

SPECIAL REPORT

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The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society

By Ahmad Shuja Jamal



A man carries a carpet through a devastated part of the Syrian city Palmyra, where the Fatemiyoun fought in 2016. (Photo by Ammar/AP/Shutterstock)

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Summary

- The Fatemiyoun, an Iranian-backed military force that has fought in Syria since 2013, is estimated to number in the tens of thousands and draws its membership primarily from Shia Afghan communities in Iran and Afghanistan.
- Recruits are mostly in their twenties and thirties who are motivated mainly by economic deprivation and vulnerabilities due to their migrant status and, to a lesser degree, by religious sentiments and a sense of youthful military adventurism.
- Nearly all Shia political and religious leaders oppose sending Afghan Shias to fight in Syria, though some leaders support the fight against the Islamic State. There is also strong opposition among the families of Fatemiyoun fighters, many of whom seek to dissuade their sons from going to Syria.
- Religious and political elites expressed concern about the lack of economic opportunities in Afghanistan's Hazara areas, increasing marginalization of Shias and Hazaras, and the lack of government attention to the security of Hazara and Shia areas. They cite these factors as possible contributors to future mobilization of armed Shia and Hazara local defense groups.
- Thousands of former Fatemiyoun fighters are returning to Afghanistan, where they are struggling to reintegrate and feed their families, and are living in fear of a possible crackdown against them by Afghan security forces.

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RECONCILIATION

ABOUT THE REPORT

Based on field interviews in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat, this report examines the origins and motivations of members of the Afghan Shia Hazara communities who joined the Iranian-backed Fatemiyoun, a military force that has fought in the Syrian conflict since 2013, and their reintegration into Afghan society. The project was supported by USIP's Asia Center

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Faithful pray at the tomb of Sayyida Ruqayya, a member of the Prophet Muhammad's family, in the Sayyida Ruqayya mosque in Damascus, Syria. (Photo by mtcurado/istock)/

Introduction

Since 2013, as many as fifty thousand Afghans have fought in Syria as part of the Fatemiyoun, a pro-Assad force organized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) for the ostensible purpose of protecting Shia holy sites. Many recruits were desperate refugees or immigrant laborers from Afghanistan's Shia community, lured to participate in the Syrian conflict by the promise of better pay as a fighter and a chance to secure residency privileges in Iran. Although some fighters traveled from Afghanistan with the specific aim of fighting in Syria, most came from the estimated three million Afghans living in Iran.

Afghan Shias had not fought as a sectarian proxy force outside Afghanistan since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. One of the Afghan combatants in that war, Ali Reza Tavassoli, helped found the Fatemiyoun in 2013 and built it into the largest force of Afghan Shias mobilized outside of Afghanistan. Its forces have collaborated on operations throughout Syria with other pro-Assad regime militias, Hezbollah fighters, Russian forces, and the Pakistani Shia militia the Zeinabiyoun. The existence of the Fatemiyoun, whose numbers rival some estimates of Afghan Taliban strength, has raised concerns over the emergence of a generation of Shia Afghan youth motivated by their sectarian identity and armed with military experience in the Middle East.¹ As such, the potential form that the Fatemiyoun might take after the war in Syria and its likely areas of activity are questions of significant importance to Afghanistan and the broader region. The United States sanctioned the Fatemiyoun as part of broader sanctions against



MAP OF SYRIA, IRAN, AND AFGHANISTAN

Adapted from artwork by Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock

Iran in January 2019.² However, proper reintegration of former Fatemiyoun fighters returning home to Afghanistan is likely to be key to building a lasting peace there.

This report explores the Fatemiyoun fighters' motivations for traveling to Syria under the auspices of the IRGC's Qods Force and, following their return to Afghanistan, how they see their future in the country. It also

explores the attitudes of Shia and Hazara religious scholars and political leaders toward the Fatemiyoun, in order to better understand the attitude of Shia Hazara society toward the Fatemiyoun and identify the conditions under which the former fighters might organize as an armed group inside Afghanistan.³

Background research involved examining more than one hundred Afghan and Iranian Persian-language media stories about the Fatemiyoun, monitoring Fatemiyoun-affiliated social media channels, and conducting phone interviews with Fatemiyoun-affiliated individuals, including fighters and propagandists. Fieldwork was also carried out in the Afghan cities of Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif, all home to large Shia and Hazara populations. The fieldwork involved semistructured, one-on-one interviews with Fatemiyoun fighters and their families. Interviewees included twenty-three current and former fighters and families of twenty fighters, including parents, siblings, and in-laws. Eight of the relatives were women, including five mothers. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of fighters and their families.

Along with the personal interviews, the researchers interviewed nine Shia spiritual leaders, including mullahs, madrasa teachers, ayatollahs, and representatives of *marja' taqlid*—grand ayatollahs with the authority to make rulings on issues of jurisprudence. In addition, the researchers spoke with eight political leaders, including a member of a provincial council, three members of the Afghan Parliament, high-level political appointees, a political party head, a senior police official, three Afghan security officials, and the second deputy chief executive officer of Afghanistan.

In-person and phone interviews were conducted between May and September 2018.

Background

The Fatemiyoun is a force of Afghan Shias organized by the IRGC to fight in Syria on behalf of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in his ongoing civil war against various opposition forces, including the Islamic State (IS). It is run by the IRGC's Qods Force, which handles foreign military operations. The Fatemiyoun has been active in Syria since its founding in 2013, having deployed as many as fifty thousand Afghan fighters recruited in Iran with the ostensible aim of protecting two Shia holy shrines in Syria. The Qods Force upgraded the Fatemiyoun from a *teep* (brigade) to a *lashkar* (army) at some point in 2015, when thousands of fighters were rushed to Syria as the fighting there intensified.

