer based on facts which are confirmed by reliable sources. I have read a variety of different and conflicting stories about the birth of

⁵³ Ahmad Shuja Jamal, "The Fatamiyyon Army: Reintegration Into the Afghan Society," *United States Institute of Peace*, March, 2019, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/sr_443-the_fatamiyyon_army_reintegration_into_afghan_society-pdf_0.pdf

⁵⁴ I have done internet searches in both languages, Persian and English, about 'How Fatamiyyon division was founded/ لشکر فاطمیون چگونه به وجود آمد',

Fatamiyyon. Everyone has his/her own version of the truth, but many of the sources I have accessed are telling a story which is more likely to be similar.

Mohammad Zakir (not his real name, all the interviewees have been given pseudonym) is 29 years old Hazara refugee who was born in Damascus, Syria and lived his entire life there and he is a former Fatamiyyon member. He still lives in Damascus. When I was doing my field work in Beirut, Lebanon in October 2018, I reached him through a common friend. In a conversation with me through an internet call with viber (a calling and messaging app) he said: the idea of defending the holy shrine of Sayyida Zaynab was first discussed in *his* friends circle in late 2012 while ISIS forces were getting closed to Damascus and threatened to destroy the Shia shrines. The long-lasting war, persecutions and poverty have scattered Afghans across the globe like pieces of shrapnel. Around 2,000 Afghan refugees ethnically Hazara who fled Afghanistan during Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan [1979-89] followed by a civil war, settled in southern suburb of Damascus where the shrine located.⁵⁵

Zakir claims that he was one of those who supported the idea and volunteered to encourage other refugee youths. Explains Zakir: We managed to absorb 22 people whom many of them were in their twenties. We approached the nearest military camp in southern Damascus and shared our concerns and desire to defend ourselves and the holy shrine with them. The colonel who led that camp asked for our contact detail and promised to contact us within a week.

After two days my friend Jafar called us for a meeting and then he said that the colonel has called him and confirmed that we can get a one-week military training and guns to form our own group to fight the ISIS. We formed our group and called it *Modafe-ein-e Haram*/مدافعين حرم *The Defenders of the Haram*. Our purpose was clear; save the shrine and not let the ISIS forces reach and disrespect the shrines which are eminent parts of our religious identity. I don't remember the exact date for our first operation, but we got involved in fighting right after we were equipped by AK-47 and RPG arms. Two of our colleagues were martyred [killed] and 3 were seriously injured in the first operation.

⁵⁵ Ahmad Shuja, "Syria's Afghan Refugees Trapped in a Double Crisis," *UN Dispatch.com* January 28th, 2013. <https://www.undispatch.com/syrias-afghan-refugees-trapped-in-a-double-crisis/>

Later, as the war intensively continued our group attended in many operations and I was wounded in an operation against ISIS in Aleppo and now I am retired. After that we succeeded in our operations, the Iranian IRGC agents approached us and asked for cooperation. Since our group did not receive adequate support from the Syrian military our leadership agreed to IRGC's demand. After some days they came back with a group of other Shia Afghans who spoke with Iranian Persian accent led by a guy called Alireza Tavassoli who wanted us to use his nickname 'Abu Hamed', then, after that our commander was killed, the group titled as the Fatamiyyon Brigade and Afghan IRGC agents took over the leadership and they shamelessly confiscated our cause for the benefit of the Iranian interests."

My personal contacts, who personally know Mohammad Zakir, have confirmed Zakir's story about the formation of the Fatamiyyon Division in Syria, and it appears reliable in light of other available sources about Fatamiyyon formation.⁵⁶

4.7 Alireza Tavassoli, The Founding Father of Fatamiyyon

As expected, sources affiliated with Islamic Republic depict a very different picture about the establishment of the Fatamiyyon Division, a picture which highlights the significance of Alireza Tavassoli [Abu Hamed's] role in the formation and establishment of the organization. Tavassoli was an Afghan Shia from the Hazara ethnic group. He was born in 1962 in Afghanistan. In his teens he and his family moved to Iran and he studied Islamic theology at an Islamic learning centre in Iran and became an Afghan Khomeinist devotee.

In the 70s when different Afghan Mujahedeen groups fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, he joined an IRGC-generated militia group called *Sepah-e Mohammad* [The Army of Mohammad, the Prophet], *Sepah-e Mohammad* consisted of Afghan Shia fighters, predominantly from the Hazara ethnic group. Due to his talent, Tavassoli rose quickly to become one of the militia group's commanders. In the same years while Iran fought a war against Iraq, Tavassoli joined the war efforts and led a group of Afghan volunteers called *Tipp-e Abuzar* [The Abuzar Brigade] in southern Iran. In the 90s when the Taliban launched assaults on the Hazara dominated area in Afghanistan, he returned to Afghanistan and fought against the Taliban. Later, as the Northern Alliance was defeated, he returned to Iran and lived there with his family.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Mohammad Zakir (former Fatamiyyon fighter) in a conversation with Basil Nicobin through telephone, *Beirut Lebanon* (October 15th, 2018).

