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IRAN-BACKED MILITIA IN SYRIA: PROFILES AND FUNCTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the crisis in Syria, Iran has sent many armed groups into the country, in addition to its own army units, with the aim of directly influencing the Assad regime's military forces, which weakened after the popular uprising. Having played an active role in the process of reshaping the Shabiha organization, whose history dates back to the 1980s, under the name of the National Defense Forces (NDF), Iran could not achieve what it had desired from forming the NDF in terms of influencing the regime's defense policy. Iran's experience in Iraq has resulted in the Hashd al-Shaabi organization, consisting of Iranian-backed militias, becoming a legal law enforcement agency after a long process and providing Iran with direct influence over the Iraqi forces.¹

Although the social structures of Syria and Iraq and their relations with regional actors

are different, Damascus is at least as important as Baghdad in Iran's strategy to increase its influence in the region and reach the Mediterranean through Lebanon. For this reason, Tehran has chosen to increase its influence in Syria through different armed groups in addition to the NDF. The army unit under the command of Bashar Assad's brother, Maher Assad, the 4th Armored Division, is in close cooperation with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah and stands as the most important extension of Tehran within the regime army.² The 4th Armored Division, together with other Iranian-backed militias, strengthens the Iranian presence³ in the region with its policies targeting the former opposition elements under the auspices of Russia in southern Syria. The Assad regime plays a leading role in drug trafficking, which is the illegal source of finance, by undertaking tasks in the production and

¹ Iraqi president signs Hashd al-Shaabi law, *Rudaw*, December 2016.

² Abdullah Alghadawi, "The Fourth Division: Syria's parallel army", *Middle East Institute*, 2021.

³ Gürkan Demirhan, «Dera Bölgesinde Yaşananlar», *Suriye Gündem*, 2021.

The LDF groups enabled Tehran to achieve its goal of having an official extension within the defense forces of the Assad regime, which was not possible through the NDF.

logistics of drugs, particularly Captagon.⁴

Although the 4th Armored Division has autonomy within the regime army and is in close contact with Iran, it remains outside the scope of this study as it is an integral element of the Baath regime and a Baathist force. This study will deal with the Local Defense Forces (LDF), which are similar to the NDF elements in terms of their emergence and construction processes, and the Iranian-backed sectarian militias classified as "Shiite militias" in the literature and the functions of these forces in Iran's regional politics.

The LDF groups enabled Tehran to achieve its goal of having an official extension within the defense forces of the Assad regime, which was not possible through the NDF. The NDF remained distant from Iran's goals for reasons such as the lack of an official assignment and Russia's increasing influence on some NDF elements. Alternatively, the LDF, which was established in 2013 and was organized in Alep-

po, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa in the first stage, was accepted as an official element of the regime army with a decision taken by the Assad regime in 2017. It stands as a second example for Iran after the Hashd al-Shaabi.⁵ The LDF quickly grew to tens of thousands of people, relying entirely on Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah for everything, including weapons and ammunition support, military training, and salary payments,⁶ and became one of the most effective regime forces on the battlefield.

When the Afghan, Pakistani, Iraqi, Lebanese and local Shiite militia elements, whose numbers exceeded 40 thousand in the peak periods, are added to the LDF elements with a total of 50 thousand personnel, one could clearly see the extent of Iran's power to shift the balance in the battlefield.⁷ Nevertheless Iran does not enjoy a total influence over all of these militia forces. The Jerusalem Brigade stands as an example that is in close contact with both Iran⁸ and Russia⁹ and adopts a position closer to one of these two actors accord-

⁴ Ben Hubbard ve Hwaida Saad, On Syria's Ruins, a Drug Empire Flourishes, *New York Times*, 2021.

⁵ Hamidreza Azizi, Integration of Iran-backed armed groups into the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces: implications for stability in Iraq and Syria, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 33:3, 2022, p.508.

⁶ Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi, Foreign sponsorship of progovernment militias fighting Syria's insurgency: Whither proxy wars?, *Mediterranean Politics*, p.7.

⁷ Orit Perlrov and Udi Dekel, "The Model of Iranian Influence in Syria.", *INSS*, 2020, p.3-4.

⁸ N. Mozes, "Iran Tightens Its Grip On Syria Using Syrian And Foreign Forces", *MEMRI*, 2015.

⁹ Caleb Weiss, "Russian special forces train Palestinian militia in Syria", *Long War Journal*, 2019.

ing to the conjuncture. In addition to that there are also some groups that cooperate with the regime intelligence, the Ba'ath Brigades and the Republican Guards, apart from their close contact with Iran.¹⁰

Iran has influenced the course of the civil war in favor of the regime by forming the NDF and LDF, and driving the Lebanese Hezbollah at first and then the foreign Shiite militias to the battlefield. Nevertheless, Iran's intervention in the civil war resulted in the improbability of placing the regime army at the center of security policies and served as the driving force behind the "militia craze" that engulfed the regime bloc. Although Russia wanted to be the dominant force in Syria and opted for transforming the regime army into an active actor through the 5th Corps under its control, it became a militia sponsor actor when it could not overcome the "militia craze". In fact, the intelligence elements of the Assad regime preferred to have a share in the militia craze instead of centralizing the regime army and making it a single great power, in order to exist in the battlefield despite the rising influence of Tehran and Moscow. To that end the regime honored

the warlords, who have militia forces on their behalf, by placing them in the parliament in show elections, thereby revealing the importance of militias in Syria today.¹¹

Having supported the Shabiha group's violent crackdown on the demonstrations in the first phase of the uprising, Tehran was looking for an opportunity to get organized in Syria through militias. However, Tehran launched this process after the regime army suffered great losses, including desertions, in the first year and a half of the war and failed to show the capacity to reverse the losses on the ground. Iran entered the battlefield through the local LDF and NDF militias and simultaneously activated the foreign militias that it brought. When the Lebanese Hezbollah entered the war alongside the failed regime army in Qusayr and turned the tide in favor of the regime, the balance started to shift in favor of the regime in Homs in the short term and in Damascus in the medium term.¹² Having started sending Shiite militias to Syria after a holy war discourse focusing on the Tomb of Sayyidah Zainab, Tehran deployed many militias to many fronts in a short time. Having deployed mi-

When the Afghan, Pakistani, Iraqi, Lebanese, and local Shiite militia elements, whose numbers exceeded 40 thousand in the peak periods, are added to the LDF elements with a total of 50 thousand personnel, one can clearly see the extent of Iran's power to shift the balance on the battlefield.

