



European  
University  
Institute

ROBERT  
SCHUMAN  
CENTRE FOR  
ADVANCED  
STUDIES



Middle  
East  
Directions

# Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service

*Manhal Baresh*

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

Research Project Report  
10 September 2020  
2020/12

© European University Institute 2020  
Content and individual chapters © Manhal Baresh 2020

This work has been published by the European University Institute,  
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies.

This text may be downloaded only for personal research purposes. Additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copies or electronically, requires the consent of the authors. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the year and the publisher.

Requests should be addressed to [med@eui.eu](mailto:med@eui.eu).

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Middle East Directions  
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Research Project Report  
RSCAS/Middle East Directions 2020/12  
10 September 2020

European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
[www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/](http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/)  
[cadmus.eui.eu](http://cadmus.eui.eu)



Funded by  
the European Union

The European Commission supports the EUI through the European Union budget.  
This publication reflects the views only of the author(s), and the Commission cannot  
be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# Private Security Companies in Syria: New Agents at the Regime's Service

*Manhal Baresh\**

---

\* Manhal Baresh is a Syrian researcher working on the Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria (WPCS) project within the Middle East Directions Programme hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence.

This research paper was originally published in Arabic on 28 July 2020 at <https://bit.ly/3jSnF3G>. It was translated into English by Alex Rowell.

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1. The Security Situation and the Legal Framework of Private Security Companies</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. The Ownership and Affiliations of Security Companies</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1. Independent Companies	7
2.2. Companies that Inherited Militias	8
2.3. Companies Close to Rami Makhlouf	10
2.4. Companies Operating to the Benefit of the Fourth Division's Security Bureau	13
2.5. Companies Close to Russia	17
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>19</b>

## Executive Summary

The Syrian regime's senior military, security and political officials regarded the decision to license private security companies as an opportunity for new investment and a means to increase their influence and bring in new economic revenue under the cover of officialdom. The companies reflect the power of patronage networks linking investors and businessmen with political, military and security leaders.

The emergence of these companies was a reaction to the security deficiencies that followed the events of 2011. To a great extent, the companies' activities compensated for a shortage of police, and they also helped provide protection to businessmen and their property. In addition, the companies have curtailed the increases in crime, extortion and kidnapping faced by businessmen in recent years.

Moreover, these companies have helped the Syrian regime maintain the loyalty of allied militia fighters and the relatives of those killed in battle by providing them with jobs following the dissolution of many of the militias. This is above and beyond the work opportunities offered by the companies to university students hailing from the Alawite communities in Homs and Damascus.

## Introduction

In 2013, President Bashar al-Assad issued Decree No. 55 licensing private protection and guard service companies in a surprising move by a repressive dictatorship that deems the power of the state and the predominance of its security apparatus an integral and indispensable part of its makeup.

The decree prompted questions about the regime inclining towards privatisation of the security sector. Was the move part of a series of concessions made by the regime to Russia and Iran on the economic and military fronts? Or was it a response to internal dynamics, reflecting a need to protect Syrian businessmen close to the regime's inner circle or those affiliated with Russia and Iran in the light of the security apparatus's failure to provide them with sufficient protection? Alternatively, was this privatisation a response to the regime's need to re-absorb certain members of disbanded militias?

This paper aims to answer the following key research question. What is the impact of the rise of private security companies on the balance of power between businessmen, security officials and the political authorities in Syria? In addition, the paper attempts to analyse the rise of these companies by detailing the most prominent ones, explaining their owners, roles and affiliations, the circumstances and reasons for their creation and the underlying local economic and security dynamics at that particular time. The research is based on personal interviews with economists, former militia fighters who later worked for private security companies and people close to the companies. The study also makes use of a large number of licensing decisions issued by the Ministry of the Interior which established the ownership of several companies whose owners were previously unknown. The author has monitored dozens of personal internet pages of people working for these companies and gathered hundreds of images of their guarding activities from various locations. The data collection period ranged from November 2019 to June 2020.

# 1. The Security Situation and the Legal Framework of Private Security Companies

Since the establishment of the Syrian state, the Syrian government had forbidden the licensing of security companies of all kinds. The Hafez al-Assad regime held a monopoly over power and security, distancing the latter even from the ministries ostensibly responsible for it. Security was bound up inseparably with al-Assad himself. During the thirty years of his reign, Syria's security agencies remained responsible for preserving the security of the state. The particular specialty of each agency varied according to the entity responsible for it, while the Ministry of the Interior remained the authority responsible for protecting government institutions in all the various sectors.

In the early 1990s, a small number of 'occupational safety' companies emerged, protecting businesses and international organisations by placing unarmed guards at their doors. When Bashar al-Assad inherited power in 2000, the need for these companies increased in the light of the emergence of private industrial and commercial facilities, the start of foreign investment and the opening-up of the Syrian market. Demand grew for guards outside buildings, embassies and international organisations, prompting a number of trading, services and recruitment companies to invest in this emerging sector, given their considerable expertise in the field. For example, the ICC recruitment company, owned and managed by Bana Zoukari, met the needs of the internal market, provided the necessary competencies for private companies in Syria and exported labour to the Gulf states. Similarly, the CBS trading company, owned by Amal al-Shalash and managed by Muhammad Dib, invested in the security guard sector.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the trader Maher al-Dassouqi, who is close to Rami Makhoul, founded a security company called Group 4 Syria in 2005.

However, in the absence of a licensing law for private security companies in Syria and a clear law permitting the establishment of private guard companies, these companies would obtain licenses from the governorate and Ministry of Trade as though they were trading companies. This also required the approval of the Political Security branch of the Ministry of Interior. Their operations were limited to guarding the entrances of commercial centres and foreign agencies in the wealthier neighbourhoods of Damascus.

By the end of 2007, there were seven security companies in Damascus: the Lions of Ebla; the White Wolf; Group 4 Syria; the Pelican; CBS; al-Imam Services; and the Jad Company for Safety Services, which is the oldest and largest company engaged in guard services and occupational safety. In addition, there were two companies in Aleppo: HCP and ICCP.

