

Newsbytes

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“Let us be alert to the season in which we are living. It is the season of the Blessed Hope, calling for us to cut our ties with the world and build ourselves on this One who will soon appear. He is our hope—a Blessed Hope enabling us to rise above our times and fix our gaze upon Him.” Tozer

Arab media Report: Israeli Airstrike on Damascus Airport

jpost.com

Arab media reports on Thursday night claimed that Israel attacked a weapons depot next to Damascus International Airport.

A report from one daily, Al Arabia Al Jadid, said that a series of explosions shook the airport. Al Masdar News, a Lebanese outlet, also reported that an Israeli drone attack the airport, citing a report from the Syrian military that the attack did not seriously damage the airport or its surroundings, and that there were no casualties. The report also claims that, in response, the Syrian military shot down an Israeli drone near the Israeli-Syrian border, though these claims remain unconfirmed.

Al-Mayadeen, a Lebanese television station, also claimed that two rockets hit near the airport. An independent Syrian pro-Assad outlet, Muraselon, reported that three strikes hit the airport. A pro-Assad Facebook page called "Damascus Now" claimed that a "hostile missile" had targeted the airport.

The weapons depot that was allegedly attacked is said to be one of Hezbollah's. There have been no confirmations or denials from Israel, Syria or Hezbollah.

In recent weeks, Israel has launched several attacks in Syrian territory. One targeted an Assad-linked outpost that is part of a scientific research center that has worked to development missiles and chemical weapons. Earlier this week, Israel launched a Patriot missile towards and unmanned Iranian aircraft operated by Hezbollah that was reportedly attempting to enter Israeli airspace in the Golan Heights.

Earlier this year, Israel reportedly attacked the same Hezbollah weapons depot next to the Damascus Airport. While the claims were never confirmed by Israeli civilian or military officials, Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz hinted that the attack had, in fact, been an Israeli offensive; he said on Army Radio that he could "confirm that the incident in Syria completely conforms to Israel's policy" of preventing Iran from smuggling weapons to Hezbollah.

This is a developing story.

The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus

reuters.com

By Babak Dehghanpisheh Filed Sept. 22, 2017, 9:30 a.m. GMT

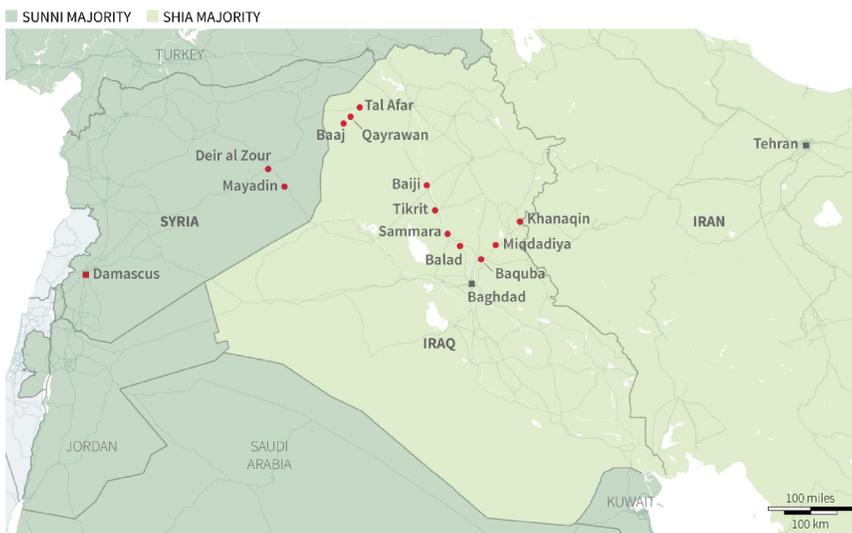
BAGHDAD - In late May, an Iraqi cleric called Akram Kaabi visited militia fighters in a desolate Iraqi town near the Syrian border. Kaabi, who heads a Shi'ite Muslim militia named Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, was decked out in a camouflage uniform and led the fighters in prayer on mats laid on the dusty ground. A video of the session showed heavily armed militiamen standing guard.

The event took place in Qayrawan, a town the Nujaba militia had seized back from Islamic State, the radical Sunni Muslim group. Nujaba, whose name means 'the Virtuous,' have also fought across the border in Syria, where they have lent support to President Bashar al-Assad in the fight against Islamic State and others.

