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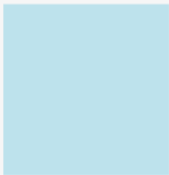
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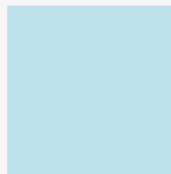
Middle
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Directions

From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria

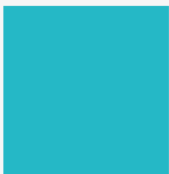
Abdullah Al-Jabassini



**Wartime and Post-Conflict in
Syria (WPCS)**



Research Project Report
14 May 2019
2019/09



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Middle East Directions
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Research Project Report
RSCAS/Middle East Directions 2019/09
May 2019

European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
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With the support of the
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From Insurgents to Soldiers: The Fifth Assault Corps in Daraa, Southern Syria

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Executive Summary

The protracted conflict in Syria has weakened the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and caused a significant manpower shortage in its ranks. After its military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia pushed for the formation of the Fifth Assault Corps (FAC) as a division of the SAA. To this end, the FAC was founded in November 2016 under joint Russian-Syrian command. To enhance the nascent unit's military capacities, Russia aimed to lure militiamen into joining it and to capitalise on the manpower of surrendered rebels.

This paper proposes a typology of the FAC constituents based on their origin (i.e. militia, rebel group) and condition (i.e. active or disbanded). This categorisation demonstrates that besides civilian volunteers and soldiers performing their mandatory and reserve military service, the FAC is composed of (1) active militias, (2) inactive (or disbanded) militias and (3) former rebels from inactive (or defeated) rebel groups. Contrary to popular belief, Russia appears to temporarily tolerate the existence of militias in Syria, as long as they are not independently active and they obey the official command of the SAA.

The paper also discusses the process of 'Rebel Military Integration' (RMI) by means of a case study of the 8th Brigade, a subdivision of the FAC in southern Syria. The 8th Brigade was established in Daraa governorate after the conclusion of the Russian-brokered negotiations between rebels and the Government of Syria (GoS) in July 2018. By April 2019, former rebels constituted more than 75% of the Brigade's fighters. However, the persistence of political violence between competing political forces has implications in terms of former rebels' motives for engaging in RMI. Contrary to what the available literature on RMI suggests, evidence from Daraa governorate shows that security considerations are the main motive for ex-rebels to engage in RMI and join the 8th Brigade, and economic incentives and tribalism constitute two secondary factors.

RMI does not in itself bring peace and stability to southern Syria. Unless political violence is brought to an end and local security improves, the potential for peace-building in Daraa will remain under threat.

Introduction

In post-conflict situations the reintegration of former rebels² presents a key security challenge. Research on the status of such ex-rebels often refers to a ‘disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration’ approach (DDR). While the objective of DDR is to demobilise ex-combatants and ensure their full integration into a civilian setting,³ remobilising and merging defeated rebels into the government army is possible too.⁴ This process of integrating former rebels into the state’s national military is referred to as ‘Rebel Military Integration’ (RMI).⁵

Between 1945 and 2006, 46 out of 126 civil war peace settlements included plans for RMI.⁶ Sudan, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi are among the states that attempted to implement RMI.⁷ Research on RMI has predominantly been devoted to exploring its effectiveness,⁸ the negative consequences of poorly structured reintegration on peace-building⁹ and the role of mediators in encouraging RMI.¹⁰ Less attention has been paid to exploring the implementation of RMI in contexts where an overall peace agreement is absent and to how persistent conflict dynamics impact on rebels’ preferences to become soldiers rather than civilians.

In Syria, where the conflict is far from over, Russia started encouraging and implementing RMI after the establishment of the Fifth Assault Corps (FAC) in November 2016. In Daraa governorate in southern Syria, it established the 8th Brigade, a sub-unit of the FAC, after the Russian-brokered negotiations led the rebels to capitulate in July 2018. Embedded in the negotiations was Russia’s aim to integrate former rebels into the FAC under the leadership of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). While Russia continues to implement RMI in Daraa, the social, political and economic landscape in the governorate has become ever more complex. Political violence perpetuated by competing political forces (e.g. the SAA, state security agencies, former rebels and nascent guerrilla groups) is a daily occurrence. Economic conditions have also deteriorated, and sporadic local protests have

² In this paper, I use the terms ‘rebel,’ ‘insurgent,’ ‘rebel organisation,’ and ‘insurgent organisation’ interchangeably. These terms are meant to describe the relationship between an armed group and the incumbent government.

³ Angel Rabasa et al., “Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration,” in *From Insurgency to Stability*, Volume I: Key Capabilities and Practices (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), 53.

⁴ Paul Collier et al., “Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy,” A World Bank Policy Research Report (Oxford: A Co-publication of the World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003), 149.

⁵ Ronald R. Krebs and Roy Licklider, “United They Fall: Why the International Community Should Not Promote Military Integration after Civil War,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (1 January 2016): 99; Katherine Glassmyer and Nicholas Sambanis, “Rebel: Military Integration and Civil War Termination,” *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 3 (2008): 365.

⁶ Caroline A. Hartzell, “Mixed Motives: Explaining the Decision to Integrate Militaries at Civil War’s End,” in *New Armies from Old: Merging Competing Military Forces after Civil Wars*, ed. Roy Licklider (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 13.

⁷ Roy Licklider, ed., *New Armies from Old: Merging Competing Military Forces after Civil Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

⁸ Glassmyer and Sambanis, “Rebel.”

⁹ Mark Knight, “Military Integration and War Termination,” in *Monopoly of Force: The Nexus of DDR and SSR*, ed. Melanne A. Civic and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2014), 61.

¹⁰ Hartzell, “Mixed Motives: Explaining the Decision to Integrate Militaries at Civil War’s End,” 25.

resumed since October 2018. All of the aforementioned factors undermine efforts at stabilisation and pose questions about the motives of ex-rebels engaging in RMI under these circumstances.

In order to better understand the process and the conditions under which RMI is being implemented in Syria, this paper introduces the FAC, discusses the Russian goals behind its establishment and draws distinctions between its constituent groups. It then sheds light on ex-rebels who have joined the 8th Brigade in southern Syria and investigates their personal motives and the incentives that led them to join.

This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with senior military personnel between July 2018 and April 2019. It adopts a parallel chain-referral sampling technique to interview former rebels who joined the 8th Brigade. Unless otherwise noted or cited, the data and information presented in this paper are derived from these interviews. To preserve the safety of the interviewees, names, exact dates of the interviews, precise locations and military ranks are not disclosed.

1. The Formation of the Syrian Fifth Assault Corps

In October 2015, approximately one month after the Russian military intervention in Syria, the SAA's Chief of Staff, General Ali Ayoub, announced the formation of the Fourth Assault Corps of the SAA from Hmeimim, the Russian base on the Syrian coast.¹¹ The creation of a Russian-backed military unit sought to integrate and meld the scattered Iranian-backed Syrian militias¹² into the SAA.¹³ The Fourth Assault Corps was based in Lattakia and brought militias such as the National Defence Forces (NDF) and the Tiger Forces under joint Syrian, Russian and Iranian command.¹⁴ Despite the advances made by the new unit against rebel groups, such as in Hama governorate, many militias, including the NDF, remained independently active and did not fully merge into the Fourth Assault Corps.¹⁵ The Fourth Assault Corps was in many ways a testing ground for Russian-Iranian coordination in Syria, which ultimately proved a failure.

