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Iran's 'Shia Liberation Army' is par for the course

The announcement shows that the country is becoming more confident in asserting itself and declaring its intentions.

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Iran has long made use of ideologically committed non-Iranian Shia to further their own foreign policy objectives, writes Abdulrazaq

In a surprising moment of transparency and clarity, one of Iran's former most senior military leaders confirmed that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), or Pasdaran in Persian, had established a "Shia Liberation Army" (SLA).

Speaking to the Mashregh news agency, which is close to the Pasdaran and the Iranian regime, retired General Mohammad Ali Al Falaki said that the new army's primary objective would be to fight in Arab countries and would recruit heavily from non-Iranian Shia Muslims across the world.

"Haj Falaki", as he is honorifically and respectfully known in Iran, announced that the SLA was formed in Syria and would be commanded by Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, the enigmatic commander of the Pasdaran's Quds Force.

In essence, the Quds Force, the Pasdaran's elite unit engaging in operations abroad, would be responsible for an entire army of foreign fighters.

This could be because, according to the interview, Falaki does not believe that it would be "wise for ... Iranian forces to be directly thrown into war in Syria".

When news of this interview broke, Mashregh subsequently edited the word "Shia" out of the organisation's name to leave it as just the "Liberation Army", but not before it was picked up by many news agencies.

This was likely an editorial decision to reduce the sense that the SLA was a sectarian force designed to further the cause of exporting the ideology and fervour of Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution.

But if the Iranians already have the Quds Force for waging low-intensity - yet no less bloody - conflict overseas, why is this announcement so important?

The reality is that none of this should be surprising in the slightest. Since Khomeini's revolution that overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran has been actively involved in the internationalisation of its revolutionary ideals.

The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 was, in large part, fought out of fear of the revolution's spread, and many of the Arab countries now at risk of SLA operations funded and supported Saddam Hussein in his bid to contain the mullahs.

Falaki's admission that the SLA was now operating across three fronts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen is not a real revelation.

Iranian involvement has been heavily documented in Syria already, with Pasdaran commanders and other Iranian troops having met their end in the war-torn country.

Indeed, Iranian support has long been a critical pillar of ensuring the survival of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, whose refusal to relinquish his grip on power has led to the deaths of almost half-a-million Syrians.

Similarly, Iran has been a pivotal player in post-2003 Iraq, influencing the state and its institutions at every single level. Indeed, the aforementioned Soleimani has featured ubiquitously across Iraqi battlefields against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group.

Soleimani first organised the defence of Baghdad in 2014, and was also seen assuming command of Iraqi forces and allied Shia militia organisations like the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) during operations to retake Tikrit and Fallujah, all while under the United States' air cover.

More recently, reports indicate that he is heavily involved in plans to recapture ISIL's last stronghold of Mosul in northern Iraq.

Outreach beyond the Gulf

It is also no secret that Iran has long supported their coreligionists in Yemen, the Houthi rebels.

This is likely so that Iran can extend its strategic influence across the Gulf of Aden as well as reinforce its current friendly relations with Oman to secure its interests in the Gulf of Oman.

With Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon already under its sway, Iran's control over critical southern Red Sea and Gulf energy trade routes would mean that it would have almost entirely encircled its regional rival, Saudi Arabia.

In all of the above fronts, Iran has heavily relied upon an veritable army of militant "jihadists", ranging from the Lebanese Hezbollah organisation who have been fighting in Syria for years, to the dozens of sectarian Iraqi militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, to the Fatemiyon Division of tens of thousands of Afghan Shia, some of whom have been given a choice of either being pressed into military service or else facing judicial sentences for drug trafficking - an offence that carries the death penalty in Iran.

What's new?

Therefore, and while Falaki's announcement may seem like a damning revelation, he actually merely stated what most observers of Iranian military and foreign affairs already knew.

Iran has long made use of ideologically committed non-Iranian Shia to further their own foreign policy objectives, and this has greatly increased their asymmetric warfare capabilities.

After all, it is cheaper to field multiple, infantry-heavy armies across many fronts than it is to field conventional forces. In light of that, the SLA is no different from many other Iranian military ventures - forces commanded by Iranians, but manned by foreign fighters.

This could also mean issuing a recruitment call, as many who fight in these paramilitary forces do so for financial as well as ideological reasons.

By using foreign fighters to reduce the burden on Iranian soldiers, Iran aims to stifle growing public discontent at its many military adventures.

The SLA announcement shows that the country is becoming more confident in asserting itself and declaring its intentions clearly to its regional rivals.

In so doing, it is showing countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey that its regional designs are here to stay, and that they would be better off giving into Iranian ambitions rather than expending any further resources being in conflict with it.