¹⁰ Helle Malmvig, Mosaics of power: Fragmentation of the Syrian state since 2011, *DIIS Report*, No. 2018:04, p.8.

¹¹ Karam Shaar and Samy Akil, Inside Syria's Clapping Chamber: Dynamics of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections, 2021.

¹² Nicholas Blanford, The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance, *CTC Sentinel*, 2013, vol:6, issue:8, p.21.

littias in heavy numbers to the Shiite villages of Nubl and Zahra in addition to Qusayr, Iran benefited from these forces in the siege of the city during the years-long war in Aleppo, while harassing and threatening the Turkish and Syrian National Army (SNA) troops in northern Aleppo. In the south of Aleppo, the Afghan Fatimid Brigade, with its thousands of militias, played a great role on behalf of Iran during the siege of the city.¹³

The Lebanese Hezbollah took an active role, especially in the eastern Ghouta region of the capital Damascus.¹⁴ It is widely known that the Iranian-backed Shiite militias played an important role in the chemical attack and inhuman siege practices in Ghouta in 2013 as much as the regime army. From this point of view, the Iranian-backed militias in Damascus and Aleppo, the two bloodiest fronts of the war, both played a role in changing the fate of the war and went down in history as the perpetrators of many war crimes that are the subject to the international law. The Ira-

nian-backed militias came to the fore at a time when the regime army lost its functional structure and the regime was weakening after continuous territorial losses. These militias, which enabled the survival of the regime first and then bestowed upon it an advantageous position with the intervention of Russia, are the only tools Iran uses to "build influence" and "balance other actors" on the eastern Mediterranean route by 2022.

The militia forces, which are used as a counterbalance to Turkey in the north, the USA in the south and the east, and Russia in the areas under the control of the regime, also enable Tehran to prepare an ideological ground for itself in the region. In addition to all these, both the survival of the regime and the reduction of the operational costs of the militias in the country, which was economically devastated, led to the use of illegal financing methods. This means that Iranian-backed militias have vital roles in the Syria-based drug network that affects the entire region.

¹³ "18,000 Shia militiamen fight for Syria's Assad: Sources", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 2016.

¹⁴ "Hezbollah forces participating in Ghouta massacre", *YnetNews*, 2018.

PROMINENT IRANIAN-BACKED MILITIA GROUPS



LOCAL DEFENSE FORCES (LDF)

The LDF is another local militia group backed by Iran, who failed to achieve what it expected from the NDF. The LDF differs from the NDF in two aspects, first it endorses ideological indoctrination and second it was recognized by the regime as an "official" law enforcement agency. Hosting many large and small militia groups, the LDF has a capacity of approximately fifty thousand fighters, according to some claims.¹⁵ Heavily influenced by the Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, the LDF is also described as a joint project of the regime army and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.¹⁶ Emerged first in Aleppo, the LDF spread through its new extensions in all regions under the control of the regime after Damascus, Latakia and Hama,

and even added some Christian regime militia to its ranks.¹⁷

THE BAQIR BRIGADE (LIWA AL-BAQIR)

Consisting of militants that belong to the Baqara tribe active in the Aleppo-Deir ez-Zor line, Liwa al-Baqir is a part of the Iranian-backed Local Defense Forces. Its name originates from Muhammad al-Baqir,¹⁸ who is claimed to be of the Baqara tribe and one of the founders of the Shiite denomination in the history of Shiite belief. While the majority of the tribe belongs to the Sunni faith, similar to other central and eastern Syrian tribes, there are also many Shiites among them, especially those who form the Liwa al-Baqir militia. Since the Baqara tribe identifies itself with the Ahl al-Bait through Muhammad al-Baqir, it proved

¹⁵ Nawar Saban, Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria, *Atlantic Council*, 2020.

¹⁶ Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 2020, p.93-94.

¹⁷ Nawar Shaban, The Iranian Crescent: Iran's Political, Geostrategic and Economic Interest in Syria- Part Three- Syrian-Iranian Relations since 2000, *Konrad Adenaur Stiftung*, p.6.

¹⁸ Nicholas Heras, Bassam Barabandi ve Nidal Betare, Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project, *CNAS*, 2017, p.4.

useful for Iran's policy of proliferating Shi'ism in especially eastern Syria.¹⁹ The organization's own claim is that the year 2012, when the conflict between the regime and the opposition in Aleppo began, is the date of foundation of Liwa al-Baqir. However, the visibility of the organization's presence in the battlefield took place in 2015 and beyond. At first, the organization participated in the clashes against the opposition in the southern countryside of Aleppo, and later on, it increased its activities in the entire Aleppo front, the desert region and Deir ez-Zor. The organization has very close relations with the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and played a leading role in the threatening rhetoric against the American forces in Syria and the regime support given to the YPG against the Turkish Armed Forces in Afrin.²⁰

LIWA SAYYIDAH RUQAYYA²¹ (LSR)²²

The name of the organization originates from the mosque and tomb of Ruqiyya, daughter of Imam Hussein, in Damascus. Its militias are from the local Shiites of Damascus, and they were mobilized for protecting the sacred sites in the city, like many of their counterparts, Iran-backed militias. The mosque mentioned above was built in the Iranian architectural style in 1985 with Iran's financial support and continuing influence, making it one of Tehran's soft power centers

in Damascus.²³ Although there is no agreement on a clear date for the establishment of the LSR, most claims point to 2012 and 2013. In the first years of its founding, the organization acted as an extension of the Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, an Iraqi group that also fights in Syria, and received military training and weapons aid from this group.²⁴ The organization is active in Damascus, particularly around eastern Ghouta. According to Nawar Shaban, the organization has a personnel count of between 5,000 and 8,000 and is one of the prominent local Shiite organizations.²⁵

HARAKAT HEZBOLLAH AL-NUJABA (HHN)

The organization is one of the Iraqi-based groups fighting for the regime in Syria. Its leader and founder, Akrem al-Kaabi, is among the important instruments of Tehran in the region as a figure with close relations with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Al-Kaabi, who was previously a member of Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, one of the prominent Iranian-backed militia groups in Iraq, established the HHN with the support of Iran, after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The organization, which has close relations with Kataib Hezbollah and Lebanese Hezbollah as well as Tehran, is one of the most active groups in Syria among Iraq-based organizations. Al-Nujaba TV, the official broadcasting organization of the organization, was founded with Iran's support in the same

¹⁹ Ömer Behram Özdemir, Deyr ez-Zor'da İran Destekli Milis Yapısının Üç Cephesi, *ORSAM*, 2021.