The group's founder was the Afghan military commander Ali Reza Tavassoli, known by his nom de guerre, Abu Hamed. Abu Hamed had lived most of his life in Iran and had fought in the Iran-Iraq War. He was killed in early 2015 in Syria in what official Fatemiyoun historiography and regime-linked Iranian media say was a mortar attack by the rival al-Nusra Front. However, in what is a sign of a split between the IRGC and its Afghan proxy fighters, some Fatemiyoun rank and file believe that the IRGC itself may have killed Abu Hamed (in a drone strike, and not a rocket attack) because he had become too independent. Fatemiyoun fighters are primarily Afghan immigrants to Iran, refugees and migrant workers of the predominantly Shia Hazara ethnic group.⁴

Since its founding, 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, against the Syrian rebels. In the recapture of Palmyra, according to Qasem, a deputy *gordan* (brigade) commander, the Fatemiyoun called in Russian air strikes. Casualty figures are high among the Fatemiyoun. Estimates from Fatemiyoun commanders interviewed for this report indicate that about five thousand fighters had died or disappeared in action since 2013, with another four thousand having been injured. The Qods Force also recruits Fatemiyoun child soldiers.⁵

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. In April 2015, the Fatemiyoun lost almost all of its contingent of fighters outside Daraa, Syria. A former Fatemiyoun fighter involved in the operation's planning told Iranian media that “about 130 people remained under siege and died one by one in front of our eyes. Very few of them came out alive.”⁶ Later, bodies of sixty-five fighters were recovered in a swap for thirteen rebels in Syrian government custody. Press reports identified several other bodies that remained in rebel custody.⁷

A 25-year-old former fighter named Mustafa explained his reaction to being ordered to participate in a high-risk operation:

The IRGC person took us to a place where, if we had gone to fight, we would have ended up dead, our heads cut and placed on our chests. I told him, “This is not a place from which we could come out alive, Haji. They’re throwing grenades all over us.”

“No, you have to go,” he said.

A few of the boys and I took him and brought him back to base. We beat him up. We didn’t kill him, though we cocked our guns, but he cried and pleaded to be spared, so we just beat him up. There were fourteen of us boys, seven from Kabul—seven from Herat. He was alone.

In November 2017, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani declared victory against IS in Syria.⁸ Shortly thereafter, the IRGC stopped recruiting new fighters for the Fatemiyoun. Instead, it has started downsizing the force, sending home fighters deemed too old or too young, or those determined unfit for duty for reasons such as battlefield injuries, drug use, or insubordination. Former fighters described how the IRGC has recruited skilled Afghan construction workers, including masons, plumbers, electricians, and bricklayers, to repair damaged homes in Syria. A fighter named Musa said that these workers are part of the Fatemiyoun and receive the same wages, though they do not receive military training and are at risk of being killed by unexploded ordnance.

FIGHTERS’ PROFILES

This study built Fatemiyoun fighter profiles based on interviews with fighters or their families. According to these profiles, all of the fighters were men, with the overwhelming majority of enlistees between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five. Roughly half were married, divorcing, or divorced; the other half had never married. Two-thirds of the fighters had received some schooling, with middle school (grades six through nine) being the most common level of attainment. None had received madrasa education, indicating that the fighters had a secular educational background. Most had dropped out of the educational system and were working to support their families when they enlisted to fight in Syria. They were employed in fields like construction, farming, coal mining, driving, tailoring, and welding. A little over 10 percent of the fighters had previous military training from their service in the Afghan security forces (post-Taliban or communist forces).

All of the fighters enlisted in Iran. Some had been living there for several years, while others went to Iran to find work but ended up enlisting; still others traveled from Afghanistan with the specific aim of enlisting. Over two-thirds reported enlisting for Syria against their families’ wishes, or stated that they had not conferred with their families before enlisting because their families would have opposed their decision to fight in Syria. In three cases, a family member or friend in Iran had intervened successfully to stop the would-be fighter from deploying. Families in Afghanistan described how they tried to intervene by phone or by traveling to Iran, but the distance involved made these attempts less successful.

Most of the men who enlisted were the eldest sons, young husbands, or otherwise breadwinners for their families. In many cases, the fighters enlisted as part of a group from the same village, clan, or workplace, with the group reinforcing peer pressure and reassuring members that they would “watch out” for one another. The fighters, all of whom were blue-collar workers or students, did not indicate radical tendencies before their deployment, though some stated that protecting

Men walk over rubble of damaged buildings in the province of Daraa, Syria, in July 2017. (Photo by Alaa al-Faqir/Reuters)

Shia holy shrines was part of their motivation to go to Syria (echoing the IRGC's ostensible rationale for their deployment). Syria is home to the shrines of Sayyida Zainab and Sayyida Ruqayya, female members of Prophet Muhammad's family and highly revered by Shias. These shrines, among the holiest in Shia Islam, are frequently visited by Shia pilgrims from around the world on their way to Karbala and Najaf, Iraq.



RECRUITMENT NUMBERS AND METHODS

It is difficult to estimate with much precision how many Fatemiyoun fighters have been deployed to Syria. About eighty *gorouh* (cohorts of fighters) had been deployed to Syria through November 2017, when recruitment stopped and downsizing began. Each *gorouh* ranged from tens of fighters to about two thousand. *Gorouhs* were smaller in 2013 when the Fatemiyoun started and peaked between 2015 and 2017, when the fighting was most intense and the IRGC gave the Fatemiyoun the status of an army. *Gorouh* strength declined again around mid-2017.

Fighters and mid-level commanders interviewed for this project gave figures of between thirty thousand to sixty thousand total fighters, with most estimates hovering around forty thousand. Given the rapid turnover of Fatemiyoun commanders (particularly because of the high casualty rates among the Fatemiyoun) and the IRGC's practice of guarding Fatemiyoun data, it is plausible that even the commanders are using ballpark figures. Perhaps the most authoritative figure came from a deputy commander of a *gordan* who worked to maintain the Fatemiyoun database during part of his last deployment. The deputy *gordan* commander, Qasem, whose information was current as of the end of 2017 when the Fatemiyoun were declaring victory against IS, said that about fifty thousand individual Fatemiyoun had been sent to Syria since the group's formation.

In 2015 and 2016, the peak years of the fighting, the Iranian government ran large public relations campaigns inside Iran to recruit Afghan fighters. Dead Fatemiyoun fighters were given heroes' burials in coveted spots in holy graveyards across Iran. Senior clerics and high-ranking military leaders met with the fighters and their families, filmed the encounters, and promoted them through the media. Starting in March 2015, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself met several times with Fatemiyoun families, praising them for their sacrifices.⁹ Iranian media extensively covered a video of General Qasem Soleimani's 2016 visit with the family of Abu Hamed.¹⁰ Programming on

state-run TV channels—including documentaries, talk shows, and interviews with fighters, and coverage from the front lines—was aired to encourage recruitment.