The Nujaba group, which has about 10,000 fighters, is now one of the most important militias in Iraq. Though made up of Iraqis, it is loyal to Iran and is helping Tehran create a supply route through Iraq to Damascus, according to Iraqi lawmaker Shakhwan Abdullah, retired Lebanese general Elias Farhat, and other current and former officials in Iraq. The route will run through a string of small cities including Qayrawan. To open it up, Iranian-backed militias are pushing into southeast Syria near the border with Iraq, where U.S. forces are based.

Corridor to Damascus

Iraqi fighters loyal to Iran are seeking to forge a land supply route that would link Tehran and Damascus, current and former officials in Iraq say. Towns marked in red are key stages on the route.



Sources: Current and former security officials; Popular Mobilization Forces; CIA factbook, Embassy of Jordan, GlobalSecurity (Sunni/Shia majorities); Maps4News

Map: the Damascus corridor

U.S. forces to stay in Syria for decades, militia allies say

The Nujaba militia is one example of the way Iran is seeking to expand its Shi'ite influence in Iraq and across the wider region. In the 1980s, Shi'ite-dominated Iran was at war with Iraq, where Sunni Muslims held power despite being a minority of the population. But after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Shi'ite majority in Iraq took control of the government.

Since then, ties between the Shi'ite-led governments in Tehran and Baghdad have become stronger, and Iran has acquired growing influence in Iraq.

Iranian money and religious backing are now key to the Iraqi government's power.

Kaabi has repeatedly said that Nujaba is allied with Iran. Last autumn, he said his group follows "Velayat-e Faqih," or Guardianship of the Jurist, the ideological cornerstone of Iran's theocratic system of government, according to the Iranian Tasnim news agency.

Current and former Iraqi officials told Reuters they worry Nujaba will help Iran make a decisive strategic

breakthrough.

“If Iran can open this road they will have access through Iraq and Syria all the way to Hezbollah in Lebanon,” said Farhat, the retired Lebanese army general.

Iran, which backs Syria’s Assad, has stated that it wants to see its influence extend through Iraq to its allies in Damascus and beyond to Hezbollah, a Shi’ite militant group in Lebanon it has long supported.

A security adviser who works with a number of governments in the Middle East said Iran needs road access to Damascus to supply the conflict in Syria. “There is a very high cost for air transport for the militias. Troops and small supplies are easy to transport but it’s hard to load heavy weapons on airplanes,” said the adviser, who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject.



ALLEGIANCE: Senior Iranian officials have said they want to extend Iran’s influence through Iraq to Damascus and beyond. Here, demonstrators mark the 33rd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, in Tehran’s Azadi Square in 2012. REUTERS/Raheb Homavandi

“If Iran can open this road they will have access through Iraq and Syria all the way to Hezbollah in Lebanon.” Elias Farhat, retired Lebanese general

“The goal is to open a road on both sides for logistics ... They want to bring in artillery, rockets and heavy equipment like bulldozers,” the adviser said.

In Iraq, the Nujaba fights under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which encompass tens of thousands of Shi’ite militiamen. Last year Iraq’s parliament passed a law that put these fighters under the control of the Iraqi government. But current and former officials in Iraq and militia members say many of the militias have been armed and trained by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.

A representative at an Iranian Revolutionary Guards office in Tehran declined to comment on the Nujaba militia.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi and other senior Iraqi officials have not spoken out in public about Nujaba or the new road. But some players within Iraq’s governing coalition want to distance Iraq from Iran.

Ayad Allawi, a vice president, is Shi’ite, but he has a nationalist outlook and wants to prevent the conflict in Syria from spilling over further into Iraq. He said in an interview: “The government of Iraq should prevent them (Shi’ite militias) from going to Syria. We are not supposed to supply fighting people to support a dictatorship in Syria.”

Asked to comment on Iran-backed militias moving into southeast Syria near where American forces are based, U.S. Army Colonel Ryan Dillon, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State, said: "The Coalition reserves the right to protect itself and its vetted Syrian partners against any threat."

A U.S. State Department official said: "The United States remains deeply concerned about the Iranian regime's malign activities across the Middle East which undermine regional stability, security and prosperity."