In 2008, with an expansion of the scope of the guard companies' work and an increase in their profits and numbers of workers, the State Security intelligence department began harassing them, trying to take a cut of their profits and even appointing senior officers from the General Intelligence Directorate (State Security) as permanent delegates in their offices. After State Security tried to employ the guard companies to spy on embassies and diplomatic and international missions for the regime, the companies closed down and withdrew from the market. This coincided with Rami Makhoul's entry into the private company market, as he was in fact behind the establishment of Group 4 Syria.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Al-Thawra newspaper, "Ariba: We Dispensed with the Services of the Plaintiff's Institution because it did not Obtain a License" (in Arabic), 15 March 2007, <https://bit.ly/3dfaUvt>. It turned out that CBS was unlicensed, and it entered into a legal dispute with Ariba asking the judiciary to place a precautionary seizure on it. In April 2007, CBS demanded that Ariba pay its full dues, which amounted to 13 million SYP. This prompted Ariba to dispense with the services of CBS.

<sup>2</sup> Skype interview conducted by the author with an operations manager in one of the companies between 2007 and 2008, 17 March 2020.

In the post-2011 period, with the expansion of the Syrian war, the proliferation of weapons led to a rise in gangs carrying out kidnappings, thefts and robberies in regime-controlled areas. Residents no longer felt personally secure, especially industrialists, traders and the urban wealthy, who became vulnerable to kidnapping in exchange for large ransom payments. The ability of the Interior Ministry to control security weakened, not least after the war led to the defection of more than 15,000 of the country's 53,000 policemen. These 15,000 came from various departments of the ministry, but did not include civilian employees. The most prominent defectors belonged to the Internal Security Forces, numbering 43,000 according to data from 2011.<sup>3</sup> Due to the uprising in most of the country's northern and eastern governorates and in Daraa, in addition to the reluctance of people from Sweida governorate to join the security and military corps after 2011, the ministry was unable to plug the large gap that constituted a third of its volunteer staff. Furthermore, a large proportion of loyalists preferred to join militias rather than volunteer to the Interior Ministry, given the influence and substantial financial returns offered by the militias to their affiliates resulting primarily from the looting of areas re-captured by the regime.<sup>4</sup>

This personnel shortage among the security forces led to much disorder, particularly in the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, where crime rates rose. This was especially the case of kidnappings for ransom,<sup>5</sup> which the regime decided to punish with ten to twenty years of hard labour under Law No. 21 of 2012.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequently, on 5 August 2013, Bashar al-Assad issued Legislative Decree No. 55, which permitted the "licensing of private protection and security guard companies" provided that they remained subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior and operated under the supervision of the National Security Bureau.<sup>7</sup> The companies were classified into three categories and had a start-up capital of at least 50 million Syrian pounds (SYP). The number of guards in each company was determined by its category: a first-class company had 801 guards or more; a second-class one between 501 and 800; and a third-class one between 300 and 500.

As the Ministry of the Interior's department for private protection and security guarding was only tasked with protecting institutions and diplomatic missions,<sup>8</sup> the ministry established a new branch supervising the work of the private companies known as the 'Private Protection and Security Guard Companies Branch.' For its part, the Political Security Directorate took over the issuance of security permits for workers in the guarding companies.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrated increased control by the authorities' security forces over each of these companies and their intervention in the employment of each of their recruits. The National Security Bureau also plays a role in supervising the companies,

---

<sup>3</sup> Sasha al-Alu, "The Interior Ministry in Syria... The Reality and the Necessity of Reform" (in Arabic), *Omran Centre for Strategic Studies*, 22 January 2019, <http://bit.ly/2G944cA>

<sup>4</sup> Looting (Arabic *ta'fish*) is a form of organised theft perpetrated by militias in opposition areas, whereby they remove furniture, metal doors, wood and aluminium from houses, dismantle water taps and extract copper wiring used for lighting from the walls.

<sup>5</sup> Sami Shahrour, "The 'Business' of Kidnapping" (in Arabic), *Arij Reporters for Investigative Journalism*, 31 May 2013, <http://bit.ly/2Rgoebn>

<sup>6</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, People's Council of Syria, "Law No. 21 of 2012 Entails Amendments to the Penal Code Issued under Legislative Decree No. 148 of 1949, Article 556" (in Arabic), 2 July 2012, <http://bit.ly/2tC2m0X>. The Syrian Ministry of the Interior registered 7,161 kidnappings and 45,000 thefts between 2012 and 2016. Crimes, however, peaked in 2013 with 2,470 murders recorded out of 4,000 crimes. See Ayman al-Shoufi, "The Organised Crime Spring in Syria" (in Arabic), *Assafir Arabi*, 29 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3iEXQTb>

<sup>7</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, People's Council of Syria: "Legislative Decree No. 55 of 2013 Grants Licenses to Private Protection and Guarding Companies" (in Arabic), 5 August 2013, <http://bit.ly/2RwHWhL>

<sup>8</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Executive Orders of Private Protection and Guarding Companies" (in Arabic), 13 November 2013, <http://bit.ly/2G5lfMn>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



which may only obtain weapons by importing them after submitting a request to the Interior Ministry and receiving the approval of the Ministry of Defence. The companies are entitled to import light weapons and medium weapons in exceptional cases if the facilities to be secured are remote and located outside of cities.<sup>10</sup>

At the time Decree No. 55 was issued, the Syrian regime's situation did not encourage investment in the security sector. The regime was in retreat militarily and had lost large swathes of territory across the country. By late 2014, a year since Assad had issued the decree, only three companies had sought to obtain a licence.<sup>11</sup> 2017, however, represented a turning point for Syria's private security companies. There were eleven private guard companies by December 2017, according to Major General Issam Abu Fakhr, head of the Interior Ministry's department of private protection and guarding.<sup>12</sup>

In 2018, this number climbed further and reached 75 by 2019<sup>13</sup> after certain businessmen close to the regime encouraged investment in the sector. They did this for three reasons. First, their decisions came after they had already felt the political results of Russia's intervention (i.e. after the regime regained control of Aleppo in December 2016 and the Astana talks between Russia, Turkey and Iran were launched in early 2017, including the declaration of four de-escalation zones). The second reason was the desire of those funding paramilitary organisations and militias to legalise their work in the convoy protection services sector,<sup>14</sup> especially after the problem of these convoy protection companies emerged into the open in Aleppo, where traders protested against the imposition of royalties and looting and plunder.<sup>15</sup> The third reason was the high rate of homicides, which numbered 570 cases in 2017. Most of these killings were committed in the regime-held city of Damascus and its surrounding countryside, prompting businessmen to obtain licences for security companies in order to protect themselves.<sup>16</sup>