⁵⁷ Shohada Akhbarjahadi, "Album-e Shohada," شهید علیرضا توسلی (September 28th, 2017) <http://shohada.akhbarjahadi.ir/2017/09/28/>

In 2013 he joined the Syrian war and became the “brave, devoted, sharp-minded and humble soldier of Islam who was present anywhere needed, sometime in Afghanistan, some time in Iraq, sometime in Syria and sometime in Palestine.”⁵⁸

Many of the IRGC affiliated sources acknowledge and admire him as founder of the Fatamiyyon and a close friend to IRGC’s Quds forces’ commander general Qasem Suleimani. In pictures published by IRGC sources Tavassoli [Abu Hamed] appeared with Suleimani hugging each as close friend.⁵⁹ Tavassoli was killed in early 2015 in a battle in Tell Qarine in southern Syria. Sources linked to the Islamic Republic say he was killed in a mortar attack launched by the rival al-Nusra Front. However, due to a split between the IRGC and its proxy fighters, some Fatamiyyon members believe that the IRGC itself may have killed Tavassoli in a drone strike, not a rocket attack, because he had become too powerful and too independent.⁶⁰

In a weblog post published in May 14th, 2017 which allegedly written by Alireza Tavassoli’s wife, the story of Fatamiyyon establishment is portrayed differently than the one Mohammad Zakir himself described. Ummul Banin Hosseini, the author of the weblog post and reportedly Alireza Tavassoli’s wife, narrates that Tavassoli was the first person who came with the idea of defending the holy shrines:

—He had just returned from Kabul; he was profoundly touched from the pictures aired by the television from the war in Syria. He often expressed his deep concern about the situation and the escalation of war that threatened the Shia holy sites. In conversations with his friend who visited him at our home he talked about the need of their contribution to the resistance front. It’s a war of ‘right and wrong’ and we who consider ourselves as Shias, its our religious obligation to help the oppressed. Those days our home had become a meeting point for groups of men constantly visited Tavassoli, I did not know much about the contain of their discussions, but I knew that the war in Syria was the highlighting subject in their long conversations. One night in those busy nights, Tavassoli came to me and said: I want to discuss with you an important issue, I knew somehow what it was, I am listening I said. The situation in Syria is worsening, the takfiris are getting closed to Shia areas and the holy shrines of Sayyida Zaynab and

⁵⁸ Rahimpour Azghadi, (a Shia cleric) describing Tavassoli’s personality and praising his sacrifice in his funeral ceremony, *Mashhad, Iran* (March 6th, 2015) <http://www.takrimeshahid.ir/2016/09/06/>

⁵⁹ Defapress, “Pictures of the Haram defender martyr/ تصاویری از شهید مدافع حرم” <http://defapress.ir/fa/news/281332/>

⁶⁰ Ahmad Shuja, “Fatemiyyoun Arme: Reintegration into Afghan Society,” United States Institutes of Peace (March, 2019) https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/sr_443-the_fatemiyyoun_army_reintegration_into_afghan_society-pdf_0.pdf

Syyida Roqayya, the takfiris have no other purpose but only one, and that is to eradicate Shias from the face of the Earth.

He referred to the event of Ashura and how Shias have always been subjected for oppressions and brutalities throughout the history. Now I together with some of my friends have decided to accomplish our religious duty and protect Shias and the Shia values. Everybody has a duty and so do we. Now we are determined to start the journey, if you give me the permission.

We are immigrants here, what is the use to go and fight in a distant part of the world? I said. As Imam Khomeini said *Islam has no border*, he said and continued, for us the ideological frontiers are more important than the geographical borders. We go there to defend our ideological borders. As a matter of fact, we are going there to prevent the repetition of another severe Ashura, he said.⁶¹ [In Persian, my translation].

I have sent an email to the administrator of the weblog asking to conduct an interview with Ummul Banin Hosseini, but I have never received any response. This is the story shared by the regime-linked medias. The stories told by the former Fatamiyyon fighters both of those who returned to Afghanistan and those who fled to Europe, explicitly contradict with the picture pro-IRGC medias depict. Former Fatamiyyon fighters describe Fatamiyyon as a grand IRGC project that is fabricated to defend Islamic Republic's geopolitical interests. Some of the members may have joined the Fatamiyyon due to their religious beliefs, while some others for youthful military adventurism, but the vast majority of Fatamiyyon fighters have been motivated by economic deprivation and vulnerability due to the status of their residence permit in Iran.