The fighters interviewed for this report had heard about the Fatemiyoun mostly through word of mouth. For a young Afghan man in Iran, it was hard to miss the recruitment activity during its peak in 2015 and 2016. Many learned about it from friends, colleagues, relatives, and other Afghans in Iran. In some cases, fighters were inspired by watching video clips of Fatemiyoun fighters on friends' cell phones. Fatemiyoun do not appear to have been recruited directly in Afghanistan itself, though during peak recruitment informal networks may have encouraged young men to go to Iran and join the fight. Some smugglers offered packages that took prospective recruits from Afghanistan straight to Fatemiyoun recruitment centers in Iran. Interviewers spoke to fighters who went to Syria as early as March 2014 (mere months after the Fatemiyoun's establishment, and about a year before Abu Hamed was killed in Daraa, Syria) and as late as November 2017 (when recruitment stopped), but did not find anyone who had registered in Afghanistan. Several fighters said that Iran did not need to run recruitment centers in Afghanistan because it could easily recruit from the large pool of Afghans in Iran.¹¹ The Fatemiyoun also drew recruits who were willing to pay their own way to Iran. A former commander, Abulfazl, who went to Syria in 2015, stated that when he wanted to register, he searched Facebook and Google for Fatemiyoun recruitment centers and checked on leads he found for Herat and Mazar, but could not find a center. He ultimately smuggled himself to Iran to register.

THE POSSIBILITY OF COERCION

The available evidence used for this report does not indicate that Iran physically coerced any of the interviewees into fighting in Syria. However, other organizations have found evidence of coercion as a recruitment tool for the Fatemiyoun.¹² Direct coercion likely was not the default recruitment tactic because the Fatemiyoun could draw from a steady stream of economically desperate and legally vulnerable Afghans in Iran. As the recruitment drive for the Fatemiyoun peaked, several factors ensured that the stream of desperate young men presenting themselves would not dry up.

First, a severe economic downturn in Afghanistan starting in 2013, related to the drawdown of foreign military forces in the region, forced many young men to migrate to Iran in search of work.¹³ This period coincided with both the founding of the Fatemiyoun and a point of particular vulnerability for the Assad regime, as a series of rebel offensives had wrested segments of the capital Damascus from the government's control.¹⁴

Second, and concurrent to the influx of Afghan migrant laborers, Iran was steadily deporting its resident Afghans. International Organization for Migration statistics show that Iran deported roughly a quarter of a million Afghans each year starting in 2012.¹⁵ Therefore, an Afghan seeking to earn a living in Iran faced increased odds of being sent back to Afghanistan. Moreover, the Iranian deportation process forced Afghan deportees to pay their own deportation expenses or languish under abuse for weeks as they cobbled together money by borrowing from fellow deportees. In some cases, Iran offered enlistment in the Syrian conflict as an alternative for deportees.¹⁶ More than a few Afghans working in Iran had their pay withheld for months by their Iranian employers, who took advantage of the Afghans' vulnerable legal status to prevent migrant employees from pursuing wage claims. For a sole Afghan breadwinner who wanted to feed his family without los-

ing his livelihood, incurring costs during deportation, forfeiting withheld pay in case of deportation, or avoiding deportation altogether, the best bet often was to “volunteer” to fight in Syria.

Fighting in Syria also was made more palatable by a promised salary that was higher than what most workers could generally earn in Iran. The religious element of contributing to the protection of Shia shrines in Syria, or the opportunity to visit the shrines as a pilgrim during deployment, sweetened the deal. In this way, Iran created conditions under which many Afghan men thought their best choice was to fight in Syria.

Because of the “voluntary” nature of the recruitment, strategically timed interventions by a recruit’s family and friends could help dissuade them from deploying. Among interviewees, in at least three cases families or friends pulled fighters out of the twenty-one-day boot camp in Iran or stopped them as they were boarding their flight to Syria. The IRGC handed the recruits over to the families without protest. One fighter, part of a cohort of 160 in 2014, described how family interventions pulled out ten of his fellow recruits. Another described how family members pulled out 325 recruits from a cohort of seven hundred in 2015. In most of the cases, relatives turned up at the *padegan* (training camp) and asked the authorities for their sons. Once identified, the authorities handed them over without objection.

Murtaza, 22, was a second-year journalism student when he dropped out of university in Afghanistan to find work in Iran. After working for four months, he decided to join the Fatemiyoun because of higher pay and rumors of Iranian citizenship and housing. As he was preparing to deploy to Syria, his Iranian boss intervened:

My boss, who was a good man, found out that I was going to Syria. He tried to reason with me and said that the Iranian government does not give citizenship and a house to the Fatemiyoun. He said, “In Syria, it will be you with your Kalashnikovs against America’s big guns; you will be killed.” He put some sense in me and I didn’t go. But you cannot make good decisions when you are under economic stress, which makes it easier to be influenced by Iranian propaganda.

The Qods Force requires recruits to have family consent at enlistment, if only to return the recruit’s remains and direct his benefits to the right family. But the requirement is loosely enforced, if at all. In some cases, recruits forge their parents’ signatures or thumbprints, or claim that their parents are deceased. No questions are asked.

The significant number of pullouts by parents demonstrates the strength of family disapproval of young men participating in the fight in Syria. Even more families would intervene if they knew that their sons were going to Syria rather than working for a living in Iran or Afghanistan. Some fighters described how they deliberately avoided calling their families about their decision to enlist because they knew their families would oppose it. Less than 15 percent of the men interviewed for this report consulted with their families before joining. It was far more common for them to call and inform their families of their whereabouts once they were in Syria or, in some cases, for their families to deduce that their sons had gone to Syria after they were unreachable by phone for some time. In one case, a fighter’s sister said her family suspected that her brother had gone to Syria when they received his salary, which was higher than his normal pay. However, because families in Afghanistan often were not in a position to stage meaningful interventions, the number of pullouts was not as high as it might have been.

