

## Lebanese Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance in Syria

*Phillip Smyth*

April 26, 2018

The groups known loosely as Syrian Hezbollah operate with little independence from their Lebanese parent, and U.S. sanctions policy should treat them accordingly.

Since 2012, Shia militia groups have proliferated [across the landscape of the Syrian war](#). While not all such Shia militias are extensions of Lebanese Hezbollah, a number are based on the Hezbollah model and have received extensive aid from the group. These organizations categorize themselves broadly as the "Islamic Resistance in Syria" (al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suriya) or as "Syrian Hezbollah" (Hezbollah fi Suriya), and they should indeed be considered [integral elements of Lebanese Hezbollah](#).

### Background

In 2012-13, Lebanese Hezbollah started to train various bands of Syrian Shia fighters, many of them initially created as localized sectarian militias. Some operated in Damascus, others in Homs, and still others in Shia villages near Aleppo. Nevertheless, as these organizations developed, their recruitment activities regularly extended beyond their zones of origin.

By 2014-15, an umbrella organization apparently had formed, with linked subgroups touting their own leaders, logos, and banners. These groups would often parrot the ideological language used by Lebanese Hezbollah, venerate Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, and fight alongside or under Hezbollah commanders. Nearly all these types of groups have used, along with their own symbolism, a flag or patches with the Lebanese Hezbollah logo, the Islamic Resistance in Syria moniker, and the motto "Labayk ya Zainab!" (At your service, O Zainab!), referring to the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the shrine that bears her name near Damascus. Defense of the shrine against Sunni jihadists has been a primary talking point in recruiting foreign and Syrian Shia jihadists.

Some prominent examples of Syrian Hezbollah-style groups are as follows:

- **Quwat al-Ridha (Ridha Forces, aka Liwa al-Imam al-Ridha or the Imam Ridha Brigade).** One of the early such groups to develop, Quwat al-Ridha often recruits in Shia villages in the Homs region. It has deployed forces across Syria.
- **Al-Ghaliboun: Saraya al-Muqawama al-Islamiyah fi Suriya (The Victors: The Companies of the Islamic Resistance in Syria).** A shadowy group composed primarily of Syrian converts to Shiism, Alawites, and other Syrian Shia, al-Ghaliboun has focused much of its recruitment attention on the highland areas near the coast, even as it has pulled in members from throughout Syria. In 2015, the militia fought in the Golan and Deraa. Al-Ghaliboun's public messaging has been relatively quiet in recent years, but it remains active.
- **Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir (aka Liwa al-Baqir, or the Baqir Brigade).** Developed between 2013 and 2015, Liwa al-Baqir's leaders and membership consist of Syrian tribal converts to Shiism. The group has also attempted to recruit from Syria's large Baggara tribe. In April 2018, it declared jihad against the United States and its Syrian allies.

In some ways, efforts by Lebanese Hezbollah to nurture these outgrowths in Syria mirror the group's earlier activity in Iraq. Captured by U.S. forces in Basra in 2007, Lebanese Hezbollah commander Ali Musa Daqduq had been sent to Iraq to train fighters, organize attacks, and give ideological guidance to Iran-backed militants who would constitute the now powerful Iraqi Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). Structurally and ideologically, AAH suggests a Lebanese Hezbollah clone, although it eventually achieved some independence from its parent.

As compared with groups like AAH, the Syrian Hezbollah manifestations are less likely to develop the capacity for the same type of independent action. This can be attributed to the geographic proximity of Lebanese Hezbollah's home base, the heavy Hezbollah presence in Syria, and in many cases strong social links between Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian Shia communities. Lebanese Hezbollah is thus well placed to maintain direct control over the strategic and tactical aspects of its Syrian clones. For Lebanese Hezbollah, Syria provides additional strategic depth and manpower resources, including local forces to assist in securing Hezbollah's zones in Lebanon and added military strength to project against regional foes such as the United States, Israel, and Sunni Arab states.

### Hezbollah by Any Other Name

A prime example of Lebanese Hezbollah's control of an Islamic Resistance in Syria unit can be found in Quwat al-Ridha. Indeed, many of the links between the two demonstrate how Quwat al-Ridha, which touts a close rapport with Hezbollah, is less an independent actor and more an extension of the Lebanese organization.