The number of private security companies has therefore increased markedly in the past two years, after the need arose to expand the security deployment map due to the regime regaining control over large areas of territory, which meant that movement on roads between the country's various provinces required professional protection services. However, despite the large number of licensed security

---

<sup>10</sup> Rania Mashouh, "Lieutenant Colonel Muhsin Ghabra: Companies Operate 100% under Private Management and under the Supervision of the Interior Ministry" (in Arabic), *al-Binaa*, <http://bit.ly/2R8TgSf>

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ikhbariya al-Suriya, "Syria: Regulating the Operations of Private Protection and Guarding Companies" (in Arabic), 25 October 2014, <http://bit.ly/367SPMc>, (the video has been deleted).

<sup>12</sup> Bashir Farzan, "11 Private Security Companies Competing for the Market: Working Days Full of 'Bodyguards' Action and 'Janitors' Traditionalism" (in Arabic), *al-Baath Newspaper* Issue 15988 (2017): 5, <https://bit.ly/30UG34E>

<sup>13</sup> Majd al-Khatib, "Syria: 75 Private Security Companies with Multiple Loyalties" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 11 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2XY3Oqa>

<sup>14</sup> Convoy protection services (Arabic *tarfiq*) are provided in return for money paid by truck owners to militiamen, who escort them between different areas on the pretext of protecting them from inspections or confiscation of their goods at checkpoints, as well as from robbery.

<sup>15</sup> It was this that compelled the Security Committee in Aleppo to abolish convoy protection services. On 19 May 2017, the Committee issued Decision No. 6400, stating the following: "All security branches, civil and military police, the National Defence, and the al-Bustan Charitable Foundation, are to cease operations of the *tarfiq* system pertaining to goods transported within and outside Aleppo as of Friday, 19 May 2017, by orders issued verbally by the Head of the Military and Security Committee in Aleppo Governorate. All violations shall be held accountable." See Enab Baladi, "Aleppo Security Committee Abolishes *Tarfiq*: Assad Intervened, Says Shehabi" (in Arabic), 20 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/2YFAnZT>. The Decision refers explicitly to the al-Bustan Charitable Foundation owned by Rami Makhoul, which owns a militia named the al-Bustan Forces, meaning the foundation engages in military activities, in contradiction of its stated charitable nature. See Ayman Aldassouky and Sinan Hatahet, "The Role of Philanthropy in the Syrian War: Regime-Sponsored NGOs and Armed Group Charities," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 11 June 2020), <https://bit.ly/2CvUoKN>

<sup>16</sup> Enab Baladi, "Homicides on the Rise in Syria: The Reasons are 'Poverty and Ignorance'" (in Arabic), 6 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2PQqODg>

companies, which total around 75, many are still unknown as their operations are limited to guarding the private assets of the companies' owners, protecting their family members from kidnapping and securing other facilities owned by people close to the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Approximately 50 companies are of this kind, most of them classified in the third category – that is, having only around 300 guards – while the number of major companies dominating the protection and guarding services sector is no greater than 15.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Ownership and Affiliations of Security Companies

The major private security companies can be divided into five principal groups based on their affiliations, owners and directors. The first group comprises companies affiliated with independent businessmen who have distanced themselves from the market and the competition, preferring to protect their own various businesses. The second comprises companies close to the military intelligence apparatus which have absorbed former militias. The third are companies close to Rami Makhoul, some of which operate through front organisations, while others are subordinate to Makhoul's business cronies. Fourth are companies close to Iran, which operate for the benefit of the Fourth Armoured Division's Security Bureau. The fifth category comprises companies affiliated with Russia which handle the protection of profitable oil, gas and phosphate fields. It should be noted that these categories may overlap.

**Table 1. Top Private Security Companies in Syria by Affiliation**

	Independent	Heirs of Militias	Rami Makhoul	Iran/4th Division	Russia
Qasioun Security Services LLC			X		
Al-Hisn Firm for Security Protection and Guard Services			X		
ProGuard for Safety and Security Services LLC	X				
Shorouk for Security Services LLC				X	
Falcon for Security Systems and Services			X		
Castle Security and Protection LLC				X	
IS Hunters					X
Alpha Protection and Security Systems LLC			X		
Al-Areen Security and Protection LLC		X			
Sanad Protection and Security Services LLC					X
Shield Security Guarding		X			
Alep for Consultancy and Technical Solution LLC				X	
Al-Maham for Protection and Private Guarding				X	
Al-Fajr Security LLC		X			

Source: Author's research

<sup>17</sup>Al-Khatib, "Syria: 75 Private Security Companies with Multiple Loyalties."

## 2.1. Independent Companies

Independent companies are seen as the weakest of the private security company groups, given that they are required by the Ministry of Interior to renew their licences each year and to obtain approval from the Political Security Branch for every recruit they hire. Their recruits are mostly former fighters from pro-regime militias whose loyalty to the regime is assured. The businessmen who own these companies aim to guarantee their own personal safety first and foremost and to protect their economic interests in the light of the widespread and disorderly proliferation of arms.

Naturally, it is difficult to speak of ‘independent’ companies in Syria, given that the majority of Syrian businessmen are linked in one way or another to the security and political establishments. Nonetheless, there is a certain margin of autonomy enjoyed by traditional businessmen who are not directly engaged in politics and have not become involved in funding militias. One such businessman is Mazen Hammour, the owner of Hammour Oil, Gas, Energy and Tourism Group, who obtained a licence for the al-Wataniya Company for Guarding and Protection Services, of which he owns half the shares.<sup>18</sup>

Traders and industrialists with smaller businesses have sought to establish companies in the third category (between 300 and 500 employees), searching for opportunities in a number of governorates. While these companies are not regarded as heirs to major militias, several of their recruits do hail from local militias. Examples include the al-Wafa Company for Security Guarding in Deir ez-Zor, the al-Assil Company for Guard Services in Homs<sup>19</sup> and the al-Timsah Company for Protection and Guard Services.<sup>20</sup>

Among the most prominent independent companies is ProGuard for Safety and Security Services LLC, an offshoot of the Arabian Group for Exhibitions and Conferences (AGE). ProGuard emerged when the latter managed to obtain approval from the Ministry of Economy in late June 2011 to expand the scope of its business guarding public and private exhibitions. The company was the result of deepened relations between the Aqqad Company and AGE, and started off with a capital of 5 million SYP (equivalent at the time of licensing to 104,000 USD).<sup>21</sup> The company began specialising in surveillance and guarding.