1.1 Rethinking Russia's Objectives

Following the failure of the Fourth Assault Corps, Russia decided to adopt a different approach, working independently to contain the proliferation of militias and pushing towards fusing them into the SAA with a view to creating a new Russian-supervised SAA corps. This step provoked tensions with Iran, which intends to preserve the alternative instruments of power represented by the surviving militias that operate in parallel to the Syrian state and do not necessarily operate under its authority.¹⁶

On 22 November 2016, the Syrian General Command of the Army and Armed Forces announced the formation of the FAC. Fit adult civilian volunteers, citizens who had completed their military service and government employees were encouraged to join its ranks.¹⁷ The FAC was given extraordinary coverage in the media and across society. TV advertisements, leaflets placed inside

¹¹ Ibrahim Hamidi, "'Fifth Corps' ... The Russian 'Army of the East' to Suppress Comrades and Install Peace," *Al-Hayat*, 1 September 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TrUZUO>.

¹² The term 'militia' has been used loosely either to describe a private armed group of pro-regime strongmen that organise to defend the political order in a certain state, or an armed formation established by warlords or tribal or regional strongmen. While both seem applicable in the Syrian case, a 'militia' should be understood in this paper as a "military force composed of civilians outside of a state's formal military structure." See: Chris Alden, Monika Thakur, and Mathew Arnold, *Militias and the Challenges of Post-Conflict Peace: Silencing the Guns* (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2011), 3-4.

¹³ Marianna Belenkaya and Ivan Safronov, "Russia is looking for an alternative to Iran in Syria," (in Russian), *Kommersant*, 8 August 2018, <http://bit.ly/2HLG2rb>.

¹⁴ Kheder Khaddour, "Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience," Arab Civil-Military Relations (*Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 16 2016), <http://bit.ly/2HOPIRP>.

¹⁵ Abdulrahman al-Masri, "Analysis: The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army," *Syria Deeply*, 11 January 2017, <http://bit.ly/2IQ2mBg>.

¹⁶ Charles R. Lister and Dominic Nelson, "All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria," *Middle East Institute*, 14 December 2017, <http://bit.ly/2GrDLiP>.

¹⁷ "General Command of the Army Declares the Establishment of the 5th Assault Corps to fight alongside Armed, Auxiliary and Allied Forces" (in Arabic), *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*, 22 November 2016, <http://bit.ly/2IMPZ94>.

bread bags¹⁸ and religious sermons all encouraged volunteers to approach FAC bases.¹⁹ During a Friday sermon in December 2016, the *Imam* of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus made the following appeal to those in attendance: “The 5th Corps calls upon the sons of this motherland, calls upon all of us ... so that the flag of the Syrian Arab Republic will remain flying over beloved Golan, and will fly over Sanjak of Alexandretta tomorrow and remain flying over Eastern Ghouta, Duma, the suburbs of Homs and Deir Ez-Zor.”²⁰

By April 2019, the number of FAC soldiers had reached nearly 25,000, with individuals of varying backgrounds making up its eight brigades. Each brigade falls under the command of the FAC’s joint Syrian-Russian leadership and is assigned Russian liaison officers who coordinate the Brigade’s command with FAC headquarters. While Major General Zeid Salih²¹ is the Syrian general commander of the FAC, his Russian counterpart remains unknown.²²

Since its establishment, the FAC has received special patronage from Russia as it both trains its fighters and supplies its sub-units with advanced weapons, tanks and infantry fighting vehicles such as the T-62 tank and BMB-1.²³ Behind the creation and supervision of the FAC is a web of important and interrelated Russian interests that include maintaining recovered territories, helping the Syrian state regain a monopoly of violence and creating a new nucleus in the SAA.

The demand for military manpower to maintain recovered territories

During the first eight months of 2015, the Syrian state lost 18% of its territory and held less than 20% of Syria under its control.²⁴ Speaking in July of the same year, President al-Assad attributed the decline in territorial control to a manpower shortage which had forced the SAA to relinquish certain areas in order to hold onto more vital ones.²⁵ By 2015, vast numbers of

¹⁸ Al-Masri, “Analysis: The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army.”

¹⁹ According to the statement announcing the formation of the FAC, FAC bases were established in the following locations: Southern Area Command; Damascus Site Command; the 10th Division Command in Qatana, Rural Damascus; Central Area Command in Homs; Site Command in Hama; Faculty of Administrative Issues in Masyaf, Hama; Northern Area Command in Aleppo; Tartous Site Command; Coastal Area Command in Lattakia; 5th Division Command in Daraa; 15th Division Command in Sweida.

²⁰ “Large Scale Campaigns for Reserve Service in Syria ... Unmarried Men and the Dead are Wanted” (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 19 December 2016, <http://bit.ly/2II6fll>. Also available on YouTube: <http://bit.ly/2IKW4TD>.

²¹ In 2011, Major General Zeid Salih was Brigadier General and Commander of 62nd Brigade of the 10th Division in Rural Damascus Governorate. He was promoted to Commander of the Security and Military Committee in Aleppo in August 2016, and then to Deputy-Commander of the 30th Division ‘Republican Guards’ in early 2017 in Aleppo.

²² The unknown Russian commander of the FAC was assigned after the killing of Lieutenant-General Valery Asapov, who commanded the FAC until he was fatally injured by IS shelling near Deir Ez-Zor in September 2017. See: “Russian Foreign Ministry: Russian Military Commander Died in Syria Due to the Duplicity of US Policy” (in Russian), *Regnum*, 25 September 2017, <http://bit.ly/2Ld12cV>.

²³ Sputnik, “Syria: The 5th Corps Obtains Fortified Tanks,” 31 October 2017, <http://bit.ly/2IK2jXI>.

²⁴ “How Foreign Powers Keep Assad From Retaking ‘Every Inch’ of Syria,” *Haaretz*, 15 March 2018, <http://bit.ly/2GqJHbP>; Columb Strack, “Syrian Government Territory Grows by 1.3% with Russian Military Support,” *Jane’s 360*, 22 January 2016, <http://bit.ly/2GtGd8E>.

²⁵ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, “Syria’s Assad: Army Focusing on Holding Most Important Areas,” *Reuters*, 26 July 2015, <https://reut.rs/2XBRV6Z>.

desertions, defections and losses of personnel had reduced the number of SAA soldiers from an estimated pre-war figure of 300,000 to between 80,000 and 100,000.²⁶

The Russian intervention in September 2015 resulted in a significant shift in territorial control in favour of the Syrian state. Between 29 September 2015 and 11 January 2016, Russia helped the SAA to regain roughly 1.3% of Syria's territory,²⁷ and by April 2019 more than 60% of Syria was back under state control. With these gains, the need for the FAC as a new land force with renewed numbers of SAA military personnel became imperative to continue the upward trend of military victories and improve the state's military capacity to retain regained territories.

Thwarting the 'militification' of Syria and curtailing Iranian influence

Russia's efforts in Syria are fourfold: stabilising the country; reforming its institutions; emphasising the importance of finding a political solution;²⁸ and helping the state to regain a monopoly of violence, a fundamental characteristic of a modern state according to Max Weber.²⁹ Achievement of these ambitions, however, is contingent on the restriction of pro-GoS militias and curbing their independent ambitions.

In contrast to Russia, Iran appears to have different priorities. To maintain its influence in Syria, Iran seeks the survival of its sponsored militias as alternative instruments of power. This divergence in outcomes and approaches has pitted the two powers against each other in a contest for influence. Russia's increasing military influence and its exploitation of the Syrian military has sought to demonstrate its upper hand in Syria to Iran.³⁰

By pushing for the creation of the FAC and placing it under its direct command, Russia appears to be willing to face down challenges to its power and curb Iranian ambition and influence in Syria. This rivalry has led to increased tension on the ground, and resulted in military skirmishes between the FAC and the Iranian-backed 4th Division of the SAA in January 2019 in Al-Ghab Plain in Hama governorate, clashes between their forces in Aleppo city in April 2019 and raids on Lebanese Hezbollah's headquarters in the Homs suburbs.³¹

²⁶ Ian Black, "Wake-up Call on Syrian Army Weakness Prompted Russian Intervention," *The Guardian*, 1 October 2015, <http://bit.ly/2XA1jrt>.

