

Understanding the IRGC's Past, Present, and Future Use of Syrian Tribal Militias

by [Abdullah Hayek \(/experts/abdullah-hayek\)](#)

Apr 30, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Abdullah Hayek \(/experts/abdullah-hayek\)](#)

Abdullah Hayek is a research assistant with The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. He specializes in Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq as well as the military affairs of the Levant and Gulf regions.



Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Militia Spotlight \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](#)

or see Part 1: [How to Use Militia Spotlight \(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight\)](#)

Iran's development of Arab tribal militias in eastern Syria will likely accelerate again, based on the model established in Aleppo and backed by new IRGC-funded social, economic, and administrative "wings."

The alphabet soup of Iran-backed Arab militias in northern and eastern Syria can be confusing, but important trends can be discerned in how they developed and why their numbers are currently proliferating. The following explainer contextualizes the activities of eight such militias covered in the [Militia Spotlight Profiles \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles\)](#) hub.

The Beginning: Imported Shia Militias

At first, Iran was largely limited to importing foreign Shia volunteer militias such as [Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas \(Lafa\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas\)](#) and [Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein \(LIH\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-al-imam-al-hussein\)](#) to secure religious sites and control military operations in areas critical to its strategic depth. Although these groups are pan-Shia in their foundational ethos, they operate under a broader strategic umbrella guided by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), indicating Tehran's dual objectives of cultural safeguarding and military expansionism. The two groups mentioned above have been a magnet for Shia volunteers from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen, and many other countries that have a strong Shia presence. Over time, their geographic focus expanded to support Bashar al-Assad's regime and the IRGC on multiple fronts such as Aleppo, Homs, and Deir al-Zour. Yet the weakness of this mechanism was that these foreign legions were outsiders to the Syrian people.

The Baggara Militias: Sunni Roots, Shia Alignment

One of the earliest—and now most potent—examples of Iran's influence in Syria is [Liwa al-Baqir \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-liwa-al-baqir\)](#). Originating in the Aleppo area and composed predominantly of the Sunni Baggara tribe, the militia has been significantly influenced by conversion to Shia Islam since 2013, showcasing Iran's ability to advance its agenda by blurring sectarian lines. The group is not just a military entity but also a political actor, deeply involved in local governance and wielding power in both Aleppo and Deir al-Zour through military strength and community engagement. This dual role highlights Iran's strategy to foster local dependencies that secure its long-term interests in the region.

The Baggara are a prominent Arab tribe with a widespread presence across Syria and Iraq. In Syria, tribal leader Nawaf Ragheb al-Bashir originally defected from the Assad regime in 2011 to join the opposition, but later realigned with the regime in 2017 and now plays a significant role. Liwa al-Baqir is the largest militia affiliated with the Baggara, but Bashir does not personally oversee it, instead exerting considerable influence over the group while directly leading Baggara militias that use distinct tribal motifs, such as the Lions of the Tribes and the Hashemite Tribes Regiment (HTR). This may reflect a divergence between the neo-Shia identity of Liwa al-Baqir's leaders and the Sunni tribal identity of most of its foot soldiers, at least for now.

Aleppo's Strategic Importance

In the northwest, the [Aleppo Defenders Legion \(ADL\) \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-aleppo-](#)



Figure 1: The inauguration of the Iranian consulate in Aleppo, May 2021.

(/sites/defa
05/The%20



Figure 2: The Iranian Economic Office in Aleppo established a booth at the "Rebuild Aleppo" Expo in 2021.

<https://www.alestikial.net/ar/article/dep-news-1639228150> various local Arab factions backed by the IRGC—has **taken control** of significant swaths of the city and surrounding areas, **managing** https://effect-network.blogspot.com/2020/04/blog-post_86.html [\[almadina.com/tags/%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%82%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86%20%D8%B9%D9%86%20%D8%AD%I\]\(https://almadina.com/tags/%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%82%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86%20%D8%B9%D9%86%20%D8%AD%I\) everything from law enforcement to local governance. Since 2017, its role has been critical in cementing Iranian influence in the region's political and military landscape, serving as a model of how Tehran integrates military prowess with sociopolitical savvy. In a few years' time, the **Shia-fiction** \(<https://npasyria.com/80408/>\) of the leadership cadre in Aleppo groups could equal that of the Baggara militia leadership.](https://ayn-</p></div>
<div data-bbox=)

Eastern Syria: A Hub of Tribal Resistance

Militia Spotlight assesses that tribal militias operating in southern portions of the Euphrates River Valley are now a focal point for Iran's strategic interests. The IRGC's apparent objective for these militias—particularly in the Deir al-Zour region—is to emulate the administrative and community engagement capacities demonstrated in Aleppo. Duplicating the ADL's robust governance model could enable Tehran to extend its administrative reach and consolidate its influence across strategically vital Syrian regions.