Motivating the Fatemiyoun to Fight

The opportunity to perform a pilgrimage to one of the Shia holy sites in Syria gives many fighters a religious underpinning for their decision to deploy, even if their initial choice stemmed from economic insecurity or their vulnerable immigration status.

The fighters and their families described a mix of motivations for fighting in Syria. The most common reason was financial, which often was mentioned together with the promise of Iranian residency. Religious motivations, such as defending the shrines and using the Syria deployment as a chance to make a pilgrimage to holy sites, even when

mentioned together with other motivators such as financial gain, featured in less than 20 percent of the interviews. Far less frequently, fighters also mentioned that they wanted to “learn military skills,” “save Syrians from Daesh [the Islamic State],” or “enjoy the military lifestyle.” Even for fighters who mentioned ideology as their sole motivation, their earnings as a fighter generally exceeded their modest earning potential as a laborer in Iran or Afghanistan. As eldest sons or husbands and fathers, most fighters were the main breadwinner for their family. One million Afghans in Iran are undocumented, and a large proportion of them are legally and financially vulnerable.¹⁷ Even those who are able to find jobs often have their pay withheld, or may be summarily deported.¹⁸ To buy themselves protection against these adverse situations, some Afghans went to Syria.

Fighters also received a *barga taraddod*, or transit slip, which allowed them to move around Iran freely between deployments. They also expected to receive an *iqama*, or residency permit, valid for one year and renewable annually for up to ten years. In case of death, fighters’ families were expected to receive the fighter’s monthly pay and the annually renewable *iqama*.¹⁹ However, even though fighters may have gone to Syria to escape poverty, as mercenaries their incomes did not pull them out of it.²⁰ The value of the rial relative to the afghani has decreased significantly since 2016. One fighter, Jawad, said that his monthly payment was worth AFN 40,000 (US\$600) in 2016, but it was worth only AFN 17,000 (US\$250) by mid-2018. As the rial continues to tumble to historic lows, the monetary value of fighting in Syria is expected to decrease further.²¹

Fatemiyoun fighters go to Syria using only pilgrimage cards, not passports or visas as is common for regular pilgrims. They perform a pilgrimage to one or both of the Shia holy sites upon arrival in Syria. This opportunity gives many fighters a religious underpinning for their decision to deploy, even if their initial choice stemmed from economic insecurity or their vulnerable immigration status. For example, Abbas, 24, smuggled himself to Iran to find work in 2014. “I did not have legal documents and I was jobless,” he said, “so other Afghans told me to go to Syria. They said I could also do the pilgrimage of the shrines there. That is how I went there first [in 2015]. The income was good, so my family told me to go again.”

Fighters’ religious motivations diverged into largely two camps: those who wanted to visit the shrines and those who wanted to save them. Baqir, 26, lived in Iran with his family. He heard about the Fatemiyoun from his friends and was inspired to join the fight in 2016. “My motivation was to defend the two shrines,” he explained. “When you hear the stories of how they are planning to destroy

The Sayyida Zainab shrine in Damascus is one of the holiest in Shia Islam and is frequently visited by Shia pilgrims from around the world. (Photo by Erdal Akan/Shutterstock)

the shrines, no matter who you are, your feelings are stirred, your blood boils. Based on the religious sentiments that everyone has, one cannot remain indifferent. This was my reason for going to Syria.”

Eesa, who is in his twenties and has a fifth-grade education, spent eight months looking for a job in Iran in 2016 before discovering the Fatemiyoun and its promise of worldly and otherworldly rewards:



We were in debt in Afghanistan and could not find work here. The situation was bad. I went to Iran to find work and repay our debts. I spent eight months there looking for a job. I ran out of money and had difficulty finding a place to spend my nights. My friends told me that there’s a place where, if you go, it’s good spiritually and economically—they pay you. My friends also showed me video clips that really made me start thinking mostly about the spiritual side of it, mostly about how [I, as a] human being, can help another human being. Because when I saw videos of Daesh hoisting breastfeeding infants on their bayonets and beheading women, we decided to take action. In fact, the day we entered [Syria], we were not really thinking about whether we would come back alive. Our only objective was to help a people who are oppressed and free them from tyranny.

In other cases, the reason was more straightforward. According to Mohsin, 26, “I left Afghanistan [in April 2016] to find a job in Iran. I spent a month there without a job. I became desperate and decided to go to Syria, regardless of whether I’d come back alive or not.” Seventeen-year-old Mujtaba went to find work in Iran in 2017 but decided to go to Syria that year for fear of being deported. According to his father, “My son went to Iran because of poverty and hunger. He went looking for work, but he could not find work and was deported twice. When he went to Iran the third time, he decided to go to Syria.”

Because their motivations to fight in Syria are not purely religious, the fighters’ own views of their involvement in the fighting can range from skepticism to disillusionment. Mohsin, who deployed to Syria twice in 2016, spoke of his disappointment at how the Qods handlers treated the Afghans:

As long as the Iranians need you, you are Mr. So-and-So. But when they are done with you, then you’re Afghan the Donkey. When we were returning from Damascus, there were three hundred or four hundred of us waiting to receive our papers. There was noise. The Iranian asked us to sit quietly, but it was a large hall and nobody heard him. Then he yelled, “You Afghan donkeys, shut it.” Then everyone was quiet. He also threatened to withhold our pay and our papers unless we kept quiet.

Some fighters also experienced a change in outlook after going to Syria. Muhammad, 23, was in the Afghan National Police before he went to work in Iran for a better income in 2015. After working as a carpenter for more than a year, he decided to go to Syria because he could not make ends meet on his wages. Because of his previous experience, he received six days of “command training,” which qualified him to lead a *gorouhan*, a squad of twelve to fifteen men.

I saw two of my men die and I was traumatized by it. But fighting is addictive. I had already recited my last prayers before my first deployment, expecting to die any moment. But on my second deployment, I didn't even care about it. Later I realized that if we die fighting in their country, we die as *murtad* [apostate]. If they [Syrian opposition] die, they are martyrs because we are aggressors in their land. I thought that instead of going to Syria, I should come serve my own country, so I am in the government now. The only benefit I got from fighting in Syria was the pilgrimage of the shrines.