In April 2012, ProGuard was founded as an independent company with a licence granted by the Ministry of Economy and Trade and the Governorate of Damascus. Its start-up capital was 10 million SYP.<sup>22</sup> The main shareholders were the brothers Hashim and Abd al-Kareem Anwar al-Aqqad (with 25% of the shares of the start-up capital each) and three sons of Raif Hilal, (Alaa, Husam and Kumai Hilal with 50%) On 12 December 2015, ProGuard obtained an official licence from the Interior Ministry. Engineer Alaa Hilal took over the company’s management and his brother Kumai also managed another new company specialised in communications and programming called Protech Group.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Mazen Hammour International Group website, <https://bit.ly/3cVchzg>

<sup>19</sup> The al-Assil Company for Guard Services was founded in Homs on 26 September 2018.

<sup>20</sup> The al-Timsah company specialises in convoy protection services (*tarfiq*) and is owned by Firas Nyazi, who is close to the Iranian militias and embassy in Damascus. The company, however, is run by Zakwan al-Halabi and is located at 29 May Street, Damascus.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, “New Company Enters the Exhibition Business in Damascus” (in Arabic), 1 July 2011, <https://bit.ly/2Agyydi>

<sup>22</sup> Taht al-Mijhar, “ProGuard Company Founded by Five Businessmen” (in Arabic), 7 August 2012, <http://bit.ly/30CYqZV>

<sup>23</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, “Kumai Raif Hilal” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2ZPEgNR>

Hashim al-Aqqad is one of Syria’s leading traditional industrialists and a figure close to the security apparatus.<sup>24</sup> He is likely to be the strongman behind ProGuard. From 1994 to 2002, he represented Damascus governorate in the People’s Council.<sup>25</sup> In July 2014, the European Union sanctioned nine entities and three Syrian individuals including al-Aqqad for supporting the Syrian authorities throughout the war. The sanctions order stated that al-Aqqad had activities and interests in various sectors of the Syrian economy and great influence within the Anwar al-Aqqad Sons Group and its United Oil subsidiary.<sup>26</sup> However, the United States imposed no sanctions on him despite his close ties to the Syrian authorities.<sup>27</sup> On 28 February 2020, the Syrian Ministry of Finance ordered a provisional freeze of his assets for violating import provisions by smuggling goods worth in excess of 5 billion SYP. The same measures were taken by the authorities against numerous wealthy individuals close to him.

It is worth noting that the company is also close to Russia. It cultivated positive relations with Russian investors by founding the Russian-Arab Company for Tourism and Tourist Services, half the shares of which are owned by the Russian investor Stanislav Govoroshkin, the other half being divided equally between Mirna Hilal and Kumai Raif Hilal,<sup>28</sup> whose father seemingly enjoys longstanding Russian ties.

## 2.2. Companies that Inherited Militias

The second group of security companies encompasses those that inherited loyalist militias after their dissolution under Russian pressure in 2017. The most prominent of these are al-Areen Security and Protection LLC, Shield Security Guarding and al-Fajr Security LLC. The companies are chiefly active in Damascus and Aleppo, at border crossings in Deir ez-Zor, between the cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Damascus, from the Latakia and Tartous ports to the major cities, and from the al-Qa’im crossing on the Iraqi border to Damascus and Aleppo. They also operated between internal border crossings in Idlib and Aleppo before the regime closed them down after regaining control over the areas in early 2020.

**Table 2. Companies that Inherited Militias**

Company Name	Affiliations	Main shareholders (Shares of Start-up Capital)	Date of Licensing	Notes
<b>Al-Areen Security and Protection LLC</b>	Iran and the Military Intelligence Branch	Oussama Mohammad al-Malki (75%) and Amer Mohammad Al-Malki (25%)	19 October 2017	
<b>Shield Security Guarding</b>	The Military Intelligence Branch and Samer Foz	Muhammad Hammadh (80%) and Yusuf Wafiq Sulayman (20%)	December 2015	Latakia-based Capital of SYP 50 million (equivalent to USD 145,000 when licensed)
<b>Al-Fajr Security LLC</b>	Military Intelligence, Iran	Lawrence Mazhar Hallaw (51%) and Khaled Abaza (49%)	28 January 2018	

Source: Author’s research

<sup>24</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, “Hashim Anwar al-Aqqad” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2B3oAw3>

<sup>25</sup> Contemporary Syrian History, “Hashim al-Aqqad” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2X8WyaZ>

<sup>26</sup> Nawwar Mahmoud, “Hashim al-Aqqad: Economic ‘Octopus’ and Political Mediator between Washington and Damascus” (in Arabic), *al-7al*, 12 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/3c6W9KJ>

<sup>27</sup> According to a document published by WikiLeaks, al-Aqqad was a messenger between Washington and Assef Shawkat.

<sup>28</sup> Mahdi al-Nasser, “Damascus... A New ‘Russian-Syrian’ Company for Tourism” (in Arabic), *al-7al*, 11 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/2BciBoV>

On 19 October 2017, al-Areen Security and Protection LLC was founded in Damascus, owned and managed by the brothers Oussama and Amer Mohammad al-Malki, who are close to Iran.<sup>29</sup> The company provides protection for privately-owned facilities and banks and convoys moving between Damascus, Aleppo and eastern Syria. Al-Areen is considered a new incarnation of the Saraya al-Areen 313 militia and subordinate to Military Intelligence, given that half of its personnel are former fighters in the militia, particularly in the eastern Homs countryside and al-Qalamoun. After the dissolution of most of the militias at the behest of Russia and their incorporation into the Fifth Corps in 2018, their fighters were distributed between al-Areen and the Sanad Forces of the Military Security branch.<sup>30</sup> Al-Areen protects several facilities in Damascus, such as the Qasioun Mall shopping centre owned by Wassim Qattan, who was added to the EU sanctions list in February 2020. Even though the company engages in heavy marketing, it avoids disclosing the names of its clients on Facebook and its official website is inactive.