²⁰ Amir Toumaj ve Romany Shaker, IRGC-controlled Syrian militia declares jihad against US forces in Syria, *FDD's Long War Journal*, 2018.

²¹ Sayyidah Ruqiyya Brigade.

²² Some sources mention the organization as Jafari Force. The reason for that is the recruited people are from the Syrian Shiites who live in the Imam Jafar al-Sadiq neighborhood in Damascus.

²³ Phillip Smyth, Hizballah Cavalcade: al-Quwat al-Ja'afariyah & Liwa Sayyida Ruqayya: The Building of an "Islamic Resistan in Syria", *Jihadology*, 2015.

²⁴ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, The 'Martyrs' of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya (The Ja'afari Force), *Syria Comment*, 2016.

²⁵ Nawar Shaban, The Iranian Crescent: Iran's Political, Geostrategic and Economic Interest in Syria- Part Three- Syrian-Iranian Relations since 2000, *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, p.6.

period. Later on it became one of the institutions included in the sanctions list by the USA.²⁶ While the activities of Iraqi militia organizations in Syria were focused on protecting the Sayyidah Zainab region in the first place, HHN was one of the first groups to expand its field of activity beyond Sayyidah Zainab and Damascus, and was one of the pioneers of the process of spreading the Iranian-backed militias to the Syrian territory. The organization, which had differences of opinion with other Iranian-backed militias due to its decision to fight outside the Sayyidah Zainab region, nevertheless started to send militias to the Aleppo front as of June 2013.²⁷ Seeking to reinforce itself in the region with the sub-groups it has established, HHN played a leading role in the establishment of groups such as Ammar bin Yasir Brigade, Hasan Mujtaba Brigade and Hamad Brigade in line with this purpose. One of the important instruments of increasing Iranian influence in the region under the pretext of war against the opposition and ISIS, HHN is also known for publishing videos that threaten Turkey, citing Turkey's military presence in Iraq.²⁸

KATA'IB SAYYID AL-SHUHADA (KSS)

KSS is another Iran-backed militia force that originates in Iraq. Abu Mustafa al-Shaybani, the founding leader of the KSH, has been active on the Syrian battlefield since 2013. He is a former Kataib Hezbollah leader and has been in close contact with the Iranian Revolu-

tionary Guards for many years. KSS, which is under the umbrella of Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, has issued several threatening messages against the US forces in the region. KSS was also among the militia forces targeted in the Tanf and Al Bukamal regions in Syria in the air strikes carried out by the USA,²⁹ and stands among the important pillars of the Iranian presence in the region. Receiving direct funds from Iran, the group is also financed by Iraq since it belongs to Hashd al-Shaabi. KSS was among the groups that were engaged in intense fighting against the opposition in eastern Ghouta and Daraa. There are allegations that the organization was responsible for blocking the escape routes of the opposition from Damascus when the chemical attack was perpetrated in 2013.³⁰

ZULFIQAR BRIGADE

Like many other Iranian-backed organizations, the Zulfiqar, which was founded in 2013 to guard the shrines that are considered sacred to Shiites in Syria, especially Sayyidah Zainab, is named after the famous sword of Imam Ali, Zulfiqar. It has a distinctive religious and sectarian emphasis like many other Iranian-backed groups. Having engaged in fighting in the south of Damascus against the opposition, the Zulfiqar Brigade is claimed to have emerged from Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade and to have recruited fighters from both the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites.³¹ The group fought in many battles around the Rif Dimashq region, especially in Adra and Na-

²⁶ Michael Knights, Profile: Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, *The Washington Institute*, 2021.

²⁷ Phillip Smyth, The Shiite Jihad in Syria And its Regional Effects, *The Washington Institute*, 2015.

²⁸ "Haşdi Şabi'ye bağlı grup, Türkçe video ile Türkiye'yi tehdit etti: Türkiye ile İran arasındaki rekabet hali Irak'ta çok daha sert karşılık bulacak", *Independent Türkçe*, 2021.

²⁹ Michael Knights, Profile: Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, *The Washington Institute*, 2021.

³⁰ K. Gilbert, "The Rise of Shi'ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat", *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism*, p.29-30.

³¹ Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin, Hizb Allah's Gambit in Syria, *CTC Sentinel*, 2013, p.16-17.

bak, and participated in joint operation rooms with the 4th Armored Division under the command of Maher al-Assad in Daraa.³² The command echelons of the group are dominated by Iraqi Shiites in close contact with Iran.³³

FATIMID BRIGADE

Founded in 2013 by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to mobilize the Shiite Afghans, the Fatimid Brigade takes its name from the Shiite Fatimid state that once dominated the Caliphate in Islamic history. The manpower of the Fatimid Brigade comes from the Shiite Afghans residing in Syria -Sayyidah Zainab region in Damascus and its surroundings- and those residing and taking refuge in Iran.³⁴ Having fought in the regime ranks against both the opposition and ISIS in Aleppo, Daraa, Homs, Idlib, Hama, Deir ez-Zor and Damascus, the Fatimid Brigade distinguished itself from other pro-regime forces with its military success and discipline in the battlefield. The Fatimid Brigade came to the fore in the clashes against the opposition in Aleppo and Daraa and made its name in the international arena.³⁵ It also took part in the operations against ISIS in the desert region between Homs and Deir ez-Zor in recent years and remained among the target groups in the ISIS attacks. According to Nawar Shaban, the number of its active fighters in the battlefield is around 3-4 thousand as of 2022.³⁶ There are estimations that the group's fighter count has surpassed

ten thousand in the past. These militias earn around 450 to 700 USD per month, and also enjoy social advantages such as citizenship, residence and work permits provided by Iran. While the IRGC forces are trying to recruit the human resource pool consisting of Shiite Afghans through the Hussainiyas and cultural centers³⁷ used as ideological indoctrination centers, while the aforementioned social advantages play an encouraging role, especially for refugee Afghans to join the Fatimid Brigade. The organization, which entered the US sanctions list in 2019, has also been accused of recruiting child fighters.