Some fighters, such as Mustafa, became survivalists. Mustafa deployed thirteen times between 2013 and 2017 and learned a few things along the way:

Your first day, your eyes and ears are not open. Whoever says something, you say “OK” until your eyes and ears open up so you can find yourself a safer place [during deployment], so you can come back in one piece, so you can spend your two months and return alive. I knew nothing on my first days, then I became my own wolf and learned what to do and what not to do.

But the fighters' relationship with the war and the camaraderie among fighters can be complex. Mustafa also talked about his love of the fight:

We did not linger long in Iran between deployments, just fifteen or twenty days. There was excitement, the boys wanted to go. When we felt fear during a fight when the bullets came toward us and we couldn't run away, we would tell ourselves we would not come back after this tour. But once we returned to Iran and relaxed a bit, we'd go back. Jobs had lost their joy for us. Once you eat food off a gun, no other food tastes good.

Mustafa fled to Afghanistan after the IRGC blocked him from further deportations and flagged him for prosecution for killing his Qods commander. Mustafa denied the murder but said that the fighters in his group beat up the commander because he was forcing them to charge into a battle that he said had a “hundred percent chance of death.”

Taqi, who was 42 years old, served in the Afghan army under President Mohammad Najibullah and again under President Ashraf Ghani. A fifth-grade dropout with two children, he went to Iran to find work. After about two months, with money running low and no work, he decided to enlist in 2015. Taqi was the deputy commander of a gordan, but has not been able to find work in Afghanistan and is deeply cynical about his experience in Syria:

They talk about religion and faith, but all of it are lies. You go to Syria and they tell you about religion and faith and defending the shrines. But when you see young boys get shot, fall, and die like dogs in front of you, then you see clearly that all of it is for nothing. . . . Iran wants to protect its own interests using the lives of the sons of a few poor Afghan men.

“My son went there only for Islam, only for [protecting] the shrine of our ancestor, Hazrat Zainab.” (Father of a Fatemiyoun soldier who deployed to Syria)

Jawad, 26, was in the Afghan army for four years and went to Syria twice in 2017 for the income. He believes that his greatest achievement during his time in Syria was visiting the shrines. Having done that, he does not want to return. “There was no other benefit to go-

ing to Syria,” he said. “One can find money wherever one works, but playing with your own life, that is not good. But if we were to do that in our own country, sure, we will serve a thousand times. But in others’ countries? That’s very hard for us.”

The Families Left Behind

The families of fighters were mostly opposed to their sons’ deployment to Syria, despite the promise of steady pay for their dire financial situations. However, in two of the studied cases, the families supported the fighters’ deployments. Sayed Qayyoun, father of Sayed Ali Naqi, was one of them. “My son went there only for Islam, only for [protecting] the shrine of our ancestor, Hazrat Zainab,” he said. “He called me from Iran and said, ‘Dad, if they destroy the shrine of our ancestors [and we let it happen], then our Muslim faith is useless. Please give me permission to go defend the shrines.’ God is our witness, he went there for Islam. We did not need the money.”

Sayed Sekandar, 21, was a tenth-grade dropout who went to Syria in 2015 without telling his family. His mother explained her anguish about her son’s deployment to Syria:

I would not have allowed my son to go fight in Syria if he had asked for permission. I have developed mental problems because of him going there. My heart does not stay in one place, it shakes. When he goes to Syria, sometimes he calls, sometimes he does not. When he does not call, my heart is worried. Night and day, I cry and pray that God brings back my son to me safely. . . . We are not at all happy that he has gone there.

She also disagreed with Sayed Sekandar’s ideological reasons for joining the fight:

They say it is about defending the shrines, but that kind of fighting is not acceptable [by Allah] because they should be defending their own country. . . . He calls himself a defender of Fatima. [She misidentifies Sayyida Zainab as Fatima, another Shia holy figure.] But his dad and I say, “No, in the books, it says you have to defend your own country.” Sayed Sekandar says it is not like that, but we are certain in our belief.

After his first deployment to Syria, Sayed Sekandar’s father went to Iran and brought him home to Afghanistan. To keep him from returning to Syria, they enrolled him in high school and used his earnings from Syria to purchase a motorbike for him. That was not enough. “We beseech him a lot not to go,” said his mother, “but he does not listen to anyone.”

Zafar Ali was 17 years old when he went to Iran to earn money to feed his family. His father, who was in jail in Afghanistan at that time, explained his son’s motives:

I was in jail for many years, so Zafar Ali had to work in a coal mine when he was sixteen. He had back pain and all kinds of pains. He told me he could not keep doing it and needed a new job. There are nine mouths to feed in our family. We do not have a place of our own to live, so we pay rent. He went to Iran because of this. After two years of on-again, off-again work, he called me about Syria. I told him, “We’re poor people, we will live with whatever we have, don’t go.” He said, “OK.” But he was a kid, so he decided to go to Syria with his friends and all I could do was send him my prayers. If he could find work in Afghanistan, I would tell him to come back. I don’t want him in danger. No parent wants their children to die.

Laila, whose son Jahangir worked as a welder in Iran but went to Syria in 2017 after his Iranian employer refused to pay his salary, said, “Jahangir’s boss did not pay him. When he insisted, the boss called the police and he spent a day in custody. When he came out, he became bitter and immediately enlisted for Syria. It was out of desperation. Who would sign up for one-hundred-percent certain death?” Jahangir went to Syria twice and was injured the second time, spending his earnings from that deployment on his medical costs. He was assumed dead from head wounds until he regained consciousness twenty-four hours later, his mother said.

Fighters sometimes returned from Iran and Syria because their families learned where they were and intervened. In other cases, the fighters themselves had a change of heart about the conflict, or their personal situation changed. Abbas, the 24-year-old fighter, did not return to Syria after two tours because he got married and feared that his young family might lose its only breadwinner. He decided to move to Afghanistan because of mistreatment from Iranians in Tehran. The Fatemiyoun sent Mujtaba, the 17-year-old, back to Iran because he had disciplinary problems. His pay was withheld and iqama revoked.