Another prominent company in the same category is Shield Security Guarding, which obtained approval from the Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection. The company was founded by Muhammad Hammadh, the declared financier of the Military Security Shield militia in Syria's coastal region, along with Yusuf Wafiq Sulayman.<sup>31</sup> The company is simply a reincarnation of this militia. Its founder and funder is the son of Brigadier General Mustafa Hammadh, an influential senior intelligence officer in the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> The size of Hammadh's ownership is a subject of controversy, for some observers believe he was not sufficiently wealthy to cover all the expenses of a militia as large as the Military Security Shield. Instead, they contend that his former brother-in-law, Samer Foz, was the true sponsor of the militia.<sup>33</sup> It is worth mentioning that Muhammad Ali Salhab (nicknamed Abu Ali Salhab)<sup>34</sup> and Badi' Said (known as Abu Ismail) were also commanders of this same militia. As for Hammadh's partner, Yusuf Wafiq Sulayman, he was already the chieftain of a group of *shabbiha* thugs called 'Civil Defence.'<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Interior Ministry documents seen by the author indicate that Sulayman's shares were transferred to a new partner named Nahla Tarabishi. After Russia pressed for militias to be disbanded in 2018, large numbers of their members were transferred to the National Defence Forces. Those based in al-Qalamoun, however, joined the emerging Russia-backed Military Security Sanad Forces. Muhammad Hammadh began to face difficulties due to his deteriorating relationship with Samer Foz, although he was able to preserve positive ties with the regime and the Russian command in the coastal region.

Al-Fajr Security LLC was founded on 28 January 2018.<sup>36</sup> It is owned by Khaled Walid Abaza<sup>37</sup> and run by Lawrence Mazhar Hallaw.<sup>38</sup> The company is notably active in Aleppo and Damascus. It provides commercial convoy protection services between various governorates, competing with

---

<sup>29</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Al-Areen Security and Protection LLC" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2XsJ6iu>; Al-Iqtisadi, "Usama Muhammad al-Malki" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2Xw11yl>; "Amer Muhammad al-Malki" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/36WdJQy>

<sup>30</sup> A large number of the company's recruits are former fighters in the al-Areen militia or militias affiliated with Military Intelligence. See Haider Junaid's Facebook page, <https://bit.ly/2U438Oe>

<sup>31</sup> Eqtsad, "Legalization of Thuggery (*Tashbih*) in Latakia: *Shabbiha* Security Company to Protect from *Shabbiha*" (in Arabic), 21 December 2015, <https://bit.ly/3gI3AeR>

<sup>32</sup> Ithar Abd al-Haqq, "Mustafa Hammadh: The Story of an Officer who Saved Hafez al-Assad from a Secret Coup Attempt Led by an Officer from Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), *Zaman al-Wasl*, 21 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/2U4KDt2>

<sup>33</sup> BBC Arabic, "Europe Sanctions Bashar al-Assad's Associates, Headed by Samer Foz" (in Arabic), 24 January 2019, <https://bbc.in/30eQccr>

<sup>34</sup> From al-Qardaha, Bashar al-Assad's hometown, Abu Ali Salhab was a famous drug dealer. He was killed in a clash with the Criminal Security branch in Barzah, Damascus in September 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Eqtsad, "Legalization of Thuggery (*Tashbih*) in Latakia."

<sup>36</sup> Al-Fajr Security LLC Facebook page, <https://bit.ly/2Uy6tFv>

<sup>37</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Khaled bin Walid Abaza" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3dXHvqY>

<sup>38</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Lawrence bin Mazhar Hallaw" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3cOpqKw>

Castle Security and Protection LLC for the Nassib border crossing with Jordan. Abaza is the son of Major General Walid Abaza.<sup>39</sup> In 2012, he founded the National Defence Militia in Quneitra, which transformed into the Golan Regiment, subordinate to the Presidential Palace since 2014. Abaza remains the commander of this paramilitary regiment even though he was also appointed Secretary of the Quneitra Baath Party branch in 2017.<sup>40</sup> Abaza hails from a loyalist Circassian family with longstanding relations with both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. Bashar relied on Abaza's retired father to quash protests and establish a Circassian militia in 2013. Abaza's mother, Jansit Kazan, was elected to the People's Council in 2016 representing Quneitra governorate.<sup>41</sup> Al-Fajr's other owner comes from the Circassian village of Ayn al-Nasr, east of Homs, and was previously unknown in business circles. Notably, the majority of al-Fajr's personnel in southern Syria and at the Nassib border crossing are fighters from Abaza's militia in the Golan. The company also includes Circassian fighters from Homs, and Circassians from the town of Khanaser make up the majority of its personnel in the city of Aleppo since the town is administratively affiliated with Aleppo governorate. It is also noteworthy that the company was licensed after Khaled Abaza was appointed Secretary of the Quneitra Baath Party branch.

### 2.3. Companies Close to Rami Makhoul

Rami Makhoul, the businessman and first cousin of Bashar al-Assad, owned a group of security companies – both directly and indirectly – active in the coastal region, Homs and Damascus.

**Table 3. Companies Close to Rami Makhoul**

Company Name	Affiliations	Main Shareholders (Shares of Start-up Capital)	Date of Licensing	Notes
<b>Qasioun Security Services LLC</b>	Rami Makhoul	Engineer Habib Khelfawi Jazaerli (20%) Raymond Gerges Ain al-Shaybeh (80%)	Began operating on 28 October 2013. Obtained a licence in April 2014	
<b>Al-Hisn Firm for Security Protection and Guard Services</b>	Ihab Makhoul	Ammar Muhammad bin Ahmad (99.9%) and Samih Aqel bin Ali (0.1%)	15 January 2014	Licence was cancelled by the Ministry of Interior on 29 November 2019
<b>Falcon for Security Systems and Services</b>	Close to Rami Makhoul	Hayan Badr Jraikous, and Raymond Gerges Ayn al-Shaibeh	3 February 2014	Licence was cancelled in May 2020
<b>Alpha Protection and Security Systems LLC</b>	Rami Makhoul	Mazen Afif al-Zarif (65%); Fuad Nazih Bouz (35%)	September 2017	Licence was cancelled on 21 May 2020

