

# Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias

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Brief Analysis

**Although Damascus has sought to maintain a grip over its network of brigades, Tehran is gaining ascendancy and could push more of them to attack U.S. forces or Israel.**

On April 5, an ostensibly pro-Assad militia calling itself the Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region (al-Muqawama al-Shabiya fi al-Mintaqa al-Sharqiya) claimed a rocket attack on U.S. forces. A day later, another militia purportedly under the regime's command—Liwa al-Baqir (the Baqir Brigade)—released a statement declaring "jihad" against U.S. and allied forces in Syria. Both groups reportedly have Iranian ties: Liwa al-Baqir is guided by Tehran more than by Bashar al-Assad, while the shadowy Popular Resistance may be an Iranian front as well. These and other cases indicate that so-called "pro-Assad" Shia militias are increasingly marching to the Islamic Republic's tune, presenting an even greater threat to U.S. and allied interests.

## SHIA MILITIAS IN SYRIA

Shia make up around 1-2 percent of Syria's population, including Ismailis and Twelvers (the dominant branch in Iran, Hezbollah, and the rest of the Shia world). Alawites, the Assad clique's sect, are their own esoteric group partly influenced by Shia beliefs.

Despite the community's small size in Syria, militias manned or controlled by Shia have played a disproportionate role in the conflict. Domestic Shia groups have been limited in number: around 3,500-5,000 total fighters in the early days of the war, and currently around 8,000-12,000. Yet Iran has steadily reinforced them with foreign Shia fighters, including Hezbollah members and militias from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. These foreigners now number around 20,000-30,000, depending on recruitment and deployment needs.

## PRO-IRANIAN SPLINTERS

Cultivating Shia splinter groups has been an Iranian strategy since the regime first exported its Islamic Revolution, and Tehran has become quite adept at it. The development of large Shia militias in Syria began in late 2011, when Assad's intelligence agencies pushed locals to form largely sectarian-aligned groups that eventually became al-Lijan al-Shabiya (the Popular Committees). The country's first major Shia militia network was Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (the Abbas Brigade, or LAFA), which would subsequently pioneer the recruitment of foreign Shia. In 2012, LAFA's numerous factions began to splinter, the first sign of Iran's plan to dominate all Shia armed groups in Syria. These splinters included:

- **Liwa Dhulfiqar (the Dhulfiqar Brigade).** According to interviews with its fighters, this group broke away early in the war due in part to disputes with some of LAFA's commanders. Its late founder, Fadhel Subhi (aka Abu Hajar), was an Iraqi exile living in Syria who formerly fought with Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Tehran actively courted him, flying him to Iran for a well-photographed visit in 2013. After he was killed in Deraa in September 2013, Assad loyalists led by Haidar al-Jabbouri (aka Abu Shahid) regained control of the group, ostracizing Subhi's family and suspending their "martyrdom" payments.
- **Quwat Abu Fadl al-Abbas (the Abbas Forces, or QAFA).** By mid-2014, major figures within Liwa Dhulfiqar had officially joined this new splinter group led by radical Iraqi cleric Auws al-Khafaji. QAFA has since adopted Tehran's ideology and supported other Iranian-controlled groups.
- **Rapid Reaction Forces and Kataib al-Imam Ali.** LAFA cofounder Ahmed Hajji Saadi helped form the splinter group Afwaj al-Kafil, more often referred to as the Rapid Reaction Forces. From 2012 to 2015, he had operated in Syria as part of a small but experienced Iraqi Shia expeditionary unit backed by Iran. By late 2016, his splinter group was officially absorbed by the Iranian-controlled Kataib al-Imam Ali (Imam Ali Brigade), which later named him as one of its Syrian representatives.
- **Badr Organization.** Abu Ali al-Darraji, an Iraqi living in Syria, took a group of LAFA veterans back to his home country at some point during the war. Once there, he quickly established a close relationship with one of Iran's most important proxies in Iraq, the Badr Organization. His faction has not returned to Syria since then.

## ASSAD'S SHIA LOYALISTS

As Iraqi Shia groups become more independent in Syria in 2015-2016, LAFA's official Iraqi branch (Suqur al-Imam al-Mahdi, or the Mahdi Hawks) faded into obscurity, and the organization tightened its public ties to Assad-controlled militias and elite regime battalions such as Suqur al-Sahra (the Desert Hawks). LAFA banners and patches also increasingly echoed the insignia of two key Syrian army units, the 4th Armored Division and Republican Guard; similar displays could be seen among Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein (the Hussein Brigade, or LIH), an Assad-controlled group that emerged from LAFA.

In late 2017, the social media accounts of some LAFA members began openly describing the network as a subsection of the Republican Guard. Likewise, all LIH fighters, including those recruited in Iraq, must swear an oath of loyalty to the Assad regime—in stark contrast to Iranian-controlled militias.

## THE HEZBOLLAH MODEL IN SYRIA

In 2013, Tehran set about constructing Syrian copies of Hezbollah (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>). These Shia groups often take their orders directly from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah. Yet this model goes beyond the simple formation of armed groups, encompassing ideological and domestic political components as well.

Unlike Assad-controlled Shia militias, Syria's Hezbollah clones demonstrate wide-ranging interests in transnational Shia ideology, economic activities, diplomacy, and politics. In particular, they indoctrinate recruits into the Iranian

regime's ideology of *velayat-e faqih*, which grants absolute authority to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Syrian Hezbollah groups often repeat propaganda straight from Tehran, and they tend to focus more on issues outside Syria than other militias do.

A good example of this broader mindset is Liwa al-Baqir. Among other activities, the group has vocally supported the Iranian-linked Houthi rebels in Yemen, maintained a public transportation network in Aleppo, sent a delegation to the Russian-brokered peace talks in Sochi, and supported Omar Hussein al-Hassan as a candidate in Syria's 2016 parliamentary elections. The group has also crossed sectarian lines by recruiting Sunni tribesmen from eastern provinces. Its influence continues to grow, likely benefiting Tehran more than Assad.

## ZONES OF INFLUENCE

**A**ssad's militias and externally controlled Shia forces appear to concentrate on different areas of influence. Iran's militias tend to deploy adjacent to U.S.-allied forces and the Israeli border. In March 2017, for instance, the Iraqi Shia group Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Hezbollah Movement of the Outstanding) announced the creation of the Golan Liberation Army, which quickly posed a threat to Israel by deploying along its northeastern frontier. A few months later, Iranian-controlled militias spearheaded an advance on the U.S.-supported rebel base of al-Tanf, including Hezbollah-style groups such as Liwa al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, Liwa al-Baqir, and Liwa al-Sayyeda Ruqayya (a subgroup of al-Quwat al-Jaafariyah).

Since then, Tehran-backed units of varying origins have launched operations in Syria's eastern desert and near Deir al-Zour, often close to border safe zones established by the United States and its allies. Some of these groups have claimed casualties from U.S. strikes; this February, for instance, local tribal forces under Liwa al-Baqir's command were reportedly hit by American artillery when they advanced on U.S.-backed forces near Deir al-Zour.

In contrast, Assad's militias have made only token appearances during probes of U.S. positions and the Golan, preferring to focus on key regime battlegrounds instead. LIH and LAFA have repeatedly deployed near Qardaha, the Assad family's ancestral hometown in the north. Both groups have also concentrated on the East Ghouta offensive in Damascus. In mid-March, LIH released photos showing its members posing with Assad and fighting in the capital's northeastern suburb of Harasta. Yet Iranian-controlled forces have been notably absent from the latest fighting in East Ghouta—even Hezbollah, which was highly committed to that front in past years.

In areas where Assad's militias do operate alongside Iran's groups, tensions have apparently mounted between them. In a March NPR report, one Syrian army defector stated that Hezbollah and Assad's forces often compete to control individual battlefields; for example, both "wanted to be the ones to claim success at securing the rebels' surrender" in the southwestern Damascus suburb of Daraya. Tellingly, LIH rushed into the town's Shia shrine of Sayyeda Sakina, not only to claim victory for Assad, but also to cast its involvement as a sectarian victory. As early as mid-2013, Arabic sources and social media were describing arguments between Syrian and Iraqi Shia forces that devolved into firefights; Hezbollah was occasionally involved in such clashes as well. Likewise, intercepted radio communications and videos indicate Hezbollah's disdain for Syrian units.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

**I**ranian influence on the ground in Syria is rapidly outstripping that of the Assad regime and Russia. Damascus has few options for reversing this trend given its minority Alawite support base. As a result, the forces gaining ascendancy in regime-controlled areas will be more prone to supporting Tehran's foreign policy agenda instead of Assad's. This agenda may include fighting U.S. forces in southern and eastern Syria or attacking Israel via the Golan.

In general, then, the United States should assume that Assad regime policy pronouncements do not apply outside Damascus and core regime areas. Yet Washington may still have opportunities to keep factions out of Iran's fold on certain battlefronts. For instance, pro-Assad militias (particularly Sunni elements) may be good targets for leaflet

drops and other psychological operations warning them not to serve Iran's foreign interests by advancing on American positions; such warnings could emphasize that Tehran does not care about them and is perfectly willing to "fight to the last Syrian" if necessary. In addition, U.S. government analysts should closely monitor the movements of pro-Assad factions that have jointly operated with Iranian proxies in the past, since they are the most likely to follow Tehran's imperatives going forward. Syria's eastern hotspots appear to be the focus of the latest anti-U.S. movements, but the Golan could heat up in the near term as well.

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