

Policy Brief # 58

Another War is Looming

By

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
1. Introduction.....	3
2. Scope of Study	3
3. Possible Consequences in Future.....	5
4. Policy Recommendations.....	6
5. References.....	7
ANNEXURE.....	8

Abstract

The study discusses the problems Pakistan may face in near future in the hands of Pakistani volunteers fighting in Syria. Pakistan is already fighting a war against 'militants', who were used against USSR in Afghanistan in the 80s, but now they are a biggest challenge for the country. This study focuses on the internal and external consequences of involvement of Pakistani volunteers in a foreign war at a time when situation at home is already tense. The study also argues about Pakistan's relations with different allies. Pakistan must call back all those Pakistani volunteers who are fighting in Syria otherwise they may emerge as 'militants' in future.

Keywords: Syria, Pakistan, militants, fighters, war, terrorism.

1. Introduction

Syrian war has been the world's worst case of ongoing mass atrocities, civilian displacement and humanitarian catastrophe for the last six years. The deadly war has so far no sign of ceasefire. The obvious inexorability of the war has made its violence more widespread, extreme and systematic. The challenges to peace-building and stability grows ever more daunting. The conflict has become an imminent and inevitable threat to the peace and stability of the entire Middle East. It has already had devastating consequences for the neighboring Iraq and posed an enduring threat to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Syria today is plagued by annihilation, large-scale displacement, sectarianism, radicalization, territorial fragmentation, and the collapse of critical infrastructure.

Pakistan, being an Islamic state, has always tried to maintain friendly relations with all the Muslim and non-Muslim states, specifically the Arab states. With Syria, Pakistan has had a varied, complex and fluctuating relations. But, the ongoing Syrian conflict demanded Pakistan to have a verdict and clarify its position, which Pakistan did with certainty. From the very beginning of the conflict, Pakistan has maintained a very neutral position, not siding the rebels but condemning the US-led military interventions to topple down Assad. Pakistan emphasized on maintaining the status quo because it argues that if Assad's government would fall, it would weaken Syria rather than strengthening it (Ramani 2016).

Objectives:

- a. This study seeks to disseminate information about the Pakistani volunteers being recruited by Iranian Revolutionary Guard (under the umbrella of Zeinabiyoun unit) in order to fight along with Assad regime against the rebels.
- b. It intends to acquire the attention of policy makers to take prior measures to cope with threats to peace and security in Pakistan that these volunteers might bring with them after their return.

2. Scope of Study

The reports about Pakistan's act of sending volunteers to join Iranian Revolutionary Guard (under the umbrella of the Zeinabiyoun unit) to participate in its pro-Assad military campaign in Syria can lead to a more apprehensive and panicky situation within Pakistan (Ramani 2016). Number of volunteers are not available yet, but if they are not in thousands, then they would definitely be in hundreds for a monthly salary of Rs120, 000 each (Ramani 2016).

These volunteers also offered to pay for the education of their children. It has been agreed to fund annual pilgrimage trips to Iran, Iraq, and Syria for the families of fallen soldiers. Some are even fighting in Syria because of Iran's promises that upon return their families will be

granted residency permits. There are different reports as to how many volunteers so far died in the conflict. Some suggest that they are 53 in number while according to few report, they may be more than 60 or even 100 (Ramani 2016).

Furthermore, some Pakistani Taliban have also reached Syria in order to fight war against Assad government. They have set up camps and reinforced hundreds of fighters to Syria to fight alongside rebels opposed to President Bashar al-Assad. Taliban commanders in Pakistan said that they had decided to join the cause, so hundreds of fighters had gone to Syria to fight alongside their like-minded friends. The Taliban commander termed the Arab fighters as their friends. Media reported the visit and presence of a Pakistani Taliban base in Syria to assess "the needs of the Jihad" (Reuters 2013).

On July 14, 2013, Pakistan's Interior Ministry spokesman Omar Hamid Khan claimed that provincial authorities in Pakistan gainsay that militants have left the country for Syria, but the Pakistani intelligence officials, who were based in the tribal region bordering Afghanistan had said that the fighters who left Pakistan for Syria included members of Al-Qaeda, Pakistani Taliban, and Suleman group, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Khan 2013). Pakistani citizens are recruited to join the fight in Syria through Urdu-language websites, which offer fighters up to \$3,000 each.