Source: Author's research

<sup>39</sup> Husam Jazmati, "Walid Abaza: At the Master's Service" (in Arabic), *Syria TV*, 4 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3cT4Us5>

<sup>40</sup> Arab Socialist Baath Party, "Comrade Dr. Khalid Walid Abaza – Branch Secretary" (in Arabic), 7 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3f9rWwn>

<sup>41</sup> Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, "Elections in Wartime: The Syrian People's Council (2016-2020)," Research Project Report (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 30 April 2020), <https://bit.ly/3kgofYc>

According to *al-Iqtisadi*,<sup>42</sup> Qasioun Security Services LLC obtained the first licence for a security company on 28 October 2013 under the Private Companies Decree. Local media outlets, however, state that the company was licensed later, in April 2014.<sup>43</sup> This inconsistency suggests that the company was permitted to work before the Ministry of Interior passed the executive order list and without reporting the owner's name. In 2014, the previously unknown engineer Habib Khlaifawi Jazayerli was identified as the company's general manager and co-founder. The company's second partner is Raymond Ayn al-Shaibeh, a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party Council<sup>44</sup> known to be close to Rami Makhoul. Among the company's purposes was protecting oil pipelines and equipment in Homs and Deir ez-Zor. In December 2018, the company obtained a permit to operate convoy protection services for goods and oil derivatives coming from Deir ez-Zor and al-Hasakah.<sup>45</sup>

The al-Hisn Firm for Security Protection and Guard Services, owned by Ammar Muhammad and Samih Aqel, was founded in January 2014 in Jaramana (rural Damascus).<sup>46</sup> It obtained a first category licence, namely one for companies with over 801 guards,<sup>47</sup> which is a large number for a newly-established company. Notably, Aqel owns just one share in the company, valued at 50,000 SYP.<sup>48</sup> Aqel is also a founding partner of the Peshawar Investment Company, founded in 2015,<sup>49</sup> in which Rami Makhoul's brother Ihab Makhoul owns 99.8% of the shares<sup>50</sup> and which owns 40% of Rami Makhoul's al-Medina Real Estate Development Company.<sup>51</sup> Al-Hisn, therefore, was merely a front for Rami Makhoul and his brother Ihab. Nevertheless, following a dispute between Makhoul and the Assad family starting in 2019 and the pressure placed on Makhoul, the Ministry of Interior revoked al-Hisn's licence on 29 November 2019. Aqel's name was not mentioned as an owner in the licence cancellation order. Instead the owners were recorded as Ammar Ahmad Muhammad and another unknown individual named Kamel Merhej<sup>52</sup>.

On 3 February 2014, Falcon for Security Systems and Services became one of the first security companies to obtain an early licence after the issuance of executive orders by the Ministry of Interior. The company is owned by Hayan Badr Jraikous and Raymond Gerges Ayn al-Shaibeh, the co-founder of Qasioun Security Services LLC, who obtained the Falcon licence two months prior to that of Qasioun. The company declares on its official website that its clients include Syriatel, Cham Wings and Milkman, all of which are either owned by or tied to Rami Makhoul.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, Falcon is largely absent from social media but for a Facebook page called 'Falcon Guarding Services' which mentions that it was established on 30 January 2019 and published two job vacancy advertisements in July 2019.

---

<sup>42</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Qasioun Security Services LLC" (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2TGAHGG>

<sup>43</sup> Syria Steps, "Qasioun, a Second Security Company for Protection and Guard Services Founded in Jaramana" (in Arabic), 23 April 2014, <https://bit.ly/2AeV0TO>

<sup>44</sup> Addiyar, "Names of Nationalist Council Members" (in Arabic), 2 February 2015, <https://bit.ly/3c03Jqd>

<sup>45</sup> The company began its activities by officially advertising a vacancy for a "civil guard" position paying a salary of between 2,500 and 3,500 SYP, to be determined based on location and tasks assigned. See Syria Jobs: A vacancy ad posted by Qasioun Security Services LLC, 13 February 2014, <https://bit.ly/3d53YSn>

<sup>46</sup> Aksalser, "Private Guarding Company Licensed in Jaramana" (in Arabic), 3 March 2014, <https://bit.ly/2zxorRe>

<sup>47</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "A Company for Protecting and Guarding Banks and Telecommunications Founded in the Damascus Countryside" (in Arabic), 2 March 2014, <https://bit.ly/3db69nl>

<sup>48</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Sami' Ali Aqel" (in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/2NHJOTG>

<sup>49</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Peshawar Company for Investment" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3egDFIU>

<sup>50</sup> Horrya Press, "Assad's Businessmen: Ihab Makhoul" (in Arabic), 14 March 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TF7xqM>

<sup>51</sup> The Al-Medina company was founded by Rami Makhoul in September 2017. Enab Baladi, "Rami Makhoul Prepares for Reconstruction by Founding the 'al-Madina' Company" (in Arabic), 29 September 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Xu7oaQ>

<sup>52</sup> The author has seen the revocation decision, No. 17/N.Q. of 29 October 2019, which stipulates the cancellation of the license granted to al-Hisn Firm for Security Protection and Guard Services owned by Ammar Ahmad Muhammad and Bassim Kamil Merhej, originally licensed by Decision No. 2/N.Q. of 15 January 2014.