²⁷ Strack, "Syrian Government Territory Grows by 1.3% with Russian Military Support," 3.

²⁸ Denis Pinchuk, "Putin Urges Political Solution in Syria, in Calls to Trump, Mideast Leaders," *Reuters*, 21 November 2017, <https://reut.rs/2XwwiF1>.

²⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of an Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 56.a

³⁰ Lina Khatib and Lina Sinjab, "Syria's Transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power," Research Paper (Chatham House, October 2018), 23, <http://bit.ly/2PNc5rN>.

³¹ "Al-Ghab Plain: the 'Fourth Division' Hands its Locations to the 'Fifth Corps,'" *Al-Modon*, 25 January 2019, <http://bit.ly/2ZapWwG>; "11 Dead in Syria Clashes between Russia Troops and Pro-Iran Militias," *Middle East Monitor*, 16 April 2019, <http://bit.ly/2IGuBAX>; "Russian-backed Forces Raid 'Hezbollah' Headquarters in Homs Suburbs," *Enab Baladi*, 29 April 2018, <http://bit.ly/2WdLu9Q>.

Creating a new nucleus in the SAA

The FAC is the outcome of Russia's ambition to build a new nucleus in the SAA for which it has long-term plans for influence and control. Ever since the establishment of the 'Russian Reconciliation Centre for Syria' in Hmeimim air base in Latakia governorate on 23 February 2016,³² Russia has used the offer of joining the FAC as a negotiating tool to spur rebel surrender and boost the number of its military personnel.

By capitalising on the manpower of surrendered rebels and bringing them into the same organisation as former pro-GoS militiamen under an official institutionalised command, Russia has been able to implement the first stages of a long-term strategic plan to establish a new nucleus penetrating the SAA institution. Given the differences in the backgrounds of the individuals in the FAC, Russia has insisted on imposing strict military discipline in its ranks to minimise internal clashes. One FAC soldier described the integration of soldiers in the FAC by saying "One may encounter former members of armed opposition, pro-Assad militia members and government employees assigned to share responsibilities and defend the regime all together." He concluded that "Military law rules these bases ... expressing political opinions that lead to rifts exposes you to imprisonment. Russian officers were serious about that."

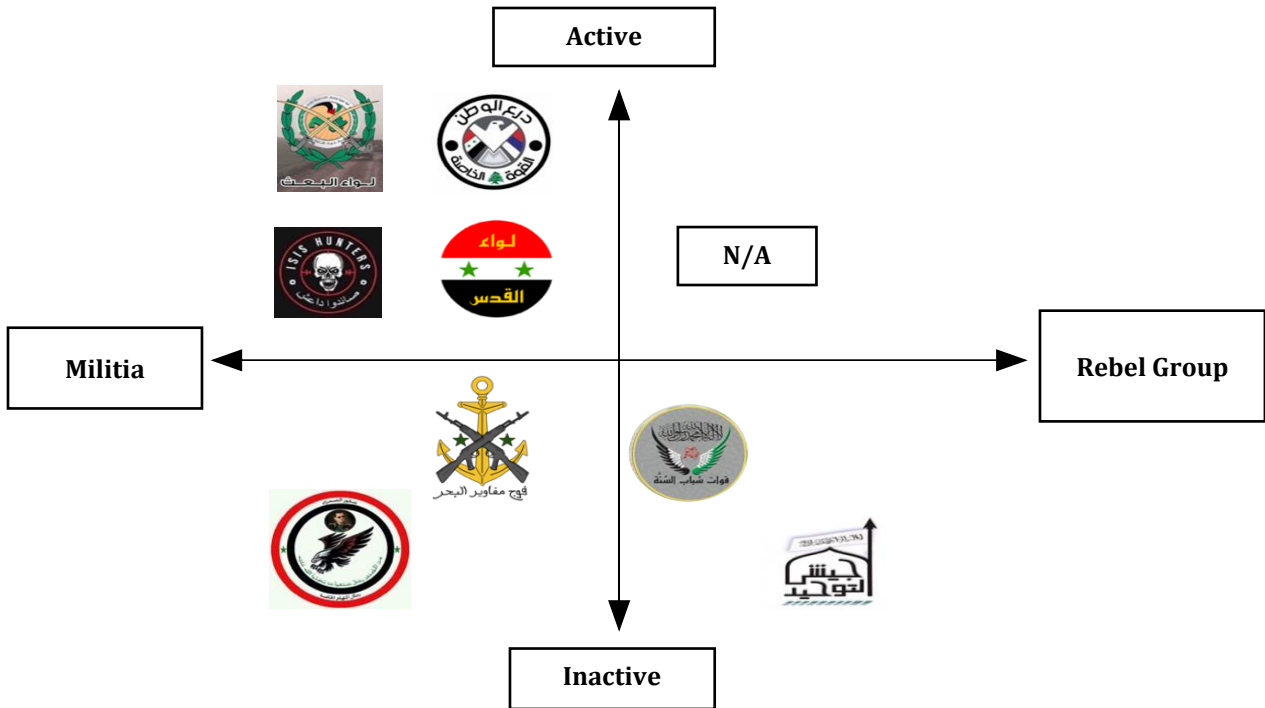
1.2. Typology of the Constituents of the FAC

In order to better understand the make-up of the FAC, I propose a typology based on: **(A)** the constituent's origin (i.e. militia, rebel group), and **(B)** the constituent's condition (i.e. active or disbanded). Theoretically, this typology should identify a small number of categories while having great descriptive and explanatory potential. Empirically, it pinpoints variation among the FAC constituent groups and offers a framework for understanding the integration of former adversaries under the command of the SAA official military institutions.

Figure 1 demonstrates the four different combinations of A and B. Only three of them are empirically based, as 'active-rebel groups' are incompatible with the FAC due to their being adversaries of the GoS. (See Annex 1 for further details of each category and group.)

³² "Syria Truce Center Launched at Khmeimim Airbase, Russia Hands Over Hotline Contact to US," *RT International*, 23 February 2016, <http://bit.ly/2TDbEog>.

Figure 1. Typology of FAC Constituents



Source: Author

(1) Active militias include militias that are officially part of the FAC, such as the Baath Brigade, and militias that have not fully merged but follow the FAC’s command (i.e. they have renounced independent activity while retaining their organisational structures), such as the al-Quds Brigade. However, all fall under the FAC’s Russian command, receive funds and weapons from it and show readiness to participate in battles alongside the FAC when needed. Hence, contrary to popular belief, Russia has so far demonstrated a temporary tolerance of active militias operating in Syria as long as they follow the official command of the SAA, fight alongside the FAC and do not operate independently. This represents a grey area as it seemingly undermines Russia’s objective of helping the Syrian state to regain a monopoly over the use of violence.

(2) Inactive (or disbanded) militias include former militiamen who, after the disbandment of their militia, joined the FAC either on an individual or group basis. Figure 1 shows two examples in this category: the Desert Hawks Brigade and the Sea Commando Regiment. Both militias were established and financed by the Syrian businessman Ayman Jaber and disbanded in 2017 as a result of a decision taken by the Syrian state. Although in this case Russia saw an opportunity to merge many of these militiamen into the FAC, the overall evidence does not suggest that Russia prioritises the disbandment of Syria’s militias in general.