In other cases, fighters stopped going because they believed that they had done enough tours to earn residency privileges for their families. In still other cases, however, the fighters’ service ended when they were killed or injured in the conflict. Twenty-year-old Reza described how he got out of the war: “I had internal bleeding when a rigged Daesh tank exploded 150 meters from me. My lungs, ears, nose, and mouth were bleeding. I was vomiting blood. The Iranians told me my lungs were punctured. After that, they pulled me out and told me I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Following his return from Syria, Reza became a driver in Afghanistan.

Elite Disapproval—and Justification

The political and clerical establishment—pro- and anti-Iranian clerics, traditional politicians, and progressives—agree that the Fatemiyoun fighters travel to Syria mainly for economic reasons, not because they are religious radicals. Those interviewed strongly agreed that the export of Shia fighters to regional conflicts is bad for the community and country. Some also felt that although non-Shia Afghan fighters may also be present in Syria, it is the Fatemiyoun whose story is “exaggerated” and “made prominent” for “political reasons.”

Clerics and politicians believe that the Fatemiyoun could become an armed force inside Afghanistan under two conditions. 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

One community leader stressed that marginalization of the Shias and Hazaras in Afghanistan, coupled with a lack of economic opportunity and the government's failure to protect the Shias from attacks, is driving them to fight in Syria.

and communities against IS- and Taliban-perpetrated violence, militia forces could form.

Haji Muhammad Mohaqiq, one of Afghanistan's two deputy chief executive officers and a prominent jihadi leader, was interviewed in May 2018 about the position of the Fatemiyoun in Afghanistan today. He stated that "nobody supports" the deployment of Afghans

in regional conflicts but pointed out that Fatemiyoun fighters have been singled out more often than Afghans from other communities who fight in Syria and Yemen because of a broader anti-Hazara prejudice. He also added that the essence of what the Fatemiyoun did—fighting against IS—"is not a bad thing," and declared that Fatemiyoun fighters returning to Afghanistan would not pose a threat to Afghanistan because Hazara and Shia leaders can control them:

After the Syrian war, the Fatemiyoun do not pose a threat anywhere because they are a force that went to Syria either due to ideological reasons, economic necessities, or other difficulties of circumstance. But they will not pose a threat for Afghanistan. . . . Handling the situation is in our hands, the hands of the [Shia] mujahideen and ulema. If the Hazaras return, they will not enter extremist folds.

Mohaqeq believes that the government would "not bother" the Fatemiyoun as long as they avoided "armed activities" in Afghanistan.

Sayed Muhammad Hadi Hadi, head of the Payambar-e Azam Cultural and Tablighi Foundation, a Shia organization with ties to Iran, agreed with Mohaqiq that the Fatemiyoun do not pose a threat in Afghanistan. He also added that non-Shia mercenaries active in Syria are not a problem either. However, he stressed that marginalization of the Shias and Hazaras in Afghanistan, coupled with a lack of economic opportunity and the government's failure to protect the Shias from attacks, is driving them to fight in Syria.

A female Hazara member of parliament, who asked to remain anonymous when interviewed in May 2018, was more alarmed about what the Fatemiyoun mean for security in Afghanistan. She felt that the broader sense of marginalization in the Hazara community could worsen the situation:

The [returning] Fatemiyoun fighters could be strengthening local commanders who are now openly flaunting their arms and their power. Prejudice against the Hazaras is creating a general sense of disillusionment with the government that could force more people into the Fatemiyoun. Together with the Taliban and other armed groups, this could take Afghanistan [back] to its pre-2001 condition.

She also believed that development activities in Hazara areas could counter the potential for youth radicalization:

The government and the international community could stop the move toward the Fatemiyoun if they increased their development efforts in Hazara areas. Hazaras believe in democracy and they are a more literate community, so it is more dangerous if Afghanistan loses Hazaras to extremism.

Arif Rahmani, a member of parliament and a critic of the government, had similar sentiments.²² He expressed his fears about the Fatemiyoun organizing in Afghanistan:

If an external hand tries to manage them, the Fatemiyoun could be an extremely effective force. . . . But does such a force exist inside Afghanistan now? We do not have evidence of an entity inside Afghanistan that would gather, support, and pay for the very high costs of organizing the Fatemiyoun. However, can the country that has created the Fatemiyoun use them in Afghanistan? Naturally, it depends on the future situation of Iran in the region and its policies in Afghanistan. So far, Iran has worked with the Afghan government. . . . But we cannot predict Iran's moves as the situation evolves.

Rahmani believed if the Taliban and IS continue to perpetrate violence against the Hazaras, the Hazaras would organize to protect themselves, which could present opportunities for individual Fatemiyoun fighters to “make themselves part of these disputes.” He said that “they are experienced fighters and will be welcomed.” But if the Fatemiyoun organized as an armed group in Afghanistan, then Rahmani believed that neither the government nor the Shia-Hazara community would be able to stop them.

The anonymous female member of parliament had similar thoughts:

The Fatemiyoun would be different to the Afghans who fought in the Iran-Iraq war. Today there is social media, so they can easily organize. The political environment is different. Then it was just Iran and Iraq. Now it is the United States, Europe, Iran, and everyone else. The Fatemiyoun could be much more disruptive now.

The Fatemiyoun maintains a strong social media presence, running pages on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and, after Telegram was banned in Iran earlier in 2018, the Iranian-developed apps Soroush and iGap. Some fighters said that they had been inspired by videos they saw on these channels.

The Shia clerical establishment appears to be firmly against the Fatemiyoun's deployment to Syria. Ayatollah Waezizada, a highly respected religious figure who runs a madrassa in Kabul, expressed his opposition to young men fighting for the Fatemiyoun. Interviewed in July 2018, he attributed the phenomenon to Iran “exploiting” their “religious sentiments and economic desperation,” and believed that there is no religious justification to fight in Syria:

The Fatemiyoun did not go to Syria based on a fatwa from Ayatollah al-Fayadh, the Hazara marja' taqlid based in Najaf. Al-Fayadh has opposed it repeatedly. The Fatemiyoun have not gone to Syria based on my fatwa. . . . Those who went to Syria did it to find employment and feed their family, much like how you get a job at a factory. We have repeatedly prohibited them from going. But they say, “But give us jobs and we will stop going.”