<sup>53</sup> The Syria Report, "Barazi Seeks to Make His Mark," 27 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2BfxMgX>

The Falcon company is managed by Bilal al-Naal, a member of the Damascus Governorate Council (elected as new MP in 2020), who was appointed as a board member of the Damascus Cham Holding Company for the year 2016.<sup>54</sup> Al-Naal is close to Bishr al-Sabban, the former governor of Damascus, and a partner of the National Defence commander in Damascus, Fadi Saqr. This explains the presence of most of the National Defence members and people close to them in the company. The Ministry of the Interior renewed Falcon's licence on 7 January 2020 for a full year ending on 4 January 2021 in a licensing decision confirming that the company is owned by Jraikous and Ayn al-Shaibeh.<sup>55</sup> Less than five months after the licence renewal, the Minister of Internal Trade, however, issued a decision to deregister the company.<sup>56</sup> This decision coincided with Rami Makhoul's crisis with the regime and the decision to seize his funds in May 2020.<sup>57</sup>

In early 2017, Alpha Protection and Security Systems LLC commenced its activities. In June 2017, it obtained the Ministry of Economy's approval decision.<sup>58</sup> In September 2017, the Ministry of the Interior agreed to license the company, which was owned by Fuad Nazih Bouz and Mazen Afif al-Zarif, both of whom are close to Ihab Makhoul. The licence classified the company in the third category, meaning it comprised between 300 and 500 guards.<sup>59</sup> The company's headquarters were in the city of Jaramana in Rural Damascus governorate. However, the Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection, Talal al-Barazi, later deregistered the company on 21 May 2020 offering no explanation.<sup>60</sup> This decision coincided with the deregistration of the Falcon company, supporting the hypothesis that Alpha too was affiliated with Makhoul.

The manner in which the crackdown on Makhoul was carried out between summer 2019 and May 2020 indicates that the regime can dissolve these companies and dispense with them whenever it wants leaving no traces of its involvement. It is capable of confiscating or revoking the companies' licences and punishing their owners while at the same time retaining their personnel so as not to stir up their resentment. The crackdown on Makhoul in late 2019 coincided with the disbanding of the al-Bustan Forces, his best-known militia, and the revocation of the licence of the al-Hisn company. In addition, a decision was issued to dissolve the General Secretariat of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, headed by Elias Shaheen and dominated by the Makhoul family, since a number of its members held leading positions in the al-Bustan Foundation in both its charitable and military wings. As the Makhoul issue came to public light, with the seizure of his funds and the placing of Syriatel under judicial receivership in May 2020 the regime's government revoked the licences of the Alpha and Falcon companies. It turned a blind eye, however, to the Qasioun company, Makhoul's oldest, most of the shares of which are owned by Raymond Ayn al-Shaibeh, Makhoul's front man. It appears that the problem lies with the branch the regime dissolved as much as it does with Makhoul, for it is most probable that the regime preferred not to act against people close to branches of the SSNP, which would create a major rift with it given that the mother party in Beirut stands with the regime politically and militarily. The revocation of the licences of Makhoul's security companies may also

---

<sup>54</sup> Damascus Cham Holding Company, "Mr. Bilal al-Naal: A Member of the Board of Directors" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2ZPuriZ>

<sup>55</sup> According to the licensing decision, a copy of which the author has obtained.

<sup>56</sup> The Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection, "Deregistration of Alpha Protection and Security Systems LLC and Falcon for Security Systems and Services" (in Arabic), 21 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2TRLnS4>

<sup>57</sup> Euronews, "Syrian Regime Imposes Provisional Freeze on Assets of Rami Makhoul and his Family" (in Arabic), 20 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ce6MLF>

<sup>58</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Protection and Guard Services Company Founded with a Capital of 50 Million SYP" (in Arabic), 7 June 2017, <https://bit.ly/3dsROmw>

<sup>59</sup> Muraselon, "Interior Ministry Licenses Private Security Company in Damascus Countryside" (in Arabic), 5 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2MpoaTm>

<sup>60</sup> The Syrian Arab Republic, "Deregistration of Alpha Protection."



be interpreted in the context of eliminating paramilitary centres of power to prevent any reaction from Makhlof while the pressure was mounting against him.<sup>61</sup>

## 2.4. Companies Operating to the Benefit of the Fourth Division’s Security Bureau

An additional group of companies operates to the benefit of the Security Bureau of the Fourth Armoured Division. Such companies are tasked with finding job opportunities for former militiamen and relatives of Alawites killed fighting for the army or pro-regime militias, especially in Homs and the Damascus suburbs. This is done so that these relatives are not abandoned, so as to preserve social bonds within the Alawite community. These companies control most of the market and are responsible in particular for protecting international organisations, banks, embassies and diplomatic missions, in addition to convoys moving between border crossings and major cities.

**Table 4. Companies Operating to the Benefit of the Fourth Division’s Security Bureau**

Company Name	Affiliations	Main shareholders (Shares of Start-up Capital)	Date of Licensing	Notes
<b>Shorouk for Security Services LLC</b>	Maher al-Assad	Maher al-Dassouqi (40%) and the British G4S company (29%)	2005	Launched under the name G4S Syria LLC
<b>Castle Security and Protection LLC</b>	Close to Maher al-Assad and Iran	Ahmad Taher (50%), Oussama Ramadan (50%)	10 October 2017	
<b>Alep for Consultancy and Technical Solution LLC</b>	Iran, Military Intelligence and the Fourth Division	Baraa Ahmad Rushdi Katerji (40%); Hussam Ahmad Rushdi Katerji (30%); Mohammad Agha Ahmad Rushdi Katerji (30%)	2 August 2016	
<b>Al-Maham for Protection and Private Guarding</b>	Iran, Military Intelligence and the Fourth Division	Ghiath Muhammad Qaterji and Abdallah Muhammad Nizar Qaterji	15 March 2017	Aleppo-based

Source: Author’s research

Shorouk for Security Services LLC, initially known as Shorouk for Occupational Safety and Services, is one of the oldest Syrian companies to operate in the security guard and protection sector under the ‘occupational safety’ label. Its executive director is Khaldoun al-Azmah,<sup>62</sup> and since November 2018 its general manager has been Wael Muhammad al-Haw,<sup>63</sup> a member of the Damascus Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors who is close to the businessman Muhammad Hamsho, Maher al-Assad’s commercial front man. Al-Haw is also a graduate of several Russian universities and maintains strong business ties with Russia. He is the agent for the Russian SLS company’s protection systems in the Middle East.

<sup>61</sup> In 2012, the mother party founded the ‘Eagles of the Whirlwind’ militia, boasting 8,000 recruits, to fight alongside the regime.

<sup>62</sup> Bashir Farzan, “11 Private Security Companies.”