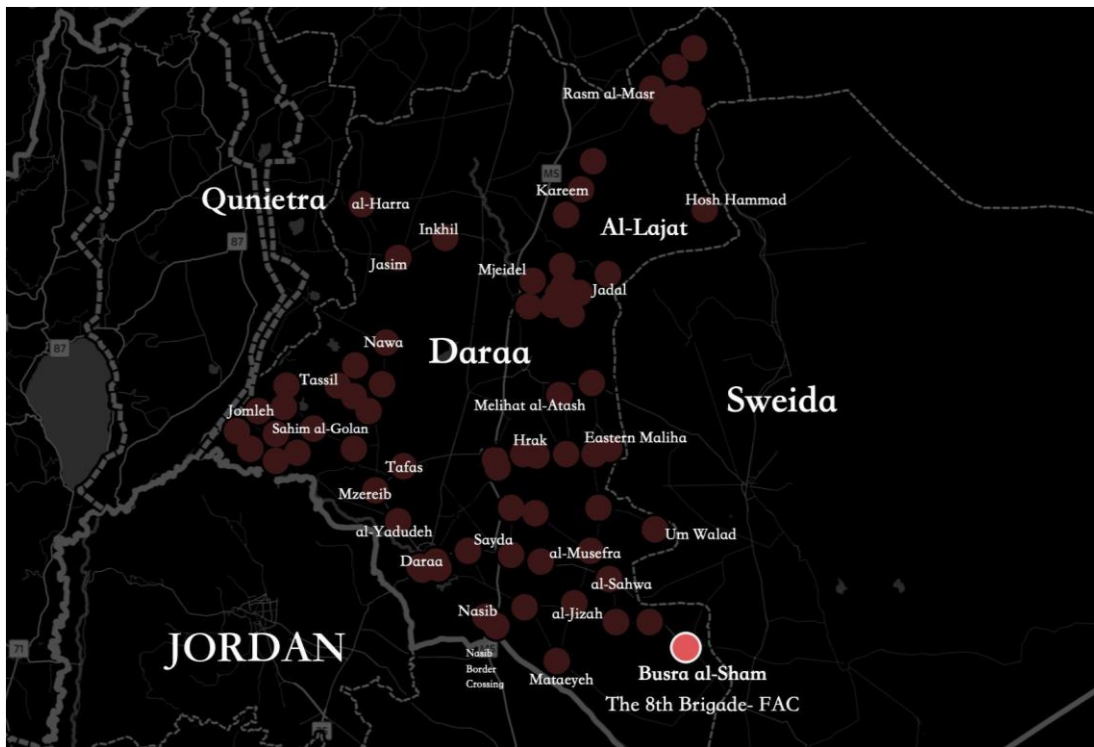
(3) The third category consists of former members of inactive (or defeated) rebel groups who joined the FAC after promises by Russia during the capitulation negotiations. It is important to note that no former rebel group has fully joined the FAC. Instead, this category is composed of individual ex-rebels who opted to join the FAC, other SAA units or State security agencies. At its core, the category represents the remobilisation of former rebels and their reintegration into the state army.

The following section narrows down the scope of this research to this third type of FAC constituents and sheds light on the process of RMI in the 8th Brigade of the FAC in Daraa governorate.

1.3 The 8th Brigade of the FAC in Daraa Governorate

Following the capitulation of rebel groups in southern Syria in July 2018, Russia officially established the 8th Brigade in October and encouraged a process of RMI. The 8th Brigade (informally known among its fighters as Liwa ‘Usud al-Harb, [Lions of War Brigade]) selected the town of Busra al-Sham in the eastern region of Daraa governorate for its headquarters³³ (see Figure 2). Since its formation, the brigade has been commanded by Ahmad Al-Oda, the ex-rebel leader of the Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna (QSS) disbanded rebel group. Al-Oda, who does not have an official military rank, is assisted by a Russian liaison officer and follows the FAC’s direct Syrian-Russian military command.

Figure 2. Busra al-Sham Town – Headquarters of the 8th Brigade



Source: Author

³³ The town of Busra Al-Sham was the stronghold of the ex-rebel group Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna (QSS), whose former leader, Ahmad Al-Oda, became the General Commander of the 8th Brigade. Ahmad Al-Oda was the first rebel leader to surrender his faction’s heavy armaments to the Russian military police and hence became the rebel leader who obtained most Russian privileges in the post-conflict era.

As of April 2019, the 8th Brigade has 1,585 officially registered military personnel that are part of the SAA military and therefore wear the SAA official uniform. It is important to note that the 8th Brigade is a unique FAC sub-unit whose members are limited to former rebels and civilian volunteers from Daraa governorate who underwent a reconciliation procedure with the GoS.³⁴ Some individuals who reconciled their status joined the nascent brigade in order to perform their mandatory or reserve military service after having previously evaded it, while others joined it after having deserted or defected from the SAA during the conflict.³⁵ All in all, the 8th Brigade brings together three general types of reconciled individuals (see Figure 3).

(1) Ordinary civilians: There are about 300 reconciled civilians who previously participated in civilian opposition activities (e.g. they worked for local councils) and joined the 8th Brigade to benefit from Russian protection. Civilian cadres perform administrative duties between 8 am and 2 pm, such as registering names and buying food and oil for the 8th Brigade's premises.

(2) Government employees: The reasons for joining the 8th Brigade cited by these individuals include the GoS not having yet accepted them back in their previous government posts, an 'employment opportunity' in the 8th Brigade and wanting to benefit from Russia's protection against state retaliation because they had worked for foreign NGOs during the conflict. There are nearly fifty doctors, nurses and paramedics from Busra al-Sham, Ma'araba and Al-Tiba who volunteered to work at Busra al-Sham hospital as 8th Brigade military personnel.

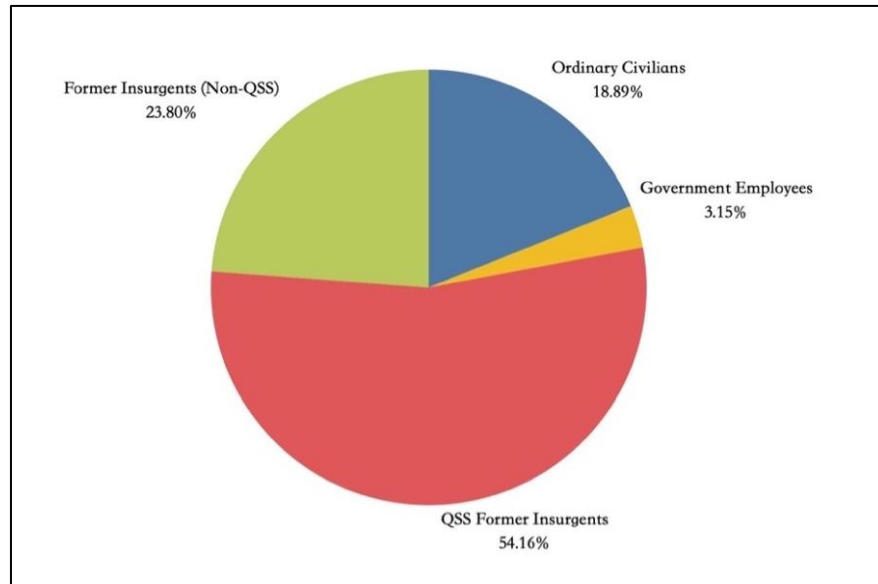
(3) Former insurgents: While former rebels from QSS compose the backbone of the 8th Brigade (around 860 fighters), there are many other ex-rebels who defected from their rebel organisations and joined QSS in June and early July 2018, and then the 8th Brigade.³⁶ Fighters in this category begin performing their duties at 8 am before handing in their weapons at the base at the end of their shift at 2 pm.

