



Exclusive Interview with an Afghan Member of the Quds Force

18th April 2015

- **We save the last bullet for ourselves, so that we are not caught alive**
- **We participate in Jihad, benefit financially and they do not deport us from Iran**

Four years has passed since the war in Syria began. Although the Islamic Republic of Iran first denied the involvement of its forces in the conflict; footprints pointed to the the direct involvement of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the Iraqi and Syria theatre of conflict. In addition to military advisors, it emerged that the Quds Force was deploying high ranking commanders, as well as mobilised foreign infantrymen and foot soldiers. The latter are members of a battalion, called "Modaefan-eh Haram" (Defenders of the Shrine). ** Bodies of those killed at the warfront are transported back to cities including Mashad and Qom, where high ranking clerics as well as Basij and Revolutionary Guard officials preside at their funeral.

Less than two weeks ago the corpses of two Afghans and seven Pakistanis, killed in Syria, were transported back to Iran. During their memorial service, attended by the personal representative of the Supreme Leader as well as the Governor of the province in addition to a number of high ranking officials of IRGC and the Basij, our reporter interviewed an Afghan member of the "Defenders of the Shrine," through an intermediary.

This exclusive interview follows a bill presented by a number Majles deputies asking that foreign members of the Quds Force, who are resident in Iran, are not deported and have issues regarding their citizenship resolved.

[Note: Questions were asked regarding size of their unit, method of recruitment and details about missions. However accurate replies were not forthcoming either because of the interviewee's low level of literacy or because of the training that these individuals receive to protect information.]

Q: When did you return from Syria and from which country were you dispatched?

A: It's around a month since I got back. I'm Afghan, but I've been a resident in Iran for several years.

Q: From which country were the forces deployed to Syria?

A: In our division, there were forces from Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the past our battalion included Syrians, but they separated us from them.

Q: Why?

A: I don't know the exact reason, but we were having a lot of arguments. For example, when we took prisoners, we were supposed to hand them over to the Syrian forces, but then we found out that they didn't deliver the prisoners to their superior officers. We don't know what they did to them.

Q: How much do you get paid?

A: There are different levels of salaries. Some earn 1.5 million Tomans (approximately US\$530), some make 2 million Tomans (approximately US\$700) and others even more.

Q: Are you paid in Dollars or (Iranian) Rials?

A: Rials (10 Rials to a Toman).



Q: How much time do you spend in the battlefield?

A: After every 3 months tour of duty and we take temporary leave and return (to Iran) for twenty days.

Q: Where do you get your training and how are you deployed?

A: Afghan volunteers must first come to Tehran and be trained in the Revolutionary Guards camps. The training lasts between three to four months. We are then flown to Damascus. Other training courses are administered by Hezbollah inside Lebanon. The Pakistanis are deployed from their own country to Syria; but Afghans must go through Iran.

Q: Can you talk about your own conditions in the war? What is it like?

A: The conditions are pretty tough. It is much safer when the bases are situated outside the city. But once we take out Daesh in cities, clear up the cities and set up base, it gets pretty nasty. Being stationed in a newly liberated city is pretty terrifying, because in the dark, you can't tell if the person standing in front of you is friend or foe, or if there will be a suicide attack on our bases, or whether you come under sniper attack from the rooftops of surrounding houses. Like last time, I was on my way back to Iran, on leave, right at the bottom of the steps of the airplane, someone was shot and killed by a sniper.

The protection of newly liberated cities is with Afghan and Pakistani battalions; the Lebanese are not dispatched to do it. I think they enjoy preferential treatment solely because they are Arab.

Q: Do you also come across the Iranian IRGC forces?

A: The Revolutionary Guards don't participate in the smaller operations. We and the Syrians safeguard newly liberated cities. The IRGC and the Syrian command units take on big operations. We come across them on flights.

Q: Is your division part of the Defenders of the Shrine?

A: Yes, the name of our division is also Defenders of the Shrine, although we are also dispatched to special missions.

Q: Why do you even accept to go to war?

A: Not only is it a duty to take part in Jihad, but we have been told that if we go, we will not be deported from Iran.

Q: How about money?

A: In three months, we earn about six million Tomans (approx. US \$2,122).

Q: How did you manage to come to Iran from Afghanistan? In other words where do you go to announce that you want to join the forces?

A: In many Afghani towns there are Shia mosques. The Imams and Prayer leaders give sermons about these issues and if anyone wants to volunteer, they they arrange contacts with the IRGC. We travel by land from Afghanistan to Tehran. Some people think of Jihad as a religious duty and go to defend the Shrine and holy locations in Syria and Iraq.

Q: Do you choose where you want to go?

A: We mainly go to Syria, though some of us are also dispatched to Iraq.

Q: Have you been to Iraq?



A: No, I've spent two entire years in Syria.

Q: Where does your family actually live?

A: My wife and children live in Qom; we've been residents in Iran for the past ten years.

Q: Have you heard that the Iranian parliament plans to resolve the citizenship and residence issues facing Afghans and Pakistanis who are in Iran, for the Defenders of the Shrine?

A: Yes, they have promised this before. Now it has gone before the Parliament. So maybe something will happen this time. They've said that those who go to war will not be deported.

Q: If anything happens to you while fighting, would your family receive compensation?

A: They've said they would pay. But up to now, families whose children or husbands have been killed in combat, have not been paid much. They've received monthly cash and food assistance, and if they get sick, they are given a referral card for IRGC approved clinics or hospitals. Generally, joining the Defenders of the Shrine, improves living conditions and we are also helped financially.

Q: How are you deployed from Iran to Syria?

A: There are special IRGC bases provided for our use. Once our leave is over, we must present ourselves at the bases and say we want to be redeployed to Syria. They choose a date and we are flown to Damascus on the first available flight. From there we are driven to the battlefields and the war front.

Q: So you do not go directly to the Shrine?

A: Well, some of our command units are in the vicinity of the Shrine. Some battalions are frontline battalions, or we must assist in the liberation of cities and towns, or for that matter, patrol those liberated areas.

Q: In those cities and towns, how and where do you patrol?

A: If there is a base or a police building in the newly liberated town, we situate ourselves there. If not, a safe house, a silo, anywhere where we can get the best coverage and protection, that's where we stay.

Q: Is it extremely dangerous?

A: Yes, one night, a while back, one of the guards was shot. Then they entered the silo and slaughtered everyone.

Q: Does getting residency in Iran mean that much that you would be willing to put your life in danger?

A: Well, we participate in Jihad, benefit financially and they do not deport us from Iran. During one of the operations, our battalion was surrounded. After several days we began to run out of food and ammunition, so we agreed that each of us would save one bullet to commit suicide instead of being taken prisoner. But we were lucky. Help arrived in time, the siege was ended and we were saved.

*** The battalion takes its name from the Sayyida Zainab mosque, a holy Shia shrine located south-east of Damascus.*