The current route that Iran is pushing to open through Iraq was not its first choice. Soon after Iran became involved in the Syria conflict in 2011, the Iranians attempted to open a logistical supply line through the Kurdish region of northern Iraq to Syria, lawmaker Abdullah, who is a member of the Iraqi parliament's security and defence committee, told Reuters. But Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, resisted the move, said Abdullah, who is a member of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

The new route bypasses the Kurdish region but could still destabilise the country, according to Abdullah.

"All the groups in Iraq other than Shi'ites will be under threat if Iran can make this road," Abdullah said. "Sunnis will be displaced. The Kurdistan region will be under threat and Christians will be under threat."

IRANIAN TRAINING

The United States has long held that Kaabi was fighting for Iran even before he became leader of the Nujaba. In 2008, when Kaabi was involved with another militia, the U.S. Treasury designated him an individual who threatened the peace and stability of Iraq. The United States blocked any assets Kaabi may have had under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibited U.S. citizens from dealing with him.

Kaabi later formed his own militia, and during the Syria conflict Nujaba gelled as a fighting force. The group initially marshalled fighters in 2013 to defend Sayeda Zeinab, a shrine south of Damascus that is revered by Shi'ites. Nujaba was then drawn deep into the conflict against Islamic State, also known by the Arabic acronym Daesh.

"Daesh became an opportunity for many of these people. When Daesh came, they became needed," said an Iraqi former senior government official. "They flourished and expanded the group: more arms, more money, more people. The money was coming from Iran."

Hashim al-Moussawi, spokesman for Nujaba, said: "We couldn't find any support for Iraq from America or Arab or Islamic countries, except Iran. Iran supported Iraq with arms and advisers."

Some members of the Nujaba militia fight because of their strong religious beliefs, but many are poor Shi'ites from the southern region of Iraq tempted by payments of up to \$1,500 per month from Iran, according to the security adviser.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards representative said Iran's link with the Nujaba was not an issue he could discuss.

Those Nujaba fighters who have training are sent to Damascus on direct flights from Baghdad or Najaf, according to the security adviser. Others head for three-month training courses in southern Iraq which focus on the use of heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades and sniper rifles.

Some train with Hezbollah in Lebanon and then cross by land into Syria, according to the security adviser; in Iran there is specialised training in de-mining, communication and operating drones. Kaabi has said that the group has Yasir drones, an Iranian copy of the Boeing ScanEagle, used for reconnaissance.

The Nujaba spokesman declined to comment on training, saying it was a confidential military issue.

COMBAT FOOTAGE

Iranian funds have allowed Nujaba to start its own satellite television station, called Al Nujaba TV, according to the security adviser. It broadcasts slickly edited combat footage, news shows and martial songs rallying supporters.

In 2014, the Nujaba released a song dedicated to Qassem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, the branch of the group that oversees operations outside Iran's borders. The video praises Soleimani for fighting the American military and Islamic State, and is interspersed with images of Nujaba fighters firing machine guns.

Photos and videos posted on hardline Iranian news sites and Nujaba's website show Soleimani and Kaabi at what the websites say are frontline positions in Syria. Reuters was unable to confirm the locations.

Videos posted online in 2016 show Nujaba military parades around Aleppo, featuring armoured personnel carriers, anti-tank rockets and pickup trucks mounted with heavy machine guns. Other clips show Nujaba members engaged in street fighting in southern Aleppo.

The Nujaba spokesman said around 500 Nujaba fighters have been killed in combat between Syria and Iraq. The war dead are memorialised in online postings, and last April the militia group posted a large billboard praising its martyrs near the gate of Baghdad University.

After Nujaba's efforts in Aleppo, Kaabi was invited for a high-profile visit to Iran. He was interviewed on prime-time TV and met with top officials including parliament speaker Ali Larijani and former Revolutionary Guards commander Mohsen Rezaie. He also met Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in a separate visit.

The group is already looking beyond the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In March, it announced the formation of a "Golan" brigade to push Israel out of the Golan Heights, which Israel has occupied since 1981.

The move "sharpens the threat posed by the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria in general, and on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights in particular," Israeli intelligence minister Israel Katz told the Jerusalem Post after the announcement.