The fighters, who have left Pakistan for war in Syria basically fall in two categories:

- a. Those who have come from places like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, as well as the Middle East to Pakistan's tribal regions in order to fight US-led fight in Afghanistan. This group includes members of Al-Qaeda who have trained Pakistani Taliban in bomb-making. Neither the intelligence officials nor the Pakistani militants could tell about the total number of fighters, who have left the country for Syria. Nothing is known about the route they were taking to get to the Middle East (Khan 2013).
- b. The second category includes household members of Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. They are under surveillance. It is difficult for them to carryout operations at home, as previously they have faced detention in connection with attacks, or are on Pakistan's radar because of their importance in their organization. The group includes Suleman, who was detained during a 2009 attack on an intelligence building in the eastern city of Lahore that killed at least 35 people, but then he was eventually released (Khan 2013).

One of many routes they are taking to get to Syria is Balochistan's coastal belt to the Omani capital of Muscat and then travelling onward to Syria. Some fly from other countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the United Arab Emirates, and Sudan making their way to Syria. In addition, they are being financed by UAE and Bahrain (Khan 2013).

3. Possible Consequences in Future

Since a long, Pakistan has been sandwiched between Sunni (Saudi Arabia) and Shi'ite (Iran) states. Furthermore, Pakistani militants have viewed the war through sectarian lens, so it is believed by security analysts that their participation and particularly their return can exacerbate Sunni-Shia tension in Pakistan (Rehman 2013). For instance, some members of Pakistan's Wahabi sect have turned to Islamic extremism, and the Pakistani Taliban have sent volunteers to Syria to join the fight against Assad government (Ramani 2016). Moreover, the TTP leadership has already planned attacks against Shia community in Pakistan in order to take revenge for attacks by Shia and Alwaites against Sunnis in Syria and Iraq (Staff Report 2013). This fear of violence even increases due to the fact that most (almost all) of the Pakistani fighters in Syria are poorly educated, unemployed and socially marginalized youth, and it is feared that al-Qaeda leadership in Syria could easily motivate them by paying money for more violence (Rehman 2013). By sending Pakistani fighters to Syria, Iran can transform 'Syrian Conflict' into 'Sunni-Shia Conflict' (Aman 2016).

Though this may give the Shi'ite community a chance to get financially stable, this stability should not be availed at the cost of risking national security of Pakistan. So when these volunteers will return to Pakistan, the only thing they would be able to demonstrate is 'extremism and intolerance'. They can make their militia group and recruit more people into it. They would definitely seek foreign investors so that they could offer new members with money. As Pakistani youth is already facing unemployment issue, there are chances of their being trapped.

Iranians have already showed desire to extend their influence in South Asia through infrastructure projects and establishing branches of Hezbollah in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan and Afghanistan have not only welcomed Iran to do so but also provided proper services to make its way easier. Pakistan has always prioritize other states' interest over its own, this is the very reason that it has always been misused and exploited by other states. For instance, former US foreign secretary Hillary Clinton bluntly stated on April 23, 2009 that the US didn't want USSR to dominate and control the Middle East so the US made a deal with ISI and Pakistan's military, recruited 'Mujahideen' and had defeated Soviet Union leaving Pakistan in lurch to deal with stinger and extremist mind.

Pakistani volunteers in Syrian fight can also harm Pak-Saudi relations which not only cultural, and religious, but also commercial, political, and strategic. It may be recalled that Pakistan has declined the Saudi request of sending troops to contribute to Riyadh's air strikes in Yemen, so the current situation can annoy Saudi leadership. Furthermore, Pakistan has also refused to send ground volunteers to Saudi Arabia's 34-nation Islamic military alliance. This

situation can also lead to strengthening Saudi-Indian relations. Similarly, the US, which is spending an extortionate amount in support of rebels, can also limit its relations with Pakistan for supporting Iran. Likewise, in recent months, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly acknowledged and thanked King Salman for the latter's help in evacuating Indian nationals from Yemen (Wahab 2015).

