

# The Zeynabiyoun Brigade



**Logo:** Similar to the IRGC's

**Flag Text:** In red: "Zeynabiyoun"; above globe: "God's aid and victory is nigh" (Quran 61:13); below globe: "1435" (the Islamic year, 2013-2014)

## FOUNDING

■ 2014

## KEY LEADERS

- Uncertain
- Iranian media have identified "Abbas" or "Seyyed Abbas Mousavi" as the commander
- "Karbala" also identified as a commander

## SIZE

- Estimated to be several hundred
- Commander "Abbas" claims "thousands"
- Iranian media claim 5,000

## POLITICAL WING

- None

## IDEOLOGICAL ALLEGIANCE

- Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

## ATROCITIES

- Possible accessory to Bashar al-Assad's war crimes

## WEAPONS

- Has access to Iranian weaponry and Soviet-era weapons and vehicles available in Syria

## CONNECTIONS TO OTHER MILITIAS

- Close operational relationship with the Fatemiyoun Division and other IRGC-led units in Syria

## AREAS OF OPERATION

- Regions across Syria, including Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Deir Ezzor governorates

## CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

- None

## SOCIAL MEDIA

- Telegram
- Facebook



## CONNECTIONS TO THE IRGC

Under command and control of the IRGC Quds Force, led by Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani

## BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

The Islamic Republic has raised a militia of Pakistani Shiites, called the Zeynabiyoun Brigade, to fight in Syria. The brigade's name refers to the shrine of Sayyida Zeynab near Damascus, whose defense is the official justification for the group's deployment to Syria.

Ties between religious militants in Iran and Pakistan predate the 1979 revolution. One of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's students was a cleric named Arif al-Husayni, "the spiritual father of the Zeynabiyoun," who hailed from Pakistan's Shiite area of Parachinar, which borders Afghanistan and has long experienced violence by Salafi jihadists.<sup>1</sup> Husayni's Khomeinist network endured following his assassination in 1988.<sup>2</sup>

A Zeynabiyoun Brigade commander has acknowledged that ties with the Quds Force already existed around the time of the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> After war broke out in Syria, the Quds Force tapped into that network, and the militia's formation was announced in 2014.

Parachinar's targeting by radical Sunni Islamists has been cited by Shiite fighters as a motivation for their militancy.<sup>4</sup> Prior to recruitment, a significant number of its members were living in Iran as well as studying in religious seminaries in Qom.<sup>5</sup>

Recruitment ads posted on Facebook in 2015 called for physically fit men, ages 18-35, and promised several months of training, regular salaries, and death benefits for the fighters' widows and children.<sup>6</sup>

In a statement released after the IRGC recently declared "victory" against the Islamic State in Syria, the Zeynabiyoun Brigade vowed its readiness to fight anywhere the IRGC orders it.<sup>7</sup>

1. "دستند-عاشقان-ایستاده-می-میرند" (The documentary of 'lovers die standing'), *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcast* (Iran), July 19, 2017. (<http://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/1919234/دستند-عاشقان-ایستاده-می-میرند-فیلم>)

2. Ibid.

3. "گفتگو-با-مسئولین-لشکر-زینبویون-پاکستان" (interview with Abbas, one of the officials in the Pakistani Zeynabiyoun division), *Shahid Rahimi International Institute* (Iran), March 3, 2017. (<https://www.shahidrahimi.com/3309/گفتگو-با-مسئولین-لشکر-زینبویون-پاکستان>)

4. Farhan Zahid, "The Zainabiyoun Brigade: A Pakistani Shiite Militia Amid the Syrian Conflict," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, May 27, 2016. (<https://jamestown.org/program/the-zainabiyoun-brigade-a-pakistani-shiite-militia-amid-the-syrian-conflict/>)

5. "سرگذشت-شیعیان-غرب-تیب-زینبویون" (The life and times of the unfamiliar Shiites of the Zeynabiyoun Brigade), *Mashregh News* (Iran), July 10, 2016. (<https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/600926/سرگذشت-شیعیان-غرب-تیب-زینبویون>)

6. Babak Dehghanpisheh, "Iran recruits Pakistani Shi'ites for combat in Syria," *Reuters*, December 10, 2015. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistan-iran/iran-recruits-pakistani-shiites-for-combat-in-syria-idUSKBN0TT22S20151210>)

7. "پیام-تبریک-تیب-زینبویون-به-سردار-قاسم-سلیمانی" (The Zeynabiyoun Brigade's message of congratulations to commander Qassem Soleimani), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), November 25, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/09/04/1583693/پیام-تبریک-تیب-زینبویون-به-سردار-قاسم-سلیمانی>)