A key question for both Iraq and Syria is what happens with the Nujaba and similar Shi'ite militia groups if, as seems likely, Islamic State is pushed out of both countries.

Iran's Khamenei said in late June that no attempts should be made to weaken Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. "The objection of the Americans to (the PMF) is that they want Iraq to lose an important component of its power," Khamenei said in a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi in Tehran, according to a report posted on Khamenei's official website. "Don't trust the Americans under any circumstances."

Tensions between Iran and the United States are reflected in confrontations between U.S. forces and Iranian-backed militias in the border areas of Syria and Iraq. In mid-May, the United States bombed a convoy of what it said were pro-Syrian government fighters moving near a U.S. base in al Tanf in southern Syria. Iranian news and militia websites reported Shi'ite militia fighters allied with Iran moved into the area at the time.

The United States targeted forces in the same area twice more in June and also downed an armed drone in southeast Syria. The drone was most likely made by Iran, a U.S. official said. It fired on Syrian forces being trained by the United States.

In mid-June, Nujaba fighters deployed in southeast Syria with trucks armed with heavy machine guns, according to reports on the Nujaba site and Iranian news sites. The group posted photographs online of their convoys on highways near the Iraqi border.

"The Americans and Shi'ite fighters are within artillery range of each other now in Syria," the international security adviser said.

Got a confidential news tip? Reuters Investigates offers several ways to securely contact our reporters. As Iran's goal of forging a land route through Iraq to Syria edges nearer, Shi'ite allies are showing new assertiveness. In early August Kaabi sent a letter, published on Nujaba's website, to the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, expressing pan-Shi'ite solidarity.

"Our fate and future are the same," Kaabi said, declaring that they were waging the same war but on "different battlefields." He added: "We announce our complete solidarity and support with your loud cry against the oppressive Zionist regime."

The following is from Christianity Today magazine, and is in no way an endorsement of that liberal magazine - but it's worth a read....MD

Benny Hinn Is My Uncle, but Prosperity Preaching Isn't for Me

As part of the family empire, I lived a life of luxury. Then doubts began to surface.

COSTI HINN | SEPTEMBER 20, 2017

Almost 15 years ago, on a shoreline outside of Athens, Greece, I stood confident in my relationship with the Lord and my ministry trajectory. I was traveling the world on a private Gulfstream jet doing "gospel" ministry and enjoying every luxury money could buy. After a comfortable flight and my favorite meal (lasagna) made by our personal chef, we prepared for a ministry trip by resting at The Grand Resort: Lagonissi. Boasting my very own ocean-view villa, complete with private pool and over 2,000 square feet of living space, I perched on the rocks above the water's edge and rejoiced in the life I was living. After all, I was serving Jesus Christ and living the abundant life he promised.

Little did I know that this coastline was part of the Aegean Sea—the same body of water the apostle Paul sailed while spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. There was just one problem: We weren't preaching the same gospel as Paul.

Lavish Lifestyle



Growing up in the Hinn family empire was like belonging to some hybrid of the royal family and the mafia. Our lifestyle was lavish, our loyalty was enforced, and our version of the gospel was big business. Though Jesus Christ was still a part of our gospel, he was more of a magic genie than the King of Kings. Rubbing him the right way—by giving money and having enough faith—would unlock your spiritual inheritance. God’s goal was not his glory but our gain. His grace was not to set us free from sin but to make us rich. The abundant life he offered wasn’t eternal, it was now. We lived the prosperity

gospel.

My father pastored a small church in Vancouver, British Columbia. During my teenage years, he would travel nearly twice a month with my uncle, Benny Hinn. Prosperity theology paid amazingly well. We lived in a 10,000-square-foot mansion guarded by a private gate, drove two Mercedes Benz vehicles, vacationed in exotic destinations, and shopped at the most expensive stores. On top of that, we bought a \$2 million ocean-view home in Dana Point, California, where another Benz joined the fleet. We were abundantly blessed.

Throughout those years we faced countless criticisms from both inside and outside the church. Dateline NBC, The Fifth Estate (a Canadian news program), and other shows did investigative work. Well-known ministry leaders took to the airwaves warning people about our teachings, and local pastors told their congregations to steer clear of pulpits filled by a “Hinn.” At the time, I believed we were being persecuted like Jesus and Paul, and that our critics were just jealous of our blessings.