Figure 3: Syrians gather around a convoy of trucks loaded with Iranian aid in Deir al-Zour, September 20, 2017.

These expanded Arab militias in the Euphrates River Valley Arab include the **Sons of Jazira and Euphrates Movement** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-sons-jazira-and-euphrates-movement>), the **Arab Tribal and Clan Forces** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-arab-tribal-and-clan-forces>), and **Lions of the Ougaidat Brigade** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-lions-ougaidat-brigade>). Formed in August-September 2023 alongside HTR, all three Euphrates groups are led by Ougaidat tribal figure Ibrahim al-Hifl. The IRGC has tapped into their desire to **challenge** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/anti-us-attacks-linked-sons-jazira-and-euphrates-movement>) the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In addition to **frequent military confrontations** (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/deir-ez-zor-torn-between-arab-tribes-struggle-independence-and-sdfs-efforts-subdue>), these groups have facilitated Iran's ambitions to **solidify control** (https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1491760-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF/) over Deir al-Zour and other areas crucial for securing a land corridor toward Aleppo. Their aggressive posture against the SDF and U.S. forces, **supported** (<https://www.alarab.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B0%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%amp>) by heavy weaponry and strategic guidance from Tehran, reflects the depth of Iranian investment in Syrian tribal dynamics.

What's Next for Iran's Syrian Arab Militias?

The IRGC will likely keep expanding its efforts to **convert** (<https://www.meforum.org/63851/tehran-shiification-of-syria>) the population of Deir al-Zour to Shia Islam, building slowly on the successful case of key Baggara tribal leaders. Such conversion activities will disproportionately focus on **recruiting** (<https://www.asswak-alarab.com/archives/29368>) Syria's impoverished and desperate young Sunni population into militias—an approach that includes **resettling** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>) foreign Shia fighters and their families in Syria and showcasing them as examples of the benefits available to those who **align with Iran** (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211025-iran-establishes-new-brigade-in-eastern-syria-composed-of-local-shia-converts/>) (e.g., free healthcare, social privileges, priority in housing and real estate, financial assistance). The extension of ADL-type functions may see other Iran-backed Arab militias spawn social, economic, and administrative "wings" backed by largesse from Tehran and the Assad regime. Yet this strategy could also bolster local support for Sunni jihadist elements such as the Islamic State, echoing the way Shia militia growth in Iraq energized the rise of IS.



PART OF A SERIES

Militia Spotlight (/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)

[How to Use Militia Spotlight](#)

(/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight)



[Understanding the IRGC's Past, Present, and Future Use of Syrian Tribal Militias](/policy-analysis/understanding-irgcs-past-present-and-future-use-syrian-tribal-militias)
(/policy-analysis/understanding-irgcs-past-present-and-future-use-syrian-tribal-militias)



[Coordination Framework Militias Pass New Anti-LGBTQ Legislation](/policy-analysis/coordination-framework-militias-pass-new-anti-lgbtq-legislation)
(/policy-analysis/coordination-framework-militias-pass-new-anti-lgbtq-legislation)

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Ongoing Debates over Water and Electricity Privatization in Morocco](/policy-analysis/ongoing-debates-over-water-and-electricity-privatization-morocco)

May 1, 2024

• Soufiane Elgoumri

(/policy-analysis/ongoing-debates-over-water-and-electricity-privatization-morocco)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Why Israel Should Declare a Unilateral Cease-Fire in Gaza](/policy-analysis/why-israel-should-declare-unilateral-cease-fire-gaza)

May 1, 2024

• Dennis Ross,
David Makovsky

(/policy-analysis/why-israel-should-declare-unilateral-cease-fire-gaza)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Assessing the Houthi War Effort Since October 2023](/policy-analysis/assessing-houthi-war-effort-october-2023)

April 2024

• Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/assessing-houthi-war-effort-october-2023)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)