ZAINEBIYOUN BRIGADE

The Zainebiyoun Brigade was formed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards by expanding the Shiite Pakistani militia within the Fatimid Brigade. It is a militia organization made up of Iran-backed Shiite Pakistanis in Syria. Although the first Shiite Pakistanis fighting in Syria belonged to the Fatimid Brigade and their existence can be traced back to 2013, the founding of the Zainebiyoun Brigade as a separate group dates back to the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015.³⁸ The military training and organizational processes of the militias recruited by Iran with social aid and ideological training processes were also carried out under the control of the Revolutionary Guards.³⁹ At the first stage, the organization joined the fighting in and around the

³² Caleb Weiss, Leader of Iranian-backed Shia militia seen inside Syrian military ops room, *Long War Journal*, 2018.

³³ Ömer Behram Özdemir, "Suriye İç Savaşında Şii Milisler", *Ortadoğu'da Devlet Dışı Silahlı Aktörler*, ed. Murat Yeşiltaş and Burhanettin Duran, Ankara: SETA Yayınları, 2018, p.446.

³⁴ Phillip Smyth, Iran's Afghan Shiite Fighters in Syria, *The Washington Institute*, 2014.

³⁵ Tobias Schneider, The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syrian Civil War, *Middle East Institute*, 2018, p.11.

³⁶ Nawar Shaban, *age.*, p.8-9.

³⁷ Ömer Behram Özdemir, *age.*, s.448.

³⁸ Farhan Zahid, The Zainabiyoun Brigade: A Pakistani Shiite Militia Amid the Syrian Conflict, *Terrorism Monitor*, volume: 14, issue: 11, 2016.

³⁹ Aydın Güven, İran destekli Zeynebiyyun Tugayı Pakistan'ın yeni ulusal güvenlik sorunu olabilir, *Anadolu Ajansı*, 2020.

Sayyidah Zainab region in Damascus, and gradually strengthened its presence in Daraa, Homs, and Deir ez-Zor regions. The organization, which is at the forefront, along with other Iranian-backed militias, in the regime's repression policies in the Idlib region, is among the pro-regime organizations targeted in the air strikes carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces.⁴⁰

ABU AL-FADL AL-ABBAS BRIGADE (ABBAS BRIGADE)

Abbas Brigade was formed by militias living in Sayyidah Zainab region and is affiliated with Iraq-based (Iran-supported) Shiite militias (Kataib Hezbollah and Mahdi Army).⁴¹ It is one of the first examples of Iran-backed militia organizations in Syria. The organization, named after Imam Ali's son Abbas, who was martyred in the Karbala incident, prioritizes sectarian symbols in its propaganda, and has close relations with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Lebanese Hezbollah, in addition to the Iraqi-based Shiite militia. Although the majority are Iraqi Shiites, it also includes Syrian Shiite elements. The organization sent militias to the Samarra region in Iraq during the period when ISIS increased its dominance in Iraq.⁴² Therefore, it is not limited to Syria as an area of action. In terms of its field of action and discourses, the emphasis on Shiism outweighs the emphasis on Syrianness. The organization, which is a party to the fighting

in Yabroud, Mleiha, Carba, Qabun, Qasimiah, Eastern Ghouta, Barzeh, Beit Sahm, Hajira and Jobar in Damascus, also carries out actions in Maaloula (Rif Dimashq), Shebaa (Rif Dimashq) Zara (Homs) regions. Apart from the above-mentioned relations of the organization, there are allegations that it is in close contact with the Republican Guard affiliated to the regime and that these relations have reached the level of direct cooperation.⁴³ On the other hand, considering that they have recently had troops and headquarters in Deir ez-Zor,⁴⁴ it is possible to say that they are at the center of Tehran's sphere of influence, like other militia forces in the region.

QUWAT AL-RIDHA (AL-RIDHA FORCES)

The al-Ridha Forces, named after Ali al-Ridha, the eighth imam of the twelve imams of Shiism, is a local extension of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the region and is a militia force directed and administered by Hezbollah. Founded by Hezbollah militant Hamza Ibrahim Haydar (Abu Mustafa),⁴⁵ the headquarters of the organization is in Homs. The action areas of the organization, whose militants are mostly composed of Syrian Shiites from Homs, Damascus, Daraa and Aleppo, stand out as Qalamoun (Yebrud and Rankus), Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Eastern and Western Ghouta (Damascus), Homs and Daraa⁴⁶ in the first years. In the following years, the organization,

⁴⁰ Joe Truzman, Turkey's Operation "Spring Shield" delivers blow to Hezbollah, *Long War Journal*, 2020.

⁴¹ Phillip Smyth, From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shia Militias, *CTC Sentinel*, Syria Special Issue, volume: 6, issue 8, 2013.

⁴² Phillip Smyth, Hizballah Cavalcade: From Najaf to Damascus and Onto Baghdad: Iraq's Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, *Jihadology*, 2014.

⁴³ Aymenn Javad Tamimi, Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and the Republican Guard, 2018.

⁴⁴ "What do you know about the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade militia?", *Deirezzor 24*, 2022.

⁴⁵ Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, 2020, p.95.

⁴⁶ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Quwat al-Ridha: Syrian Hezbollah", *Syria Comment*, 2015.

which appeared in Idlib⁴⁷ and Latakia⁴⁸ in addition to these regions, is also deployed alongside various Iranian-backed forces⁴⁹ in Qutaifah, Rif Dimashq. The Qutaifah region, as one of the regions targeted by Israel recently, reflects the effectiveness of Iran/Hezbollah presence in the region.⁵⁰ The al-Ridha

Forces is one of the important instruments of Hezbollah among the Syrian Shiites and was trained by the officers of the regime army.⁵¹ It also went through the Russian military training process⁵² after Russia's intervention in the war, and thus became a group that has contact with both Iran/Hezbollah and Moscow.

⁴⁷ David Sorenson, *Syria in Ruins: The Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War*, Praeger Security International, 2016, p.51.

⁴⁸ <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1187894065372622849> , Eriřim Tarihi: Ađustos 2022.

⁴⁹ <https://syriafiles.net/02-6/> , Eriřim Tarihi: Ađustos 2022.

⁵⁰ Israel attacks positions near Russian base in Syria, *The Cradle*, 15 August 2022.