<sup>63</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, “Wael al-Haw” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2XvKP5n>

Since 2005, Shorouk for Security Services LLC has become one of the leading entities in safety and security services in Syria.<sup>64</sup> It is one of the largest protection companies in terms of clients and employees, the latter amounting to 1,400 in summer 2018<sup>65</sup> and then increasing to 3,000 in 2019. The true number may be estimated at twice this figure given the expansion of the company's operation areas and the significant rise in the number of its clients. The company assumed the task of protecting the Damascus International Fair for free in 2018. Its operations began under the supervision of senior State Security officers, who then became directors of company divisions on retirement. They include Brigadier General Jamal Habib, Brigadier General Ragheb Hamdoun,<sup>66</sup> Brigadier General Ghiath Anis and Brigadier General Muhammad Yassin Yasmine.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, Shorouk is distinct for being one of the most professional and skilled private security companies. It publishes detailed information about its activities on social media, including new clients and vacancies. At the same time, the company refrains from publishing details of the names of its owners and shareholders, although it does state the names of its general manager, executive director, head of operations<sup>68</sup> and heads of sectors in Damascus, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo and al-Hasakah. The company was granted a Swiss Approval quality certificate in January 2020 in an effort to cement its reputation as a security company that adheres to international standards.<sup>69</sup>

Shorouk only has an English language website, which is intriguing considering the majority of its customers are Arabic speakers. It is also notable that the website is not linked to any Facebook page and neither are there any links to social media platforms.

According to its main homepage, Shorouk for Security Services (Group 4)'s main launch was in 2005 under the name of G4S Syria LLC as a branch of the global British G4S company – which owns 29% of Shorouk's shares – according to the last annual report of the latter.<sup>70</sup>

The businessman Maher al-Dassouqi is considered a founding partner and front man for G4S Syria. A third partner who owns 30% of the shares remains unknown. Al-Dassouqi is also a shareholder in Damascus Cham Holding Company and is close to the prominent businessman Nader Qali, who is on the EU sanctions lists.

Notably, Maher al-Assad is alone in partnering with the global security giant G4S, which he has done through the al-Dassouqi Group, breaking one of the key taboos in a police state that has prosecuted and imprisoned its opponents on charges of dealings with foreigners for fifty years. Furthermore, the company has continued to operate despite violating Decree No. 55 of 2013, which prohibits it from being a branch of an Arab or foreign company or dealing with companies outside the country.

---

<sup>64</sup> Shorouk's English-language website, <https://bit.ly/3ewpdgk>

<sup>65</sup> Dam Press, "Special Events on Day Seven of the Damascus International Fair" (in Arabic), 25 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/2TXmIfd>

<sup>66</sup> Odaba al-Sham, "Syria Backstage 2: The New *Shabbiha*" (in Arabic), 5 November 2011, <https://bit.ly/2TXmIfd>

<sup>67</sup> WhatsApp interviews with a former Shorouk employee, September and October 2019.

<sup>68</sup> The administrative and financial manager of the company is Khaldoun al-Azmah, according to his LinkedIn profile. See <https://bit.ly/3dkl6Ua>, accessed 31 May 2020. Operations are, however, managed by Yaqoub Aqel. See Shorouk for Security Services LLC, "An Interview with Yaqoub Aqel on the Syrian Satellite Channel," Facebook, <https://bit.ly/3dxwXhS>

<sup>69</sup> The author has verified the certificate as authentic. It has been uploaded onto the Swiss Approval website, <https://bit.ly/3cjdkZA>, under the code TB-963-02-100-01057. The certificate is also posted on Shorouk's Facebook page, 27 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XeHEjK>

<sup>70</sup> G4S, "Integrated Solutions in a Connected World," Integrated Report and Accounts 2018, <https://bit.ly/36uU4ae>; G4S, "Securing Your World," Integrated Report and Accounts 2019, <https://bit.ly/36uU4ae>. The international company's annual report for 2005 also mentions that Syria is one of the countries in which it operates (<https://bit.ly/2B2H2F7>), a fact that Shorouk also mentions on its website.

The most influential security company of all is Castle Security and Protection LLC,<sup>71</sup> a direct arm of the Fourth Division. The company obtained a licence from the Ministry of the Interior as a first-class private security company on 10 October 2017.<sup>72</sup> It is run by Ahmad Ali Taher,<sup>73</sup> brother of the trader Khodr Taher, the company's chairman, who is nicknamed Abu Ali Khodr and owns half the shares.<sup>74</sup> The other half of the shares belong to Usama Hasan Ramadan, a person otherwise unknown in business circles except for being close to Abu Ali Khodr.<sup>75</sup> Apart from legally owning the company, the two men engage in neither administrative nor financial activities, nor even operational ones. While they are officially the company's owners, the company's website contains an interview with the general manager of 8 March 2018 in which he states that the owner is Abu Ali Khodr.<sup>76</sup>

It is worth noting that the company's general manager at the start of its operations was a former senior officer in the Ministry of the Interior's Criminal Security branch named Asaad Warda. He was replaced in 2018 by Muhammad Derki, who functioned merely as a media front. The real manager of the company and the person responsible for its security is the engineer Ihab al-Rai, brother-in-law of Khodr Taher. Owing to his financial partnerships and significant influence, al-Rai's father, Muhammad Saleh al-Rai, became a member of the People's Council representing Homs governorate in September 2018 filling a vacant seat.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, the company's Aleppo branch is managed by Qusay Ahmad.<sup>78</sup>

The company launched its operations in 2013<sup>79</sup> with a partnership between al-Taher and certain Iraqi businessmen, after which al-Taher purchased the Iraqi partners' stake turning the company into a Syrian one. Initially, Castle Security and Protection LLC came to the public's notice under the name 'National Company for Protection and Guarding.' It was managed by Muhammad Derki, who remains the manager today.<sup>80</sup> The name matched the old name on the company's Facebook page but it was changed after it became officially licensed.

Castle Security and Protection LLC began operations protecting Shiite pilgrims. It is considered one of the main Syrian companies working in the field of coordinating religious tourism,<sup>81</sup> having worked since 2013 accompanying Shiite visitors from Damascus airport to various religious sites. The company's activity is clear in the Sayyida Ruqayya area of the old city of Damascus, where it has a permanent office, but also in the Sayyida Zaynab area south of Damascus<sup>82</sup> and in certain

---

<sup>71</sup> Ayman Aldassouky, "The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division during the Syrian Conflict," Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 24 January 2020), <http://bit.ly/2wSsBS9>

<sup>72</sup> