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Iraqi Shi'ite Militia Helps Outrun Damascus Suburb

By Jason Ditz

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Reflecting the ever growing regional nature of the Syrian Civil War, the retaking of the Damascus suburb of Sheikh Omar by pro-government forces centered on foreign Shi'ite fighters, including an Iraqi militia.

The suburb had been held by Sunni militants, including foreign Islamist fighters. Much of the rebellion centers around al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which has aimed to take over other Islamist factions.

Shi'ites from around the region have flocked to Syria as well, mostly with an eye toward protecting religious sites from Sunni rebels. Hezbollah was noteworthy as the first Shi'ite militia to begin taking part in offensive operations, but it seems that Iraqi Shi'ites are following that trend as well.

Scores of fighters on both sides were killed around Damascus today, and the war is less and less about internal power struggles in Syria, and rather is a catch-all religious war between regional factions of Sunnis and Shi'ites, with Syrians simply trapped in the middle.