The stories told by the Fatamiyyon fighters reveal that a mix of material and religious motivations combined with youth military adventurism and pilgrimage of the shrines are the main motivators for the deployment of the Afghan Shia fighters in the Syrian conflict. It is also noticeable that in some cases, the motivation factor has been transformed through a process. A former Fatamiyyon fighter named Mohammadullah in an interview Iranwire website has said:

I lived in Afghanistan, when my father told me to get ready for a travel to Iran. Your uncle is wounded and is in a hospital in Iran. I came to Iran to visit my uncle in the hospital, he was one of the Fatamiyyon commanders in the front. Other Fatamiyyon fighters who were in their mid-term vocation visited him regularly and talked

⁶¹ Ummul Banin Hosseini, "How was the Fatamiyyon Established," *Modafeharam Blog* (May 14th, 2017). <http://modafeharam.blog.ir/post/>

interestingly about the pilgrimage, adventures and most importantly the 10-years residence permit in Iran. To me, as a youth who has just arrived from Afghanistan, a country with no clear economic perspective for making a future combined with the daily security threats posed from the Taliban, sounded promising. I enlisted myself as a volunteer, then I along with hundreds of other Shia Afghans volunteers were sent to a military training centre in the Yazd province. After a 20-days training, we were moved to Damascus and divided into several groups with one IRGC person in command. Performing pilgrimage of the holy shrine of Sayyida Zaynab was a part of the procedure before being deployed to the fronts. During the pilgrimage and listening to the preacher who described what Daesh [ISIS] are doing to the Syrian people and the damages of the shrine done by ISIS fighters, led to a profound mental transformation in me. I forgot about the material rewards, the money, the residence permit all gone. Defending the holy shrines and fighting ISIS became my main objective.⁶² [In Persian, my translation].

As the above-mentioned Fatamiyyon veteran describes, the IRGC officials arguably use the holy shrine as a psychological tool to provoke the volunteers' religious sentiments at their arrival in Damascus. There are several stories which shares similar description as the one above. For the IRGC, its vital to make sure that the fighters fight for a cause they believe in, rather than just to fight for money and material advantages. However, the material rewards play major role for the fighters. Even the fighters who mentioned religious belief as their only motivation, their earning as fighter in Syria exceeded their modest income as labourer in Iran or Afghanistan. During my research I figured out that most of the fighters were eldest sons, fathers, or husbands and generally the breadwinners for their family. There are around one million undocumented Afghan refugees living in Iran. Most of them are legally and economically vulnerable. Even those who can find jobs often have their salary withheld by their Iranian employers. Amir who has lived his entire live in Iran says:

My father worked in a stone factory outside the city. He stayed at work and came home once a week to avoid being arrested by the highway police who frequently stopped the vehicles and checked for undocumented refugees. His employer withheld his salary and paid only half of it, to keep the employees work for him and use it as a tool to frighten

⁶² Sirat Shayegan, "Yazd Garrison, a Secret Training Centre for the Afghan Fighters" *Iran Wire* June 28th, 2018. <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/27033>

the undocumented Afghans by calling the police and get them deported if they did not obey him.

Many of these undocumented Afghans joined the Fatamiyyon in Syria because of their vulnerable situation in Iran. Even the Afghan refugees who have an extendible residence permit in Iran, are not allowed to travel freely within Iran. They need a *barg-e taraddod*, or travel paper that is only valid for a few days. The Iranian police officials issued travel paper for those who were interested in deployment to Syria, regardless of their residency status to facilitate their undisturbed movement between the cities to reach the registration centres. After the enrolment they also expected to receive *barg-e eqamat*, or residency permit valid for one year that can be renewed annually for up to ten years. In case of death, fighters' families are entitled to receive the above-mentioned rewards. Even though the Afghan fighters may have gone to Syria to escape poverty, but because of sanctions, and the steady decreasing value of the Iranian currency [rial] relative to the Afghani, their income did not pull them out of poverty. Since 2016 the monthly salary of the Fatamiyyon has also decreased from \$600 to \$250 in 2018. As the war in Syria winded down, the IRGC has began to downsize the number of Fatamiyyon by decreasing the amount of their salary and stopped enlisting new fighters. There are no evidence showing that IRGC has had recruitment centres inside Afghanistan. According to a former Fatamiyyon fighter, IRGC did not to run recruitment centres inside Afghanistan, because they had access to millions of Afghan refugees in Iran. Concurrently, social medias such as Facebook, Instagram, and Telegram unconsciously served IRGC in attracting more volunteers to join. Propaganda pictures produced by the IRGC affiliated medias about the war fronts in Syria and broadly republished in the social medias, played a significant role in outreaching and absorbing more volunteers to join. Even though high-profile Shia clerics such as Ayatollah Mohammad Ishaq Fayyaz who is based in Najf, Iraq has in multiple occasions opposed the fight in Syria as an Islamic religious duty and asked the Islamic Republic to stop sending the desperate Shia Afghans to the Syrian war.⁶³ The poverty, insecurity, deprivation and despair combined with IRGC's propaganda machine made the clerics' voice fade away in chaos and never heard.