4. Policy Recommendations

At present, Pakistan is working on some big projects, like CPEC which can boost the country's economy. A significant increase in the Foreign Direct Investment is also in the offing, which will create jobs. In such a scenario, Pakistan cannot afford to tarnish its image internationally and regionally, as it has already been labelled as 'a terrorist state' by its enemies. It has to make bold and assertive policies to help it prosper rather than indulging in foreign wars, which will result in nothing but annihilation and devastation.

In order to restore peace in Pakistan, the National Crisis Management Cell (NCMC) of the federal government should alerted law-enforcement agencies to take preventive measures and to tighten security in all the airports and on Pakistani borders, especially in Balochistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and coastal regions. The government should try to call back all the Pakistani volunteers as soon as possible. A separate independent institution or committee should also be required to monitor them 24/7 (not letting them know about it) without even blinking of eye and observe their activities. Their contacts should be checked with any militant organization or foreign power. The NCMC should direct the intelligence and law-enforcement agencies to also keep surveillance on families of the individuals, who had travelled to conflict zones and they should be taken in confidence. Their names should be included in ECL so that they might not be able to exit from Pakistan. The government should also arrange psychotherapists for them so that they could be de-hypnotized and could understand the disastrous plans they have been part of. This is the most important step the government should be taking for the long-term results. The government should also provide them immediate jobs with enough salary to meet their expanses so that they don't think of negative alternatives to earn money.

5. References

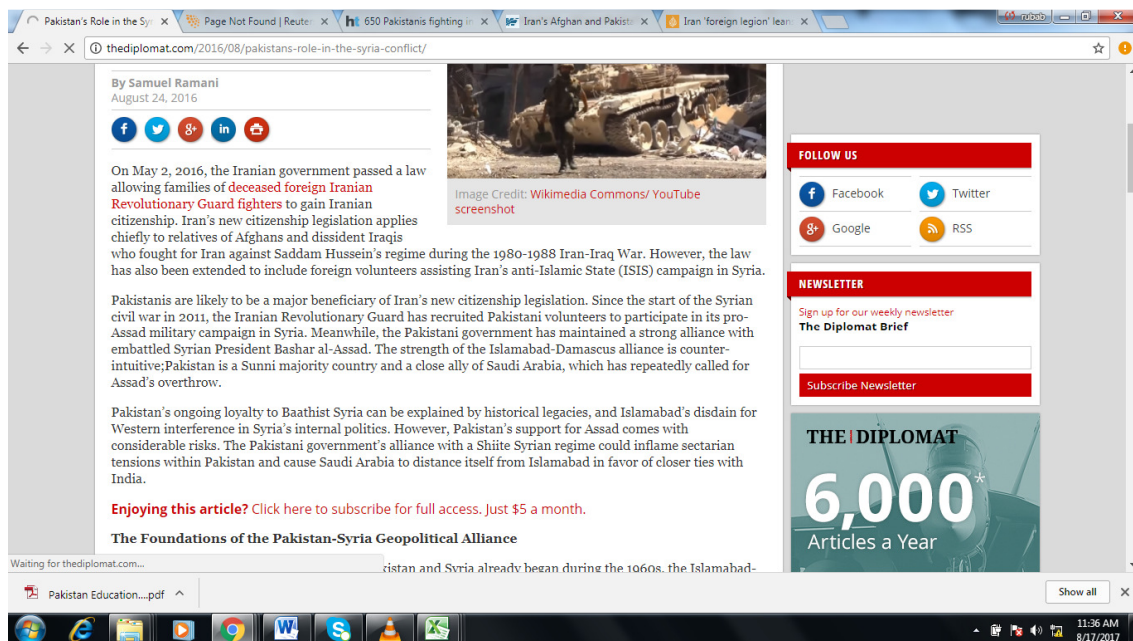
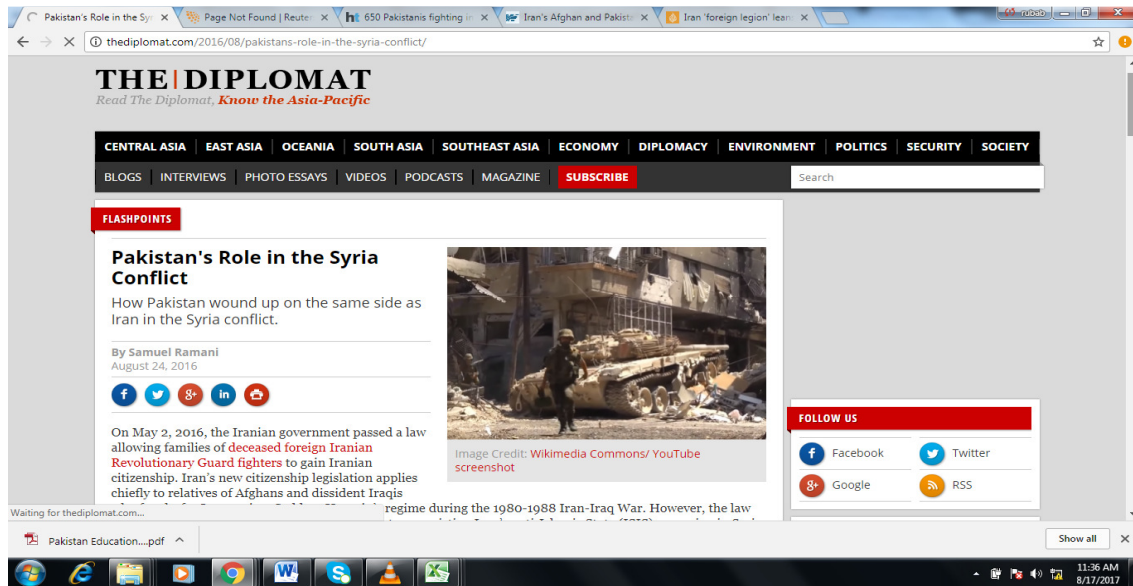
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ANNEXURE