³⁴ Reconciliation is a GoS-led process in which individuals who had previously demonstrated their disloyalty to Syrian authorities in ways such as attending demonstrations, evading military service, defecting or joining a rebel group were given an opportunity to 'reconcile their status.' See Abdullah Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa Southern Syria: The Impacts and Outcomes of Rebel Behaviour During Negotiations," Working Paper (European University Institute, January 2019), 13, <https://bit.ly/2CDpfIK>.

³⁵ Soldiers who defected from their units during the conflict and joined the 8th Brigade after receiving permission to transfer from their original SAA units that they had defected from to the 8th Brigade of the FAC. Soldiers in this category do not leave the 8th Brigade base except on official leave.

³⁶ Ex-rebel organisations such as Jaysh Al-Yarmouk, Fawj Al-Madfa'ya, Liwa' Al-Tawheed, Jaysh Al-Thawra and Fallujat Hawran are organisations that were prone to defections. The rebels who defected and joined QSS during the talks with the GoS did so, they say, because of their dissatisfaction with the performance and behaviour of some rebel leaders during the surrender negotiations as they believed that non-cooperation with Russia was not a good tactic.

Figure 3. Approximate Illustration of the Profiles of the Military Personnel in the 8th Brigade



Source: Author

To enrol in the 8th Brigade, an individual must follow a procedure that is fully supervised by the Syrian Ministry of Defence. First, he must approach the 8th Brigade's headquarters in Busra al-Sham and sign a two-year contract entitled 'Voluntary Contract with the Fifth Assault Corps.'³⁷ Second he is required to have his name and personal information validated in Damascus at the Military Registries, then at the southern region recruitment centre and finally at one of Daraa's recruitment centres (e.g. Izra', Daraa city, As-Sanamayn). Finally, the officer in charge of FAC recruitment in southern Syria, Brigadier General Mohammed Al-Ali, will approve the application and notify the applicant that he has been accepted into the 8th Brigade. On joining, the applicant's name is added to the payroll and thenceforth he is paid a monthly salary proportionate to his rank.

Since its establishment, the 8th Brigade has participated in battles against Jaysh Khalid bin al-Walid (JKBW)³⁸ and IS in various locations. In July 2018, it participated in the al-Yarmouk Basin battle against JKBW. In November and December 2018, it mobilised two batches of 400 fighters that alternately fought alongside the SAA in several combats against IS in the desert in Sweida and Deir Ez-Zor governorates. Most recently, in February 2019, the 8th Brigade deployed its forces near Salma in Lattakia governorate, where they fought together with the 2nd Division of the SAA and the Al-Quds Brigade to prevent possible attacks being carried out by active rebels located in Idlib governorate. In all of these battles, four soldiers from the 8th Brigade were killed in clashes against IS.

³⁷ The author has obtained a copy of the contract.

³⁸ Jaysh Khalid bin Al-Walid (JKBW, or Khalid bin Al-Walid Army) is an Islamic State affiliate rebel group that emerged in May 2016 in al-Yarmouk Basin in the western region of Daraa that has fought against local rebel groups.

It is noteworthy that the number of former rebels who have been involved in RMI in the 8th Brigade is low compared to the overall number of rebels active in Daraa governorate before they surrendered. This could be explained by the fact that nearly 5,000 active rebels were evacuated to Idlib governorate at the end of the negotiations in August 2018 and that Russia later decided to abandon the western region of Daraa. Indeed, Russia dissolved the branch of the FAC in the western region of Daraa in September 2018 after the former rebels in this area showed a low capacity to mobilise. As a result, many ex-rebels opted to join regular SAA units or state security agencies.³⁹ By focusing its efforts on the eastern region of Daraa, Russia intends to increase the numbers in the 8th Brigade. It may also establish another FAC brigade in Sweida governorate in order to have a military force stretching along most of the Syrian-Jordanian border line and secure it.

2. From Insurgents to Soldiers: Unpacking Incentives and Motives

The Syrian case pinpoints an important paradigm in which RMI is stimulated and implemented by a third party when a clear-cut peace settlement does not exist. While existing data show that ex-combatants prefer RMI because of the economic opportunities it offers rather than its security guarantees,⁴⁰ the Syrian case suggests that engaging in RMI is principally the result of former rebels' security concerns. My extensive interviews with reconciled ex-rebel members have in fact identified at least three broad incentives driving their decisions to join the 8th Brigade. I have ranked them in order of the level of importance attributed to them by the interviewees. These are: security considerations, economic incentives and tribalism/vengeance on ex-rebel rivals.

2.1. Security considerations

In the political and military situations that beset rebels in Daraa in June and July 2018, (e.g. abandonment by the United States, exposure to high degrees of indiscriminate violence and pressure from the local population), rebel leaders had no other choice but to go to the negotiating table, which ultimately led to their capitulation. In contrast to rebel leaders who were part of the Russian-sponsored talks, ordinary rebel members were voiceless during the negotiations. One 8th Brigade fighter explained: "After their meetings, we were sitting outside waiting to know our fate. Later, we repeatedly heard one sentence: 'Join the FAC, it is the best promise we obtained from Russia'."

Ex-rebels acknowledged the impact of the persistent local instability on their decisions to go through RMI in Daraa. According to the majority of the interviewees, the choice to join the FAC and their grudging acceptance to become potential tools of counterinsurgency against active rebels was shaped by the absence of a peace settlement guaranteeing their personal security. Both the local population and ex-rebels suffer from detention and arrests carried out by SAA units and state security agencies. Given the circumstances, their alternative was to join the FAC and have faith in Russia upholding its end of the bargain. An 8th Brigade fighter plainly stated: "Let's be honest, the regime did not, and will never, fulfil the outcome of the negotiations ... joining the FAC will

³⁹ For a thorough analysis of the variations in ex-rebel mobilisation capacities in the post-conflict era, see: Al-Jabassini, "From Rebel Rule to a Post-Capitulation Era in Daraa, Southern Syria."

⁴⁰ Glassmyer and Sambanis, "Rebel," 382.

protect me until there is a peace deal or a political solution ... Yes, Russia was my enemy, but there are no permanent enemies, and no permanent friends, I am a soldier today and not an opposition [rebel] after all.”

In the eyes of many surrendered rebels, at least in the eastern region, the perceived reliability of Russia to keep the promises it made in negotiations and its ability to contain selective retaliatory actions by the GoS have led them to reverse their identification, albeit ostensibly, from hostile rebel to loyal soldier. One such ex-rebel who joined the FAC in order to benefit from Russian protection explained: “One of my friends is an FAC member ... Once he was detained at a checkpoint that belonged to the regime’s army, his friends contacted the Russian military police and they came and released him ... I wanted someone to protect me too, so I applied to join a week later.” He added: “Today only Russia can protect you in Daraa, and to ensure your security you must join the FAC.”

While occurrences of GoS selective violence remain a serious concern for ex-rebels, the threat to personal security has recently become twofold with the emergence of a guerrilla group called ‘Al-Muqawama Al-Sha’bia’ (AMS – Popular Resistance). AMS, which appeared in mid-October 2018, has so far conducted multiple assassinations and hit-and-run operations against SAA personnel and civilian figures (e.g. reconciliation promoters and heads of municipalities), as well as targeting reconciled former rebels who have cooperated with the GoS (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. The Emblem of The Al-Muqawama Al-Sha’bia (AMS)



Source: local activist

As a result of AMS attacks, the fighters in the 8th Brigade admit the possibility of being targeted by the guerrilla group. A statement issued by the AMS in late 2018 confirmed their security concerns: “In order to eradicate the criminal regime, we must eradicate all of its agents in the region.”⁴¹ A member of the brigade explained his concerns: “Back in the day, we knew that the Syrian army was our enemy. Then we reconciled and became part of it ... now, other militants have appeared to punish those who shifted, and I think that they are against us too.”