One of the highest-ranking Shia clerics inside Afghanistan, Ayatollah Waezizada believes that Iran could instrumentalize the Fatemiyoun in Afghanistan if Hazara areas become more insecure and the United States “rejects” the Hazaras for their perceived proximity to Iran based on a shared Shia faith:

If insecurity keeps increasing and the US rejects us by saying the Hazaras and Shias belong to Iran, then Iran can do whatever it wants. Nobody makes concessions for anyone else in a state of war. Iran is an adversary of the United States, and an adversary will do whatever it can against the other. . . . If the Afghan National Army, police, and NDS [the National Directorate of Security intelligence agency] do not accept our youth, then the youth will go wherever takes them. And they have gone to Europe, Australia, and Iran. In Iran, [the Iranians] are misusing their religious sentiments and economic desperation.

Another high-ranking cleric, the imam of a major Kabul mosque, also opposed the deployment of Afghans to fight in Syria. The cleric, who preferred to remain anonymous to speak freely, said that Iran “manipulates” the sentiments of Afghans going there to live and work:

The fight in Syria is not about the shrines. It is political. That is why going to fight in Syria is not in the least bit in the interest of our people. We do not support Afghans—Shia or non-Shia—to fight in other countries. It is not right for an Afghan Muslim to fight other countries’ wars.

The cleric, who is the representative of a prominent foreign-based Hazara marja’ taqlid and offers religious advice to the ayatollah’s followers in Kabul, said that he tells young men that “going to Syria is not justified.”

The Tebyan Center, a Shia cultural and religious center with ties to Iran, supports the Fatemiyoun’s cause of fighting IS, even though it insisted that it has not encouraged anyone to join the group. In 2017, IS fighters attacked Tebyan’s Kabul office and killed more than 40 people.²³ Sayed Asadullah Beheshti, the center’s director in Herat said:

We strongly support the fight against Daesh and other *takfiri* groups like al-Qaeda wherever it takes place and by any person, group, or country, let alone the most sacred group of fighters and martyrs, the Fatemiyoun. Their fight receives our intellectual and religious endorsement. . . . [But] we have not encouraged, nor will we ever encourage, any Afghan youth to go outside of Afghanistan’s borders and participate in a war. However, those who have already gone and fought and are fighting, we endorse the cause for which they are fighting.

To explain his position, Beheshti made a distinction between the “land borders” demarcating countries’ boundaries and the “faith borders” where the Fatemiyoun operate:

Faith borders relate to our Islamic beliefs that do not contain themselves within a [land] border. Religious and cultural discourse do not accept the confines of a border, especially land borders. It is possible that, in the farthest corner of the globe in the Horn of Africa, a number of Muslims are oppressed. If an Afghanistani youth goes and supports them in any way, the sacred religion of Islam and Islamic values strongly support it and accept it.

Dr. Abdul Qayyum Sajjadi, a member of parliament and the president of Khatam al Nabieen University, founded by the Iran-linked Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, stated that Afghan refugees’ dire straits are exploited for geopolitical rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But Sajjadi also said he felt that Shia or Hazara groups, who remain among the most committed to the current political order, have not been involved in the Fatemiyoun’s recruitment. He said he felt that recruitment could be stopped when the government and the international community “end the destitute situation of the youth stemming from their immigration status” because “an immigrant and destitute

people can always be open to exploitation.” Moreover, he did not think that the Fatemiyoun would become a power in Hazara areas:

I do not agree with the notion that Hazarajat is a bed for the return of the groups that Iran used in the fight in Syria. I consider this an exaggeration. If the government creates security mechanisms in Hazarajat, then naturally the people will support the government institutions and will defend themselves alongside the government. There won't be any reason for irresponsible groups disconnected from the government to form.

Sajjadi felt that the Shias and Hazaras have a greater incentive to support the current system:

It is my belief that our people benefit more than any other ethnic group from the rule of law. The more we approach anarchy, and the more local warlords or irresponsible armed groups gain power in various regions, it is to the detriment of our people and the detriment of the existing system.

All the same, he warned that increasing insecurity will prompt local Shia communities to organize in self-defense, and “they could turn into something that nobody can control.”

After the Conflict: A Lukewarm Welcome Home

Individual Fatemiyoun fighters are returning to Afghanistan in the thousands and are struggling to reintegrate. Most of the former fighters interviewed found it difficult to find a job and make a living for their families. Some were jobless, some barely made ends meet as cab drivers, and others had taken to unorthodox enterprises such as hunting houbara bustard, a rare bird species, in the hope of selling the birds for a hundred dollars. Many fighters returned to the same kind of economic difficulties that they sought to escape by going to Syria. In some cases, they have become more economically desperate; some were dismissed without pay after a full deployment because of disciplinary problems.

In the absence of alternatives, the same factors that pushed the Fatemiyoun fighters to deploy in the Middle East could see them put their newfound military experience to use again. The IRGC may have downsized the Fatemiyoun, but a committed core of the most loyal fighters remains, which suggests that Iran envisions a use for the outfit in a protracted, low-intensity fight in Syria or for deployment to other regional conflicts in the Middle East.²⁴ Former fighters who have returned to Afghanistan, lacking other prospects, could rejoin the outfit. But perhaps the group of former Fatemiyoun most vulnerable to this kind of recruitment are the fighters who, together with their families, are staying in Iran under the temporary residency program. The IRGC could use their residency benefits as leverage to recruit them for future fights.

To date, the returning former Fatemiyoun are not being organized as an independent political or military force. Although Shia religious and political figures broadly opposed such a possibility, they admitted that the former Fatemiyoun fighters might organize as a stand-alone force or that individual former fighters might join other militia groups if their community came under greater assault from the Taliban or IS and the government failed to offer protection. When asked if they

would join an incarnation of the Fatemiyoun, some fighters said that they would if the outfit were well resourced—an indication that they see it as a potential form of employment. Some were more reluctant to agree with this idea; unlike in Iran, where their families could live safely while they fought in a different country, the insurgency in Afghanistan would threaten their families directly.

Another possible option for the former Fatemiyoun, enlistment in the Afghan National Security Forces, has a certain appeal to many returning fighters. Some of those interviewed either rejoined the security forces upon returning to Afghanistan or are in the process of enlisting. Other former fighters, however, cited difficulties enlisting, including real or perceived bias in the recruitment process.