Following are the links of the sources, which can provide proofs of the presence of Pakistani volunteers in Syria.

THE DIPLOMAT:

The Diplomat is the premier international current-affairs magazine for the Asia-Pacific region. Here is the website link: <http://thediplomat.com/the-diplomat/> and here is the link of it claim: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/08/pakistans-role-in-the-syria-conflict/>



HINDUSTAN TIMES: Hindustan Times Media is one of India's largest media companies across states and media platforms. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/>,

link of claimed news: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/650-pakistanis-fighting-in-syria-iraq-yemen-afghanistan-media-reports/story-Fg3dAD8GehOegqgBZz3R0M.html>

The screenshot shows the Hindustan Times website interface. At the top, the logo 'hindustantimes' is displayed in blue. Below it, navigation links include 'e-paper', '33°C New Delhi, India', and social media icons for Twitter, Facebook, and Google+. A secondary navigation bar lists categories like 'India', 'world cities', 'opinion', 'slvs', 'ind', 'sports', 'entertainment', 'lifestyle', 'business', 'tech', 'education', 'whatnow', 'photos', and 'videos'. The main article title is '650 Pakistanis fighting in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan: Media reports'. A sub-headline reads: 'Some 650 Pakistanis are fighting in conflict zones in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Central Asian states and their return to the country could add to sectarian strife, according to a media report on Wednesday.' The article is dated 'Updated: Aug 03, 2016 14:20 IST' and is attributed to 'HT Correspondent Hindustan Times'. A photograph of a landscape with a stone wall and hills is visible. On the right, there is an advertisement for 'BRAND NEW VEHICLES 2017' featuring a red SUV and 'CarJunction.com' contact information. Below the article, a 'recommended for you' section shows a link to 'Conflicts in Syria, Iraq far'.