According to his official Hezbollah biography, Hamza Ibrahim Haidar was killed June 29, 2013, while leading an attack in Khalidiya, a Homs neighborhood directly abutting the Old City. This advance utilized Hezbollah fighters as well as figures from the emergent Quwat al-Ridha. As for Haidar, his links to both groups are evident. He served as a commander for Hezbollah's elite Radwan Division (Fawj al-Radwan) as well as for Quwat al-Ridha, which praised its fallen leader in a martyrdom post, referring to him as having "supervised the establishment and training" of the militia.

Additional overlap between Lebanese Hezbollah and Quwat al-Ridha is evident in individuals like Ali Fawzi Taha (aka al-Hajj Jawad), a Lebanese Hezbollah commander from Tyre, Lebanon, who was listed in semiofficial Facebook posts by supporters of both groups as a "commander" of Quwat al-Ridha. Multiple social media posts by Quwat al-Ridha have praised Taha for his "martyrdom," which took place in April 2016.

Most striking perhaps is the connection between Ali Muhammad Bayz (aka Abu Hassan or Bilal) and Quwat al-Ridha. Killed fighting in the Homs governorate in May 2017, Bayz was a Lebanese Hezbollah commander who lived in southern Beirut and was active in combat, command, and logistics roles throughout Syria. According to a biography posted to a social media profile reportedly managed by his son, the fallen Lebanese Hezbollah commander was described as "one of the most important leaders of the resistance in Syria," in addition to being one of Quwat al-Ridha's "founders" and the commander of specialized units within the group. Photos of Bayz's funeral were posted to Quwat al-Ridha's social media, which listed him as a "martyr commander."

## Direct Recruitment in Syria

Along with supporting Syrian Hezbollah clones, the Lebanon-based group has recruited directly for its own ranks from the Lebanese-Syrian and Syrian Shia communities, largely from among Twelver Shia who reside near the border, around the Syrian cities of Homs and al-Qusayr. This makes sense given the area's geographic nearness to the Hezbollah heartland in Lebanon's Beqa Valley, clan links, as well as the large numbers of Shia living on both sides of the border.

The Syrian village of Zita, just across from the Lebanese town of al-Qasr, exemplifies Hezbollah recruitment in the borderlands. Despite being on the Syrian side, most of Zita's inhabitants are Lebanese Shia and have close familial links to Lebanon. After a spate of sectarian kidnappings and killings between 2012 and 2013, village residents formed ad hoc militias as a response. Having been seized by Syrian rebel forces in 2012, Zita and some neighboring Shia villages were retaken in 2013 by Hezbollah forces, which had previously held strong influence in them. Hezbollah then armed and trained residents into defense groupings before eventually absorbing them.

One former Zita resident, a twenty-two-year-old Lebanese-Syrian Shia named Mahdi Abdullah Idris (aka Abu Salah), was part of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Regiment, which belongs to the division of the same name mentioned earlier. Idris was killed in July 2016 while fighting in Hurayra, a town in the mountainous Qalamoun region north of Damascus. According to his semiofficial martyrdom biography, Idris was a "participant in all of the battles of the Resistance in Syria since the start of the crisis." Other Hezbollah "martyrs" to come from the border zone include Wael Hussein Zaytar (killed in 2017) and Ali Deeb Zaytar (killed in 2015), both from Hawik, another majority-Shia village north of Zita.

Originating deep within the Homs governorate was Hassan Melhem Assad, a Syrian Shia from the village of al-Rabwah, near Homs city. Assad was listed as a "commander," demonstrating how Syrian fighters have increasingly been integrated into Hezbollah ranks. In released photographs of the fallen commander, Islamic Resistance in Syria flags appear during what could be a lecture to Syrian recruits. Melhem, who was killed May 12, 2017, was buried under Syrian and Hezbollah flags, and Hezbollah's central military office even released a martyrdom video for him.

## Policy Implications

As the U.S. government continues to sanction individuals linked to Lebanese Hezbollah networks, it needs to look more closely at what appear to be autonomous or domestically grown Hezbollah-style groups in Syria. In fact, a number of these entities are not simply offshoots or independent groupings associated with the Lebanon-based organization, but integral elements of it. As a result, potential incidents involving U.S. individuals engaged in some way with groups operating under the Islamic Resistance in Syria or Syrian Hezbollah umbrella should be viewed as operating as part of Lebanese Hezbollah.

*Phillip Smyth is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its study [The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects](#).*