Today, local instability and violence continue to prevail in Daraa. Punitive actions against locals generate new grievances which in turn trigger the emergence of spoilers, such as the AMS, whose guerrilla attacks against GoS civilian and military targets persist. These are significant factors that continue to undermine the whole stabilisation process in Daraa and therefore make personal security the main concern for the local population, and also a main motive for ex-rebels to engage in RMI in Daraa.

⁴¹ “‘Popular Resistance’ Warns Against Security Coordination with the ‘Assad Regime’ in Southern Syria” (in Arabic), *El-Dorar Al-Shamiya*, 22 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/2EQ3Whk>.

Figure 5. Guerrilla Attacks between October 2018 and April 2019 in Daraa Governorate



Source: Author

2.2. Economic incentives

During civil wars, economic incentives play a key role in encouraging rebel recruitment.⁴² During the Syrian rebellion in Daraa governorate, single and married QSS members received salaries of 35,000 SYP (\approx 75 USD) and 70,000 SYP (\approx 100 USD) respectively from the Military Operation Centre (MOC). “Of course, I joined QSS because I supported the Syrian revolution, but I also wanted money, I was jobless,” a former QSS member explained. In the post-surrender era, applying for RMI is described by some interviewees as a ‘contractual relationship’ that secures employment and improves an ex-rebel’s economic situation in the overall deteriorating economic conditions in Daraa governorate.

In October 2018, the re-opening of Syria’s southern Nassib-Jaber border crossing with Jordan negatively impacted economic conditions for the population of Daraa.⁴³ It boosted trade for local merchants, who now receive a high number of customers from Jordan. However, the increase in Jordanian demand has also led merchants and peasants from Daraa to increase the prices of products such as oil and foodstuffs, thus disadvantaging ordinary citizens who do not benefit from these economic transactions and so are left worse off.⁴⁴ As one 8th Brigade fighter stated, “To be honest, I joined for my personal security. There is no state to protect you nowadays ... The opening of Nassib came as a second reason for my decision to join ... prices are so high in Daraa now, more than what they were when the border crossing was closed, and I need money to survive ...”. As of April 2019, the collapse of Syria’s currency, fuel shortages and expensive alternatives to government services (e.g. water and electricity) have all worsened the conditions of daily life for the majority of the southern inhabitants.

Under these economic conditions, the option to reconcile their status with the GoS was the only one available for ex-rebels to avoid poverty, which, according to them, has beset other government employees and SAA soldiers in Daraa. “This was a good decision [joining the FAC] ... My salary is great compared to employees and regime soldiers,” an 8th Brigade fighter explained. For those who share the same perspective, becoming a member of the FAC can be described as an ‘occupation’ which generates a relatively high salary when compared to state employees or other individuals who joined other units of the SAA.

A fighter in the 8th Brigade is entitled to a salary proportionate to his rank: military officers receive 300 USD, non-commissioned officers receive 250 USD and conscripts receive 200 USD. By way of comparison, the salary of an SAA officer, according to his rank, ranges between 49,394 SYP (\approx 96 USD)⁴⁵ and 81,605 SYP (\approx 160 USD) as a result of Presidential Decree No.20 issued in December 2018. “When the offer was put on the table, I did my calculations. The salary provided by the FAC is triple that of the normal salary of a soldier in the regime army,” an 8th Brigade fighter explained.

⁴² Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴³ Rebels declared full control over the border crossing on 1 April 2015. GoS restored full control on 6 July 2018 and opened and began to operate it on 15 October 2018.

⁴⁴ “Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South,” Middle East Report (Brussels: Crisis Group, 25 February 2019), 6, <https://bit.ly/2XDZ3jN>.

⁴⁵ “President Assad Issued a Legislative Decree to Increase the Compensation and Allowances Granted to the Military Men and to Adjust the Salary of Pilot Officers” (in Arabic), SANA, 23 December 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Iuk8ZM>.

2.3. Tribalism, revenge on ex-rebel rivals

Beside security considerations and economic incentives, there is an interesting social dynamic that a few ex-insurgents claimed was instrumental in their enlistment in the FAC, namely the tendency to seek vengeance against JKBW members. Whether this is a genuine factor related to the fact that tribes and clans are honour bound to take revenge on assailants⁴⁶ or a mere guise to justify their joining the FAC and conceal their status as defeated rebels, a few 8th Brigade fighters underlined the necessity of taking revenge on JKBW. According to these individuals, JKBW was the main reason for the defeat of the Syrian ‘revolution’ in Daraa. By vowing to take revenge against members of JKBW who were transferred out of Al-Yarmouk Basin to the eastern suburbs of Sweida and Deir ez-Zor governorates, these former rebels are able to do their duty to be good men in their tribal communities. A soldier who joined the 8th Brigade reasoned, “Let’s be honest, *Daesh* was the main reason why we [rebels] failed ... If *Daesh* did not exist in Daraa, things would be completely different today ... we must fight and take revenge on *Daesh* for what they did to the *Hawran* people, even if this means enlisting in the 5th Corps and fighting under the regime’s command.”

For members embedded in the tribal region, JKBW activity that inflicted torment on the *Hawran* people is a main cause of blood feuds. The fact that the backbone of JKBW were rebels who descended from local clans and families increases the likelihood of tribal revenge. “I can recognise many of them [JKBW members] and I know their clans very well, I will follow them to the end of the earth, and we will take our revenge on them for degrading, killing and slaughtering our people [Daraa] ... I do not care under whose command I fight *Daesh*, Russian or Syrian, I just wanted to take revenge for the blood of my relatives and for the wasted revolution,” stated an 8th Brigade fighter.

At its core, this discourse hopes to translate defeat by the state into a victory over previous rebel adversaries. Battling IS elsewhere in Syria allows former insurgents to express their agency in redrawing the contours of their goals and to publicly rearticulate their principles to their communities. “I was waiting for an opportunity to take revenge on *Daesh* for killing my cousins ... Today, I am delighted because I am helping protect Syria and Syrians from those dirty scum,” explained an 8th Brigade fighter.

Whether or not the desire to battle IS is really a genuine motive for joining the 8th Brigade, one can argue that efforts to present themselves as heroes loyal to their societies is one way for these individuals to continue exercising authority in their communities. In this sense, the authority they exercised previously as rebels has transitioned into the authority of a soldier. One 8th Brigade soldier stated, “Perhaps I got used to military life? I do not know, I just cannot imagine myself a civilian like others in my town after all these years.”

⁴⁶ Haian Dukhan, “Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising,” *Syria Studies* 6, no. 2 (2014): 1–28.

Conclusion

Throughout the years of conflict, Syria witnessed the formation and disbandment of many pro-GoS militias and rebel groups. Following the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia pushed for the creation of the FAC in the SAA as a strategy to maintain territorial control, create a new SAA nucleus and restrain pro-GoS militias. While the evidence available suggests the validity of the first two objectives, the proposed typology of the FAC illustrates Russia's tolerance of the existence of active militias as long as they abandon independent activities and follow the official command of the SAA.

To enhance the military capacity of the FAC, Russia aimed to merge former rebels into its ranks too. At its core, this represents a process of RMI stimulated and managed by a third party. However, the pressing issue remains that in the absence of a clear-cut peace settlement former rebels' insecurities have increased. While the data available have suggested that former combatants engage in RMI for the economic incentives it offers rather than for security guarantees, some former rebels in Daraa governorate engaged in RMI primarily as a strategy to secure their safety, and only secondly for the economic incentives the process offered.

Finally, and most importantly, RMI does not mean the termination of a conflict. On the contrary, it bears an inherent risk of backfiring and accelerating the re-eruption of local conflicts. While RMI is a possible peace-building mechanism, it does not build peace by itself. To make RMI feasible and effective in southern Syria, Russia must go beyond mere financing and monitoring and take into account the promises and vows it made to the overall population of Daraa. Only when political violence comes to an end, security guarantees are in place and spoilers have no potential grassroots can stabilisation efforts in Daraa be fruitful.

ANNEX 1- The Fifth Assault Corps Constituents

1. Active Militias.

Examples in this category are:

Liwa Al-Baath (LAB –The Baath Brigade) is a pro-GoS militia composed of volunteer forces that initially joined Kata'ib Al-Baath (KAB – The Baath Battalions). The KAB first appeared in 2012 in Aleppo city on the order of Hilal Hilal, who was the former Party Secretary of the Branch Command of Aleppo in 2011 and was promoted in July 2013 to be the Assistant Regional Secretary of the Syrian Ba'ath party. The battalions were initially assigned to protect government buildings and staff checkpointsⁱ but were then posted to several Syrian governorates such as Tartous and Lattakia and later appeared in Damascus city towards the end of 2013.ⁱⁱ

An Example of the Promotional Advertisements Issued by Liwa Al-Baath

إعلان شام

لواء البعث

إيماناً و انطلاقاً من دور البعث في الدفاع عن الوطن وحمايته، وإنزال الروح والدم في سبيل عزته وشفقة، وتعزيزاً لتجاهات قواتنا المسلحة وتلبية لرغبات شعبنا لوضع حد نهائي للأعمال الإرهابية وإعادة الأمن والاستقرار إلى كامل أراضي الجمهورية العربية السورية. نعلن القيادة القطرية لحزب البعث العربي الاشتراكي - قيادة كتائب البعث - عن تطوع رفاق مقاتلين في لواء البعث كعضيل مقاتل من فصيل الفيلق الخامس أختارين بالإختيار هاليبي:

- مدة العقد عام واحد قابل للتجديد بناء على رغبة الرقيب المقاتل على كامل الجغرافية السورية.
- الراتب الشهري / 200 / دولار أمريكي.
- تسوى أوضاع الرفاق للظلمين للخدمة الاحتياطية والمتخلفين عنها.
- يتقاضى الموظفون إضافة إلى مبلغ / 200 / دولار راتبهم الشهري كاملاً 80 ٪ من راتبهم.
- يتخضع جميع الرفاق للضمان الصحي والعلاج طبية فترة الخدمة وما بعدها في حال الإصابة.
- يتخضع الرفاق المشطوعون لدورة إعادة تأهيل لانتقل مدنها عن إسبوعين.

مركز جامعة البعث لشركات البعث الكائن في صعدة البعث - حيس في جامعة البعث للأشرف الجيش لطفة سورية - فرع الحزب في الجامعة مكتب البعث أو الاتصال عبر الأرقام التالية:

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ملاحظة

لطلاب الجامعة ميزات خاصة يرجى من الطلاب في الجامعة مراجعة فرع الحزب بالجامعة أو فرع الاتحاد أو مركز الكتائب بالجامعة أو الاتصال على الأرقام المذكورة سابقاً للاستفسار على الشروط الخاصة بهم.

Liwa Al-Baath

As we believe young people have a role to provide the soul and blood to defend and protect the homeland, and in order to multiply the successes of our armed forces and to meet the wishes of our people to put an end to terrorist acts and restore security and stability throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, the Baath Party's national leadership and the Baath Battalions' leadership announce the opening of vacancies for armed comrades in the Baath Brigade within the faction of the Fifth Corps. The offer of employment is the following:

- The duration of the contract is for one year. Renewable at the request of the comrade fighter.
- A monthly salary of 200 USD.
- Settled status for comrades who are wanted or evaders of reserve military service.
- In addition to the amount of 200 USD, employees will receive 50% of their monthly salary.
- Comrades receive health insurance and treatment throughout the service period, and beyond in the case of injury.
- Volunteers are subject to an at least two-week rehabilitation cycle.

Source: Copy given by a local activist to the author. Translation: Author

In February 2017, LAB merged to become a faction of the FAC. New recruits to the brigade were offered a monthly salary of 200 USD (\approx 130,000 SYP back then) and exemption from compulsory military service, which opened the door for university students and government employees to join.ⁱⁱⁱ LAB (previously known as KAB) participated in major battles during the Syrian rebellion such as the battle for old Aleppo (2014), the Palmyra offensive (March 2016) and the Kuweires offensive (September-November 2015) that successfully broke the siege imposed by IS on Kuweires airport in Aleppo. They also helped to drive back rebel attacks on Aleppo city (July 2015 and October-November 2016). As a faction of the FAC, LAB engaged in fierce clashes with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in March 2017 and maintained recovered territories in northern Hama governorate. The number of Baath Brigade fighters was estimated to exceed 5,000 as of April 2019.

Liwa' Al-Quds (LAQ) (Al-Quds Brigade) is a militia loyal to the GoS and is affiliated to the leadership of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Funded by Iran, LAQ was established in mid-2013 by a Palestinian engineer, Mohammed Al-Sa'id, who recruited fighters from the Palestinian diaspora in Al-Nayrab and Handarat camps in Aleppo. In mid-2015, the number of LAQ fighters was estimated to be between 2,000 and 3,000.^{iv}



At the beginning of 2019, Russia attracted LAQ with protection, armaments and funds in a situation after Iranian support had sharply declined and the arrest of several leaders by the Syrian state's security agencies in late 2018.^v Following Russian orders, LAQ dismissed figures loyal to Iran, increased the number of its fighters to 5,000 and established new training camps in Handarat, Al-Mallah and Al-Sheikh Najjar in Aleppo.^{vi} Although LAQ has not yet merged into the FAC, it follows the FAC's command and supports its forces. In February 2019, LAQ forces were reportedly deployed by Russia to Salma in Lattakia governorate. "We were stationed in northern Lattakia when groups from Liwa Al-Quds arrived. We objected as we do not want to fight alongside Iran-backed groups. The answer from the Russian officers was: 'Liwa Al-Quds is backed by Russia now' ... Members of Liwa Al-Quds told me that Iran had abandoned them," explained a FAC fighter who was deployed to Lattakia.

Katibat Dir' Al-Watan (KDW – Homeland Shield Battalion) is a militia established and led by Al-Hajj Muhammad Ja'afar, who comes from Al-Qasr hamlet in the Al-Hermel area in northern Lebanon. KDW includes both Lebanese and Syrian members and chose Zita village for its headquarters in the Al-Qusayr area of Homs governorate. Shortly before the KDW formed in April 2017, a Russian delegation had reportedly visited the area and reached an agreement with the local population to create a local Russian-supported armed faction to protect the region and help fight terrorist groups.^{vii} KDW participated in several battles in Syria's desert including the Palmyra offensive (2017) against IS, which reached Deir Ez-Zor.



Sayadou Da'esh (SD – ISIS Hunters) is a Russian-backed militia that reportedly began to operate in February 2017 in eastern Homs governorate.^{viii} Some reports suggest that SD is a private security company formed and funded by the Russian military in Lattakia which later received training from the Wagner group.^{ix} Later, the SD became part of the FAC and its forces were deployed to protect the military airport and gas and oil fields in the Syrian Desert.^x SD has its own military bases in Lattakia and Tartous and operates under direct Russian command in Deir Ez-Zor. SD has operated mostly in Syria's desert in support of SAA operations on the frontline against IS in Homs. The group helped to liberate Palmyra from IS and encouraged new volunteers to join, especially those who wanted "revenge on the terrorists."^{xi}



2. Inactive or Disbanded Militias. Examples in this category are:

Liwa Suqour Al-Sahra' (LSS) (Desert Hawks Brigade) was established and financed by the Syrian businessman Ayman Jaber in late 2013 and led by his brother Colonel Mohammed Jaber. LSS was assigned to protect oil wells located in the Syrian Desert^{xii} and aimed to cut the supply route connecting armed groups in Syria and Iraq.^{xiii} LSS participated in the Palmyra offensive (March 2016), joined the successful attack on Latakia known as Anfal, which drove back Jabhat Al-Nusra (or the Al-Nusra Front) (March 2014), and assisted the SAA in regaining Al-Sha'ir gas field from IS (October-November 2014). In August 2017, Colonel Mohammed Jaber disbanded the group^{xiv} and left for Russia.^{xv} The remaining fighters from his militia either joined the 3rd Division of the SAA or the FAC.



Fawj Maghawer Al-Bahr (FMB – Sea Commando Regiment) was also established and funded by Ayman Jaber and operated alongside LSS in Lattakia governorate.^{xvi} In March 2016, the militia joined the campaign that had begun in October 2015 in Lattakia, during which the SAA recaptured localities such as Salma and Rabi'a from rebels. Shortly after LSS disbanded, the FMB was forcibly disbanded and many of its members were merged into the FAC in late 2017. LSS's founder, Ayman Jaber, was reportedly placed under house arrest and his properties were confiscated by the Syrian state in May 2018 on grounds of corruption.^{xvii}



3. Ex-Rebels from Inactive or Defeated Rebel Groups. Examples in this category are:

Jaysh Al-Tawhid (JAT – Al-Tawheed Army) is an ex-rebel group that emerged in Homs governorate in May 2015 and fused several rebel groups,^{xviii} bringing together around 5,000 rebels under a unified command.^{xix} In May 2018, the group, which was based in northern Homs, accepted a surrender agreement during Russian-brokered negotiations, surrendered their heavy armaments and reconciled their status with the GoS.^{xx} As these local agreements entailed remobilization rather than demobilisation, many defeated rebels rejected evacuation to Idlib and instead joined the Air Force Intelligence and other units of the SAA. Russia integrated around 200 of these former insurgents into the FAC.^{xxi}



Quwwat Shabab Al-Sunna (QSS – Youth of Sunna Forces) is a former insurgent organization that emerged as a battalion in April 2013 in Daraa's eastern region. It made Busra al-Sham its headquarters after ousting the SAA from it in 2015. The rebel organization was affiliated with the Free Syrian Army's Southern Front and received US TOW anti-tank missiles. In June 2018, the group accepted Russian-brokered negotiations with the GoS and at the beginning of July 2017 its leader, Ahmed Al-Oda, surrendered his heavy armaments to Russia and became the head of the 8th Brigade of the FAC in Daraa. There are 860 former QSS rebels who joined the 8th Brigade of the FAC and constitute its backbone in southern Syria.



- ⁱ Edward Dark, “Syrian Baath Militia Commander Goes Rags-to-Riches,” *Al-Monitor*, 20 November 2013, <http://bit.ly/2TuXd5N>.
- ⁱⁱ “Ba’ath Battalions to Damascus Streets,” *Al-Akhbar*, 30 December 2013, <http://bit.ly/2TsOSiZ>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Zaman Al-Wasl, “Al-Ba’ath Brigades, New Militia Mostly from University Students,” 20 February 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TAYbxz>.
- ^{iv} “What is ‘Quds Brigade’ Militia and What is its Link to Palestine?” (in Arabic), *Orient Net*, 6 June 2015, <http://bit.ly/2ToG0en>; “Details of the Investigation with a Leader of the ‘Quds Brigade’ Militia.. Sold Weapons to Daesh,” *Orient Net*, August 14, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2Tzh43G>.
- ^v Abdulrahman Khudr, “Syrian Regime Arrests Deputy Commander of the ‘Quds Brigade’” (in Arabic), *Al-Araby*, 29 November 2018, <http://bit.ly/2TuhUyJ> .”
- ^{vi} “The Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade: From Iranian to Russian Support” (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 5 February 2019, <http://bit.ly/2Ttcy6S>; “After Its Influential Expansion and Association with Russia, ‘Al-Quds Brigade’ Militia Transforms the camp of Hndarat in Aleppo into a Military Base” (in Arabic), *El-Dorar Al-Shamiya*, 3 February 2019, <http://bit.ly/2TvGwXS>.
- ^{vii} “Lebanese-Syrian Militia in Homs with a Russian Support” (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 12 April 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TrIY2T>.
- ^{viii} “Daesh Hunters’ a New Russian Funder Unit in Syria” (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 24 February 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TvxtGd>.
- ^{ix} The Wagner Group is a Russian private military company that has been active in Ukraine and Syria and is owned by the Kremlin-connected Russian billionaire Yevgeny Prigozhin. Sergey Sukhankin, “‘Continuing War by Other Means’: The Case of Wagner, Russia’s Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East,” in *Russia in The Middle East*, ed. Theodore Karasik and Stephen Blank (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2018); Navvar Şaban, “Profiling Top Private Security Companies in Syria” (Istanbul: Omran for Strategic Studies, 11 February 2019), 5.
- ^x Matteo Puxton, “Syrie: Les ISIS Hunters, Ces Soldats Du Régime de Damas Formés Par La Russie” (in French), *France Soir*, 30 May 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TvplWo>.
- ^{xi} “‘Terrorists Flee When They Hear Us Coming’: Syria’s ISIS Hunters to RT,” *RT International*, 6 April 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TBgfYo>.
- ^{xii} “The ‘Desert Falcons’ ... From the Protection of Oil Wells to the Regime’s Spearhead Against the ‘Turkmen’ and ‘Kurdish’ Rebels,” *Zaman Al-Wsl*, 17 December 2015, <http://bit.ly/2TqrAdF>; Samar Batrawi, “Drivers of Urban Reconstruction in Syria: Power, Privilege and Profit Extraction,” CRU Policy Brief (The Hague: Clingendael, January 2018), 3, <http://bit.ly/2HOpI95>.
- ^{xiii} “Desert Flacons’ Appear in Kasab: Ambushing and Hard Special Missions!” (in Arabic), *Elnashra News*, 1 April 2014, <http://bit.ly/2TtY5rj>.
- ^{xiv} Leith Aboufadel, “Pro-Government ‘Desert Hawks’ Disbanded after Three Years of Service,” *Al-Masdar News*, 2 August 2017, <http://bit.ly/2Tw48vx>.
- ^{xv} SouthFront, “Syrian Government Disbands Desert Hawks Brigade - Reports,” 2 August 2017, <http://bit.ly/2TB050T>.
- ^{xvi} Batrawi, “Drivers of Urban Reconstruction in Syria: Power, Privilege and Profit Extraction,” 3.
- ^{xvii} “The Regime Confiscates Ayman Jaber’s Properties” (in Arabic), *Al-Modon*, 30 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2IZthL4>.
- ^{xviii} Alwyat Al-Iman bi Allah, Liwa Usud Al-Islam, Harakat Ahrar Al-Sham Al-Islamiyah, Alwyat Shuhadaa’ Badr, Tajamou’ Suyuf Al-Haq and a few other battalions.
- ^{xix} “Syrian Opposition Factions Merge to Form the Monotheism Army in Homs” (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera*, 6 May 2015, <http://bit.ly/2IOEMEW>.
- ^{xx} “Joint Monitoring Points Between Russians and the ‘Monotheism Army,’” *Geiroon*, 17 May 2018, <http://bit.ly/2IVAcVt>.
- ^{xxi} “Iranian Revolutionary Guards’ Open a Recruitment Center in the North of Homs” (in Arabic), *Smart News*, 4 September 2018, <http://bit.ly/2J2Ot2y>.



Research Project Report

14 May 2019



ISBN:978-92-9084-767-0
doi:10.2870/935876