This screenshot shows the lower portion of the article page. It features social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+. The main text continues: 'An unnamed senior official said that intelligence agencies had reported about Pakistani fighters' plans to return to the country.(AFP file)'. Below this, the article text is repeated: 'Some 650 Pakistanis are fighting in conflict zones in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan and Central Asian states and their return to the country could add to sectarian strife, according to a media report on Wednesday. Intelligence agencies have identified 132 of these Pakistanis and expressed fears about their return after being defeated by international forces, Dawn newspaper reported. The National Crisis Management Cell (NMC) of the federal government has alerted law enforcement agencies to take preventive measures and to tighten security on Pakistan's borders, especially in Balochistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and coastal regions, and at airports. An unnamed security official was quoted as saying by Dawn that the "defeat of fighters in Middle East, Afghanistan and Central Asian states had put Pakistan on the verge of sectarian'. On the right, an 'editor's pick' section lists several related articles with small thumbnail images: 'Speed crash at Maruti House', 'Why Nitish looks like a mirror image of Mehbooba in NDA', 'Why UP does not need a special law to fight organised crime', and 'I wonder who they voted for: Indians facing identity crisis in US under Trump'. The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the time as 11:37 AM on 8/17/2017.

THE WASHINGTON ISNTITUTE:

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy is an American think tank based in Washington, D.C., focused on the foreign policy of the United States as it pertains to the countries of Southwest Asia. Website: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>,

claim: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-afghan-and-pakistani-proxies-in-syria-and-beyond>

The screenshot shows the website of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The main article is titled "Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?" by Farzin Nadimi, published on August 22, 2016. The article's abstract states: "As part of its renewed effort to export the Islamic Revolution through armed proxies, Tehran has been recruiting and training Afghan and Pakistani fighters for Syria's battlefields, thereby giving them invaluable experience for potential future campaigns in other regional countries." The article also mentions that Iran has a long history of building up militant ethnic groups across the Middle East to wage unconventional fights against Israel, Western interests, and, more recently, Sunni Salafists. The article is categorized under "POLICY ANALYSIS" and "POLICYWATCH 2677". The website header includes the logo of The Washington Institute and the tagline "Improving the Quality of U.S. Middle East Policy". The navigation menu includes "HOME", "POLICY ANALYSIS", "EXPERTS", "PRESS ROOM", "ABOUT", "SUPPORT", and "FIKRA FORUM". The article is available in Arabic as well. The sidebar includes a "SHARE" section with social media icons, a "VIEW PAGE AS PRINTABLE PDF" button, and a "MORE ON" section with "Topics" (Military and Security), "Countries" (Iran, Syria), and "ABOUT THE AUTHORS" (Farzin Nadimi).

ALJAZEERA:

Al Jazeera, also known as JSC, is a state-funded broadcaster in Doha, Qatar, owned by the Al Jazeera Media Network. Website: <http://www.aljazeera.com/>,

Claim: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/iran-foreign-legion-leans-afghan-shia-syria-war-160122130355206.html>

The screenshot shows the Al Jazeera website with a news article titled "Iran is recruiting Afghan Shia fighters in their tens of thousands to step up the Islamic Republic's efforts in the Syrian war, offering them salaries to join the fight to save the government of President Bashar al-Assad." The article is dated January 16, 2016. The text states: "As the conflict enters its fifth year, Iranian media has said that there are some 20,000 fighters in the Fatemiyon division, which is made up of both naturalised Afghans who lived in Iran and those who have travelled from Afghanistan." It also mentions that "Five days ago, four Afghan Shia fighters were captured in southern rural Aleppo. In addition to Iranian fighters, there are also militia fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, and recently China," Anas al-Abdah, the secretary of the opposition Syrian Coalition's political committee, told Al Jazeera. The article further states: "Iran is recruiting fighters from Shia communities across the world to fight in Syria," continued al-Abdah, who is based in Turkey. "Iran considers itself the one and only reference point for all Shia people in the whole world. It organises them into political, social, and military organisations, both in their local communities and abroad." "This is part of the main mission of the Iranian regime in terms of exporting the revolution. Iran recruits, motivates, organises, finances, and trains Shias from all over the world to help support Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapsing." The article is categorized under "News" and "Middle East". The website header includes the Al Jazeera logo and navigation menus for "News", "Middle East", "Documentaries", "Shows", "Investigations", "Opinion", and "More". The article is available in Arabic as well. The sidebar includes a "SHARE" section with social media icons, a "RELATED" section with "Analysis: Is Iran really pulling out of Syria?" and "[Opinion] The real threat of foreign fighters in Syria".