⁵¹ Mazen Ezzi, "Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria", *European University Institute*, 2020, p.6.

⁵² Sarah Fainberg, "Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict", *Ifri*, 2017, p.24

Table: Prominent Iran Backed Militia Groups in Syria (2011-2022)

Name	Religious or Sectarian Reference in the Name	Area of Operations	LDF element
313 Forces	x	Quneitra, Daraa, Hama, Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, Deir ez-Zor	x
Hashemite Brigade		Al Bukamal	
Quwat al-Ridha	x	Eastern Ghouta, Daraa, Aleppo, Tadmur, Deir ez-Zor, Qalamoun, Homs	
Imam al-Mahdi Brigade	x	Daraa, Eastern Ghouta, Quneitra, Aleppo, Hama (rural)	
Imam al-Hussein Brigade	x	Damascus, Daraa, Idlib	
Saif al-Mahdi Brigade	x	Damascus, Homs, Tadmur	
Zulfiqar Brigade	x	Damascus, Daraa, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor	
Kataib Imam Ali (Iraq)	x	Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Aleppo	
Hadrat Abbas Brigade	x	Quneitra, Hama, Homs	
Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba		Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Damascus, Homs.	
Liwa al-Baqir	x	Hama, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo	x
Fatimid Brigade	x	Daraa, Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, Hama	
Zainebiyoun Brigade	x	Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, Deir ez-Zor	
Sayyidah Ruqayya Brigade	x	Damascus, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor	x
Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade	x	Daraa, Damascus, Aleppo, Quneitra, Deir ez-Zor	
Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhadah	x	Damascus, Daraa, Quneitra, Deir ez-Zor	
Quds Brigade		Aleppo, Damascus, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor	
Hezbollah (Lebanon)		Homs, Damascus, Deir ez-Zor, Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Quneitra, Daraa, Haseke	
Fawj el-Hadi	x	Idlib, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor	
"Special Force"		Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Quneitra	x
Saraya al-Ariin (Fawj Abu Haris)		Latakia, Homs	x
Fawj Sheikh al-Jabal		Latakia, Idlib, Hama, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor	x

Fawj Tha'ir Allah		Aleppo	x
Shahid Zainal Abidin Barri Brigade		Aleppo, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Idlib, Hama	x
Qatibat al-Maham al-Hasa		Homs, Damascus, Latakia, Idlib, Aleppo	x
Ahrar Brigade		Suwaydah, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, Homs	x
Saraya al-Ra'ad		Hama, Idlib, Homs, Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia	x
Ashbal Hussein Brigade	x	Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo	x
Mukhtar al-Tiqfi Brigade	x	Latakia, Homs	x
Saraya al-Wa'ad		Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Damascus	X
Wa'ad el-Sadiq Forces		Damascus, Daraa, Quneitra	x
Fawj Nabi al-Akram	x	Damascus, Homs, Hama, Deir ez-Zor	x
Al-Ghalibun	x	Damascus, Aleppo, Quneitra, Homs	x
Usud al Hussein Brigade	x	Hama, Homs, Damascus, Deir ez-Zor	x
Saraya Muqawama		Latakia, Hama, Deir ez-Zor	x
Qatiba Nairab		Aleppo	x
Fawj al-Safira		Aleppo	x
Fawj al-Nubl w'al-Zahra		Aleppo	x
Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi	x	Aleppo	x
Fawj Imam al-Hujjah	x	Aleppo	x
Saraya Fursan al-Basil		Aleppo, Idlib	x
Rijal al-Qaim	x	Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, Latakia, Deir ez-Zor, Hama	x
Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (Iraq)			
The National Ideological Resistance	x	Damascus, Aleppo, Homs	x
Badr Brigades (Iraq)			
Tufuf Brigade (Iraq)			
Harakat Abdal (Iraq)			
Jund Mahdi	x	Aleppo	x
Asadullah al-Ghalib Brigades	x	Damascus, Aleppo, Homs	
Kataib Hezbollah (Iraq)			

BALANCING REGIONAL/GLOBAL ACTORS: USA, ISRAEL, TURKEY AND RUSSIA



Using over 300 military bases and points in Syria alone,⁵³ Iran has built a large area of influence in these territories by using both its own forces (Revolutionary Guards) and militia groups. The USA comes first among the actors against which this large-scale military presence serves as a counterbalance. Iranian-backed militia groups' anti-US activities are focused on eastern and southern Syria. In eastern Syria, the Assad regime, Russia and Iran's move was to put forward militia groups against the dominance of the YPG/SDF, the U.S. ally in the region, which also covers the underground resources. While the Assad regime and Russia have a presence in the region with NDF elements and pro-regime tribal forces, Iran supports these elements with LDF units and Shiite militias in the region.

Thousands of Iranian-backed militias deployed along a line from north to south in Deir ez-Zor are both creating a barrier against the

YPG/SDF and taking on the task of keeping the Iraq-Syria logistics line open for Iran. The Liwa al-Baqir and the Quds Brigade are stationed in Tebni, the northernmost. There are forces of the Quds Brigade and Fatimid Brigade in Kebajib and the Liwa al-Baqir, HHN, Kataib Imam Ali, various Hashd al-Shaabi elements, and Zainebiyoun Brigade in the region from Huseyniya to Bokrus. The same groups were heavily deployed and fortified in Mayadin, which had become one of the important militia centers of the region. In Al Bukamal, which is the junction point of the Iraqi-Syrian border for Iranian-backed militias, there is an intense militia presence, including groups of Iraqi origin, such as Harakat Abdal, Tufuf Brigade, Kata'ib Imam Ali, Badr Brigades, HHN and Quds Brigade.

The militias in the region not only stand firm against the YPG/SDF, but also periodically harass the US forces in the Tanf Base.

⁵³ Foreign Forces Points in Syria End of 2021 and Beginning of 2022, *Jusoor For Studies*, 2022.

Instead of a direct ground intervention that would be difficult to implement and costly, Israel preferred aerial targeting of the regime and Iranian forces in Syrian territory.

The Tanf Base was hit by armed drones both in 2021⁵⁴ and 2022,⁵⁵ and these attacks were left unclaimed. Nevertheless, the data from open sources point the Iranian-backed militia groups as the perpetrator.⁵⁶ American decision makers seem to share the same opinion since the U.S. Army launched direct attacks against the Iranian-backed militias in the region in various operations in 2021⁵⁷ 58 and 2022.⁵⁹ These attacks by the U.S. forces neutralized Iranian-backed militia fighters from various organizations. Considering the Israeli air strikes, the indirect confrontation between Iran versus U.S. and Israel is likely to continue through responses on militia forces.

