



## The Two Faces of the Fatemiyun (I): Revisiting the male fighters

**Author :** Mohsen Hamidi

**Published:** 8 July 2019

**Downloaded:** 7 July 2019

**Download URL:**

<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-admin/post.php>



Over the last eight years, thousands of Afghan men and some boys have fought on the side of the Iran-supported Assad government in Syria as members of the Fatemiyun group. Although they are sent to Syria from Iran and supported by the Iranian government, Tehran describes the group as “self-motivated.” This dispatch, which is the first in a two-part series, explores why so many Afghan men decided to join the group and what the consequences of this might be for Afghan society at large. Given the recent drawdown of Syria’s armed conflict, many of these men are now returning home, either to Iran or Afghanistan. This return is fraught with complexities. AAN guest author Mohsen Hamidi\* also examines the reports that warn of a Fatemiyun threat in Afghanistan and notes how the Syrian war has become a way of life for some of these men, for better or for worse.

*A second dispatch will look at the women behind the Fatemiyun fighters, exploring their roles and experiences as their men go to war in Syria – and return home.*

*Afghans in the Syrian war: the context*

The Iranian government has been a major actor in the catastrophic war in Syria. (1) It has deployed or supported proxy forces there as part of its policy to maintain and strengthen what it



calls the 'Axis of Resistance', which, in its eyes, stretches to Palestine through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Yemen. (2) Iran denies any role in forming or supporting any proxy force. It calls those fighting in Syria, for example, 'self-motivated' and argues individuals went there of their own accord in order to 'defend their faith.' It sees its role in the region as legitimate and itself as acting in self-defence against threats faced from the United States and Israeli governments and the risks of regional instability that threaten its allies such as the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria (details in this [RUSI paper](#)).

One of the proxy forces deployed to Syria by the Iranian regime has been the Fatemiyun, a group of thousands of Afghan men who have fought on the side of the Syrian government since 2012/2013. The group has played a small, but not insignificant, role in the conflict in Syria.

The name 'Fatemiyun', meaning 'followers of Fatema', was chosen on religious grounds. According to a 9 Khordad/Jawza 1394 (30 May 2015) [report](#) by Kayhan, considered a hard-line Iranian newspaper, the group was named after Fatema Zahra, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, because it was formed during her traditional annual commemoration days (year not specified in the report).

Drawing on official Iranian historiography and individual founder biographies, Tobias Schneider, research fellow at the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi), presented the group's 'origin story' in an October 2018 [paper](#). (3) These sources trace the roots of the Fatemiyun to "a small and fluctuating number of [Afghan] volunteers organised as the Muhammad Corps [Sepah-e Muhammad]" that fought in a series of wars, including the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion and the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, as well as against the Taliban regime in the 1990s. (4) According to this history, the fighters moved to Iran from post-2001 Afghanistan because of what Schneider calls "fear of prosecution by the new Afghan government and its American-led coalition backers." The history continues that in about 2011 (the exact year is not specified in the paper):

*...when the Syrian conflict erupted, the group's commander Ali-Reza Tavassoli, known as Abu Hamed, and senior cleric Mohammad Baqir Alaoui [Alawi] petitioned the Iranian government for his then 22-25 fighters based around Mashhad to be sent to Syria to defend the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab. [5] The request was swiftly approved in Tehran under the new umbrella of the "Fatemiyoun."*

Checking for facts, Schneider writes, "Kayhan's historical account appears to correspond to the individual biographies of senior Fatemiyoun commanders who were killed in battle and whose exploits could be recounted." Of this founding generation of commanders that have all been killed in action in Syria, he names Ali Reza Tavassoli, Sayyed Hakim, Hossein Fedai Abdarchi, Reza Khavari and Sayyed Ibrahim. Their biographies indicate they fought for Iran in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and against the Taliban in the 1990s, most probably as part of the Shia factions that made up Hezb-e Wahdat.

The picture on the ground seems far messier, in contrast to the coherent historical narrative



presented above. According to this author's research, for instance, one senior Fatemiyun commander and several members of the group were working as part of the security forces of the US-backed Afghan government post-2001. The commander had even worked in a private security company for a while, offering protection to convoys transporting supplies for the US-led foreign troops. He then quit and left to join the Fatemiyun in Iran.