⁶³ Fayyaz is a well-known Shia Ayatollah and is based in Najaf, Iraq. He is originally a Hazara Shia from Afghanistan, and has studied and lived his almost entire life in Najaf, Iraq. <http://www.afghanpaper.com/nbody.php?id=77529>

Conclusion

In late 2013, when the picture of an Afghan Shia militia wearing military uniform and holding a Russian-made machinegun in Syria, published on the internet, went viral on social medias and shocked the Afghans who never imagined that such a thing could be possible. Sunni fighters who fought abroad under the banners of al-Qaeda, ISIS and other militia groups were a common phenomenon. In contrary, the involvement of the Hazara Shias from Afghanistan in a war thousands of kilometres away from Afghanistan was unimaginable. Subsequently as the war intensified in Syria, the name of Tip-e Fatamiyyon/ Fatamiyyon Brigade gradually became familiar.

The Fatamiyyon which is created, equipped and trained by the Iranian IRGC forces has suffered heavy losses where thousands of its fighters have been killed and around 8,000 others reportedly have been injured. As the name of the organization stem from Fatemeh the grand daughter of prophet Mohammad and the wife of Shia's first Imam, Ali ibn-e Abu Talib, the organization's primary aim is to protect the 'holy shrines' of Sayyida Zaynab and Sayyida Roqayya which both are located in Damascus and are being visited by hundreds of thousands of Shia pilgrims from around the world. The medias linked to the Iranian regime call them 'the defenders of the shrines and the fighters without borders' referring to Ayatollah Khomeini's (the founding father of the Islamic revolution) quote that said: "Islam has no border". After that the war in Syria winded down for the benefits of the Syrian regime, the question of Shia militia groups backed by Iran has attracted attentions. One of the prominent militia groups who fought under the direct command of IRGC and the Lebanese Hezbollah is the Fatamiyyon corps which is estimated to have 15,000-20,000 fighters who have been recruited by the IRGC forces among the over two million Afghan refugees residing in Iran.

Sources linked the Iranian regime claim that the Fatamiyyon fighters have been voluntarily deployed to Syria based on their religious sentiments and to perform their religious duty which is protecting the holy sites of Shias which Daesh [ISIS] has threatened to destroy. There are

explicit paradoxes in Iran's own allegations about Fatamiyyon's aim of fight. According to one of my interviewees who is born and grown up in Syria, there are only two Shia shrines in Syria and they both are in Damascus, but most of Fatamiyyon fatalities have been taken place in other places than Damascus. Even Alireza Tavassoli the founder of the organization and his deputy Fateh were killed in a battle in Tell Qarine, a place in Southern Syria close the Golan heights. If the main goal was to protect the shrines, the Fatamiyyon forces should have remained in Damascus and protect the shrines. But they have reportedly conducted operations in many fronts far away from Damascus such as in Palmyra, Aleppo, Daraa, Tell Qarine and many other positions.

Iran has been accused by the Afghan government, prominent Shia clerics and the international medias for exploiting the misery of the Afghan refugees in Iran and sending them to Syria to serve Iran's geopolitical interests. Iran has continually denied the accusations and stated that the Afghans are being volunteered to fight in Syria to perform their religious duty and to protect the Shias' holy sites. Many of the former Fatamiyyon fighters who have spoken to the media, have expressed their disappointment from the Iranian government and have accused the Iranian government for the mistreatment of the Afghan refugees in Iran and exploiting their misfortune and poverty for Iran's political aims. Over two million Afghan refugees predominantly from the Hazara ethnic group who have suffered historical persecutions and structural violence in Afghanistan, live in Iran. Most of these Afghans are undocumented and are being considered as illegal immigrants who have no legal rights.

They are working on the farms, construction sites, mines and harsh manual labours which the Iranian citizens do not do. They are less paid and are consistently living under stress of being captured and deported to Afghanistan, where they face no better condition. Despite living decades in Iran, they still have no rights to buy properties, study in the governmental universities or receive Iranian citizenship. This vulnerability has made the Afghan refugees a pool of cheap lives for Iran to sacrifice for its political goals. Many of the Fatamiyyon fighters have been promised to be granted Iranian resident permit that is extendible up to 10 years combined with a monthly salary which in the beginning was more than the amount an Afghan refugee can earn in manual labouring in Iran. The salary was decreased gradually as the war flame in Syria began to wind down and the issue of residence permit remained unsolved.

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