In the context of the Israeli-Iranian rivalry, one could observe that Iran is not a balanced actor, but an actor, who seeks to be balanced. Unlike the USA, Israel does not have a direct military presence in Syria, nor does it have militia partners such as the YPG/SDF. The battlefield in Syria has become a training and deployment center for those armed elements that Israel sees as a

threat with the involvement of Hezbollah, Iraqi militias and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria. This development necessitated the intervention of Tel Aviv in order to restore the balance. Instead of a direct ground intervention that would be difficult to implement and costly, Israel preferred aerial targeting of the regime and Iranian forces in the Syrian territory. Israel started utilizing this option more frequently when the U.S. administration in the Trump period adopted an anti-Iranian stance. These operations, which also provided the function of curbing the increasing Iranian influence for Russia, were carried out quite rarely in the period until the Trump administration, except for May 2013. Israeli airstrikes, which targeted only the Damascus region infrequently until 2017, have increased exponentially after this period. Israeli airstrikes between January 2017 and August 2022 constitute approximately 95% of all Israeli attacks in Syria since the beginning of the war.⁶⁰

Israel carried out air strikes 27 times in 2017 and these attacks

⁵⁴ US base in Syria hit with suspected drone attack, *Al Monitor*, 2021.

⁵⁵ U.S. reports drone strikes on Tanf base in Syria, no casualties, *Washington Post*, 2022.

⁵⁶ Michael Knights, Kataib Hezbollah's Role in the August 15 al-Tanf Attack, *The Washington Institute*, 2022.

⁵⁷ "ABD, İran destekli Şii milis güçlerden Ketayib Seyyid eş-Şuheda ve Ketayib Hizbullah unsurlarına hava saldırısı düzenledi", *Suriye Gündemi*, 26 Şubat 2021.

⁵⁸ Amanda Macias, "U.S. releases footage of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria at fragile moment for Iran nuclear talks", *CNBC*, 28 June 2021.

⁵⁹ "US carries out raids in Syria on 'Iran-linked' targets", *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2022.

⁶⁰ <https://sami-r.carto.com/maps> , Israeli strikes in Syria, Erişim Tarihi: 30 Ağustos 2022.

started to reach beyond Damascus by hitting targets in Masyaf (Hama), Hasya (Homs), Aleppo, Al Bukamal (Deir ez-Zor), Quneitra and Daraa, apart from the targets in Damascus. In 2018, the same numbers of attacks hit Damascus, Hama, Homs and Quneitra, as well as Latakia and Suwayda, while the bases and facilities used by Iran in the region were specifically targeted in these attacks.^{61 62} While the number of attacks approached 50 in 2019, Damascus Airport and its surroundings were hit in 8 of these attacks. While the buildings used by Iranian elements in Al Bukamal were targeted in the attacks of this period,⁶³ Iranian-backed military elements stationed in Damascus were also targeted and militias, including Revolutionary Guards elements, were killed.⁶⁴ Israel has also shown that it is aware of how Al Bukamal functions as a station for the Iranian militia line by hitting forces⁶⁵ affiliated with the Hashd al-Shaabi in al-Qaim, which is on the Iraqi side of the border, east of Al Bukamal.

In 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic started, Israel did not slowdown in attacks, but on the contrary, increased it to over 60 per year. Eight of these attacks targeted buildings thought to be used by Iran in and around Damascus Airport. In addition, Israel aimed to weaken the Iranian-backed forces from the air by targeting the Suhna and Kabajib regions, where these forces are heavily deployed in the desert region in operations against ISIS.

Israel hit the Sayyidah Zainab⁶⁶ region, which is the heart of the Iranian-backed militias in Damascus, the Imam Ali Military Base⁶⁷ used by the Shiite militias in Al Bukamal, and a factory in Aleppo⁶⁸ that produces missiles for the Iranian-backed forces, thereby covering the entire country on the Aleppo-Damascus-Deir ez-Zor line in a demonstration of power.

While 65 attacks took place in 2021, the intensity of attacks increased in Deir ez-Zor, Homs, Latakia and Tartus. These attacks targeted Iranian-backed militias, bases and logistics convoys belonging to Iran and its affiliated forces. According to Israeli sources, the logistical corridors through land, air and sea used by Tehran in the region in the 2021 Israeli attacks lost 70% of their functionality. Israeli Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi claimed that as a result of targeting Iran's smuggling routes in the attacks, there was a decrease in weapons and ammunition entering Syria.⁶⁹ In the first eight months of 2022, the number of Israeli attacks exceeded 50. Damascus Airport, Quneitra, Masyaf and Tartus were the most heavily hit targets. The reason Israel selected Quneitra was a reminder to the Iranian-backed forces and the regime that Israel is ready in the Golan, the Masyaf, Tartus and Damascus Airport attacks were an indication that the logistics and weapons production centers of the Iranian-backed forces will continue to be hit.

⁶¹ <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1018851669168283648>, Erişim Tarihi: 30 Ağustos 2022.

⁶² <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/995241720349691905>, Erişim Tarihi: 30 Ağustos 2022.

⁶³ <https://twitter.com/ImageSatIntL/status/1171105697976553478>, Erişim Tarihi: 30 Ağustos 2022.

⁶⁴ <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/issy005-november-19-2019/>, Erişim Tarihi: 30 Ağustos 2022.

⁶⁵ "Israel blamed as deaths reported in airstrike on pro-Iran Iraqi militia", *Times of Israel*, August 2019.

⁶⁶ <https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/1254691115367792640>, Erişim Tarihi: 30 Ağustos 2022.

⁶⁷ "Secret airstrike destroys Iran's Albukamal base", *The Jerusalem Post*, March 2020.

⁶⁸ Israeli intel firm: Friday airstrikes in Syria hit missile production facility, *The Times of Israel*, September 2020.

⁶⁹ "İsraill Genelkurmay Başkanı: 2021'de İran'ın Kaçakçılık Yollarına Darbe Vurduk", *Suriye Gündemi*, Aralık 2021.