It was only after former fighters who had been captured by rebels in Syria or fled to seek asylum in Europe began to speak to journalists and researchers, from 2015 onwards, that information started to emerge about this "Afghan face to the Syrian conflict" (see AAN [reporting](#) in June 2015 and this April 2016 [report](#) from BBC Persian). This reporting indicated that because the Syrian government had been running out of soldiers, its allies such as Iran had started mobilising proxy groups like the Afghan Fatemiyun to bolster its forces.

### *Mobilising fighters: differing perspectives*

Within a couple of years after 2011, the year in or around which discussions about forming the group probably started, the Fatemiyun group grew dramatically from a small core composed of a handful of individuals to thousands of fighters. The sudden growth of the Fatemiyun was due, in large part, to a pervasive recruitment campaign in Iran since 2012/2013, described as "maddening" (in the sense of disabling one's rational thinking) by an Afghan man who wished to join the group, but was prevented from doing so by his family (he then returned to Herat where he spoke to AAN). According to recent reporting, out of the roughly three million Afghan refugees and migrants living in Iran, an estimated 50,000, entirely Shia Hazaras and Sayyeds, joined the group. At its peak, there were an estimated 10,000-20,000 active Fatemiyun. (6)

In several reports, some of them based on original research, one question stood out: why had so many Afghans joined the Fatemiyun to fight a war in someone else's country? All in all, two main explanations have been offered – both of which have been rejected by the group and its Iranian backers.

The dominant explanation has focused on the circumstances under which Afghans live in Iran. It says that Iran was able to successfully mobilise Afghans, especially those without papers, by offering various benefits, such as better pay (than they were getting elsewhere), more permanent residence permits and the promise of 'social recognition' gained by going to war in Syria. For most Afghans who joined the Fatemiyun, life in Iran was so miserable that it seemed a good option. Writing for the Middle East Institute, researcher Lars Hauch [sums](#) up this point of view:

*[The] underlying violence is more structural than direct. The authorities in Iran have put them [Afghans] in such a horrible situation that many of them actively decide to join the Fatemiyoun because it's the only thing they can do to address the devastating feeling of not being accepted as human beings, to feel power in their lives, and find some sense of meaning, however fleeting.*



This perspective might clarify why Afghans were susceptible to joining the Fatemiyun when the Iranian government, in particular the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), launched its active recruitment campaign. In November 2015, [The Guardian](#), for instance, reported regular recruitment by the Iranian regime particularly through mosques in cities such as Qom and Mashhad – which are holy places for Shia Muslims – where “the [Afghan] refugees, usually young men, sign up on a daily basis to go and fight for Iran in Syria.” According to this report, Afghan men approached these mosques, queuing to get registered for joining the war in Syria, and conditions of recruitment were easy: “those interested have to prove they are Afghan, and singles or minors must have parental consent.” According to this author’s research, however, many youths joined the group without the consent of their families.

There were also cases of coerced enlisting of undocumented Afghans in Iran, as [reported](#) by Human Rights Watch in January 2016:

*Iran has not just offered Afghan refugees and migrants incentives to fight in Syria, but several said they were threatened [by Iranian police] with deportation back to Afghanistan unless they did. Faced with this bleak choice, some of these Afghan men and boys fled Iran for Europe.*

Afghan children have also been recruited into the Fatemiyun. In October 2017, [Human Rights Watch](#) presented cases of Afghans not yet 18, including a boy as young as 14, who had fought and died in Syria and had then been brought back to be buried in cemeteries across Iran.

While the vast majority of Fatemiyun members have been recruited in Iran, some men and boys in Afghanistan, again all Shia Hazaras and Sayyeds, were also attracted and joined the group, as has been reported from [Bamyan](#), [Herat](#), [Mazar-e Sharif](#) and through an “unofficial recruiting centre in west [Kabul](#).” In most cases, they either decided to join the group themselves or were encouraged by pro-Iran Afghan clerics to do so. These men and boys first went from Afghanistan into Iran through smuggling and from there were enlisted to fight in Syria.

The second explanation for why so many Afghans decided to join the Fatemiyun focuses not so much on external pressures and conditions, but rather on the individual fighters and their choices. There is some research that views the Syrian war as an arena in which diverse actors – ranging from states to individuals – have sought to maintain, transform or gain social, political and economic capital to pursue their interests in and through the conflict. (7) Seen from this perspective, different actors, including individuals, have been pursuing their different interests in and through the armed conflict in Syria.

Drawing on this second perspective, previous [AAN research](#) showed that some Afghan youths who had failed to integrate back into their local communities in Afghanistan and then failed in their efforts to get to Europe opted instead to go to the Syrian battlefield. In their view – and of their peers and families – it was a means to show they had matured into ‘responsible’ men fighting a ‘just’ war, thereby achieving identity and status. By defending Shia shrines, as they viewed it, they won recognition for themselves, their families and Afghan communities in Iran. More importantly, their wages as Fatemiyun fighters meant they could support their parental



families. Some even later married and established their own families in or moved them to Iran. They regarded Iran as a safer and better place to live than Afghanistan, given their improved, post-fighting in Syria status, at least for now.

Neither explanation tallies with the Iranian government's (and by extension Fatemiyun's) view of Afghan participation in the Syrian war, however. Both have justified the fighters' 'voluntary' participation as the need to defend Shia shrines and especially the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab (one of the great grand-daughters of the Prophet) in southern Damascus, against assaults by the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS/ISIL/Daesh) – only an explanation after June 2014 when the group declared itself – and other 'takfiris' (who believe in killing Muslims of other sects and schools, especially Shias).

The official explanations have thus focused on religious faith as the fighters' key and even sole motivating factor. As a staunch, long-time Fatemiyun member told AAN, "Nothing material can make someone sacrifice their life." Iranian officials have said they find the singling-out by reporters and observers of the Fatemiyun "bizarre," because, from their [standpoint](#), "there is no reaction to the recruitment of Afghan citizens by the IS in West Asia [Middle East]." (8)

It is not clear how many or indeed whether Afghans have gone to Syria to fight against the Assad government. There seems to be some, suggested a 2015 [AAN dispatch](#) without giving more detail: Syria had turned, it said, into an "odd meeting place" for Afghans, with both Shia and Sunni Afghans pitted against one another there. Yet, given the relative lack of reporting on Sunni Afghan fighters, it seems doubtful that their numbers have in any way matched those of the Fatemiyun.

Some Fatemiyun fighters were certainly religiously motivated from the outset. Also, in many cases, what they say about why they fought changed – from saying they wanted to fight for Iran to get benefits, to defending a 'just' religious cause in Syria. This change in perception or self-justification appears to have come following their initial or subsequent deployments to the war and socialisation with comrades. The religious justification is very apparent in official Iranian and Fatemiyun narratives which fighters came to adopt, which references broader aims, such as defending Shia shrines and the faith as a whole, guarding defenceless people and securing not just Syria, but also the broader region, including Iran and Afghanistan against Islamic State incursions.

It also has to be stressed that, far from defending Shia shrines, the Fatemiyun have been deployed by Iran and the Syrian government far more widely: the photograph accompanying this piece, for example, is from Palmyra (Tadmur) which is a long way from any Shia religious sites which cluster around Damascus, with a couple more in the northern city of [Aleppo](#). As Fullbright scholar Ahmad Shuja Jamal [wrote](#):

*... the Fatemiyoun has been deployed in most of the Syrian theater and used to spearhead operations to recapture territory, which then would be handed to Syrian troops to hold. The Fatemiyoun fighters either operate alone or, in some of the toughest battles like the recapture of*



*Palmyra and Deir Ezzor, fight in conjunction with other so-called resistance forces, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Pakistani Shia mercenary force of Zeinabiyoun, and Russian forces...*

Moreover, he writes that “[the] Fatemiyoun are sometimes referred to as “cannon fodder” for their deployment as an expendable force. Stories of high casualties in several Fatemiyoun operations appear to bear this out.”

### *Returning ‘home’: complexities*

Given the very high casualty figures, large numbers of Fatemiyun fighters have returned to Iran injured or it is their remains that have been returned. One August 2015 [study](#) estimated there had been 121 deaths between January 2013 and August 2015 based on open-source data alone. A later [paper](#) in November 2018 put the dead and wounded in action rates respectively at 10 and 30-40 per cent in the period 2013-17, indicating 2,000 killed and 6,000-8,000 injured from among what the paper estimated was a peak strength of 20,000 active Fatemiyun members.

The Iranian authorities have glorified fallen [fighters](#) by naming streets after them, praising their sacrifices through state media and providing their families with livelihood [support](#). They have also paraded their coffins and buried them in high-status [cemeteries](#) in Iran. This includes Behesht-e Zahra in Tehran where some fallen Fatemiyun fighters have been buried in a special section near the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, the architect of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, and next to thousands of Iranian soldiers who died in the 1980s war with Iraq.

It seems the Iranian authorities might also fear that Fatemiyun returnees to Afghanistan could reveal details about the group’s internal affairs. This author has heard from two families that Fatemiyun members who wanted to quit and return to Afghanistan were likely to run into troubles with their previous organisation and its Iranian patrons. A Herat-based sister of a Fatemiyun fighter said their family thought her brother’s death in a traffic accident in Iran was a “conspiracy” because “the Iranians didn’t want him to get back to Afghanistan and somehow disclose their secrets.” She said her brother was a Fatemiyun commander and had been about to step down and come back home. In another instance, on a short visit back to Herat, a former Fatemiyun fighter said that Fatemiyun members were afraid of what the Iranians would do to them if they decided to abandon the group and return to Afghanistan. That is why they tended to hide their travel plans from both their Afghan and Iranian supervisors or lie to them about where they were going, as he had done himself (eg saying they were going on a pilgrimage to Mashhad city in Iran while actually visiting family in neighbouring Herat across the border). Although it is impossible to verify these statements, they at least indicate that some Fatemiyun men may be so entangled in the Syrian engagement that they cannot easily get out of it even if they wanted to.

As for coming back to Afghanistan, several sources have reported that thousands of Fatemiyun members have returned home. In April 2019, for instance, the Associated Press [quoted](#) an unnamed “senior official in Afghanistan’s Interior Ministry who is familiar with government



intelligence” as saying that “[roughly] 10,000 veterans of the [Fatemiyun] brigade have returned to Afghanistan.” In his March 2019 study of the Fatemiyun, Jamal says that “[individual] Fatemiyun fighters are returning to Afghanistan in the thousands.” (9)

However, these numbers are disputed and likely wrong. First, they are based on government intelligence (in the first source quoted above) and we do not know how this information is gathered or checked. Second, the vast majority of men joined the Fatemiyun in a bid to turn Iran into a more permanent ‘home’ for themselves and their families including by taking their families there. This casts doubt over their returning to Afghanistan in such high numbers.

Regardless of the number of Fatemiyun returnees, all existing reporting, including research, concurs that they struggle to return to civilian life and to find adequate and meaningful employment in order to make a decent living for themselves and their families. As Jamal writes, “Many fighters returned to the same kind of economic difficulties that they sought to escape by going to Syria.” (10)

The returnees to Afghanistan face other serious concerns, too. First, they fear a possible crackdown by Afghan government security agencies for participating in a foreign war. According to Jamal, besides the Law on Crimes against Internal and External Security, the Penal Code of 2018 (which has been revised and went into effect in February 2019) provides a clue on how ex-fighters such as Fatemiyun returnees could be treated by the criminal justice system. (11) The code (article 245 (4)) stipulates “long-term imprisonment” for those taking part in “wars or internal armed conflicts of other countries.” (12) As Jamal writes, however, Afghan government security agencies such as the Ministry of Interior and the National Directorate of Security are not actively looking for Fatemiyun returnees because “their hands are full with more pressing threats” (13) notably the ongoing full-scale insurgency across Afghanistan.

Second, Fatemiyun returnees are afraid of retaliation by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the local IS franchise. Some potential links, for example, already exist between ISKP-claimed attacks against Shias in and around Herat city and the participation of some young men from Herat in the Syria war (see this previous [AAN dispatch](#)), to say the least.

Third, added to the above, is the recent designation in January 2019 by the [US Treasury](#) of the Fatemiyun Division (in Iranian military ranking) for ‘terrorism’ and ‘human rights abuses’ – charges that have been vehemently rejected by the Fatemiyun [themselves](#). Some Afghan politicians, including Muhammad Mohaqqueq, former second deputy to the government’s Chief Executive, also think they have done nothing wrong.

As Jamal says, there could be “better options” both for the returning fighters as well as to “keep similarly vulnerable young men out of foreign conflicts.” (14) The Afghan government could clarify its stance on how it intends to deal with the returnees and, if prosecution is not its intended course of action, it could help assuage fears among ex-Fatemiyun fighters. This could be followed by reintegration, eg through the provision of employment opportunities, including within the security and defence forces. Jamal concludes: “Individual Fatemiyoun fighters who



are returning to Afghanistan are struggling to build a life after giving up violence. Helping them reintegrate is thus primarily a humanitarian task.” (15)

## *Moving on: contingencies*

Speculation has arisen about future trajectories of the Fatemiyun group. Although some reporting has wondered if the group could be deployed by Iran to fight for its allies in Iraq and Yemen (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), the focus in this section is entirely on Afghanistan.

Recent reporting has paid increasing attention to what Iran could or might want to do to with, as one [report](#) calls it, “tens of thousands of battle-hardened [Fatemiyun] fighters.” This has sounded alarm bells among some Afghan officials who fear that the return of Fatemiyun fighters to the country could turn Afghanistan into “the next great sectarian battleground” (see [here](#)) between regional foes, in particular, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Some Afghan authorities and commentators have expressed concerns that Iran may be laying the groundwork for an organised presence of its Fatemiyun proxy in [Bamyan](#), [Kabul](#) and the country at large (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Some reporting claims that the Fatemiyun as an *organisation* has already been implicated in recent violent disputes in Afghanistan, the central highlands of Hazarajat in particular (see [here](#)). For example, Antonio Giustozzi and Shoib Najafizada have [claimed](#):

*[The] organization [Fatemiyun] got involved already in the conflict between Pashtun nomads and Hazara settlers in central Afghanistan. Alipur, in the past a commander linked to a local Hazara party, has joined hands with Fatimiyun and started recruiting veterans of Syria into his militia, that has been blocking access to the pastures of Hazarajat in Behsud (Wardak) against armed nomads for years. The two communities accuse each other of aggression.*

These reports on alleged organised Fatemiyun engagement in Afghanistan appear flawed on at least two grounds. First, it plays up the ‘Fatemiyun threat’ by relying mostly on statements from unnamed Afghan government officials who tend to blame Afghanistan’s troubles on anyone but the government. Second, they do present no evidence for the involvement of the Fatemiyun as a group in recent violent clashes in Wardak (Behsud), Ghazni (Jaghuri and Malestan) or Uruzgan (Khas Uruzgan) provinces. Indeed on-the-ground monitoring has found no footprint of the Fatemiyun as a group in these clashes.

It is important to note that the Fatemiyun does have the potential to act, as a group, in places Iran sees as important to its interests. However, central Afghanistan is not such a place, at least not yet (see also this [Hasht-e Sobh report](#)). In fact, as AAN reported in November 2018 (see [here](#) and [here](#)), the violence in Jaghuri and Malestan districts in Ghazni province and Khas Uruzgan district in Uruzgan province in late October 2018 involved fighting between the Taliban on the one hand and government forces and pro-government militias on the other (although there was also an ethnic dimension with the Taliban pushing deep into predominantly Hazara-inhabited areas). Fatemiyun returnees might have joined the local militia groups but if they did, they did so as individuals; we have no indication that any fighting occurred on an organisational basis.



Conditions may, however, arise under which the Fatemiyun could be mobilised in Afghanistan as a group. Summing up the views of Afghan clerics and politicians, Jamal lists two such conditions: (16)

*First, if the Afghan government continues its perceived prejudice against Hazaras, and continues to neglect development in Hazara areas, it could alienate the Hazara and Shia communities. Second, if the government fails to protect Hazara mosques and communities against IS- and Taleban-perpetrated violence, militia forces could form.*

Possible options for future mobilisation could be the self-organisation of Fatemiyun returnees, their co-opting by Shia political forces that could provide them with logistics in Afghanistan, or Iran keeping or raising a similar military formation when and where it needs to, including in Afghanistan. It is doubtful that Iran would disband the group in its entirety. It is instead most likely that Iran will maintain the current core of Fatemiyun, who could then mobilise from among the vulnerable Afghan refugee and migrant population residing in that country, when and if needed. But that time has not yet come, at least as far as Afghanistan is concerned. For the time being, reports from Iran indicate that, given the downscaling of the war in Syria, new recruitment into the Fatemiyun has stopped, the group is being downsized and its members are returning 'home,' mostly to Iran rather than Afghanistan.

### *Afghan government: a passive posture*

So far, the Afghan government has responded to Iran's mobilisation of the Fatemiyun group in a reactive way. A few senior officials, most notably Mohaqqueq, praised "combatants" such as the Fatemiyun for their "victory against Daesh" in a November 2017 [speech](#) in Tehran. When his remarks created great controversy, he [said](#) his speech had been misinterpreted and that he had only mentioned them because they "had freely participated in the war against Daesh ... But this is neither my policy nor our party's policy nor our government's policy [to uphold them]."

On other occasions, watchdog reports (such as the Human Rights Watch report on the recruitment of children into the Fatemiyun) prompted the Afghan government to respond, again in a reactive mode. In October 2017, for instance, the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs [asked](#) Iran to stop "pressuring and enticing" Afghan migrants, and children in particular, to take part in "activities contravening international principles." In January 2018, the Afghan government [asked](#) Iran to dissolve the Fatemiyun group. In late March 2019, an Afghan presidential advisor responded to the Iranian leader's meeting with families of the Fatemiyun and his special praise for the group by [saying](#) that "Iran has abused Afghan migrants [living in that country]."

There are a variety of reasons why the Afghan government has failed to deal seriously with Iran on the Fatemiyun issue thus far. First of all, the Afghan government is in the weaker position, unable to hold it to account given the leverages Iran has over Afghanistan, notably on the issue of the refugee population and its trade advantage. Second, the Afghan government is partly responsible for the conditions that have led many to flee the country, including those who have ended up being enlisted in the Fatemiyun. Third, given the proxy nature of the group, Iranian



officials have engaged in a politics of denial, stating repeatedly that those who have formed and joined the Fatemiyun have done so on a ‘voluntary’ basis without Tehran taking any part in it. The Fatemiyun do not accept the proxy label either.

How much the issue of the Fatemiyun is tied to the broader issue of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran came to light most recently in May 2019. Then, Abbas Araqchi, an Iranian deputy minister of foreign affairs, [said](#) that Iran would ask the Afghans living in that country to leave if “[US] sanctions are effective and our oil sales get to zero” and that “it was up to them where to go.” He was severely criticised, including by influential Iranians (see, for example, this media [report](#)) who reminded him of Iran’s leader’s praise for Afghans such as the Fatemiyun who “participated well and fought well in situations such as Syria.” The Iranian official later retracted his statement and said his remarks had been addressed to Europeans (warning them that Afghan refugees would leave Iran for Europe), not Afghans.

Apart from an Afghan government response that Iran should behave “responsibly” with the Afghans who live in that country, Araqchi’s statement caused harsh reactions even among some Fatemiyun members. One of them told AAN:

*If you [Iran] are in danger, you make us Fatemiyun and if you need labour for the construction of your country, you make us workers. If you have a budget deficit, you tax us more and now that you are under the pressure of sanctions, you use us like a tool.*

## Conclusion

So what do we make of the Fatemiyun based on the above? Although it is clear that one’s understanding of the group is mostly shaped by where one stands ideologically and with whom one interacts, some assertions are more plausible than others. When it comes to mobilising fighters, the Iranian government with its incentives and pressures has been a key motivator, aided in large part by the miserable conditions in which many Afghans there live. At the same time, the agency of fighters themselves – mostly young men seeking an identity in dire circumstances – cannot be ignored; however, this would not have led them to fight in Syria without the mobilisation and propaganda by the Iranian government.

Historical accounts of Fatemiyun fighters indicate that several have been involved in a series of successive wars in the region, mobilised by various state and non-state actors. In these accounts, fighting wars on behalf of others has turned into a lifestyle for many men. This is yet another version of the damaging cultural message that to be a man means to fight a war. In the recent Fatemiyun reincarnation, many Afghan youths have gone to war in Syria to establish their identity as men. As such, they have been able to support their parents and form their own families and have taken them to live in Iran. They have also won recognition for Afghan communities in that country. So, they feel they have become men through joining the Fatemiyun and fighting Iran’s war in Syria.

As for returning ‘home,’ Fatemiyun ex-fighters, regardless of their disputed numbers, generally



prefer to return to Iran and to turn it into a 'new home' for themselves and their families. This is possible thanks to residence permits and other benefits achieved through fighting in Syria. As for those who return to Afghanistan, they struggle to get back to civilian life. Many again end up in the bleak conditions they tried to escape by going to fight in Syria in the first instance. So far, there seems to be no community support for their future reintegration into society. The generally negative attitude towards them by the government threatens to alienate them instead. On the other hand, some will argue that providing them with reintegration support might set a negative precedent, encouraging others to go and fight outside the country and then return and be welcomed back.

Reports of the involvement of the Fatemiyun as an organisation in recent fighting and other violent disputes in Afghanistan should be taken with a large grain of salt. If Fatemiyun members were involved, it was on an individual, not organisational, basis, at least thus far – although conditions might arise in the future causing higher levels of mobilisation (for instance the Afghan government's failure to protect Shia communities and in particular mosques). As for the members who are still in Syria or who have returned to Iran, they are clearly under much greater Iranian influence than those now in Afghanistan, since Iran could cut Syria-related benefits to 'encourage' them to, for example, return to Syria or to fight elsewhere. As Hauch [writes](#), although the Fatemiyun have found a place in Iran's narrative on Syria, , "their place in [Iranian] society remains precarious."

*Edited by Sari Kouvo, Martine van Bijlert, Thomas Ruttig and Kate Clark*

\* Mohsen Hamidi (pseudonym) is a local researcher with focus on western Afghanistan including Afghan-Iranian relations.

(1) The Iranian government is not a unitary actor. Some have referred to a "deep state" consisting of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and security and intelligence agencies in Iran that have the influence required to make key, but contentious, policy decisions, for example, on forming and supporting costly regional proxy forces. See: Alex Vatanka, Sanam Vakil and Hossein Rassam, "How Deep Is Iran's State? The Battle Over Khamenei's Successor," July/August 2017, *Foreign Affairs*.

(2) See, for instance: Ali Alfoneh, "[Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions](#)," 30 January 2018, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises: How It's Forging a New Middle East," 24 January 2017, *Foreign Affairs*; W. Andrew Terrill (2015), "Iran's Strategy for Saving Assad," *The Middle East Journal* 69 (2): 222-36.

(3) Tobias Schneider, "The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War,"



October 2018, Policy Paper 2018-9, Middle East Institute: Washington, DC, pp 1-3.

(4) Given some Afghan involvement through the then Iran-based Shia mujahedin factions including one by Muhammad Akbari in the Iraq-Iran war called Pasdaran-e Jihad-e Islami (founded in 1983; it joined Hezb-e Wahdat with seven other groups when it was established in 1989), it is possible that Sepah-e Muhammad emerged from this involvement.

(5) Sayyeda Zeinab is the daughter of Hazrat Fatema and Ali ibn Abi Taleb and granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. She is highly revered by Shia Muslims for her role in preserving and continuing the prophet's lineage through Fatema and Ali.

(6) The sources for the estimated 50,000 and 10,000-20,000 respectively are: Ahmad Shuja Jamal, "[The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society](#)," March 2019, Special Report No 443, United States Institute of Peace: Washington, DC, p 3; Lars Hauch, "[Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life Through the Eyes of a Militia Member](#)," 22 May 2019, Middle East Institute. In October 2018, Schneider drew on an internal Fatemiyoun source to put the range "at a more realistic peak of 12,000-14,000." See: Schneider, "The Fatemiyoun Division," p 5.

(7) For instance, see: Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay (2018), *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*, translated by Louise Rosen and Henry Randolph, New York: Cambridge University Press. See also this review article: Daniel Neep (2018), "*Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* by Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro and Arthur Quesnay (review)," *The Middle East Journal* 72 (4): 704-706.

(8) In a recent reaction, which was a response to a 15 November 2018 [event](#) held in Kabul by the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS) to present and discuss the Dari [version](#) of Schneider's above-quoted paper, the Iranian embassy in Afghanistan rejected the paper as "incorrect propositions, contradictory arguments, doubts and ambiguities and, in numerous cases, exaggeration and hyperbole." In its obliquely-worded [statement](#), the embassy described the paper as part of an "Iranophobia project in Afghanistan" by what it called "malevolent actors from outside the region" in which "a part of Afghanistan's society is unjustly subjected to accusation and criticism." It finally emphasised the "continued constructive and close interaction" between Iran and Afghanistan based on "mutual interests and common threats."

(9) Ahmad Shuja Jamal, "[The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society](#)," March 2019, Special Report No 443, United States Institute of Peace: Washington, DC, p 18.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid, p 19.

(12) Ibid.

(13) Ibid.



(14) Ibid, pp 20-21.

(15) Ibid, p 21.

(16) Ibid, pp 14-15.