In a few cases, the former fighters expressed an intention to seek asylum abroad, citing a lack of prospects on the one hand and fears of possible crackdown by the National Directorate of Security on the other. High-level Afghan security officials, who preferred to remain anonymous, said that there is no law specifically addressing Afghans who fight in regional conflicts, but that the Law on Crimes Against Internal and External Security is applicable. This betrays a certain lack of awareness about the Penal Code of 2018, which went into effect in February 2019. Article 245(4) of the revised code specifies “long imprisonment” for people participating in “wars or internal armed conflicts of other countries.” This could open the floodgates for the prosecution of current and former fighters, giving credence to their fears about a crackdown.

The Ministry of Interior Affairs, which runs the police, lacks data on the Fatemiyoun and does not monitor the former fighters now in Afghanistan. The National Directorate of Security has the returning fighters “on its agenda” but does not “actively manage” the issue currently. Afghan officials and security experts are concerned about the fighters’ radicalization and their connections with foreign entities such as the IRGC, but stressed that their hands are full with more pressing threats.

Some of the fighters who were dismissed and deported from Syria back to Iran also face charges for offenses there, such as insubordination or assault of Qods Force officials. Some of these former fighters, who have fled Iran, cannot return to Iran and work under any sort of legal permit. They would have to smuggle themselves to Iran and work there illegally—which would open them up to greater legal and financial vulnerability than the problems that led them to go to Syria in the first place.

Perhaps the closest (if crude) comparison about the future of the Fatemiyoun would be the Afghan Shias who fought in the Iran-Iraq War. Fatemiyoun founder Ali Reza Tavassoli was part of an unknown number of Afghans who participated in that war and later returned to his blue-collar job in Iran, only to reactivate his old network of fighters three decades later to start the Fatemiyoun. As tensions in the Middle East heighten and Afghanistan’s security deteriorates, there are fewer reasons that Iran would simply decommission all the Fatemiyoun fighters as it did in the 1980s. The Fatemiyoun has spawned a generation of Shia fighters in their twenties and thirties for whom the sectarian fight against IS was a key formative experience, one that gave them relative respect in society and status in Iran. Some of them cherish the experience and look for opportunities to repeat it. And because thousands remain legally and financially vulnerable, some among them will have more to gain than lose by joining another transnational fight.



Afghan returnees sit under an International Organization for Migration transit center sign after arriving in Herat from Iran in January 2019. (Photo by Hoshang Hashimi/AFP/Getty Images)

Better Options for Returning Fighters

The Afghan government has a few possible options for reintegrating the demobilized Fatemiyoun fighters into their society and making use of the political-clerical consensus against their deployments to keep similarly vulnerable young men out of foreign conflicts. Specifically, it will need to clarify its legal position on whether former Fatemiyoun will be prosecuted for fighting abroad, provide assistance in reintegrating fighters into their communities, and make efforts to prevent other young men from seeking mercenary opportunities abroad.

The Hazara and Shia political elite do not have a clear sense of what laws apply to the Fatemiyoun. The previously cited female member of the Afghan Parliament said that she did not believe the country had specific laws for dealing with the fighters, whereas Haji Muhammad Mohaqiq said that the fighters had done nothing wrong. A senior police official, by contrast, said he believed that the Fatemiyoun could be charged with violating the law on Crimes Against Domestic and External Security. Former fighters often live in fear of Afghanistan's intelligence and law enforcement agencies, even though these agencies do not appear to be actively pursuing them—though with the new Penal Code taking effect, that might change. Clarifying how

the government intends to treat the former Fatemiyoun fighters will allay the fears of the fighters and help them reintegrate into normal life. The government must also deal with the Fatemiyoun without using incendiary language that could alienate them and the broader Shia and Hazara community. The Shia and Hazara community are sensitive about being labeled as pro-Iranian because of their shared Shia faith. Many believe that they are not recognized for their strong buy-in for the post-Taliban democratic order, their support for peace and development, and their welcome of the international community.

The government has several options to encourage and enable reintegration. First, it could reintegrate the fighters who have renounced violence by providing skills training and job placement to address their economic vulnerability and help keep them from being drafted into another militant outfit. The High Peace Council, which offers reintegration assistance to anti-government combatants, could help develop the model or even run such a program. Karim Khalili, an influential Hazara leader and head of the High Peace Council, could be instrumental in the success of this program. Once a reintegration program is in place, former fighters and their families also should be encouraged to return from Iran. This will decrease Iran's leverage over them and address the legal and financial vulnerabilities that led them to deploy to Syria. The religious and political leaders of the Shia and Hazara community could help encourage them to repatriate. In addition, the government could directly recruit veteran Fatemiyoun fighters into Afghanistan's national security forces after vetting them. Many fighters are jobless and complain about real or perceived prejudice in enlisting and promotions. More Shias and Hazaras in the armed forces will allay the broader community's concerns about prejudice and help with armed forces recruitment efforts.

In terms of prevention, there are several possible approaches. The Afghan government should bring to bear maximum diplomatic pressure to urge Iran to stop deploying Afghans in foreign conflicts. To prevent potential recruits from making the journey to Iran, the government should crack down on known people smugglers who offer door-to-door packages to prospective recruits, and work with Afghan companies that offer pilgrimage services to Iran to ensure that they do not unwittingly provide recruits for the Fatemiyoun. Safe, affordable, and easily accessible pilgrimage services may help remove the inducement of visiting religious shrines as a reason to deploy to Syria.

The government should also address the widespread sense of disenfranchisement among the Hazaras, including religious leaders and the political elite.

Authoritative religious and political voices also should openly discourage enlistment in the Fatemiyoun. Promoting these voices will help counter the pro-enlistment propaganda that emphasizes religious reasons. Community leaders should speak out more actively against the deployment of Hazara and Shia youth by foreign countries in regional conflicts, and discourage youth from enlisting when they seek religious advice before deploying. Using official and informal connections, they could also ask the Iranian government to stop future recruitment of Afghans, thereby addressing the "pull factor" for youth who enlist out of economic desperation.

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. Hazara leaders fear that if integration fails, violence against the Hazara communities continues, and development dividends do not reach the communities, humanitarian concerns could give way to security ones.

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