Even though Turkey retaliated harshly against these militias in Idlib and Afrin, Iran continues to use these militias in Idlib and Tel Rifaat for harassing the Turkish army and the SNA. In a possible operation against Tel Rifaat, it would not be a surprise if the Turkish Armed Forces and SNA encounter Iranian-backed militias.

In Tehran's policy towards Turkey, the regions where militias were used as a balancing tool were Idlib and Aleppo. Before 2016, when Turkey directly intervened in Syria, the Tehran-Ankara rivalry was based on the struggle between Iranian-backed militias and Syrian opposition. In the next period, the Turkish army came into direct encounter with Iranian militia forces from time to time in the field. When Turkey, after Russia, deployed its forces directly in the battlefield, Tehran was confronted with the fear of being left behind in Syria. In December 2016, Turkey and Moscow's negotiations on the evacuation of the city in order to prevent the humanitarian tragedy in Aleppo, which has been under siege for many years, left Iran out of the negotiations table. Therefore, Tehran had to bring forward its militias in order to be included in the equation. Hezbollah and HHN militias, which took part in the siege in Aleppo in the first place, prevented the evacuation convoys from leaving the siege zone.⁷⁰ The convoys were allowed to pass after Russia's request, yet Iranian-backed militias opened fire on the convoys

causing civilian deaths.⁷¹ In the announcement of the ceasefire agreement signed between Turkey and Russia at the end of December, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu emphasized that the guarantor countries were Turkey and Russia, and that Iran should contribute to the ceasefire efforts by using its influence over the Shiite militias, especially Hezbollah.⁷²

Tensions between Ankara and Tehran increased even more as Turkey started to set up observation posts in the region by sending troops into Idlib. In February 2018, the Turkish army convoy was on the move to establish an observation point in the al-Eis region in the countryside of Aleppo, Shiite militia forces opened fire with rockets and mortars causing martyrs and wounding others.⁷³ In the same days, while Turkey's Operation Olive Branch against the YPG/PKK in Afrin was going on, some LDF forces led by Liwa al-Baqir departed from Nubl and Zahra on behalf of the regime and moved towards Afrin.⁷⁴ Ankara had warned that it would deem any force that stands together with YPG/PKK against itself in Afrin as a legitimate target.

⁷⁰ "İran destekli milislerden Halepli sivillerin tahliyesine engel", *Anadolu Ajansı*, Aralık 2016.

⁷¹ "Şii milisler Halep'te tahliye konvoyuna ateş açtı", *Anadolu Ajansı*, Aralık 2016.

⁷² Dışişleri Bakanı Sayın Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu'nun Basına Yaptığı Açıklama, *MFA*, 30 Aralık 2016.

⁷³ "Türkiye'nin El Eis'teki gözlem noktasına saldırıda 1 asker hayatını kaybetti, 5 asker ve 1 sivil yaralandı", *BBC Türkçe*, 6 Şubat 2018.

⁷⁴ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Who are Liwa al-Baqir, the pro-regime unit seeking to enter Afrin?", *MECRA*, 2018.

Therefore, the Turkish Army neutralized more than thirty Iranian-backed regime militias with an air operation⁷⁵ and completely blocked any possible regime support to Afrin.

In Idlib, the Syrian National Army (SNA) resisted against the advance of the regime forces and Iran under the air cover provided by Russia, with the support of the Turkish army. Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield after 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an attack in Idlib perpetrated by Russia and the regime. The Turkish army attacked the regime forces and the Iranian-backed militia in Idlib with large numbers of armed drones. Dozens of Hezbollah and Zainebiyoun militia fighters were killed in Turkish airstrikes.⁷⁶ Even though Turkey retaliated harshly against these militias in Idlib and Afrin, Iran continues to use these militias in Idlib and Tel Rifaat for harassing the Turkish army and the SNA. In a possible operation against Tel Rifaat, it would not be a surprise if the Turkish Armed Forces and SNA encounter Iranian-backed militias.

In the context of Iran's competition with Russia, the territories in the south and east of Syria are highly contested areas. Russia established and funded the 5th Corps against the 4th Armored Division in the regime army, yet it lags behind Tehran in the competition in terms of militia groups. Burdened by historical and religious disadvantages in terms of contact and influence with local actors in the region compared to Iran, Russia is trying to make up for these shortcomings and attract some militia forces to its side. Russia's collaborators in the battlefield consist of the 25th Special Mission Division (Tiger Forces) under the command of Brigadier General Suheil Hassan, the Quds Brigade, which is also associated with Iran, the Christian militias under

the NDF in the Hama region, and the former opposition forces reconciled with the regime in Daraa, apart from the Russians' own military forces and mercenary companies.

Russia, as the guarantor of the ceasefire and reconciliation, tried to reinforce itself through former opposition forces in Daraa, where its competition with Iran is the toughest. As the birthplace of the popular uprising, Daraa has seen harsh regime crackdowns since the first days of the uprising and has remained for many years as a flashpoint after the outbreak of the civil war. The conflict between the regime and the opposition entered a new phase in 2018 as the opposition forces signed an agreement with the regime under the Russian guarantee. This agreement aimed to achieve a ceasefire and to stop hostilities against the regime by former opposition members. Yet in practice, it has provided Russia with an opportunity to form its own militia groups. On the other hand, it did not take long for Iran to start pressuring Daraa through its affiliates within the regime forces. The 5th Corps, built by Russia within the regime army, served as an umbrella during Moscow's offensive in Daraa. While the former opposition members operated under the leadership of Ahmet al-Oda as the 8th Brigade under the 5th Corps, the regime did not "officially" recognize the 8th Brigade under Iran's pressure. Tehran clamped down on Daraa with the 4th Armored Division and Hezbollah, while also targeting former opposition members with assassinations. When former opposition members responded to these tactics with assassinations, Daraa has been transformed into an environment of chaos where there is no trust and stability. Moscow lacked the required level of control and influence over the 8th Regi-

⁷⁵ "Turkish air strikes kill dozens of pro-regime fighters in Syria's Afrin", *France 24*, March 2018.