Within the family, we didn’t tolerate criticism. One day I asked my father if we could go heal my friend from school who had lost her hair due to cancer. He replied that we should pray for her at home rather than going to heal her. I thought to myself, Shouldn’t we be doing what the apostles did if we have the same gift? At that point, I didn’t question our ability to heal, but doubts began to stir about our motives. We only did healings in the crusades, where music created the atmosphere, money changed hands, and people approached us with the “right” amount of faith.

Other doubts would surface. What about unsuccessful healing attempts? I learned that it was the sick person’s fault for doubting God. Why would we speak in tongues without interpretation? “Don’t quench the Spirit,” I was told. “He can do what he wants.” Why did many of our prophecies contradict the Bible? “Don’t put God in a box.” Despite the questions, I trusted my family because we were so successful. Tens of thousands of people followed us, millions packed stadiums annually to hear my uncle. We healed the sick, performed miracles, rubbed elbows with celebrities, and got incredibly wealthy. God must be on our side!

Before going to college, I took a year off and joined Benny’s ministry as a “catcher” (someone who catches the people who are “slain in the spirit”) and personal assistant. This was a rite of passage in my family, as nearly every nephew worked for him at some point. It was a show of loyalty and gratitude. That year was a whirlwind tour of luxury: \$25,000-a-night royal suites in Dubai, seaside resorts in Greece, tours of the Swiss Alps, villas on Lake Como in Italy, basking on the golden coast of Australia, shopping sprees at Harrods in London, and numerous trips to Israel, Hawaii, and everywhere in between. The pay was great, we flew on our own private Gulfstream, and I got to buy custom suits. All I had to do was catch people and look spiritual!

A Life-Changing Verse

After graduating college and returning home, I met my wife, Christyne. I had no idea that God would use her in bringing about my salvation. In fact, my family and I were nervous because she didn't speak in tongues. We set out to fix that problem by having her attend one of Benny's crusades, but nothing happened. Next, she attended a service at my home church in Vancouver, but that didn't work either. Finally, she received some coaching at a youth conference, but she couldn't manage more than a few mumbled syllables. I truly thought I could never marry her unless something changed.

Then one day she pointed to a verse I had never seen: 1 Corinthians 12:30 ("Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?"). I was shaken to the core. There it was plain as day—not everybody has to speak in tongues. Soon, the domino effect began. Other longstanding beliefs were failing the biblical test. No longer did I believe that God's purpose was to make me happy, healthy, and wealthy. Instead, I saw that he wanted me to live for him regardless of what I could get from him.

While struggling to strike out into ministry, I received a call from a pastor-friend who was planting a church in California, offering me a part-time youth pastor position. It seemed like a perfect place to learn and grow, so Christyne and I packed up and took a step of faith as newlyweds.

Soon after joining the staff, God put the final crack in my false belief system, and the truth came bursting forth like a wave of grace. One of my first preaching assignments was John 5:1–17—the healing at Bethesda. As I studied for the sermon, my pastor-friend gave me a trusted commentary. Then the Holy Spirit took over. The passage showed that Jesus healed one man out of a multitude, the man didn't know who Jesus was, and the man was healed instantly!

This left three treasured beliefs in tatters. Isn't it always God's will to heal? No, Jesus only healed one man out of a multitude. Doesn't God only heal people if they have enough faith? No, this crippled man didn't even know who Jesus was (let alone have faith in him). Doesn't healing require an anointed healer, special music, and an offering collection? No, Jesus healed instantly with a mere command. I wept bitterly over my participation in greedy ministry manipulation and my life of false teaching and beliefs, and I thanked God for his mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. My eyes were completely opened.

I am thankful that my wife was willing to question my insistence on speaking in tongues and that my pastor loved me enough to disciple me out of prosperity gospel confusion. I've seen how God uses evangelism and discipleship to transform lost souls into found saints. A Christian's greatest ability is availability. When God's people are willing to take a step of faith and speak the truth in love, lives are transformed and God is glorified. You never know who he might save through your faithfulness.

Costi Hinn is executive pastor at Mission Bible Church in Orange County, California.