⁷⁶ Joe Truzman, "Turkey's Operation "Spring Shield" delivers blow to Hezbollah", *Long War Journal*, March 2020.

ment forces unlike Iran, and had to gradually reduce its support for the old dissidents from Daraa, whom it could not persuade to fight on different fronts. The militias of the 4th Armored Division, Hezbollah and Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade increased their attacks targeting the Daraa al-Balad location in the center of Daraa in 2021 and reached a new ceasefire in which the old opposition members had to make concessions after a harsh siege.⁷⁷

Russia still has influence in Daraa province and has not completely withdrawn from the region. Various regime militias, including the regime intelligence units in the region, are in close contact with Moscow. Nevertheless, Iran foiled the Russian plot of the 8th regiment to create a militia force of its own through former dissidents. In Deir ez-Zor in the east, Russian-backed forces and Iranian-backed forces cooperated against ISIS throughout

the desert region. However, Iran's desire for operational leadership creates discomfort for Russia.⁷⁸ While Russia is present in the region through NDF forces and the 5th Corps, it has made contacts with the Deir ez-Zor tribes to increase its local influence. However, instruments such as militias, NGOs and cultural centers enabled Tehran to build and reinforce influence in Deir ez-Zor, thereby providing it an advantage over Russia. One could also observe that the material effects of Russia's intervention in Ukraine began to affect the Russian-backed militias in Syria. Some militia fighters started to defect to Iranian-backed groups over problems related to their salaries.⁷⁹ It seems difficult for Moscow to shift the balance in its favor in the short term, in regions where it lags behind in the competition. This disadvantageous situation means that Moscow will remain silent for a while to the US-Israeli attacks targeting Iranian forces.

⁷⁷ Gürkan Demirhan, Dera Bölgesinde Yaşananlar, *Suriye Gündemi*, Eylül 2021.

⁷⁸ Nicole Grajewski, The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria, *CSIS*, 2021.

⁷⁹ Waleed Abu al-Khair, "Russia-backed militias in Syria feel the pinch as focus shifts to Ukraine", *Caravanserai*, 2022.

ILLEGAL FINANCING AND SECURITY OF MILITIA LOGISTICS



For Tehran, the presence of militia in Syria is of great importance for the survival of the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon line. The Iranian-backed militia groups around the Tel Se-fuq border region in Hasakah countryside, the desert region in Deir ez-Zor consisting of Tebni, Huseiniyyah, Salhiya, Deir ez-Zor, Hatla, Maarrat, Mazlum, Qusham, Muhasan, Bokrus, Mayadin, Mahkan, Kurayya, Ashara, Sebikhan, Cala, Al-Bukamal, Kebajib, Shoula and Badia, and the regions of Sukhna, Tadmur, Arak, T4 Military Base and Qusair in Homs, fortify Iran's logistics lines in central and eastern Syria. Iranian-backed militias are deployed in the rural areas of Aleppo, Idlib and Hama, Latakia, Quneitra, Damascus, Rif Dimashq and most of Daraa in the north and the west. While tens of thousands of militias ensure the security of Iran's Iran-Lebanon logistics line by land, it also incurs a great cost for Tehran. The devastating economic bottleneck that the Assad regime is currently in already creates difficulties

for Iran and Russia, the greatest supporters of the regime. Living through a difficult period in terms of economy, Tehran needed to find an alternative source of funding for the militias and its partner regime for sustaining its influence in the battlefield. The recent operations in the neighboring countries and the news and evidence originating from Syria show that the most important pillar of this financing is currently drug smuggling.

Latakia Port is of vital importance for the Syria-based drug network operating in regional countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Turkey.⁸⁰ The seizure of drugs of Syrian origin, worth 3.5 billion USD in 2020 and 6 billion USD in 2021, by the security forces of various countries, reveals the dimensions of the drug economy being built in the region.⁸¹ In this illegal financing process in which Hezbollah stands out as the dominant actor, the Latakia-Qusayr-Qalamun-Damascus-Da-

⁸⁰ Martin Chulov, 'A dirty business': how one drug is turning Syria into a narco-state, *The Guardian*, 2021.

⁸¹ Charles Lister, "We cannot ignore Syria's emergence as a narco-state", *Middle East Institute*, 2022.

ra-Suwayda line is used both in production and distribution (land and sea). Hezbollah and the 4th Armored Division are leading the production and distribution process. While Hezbollah's access to drug financing is perceived as a threat to Israel, the use of the Jordanian border as an active gateway to this logistics

line also disturbs Amman. Although Amman has re-normalized long-time deteriorating relations with Damascus in order to eliminate this threat, there has been no slowdown in the drug trafficking wave. This situation led Jordanian border guards to engage in bloody fighting along the Jordanian-Syrian border.⁸²

⁸² "Jordan kills 27 smugglers on Syria border in largest operation since 2011", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 2022.

CONCLUSION



Coffins of the Hezbollah fighters killed in Idlib

In the first years of the war, Tehran became involved in the Syrian civil war through militias in order to make up for the losses of the regime army, which was on the verge of disintegration after suffering heavy losses in the battlefield, and to keep the regime standing. In the following years, when the course of the war changed and the balance shifted in favor of the regime and its allies, the functions of the militias also changed. After Iran started using the Syrian war as an opportunity to reach the Eastern Mediterranean and creating an uninterrupted line of armed power, it no longer found only the Syrian opposition but also regional/global actors trying to balance itself in the region. The declining tempo of the civil war did not reduce Iran's militia presence in Syria, but on the contrary, it led to the continuous renewal of the said forces. The militias, which appeared in the conflicts against the Syrian opposition and ISIS, especially in Aleppo and Damascus, started to act as a counterbalance to the military assets of Turkey in the north, the USA in the east, and Russia in the south and east as of 2022. This intense presence of the Iranian-backed militia causes Israel, which does not have a military

presence in Syria, to participate in this struggle for balance through air strikes.

Illegal means, especially drug smuggling, are observed as a common practice aimed at covering the financial burden caused by the militia groups, who are trained and equipped to keep the regime alive and balance Iran's regional rivals on land. Russia's decision to cut costs in Syria due to the Ukraine war has created a vacuum that Iran is willing to fill. However, Tehran's militia presence, which is increasing day by day, may lead to further escalation rather than backward steps by other actors. The harassment and threats of Iran-backed militias in the region against Turkey's possible military action in Idlib and Aleppo, harassment attacks on the US military presence, and Israel's air strikes, which are increasing every year, are the actions of these actors against Iran in the near or medium term. It is likely that these actors will take tougher steps and even joint action against Iran in the medium term. It is also possible that the moves against the Iranian-backed militias, which do not threaten the existence of the regime, will receive Russia's tacit approval.



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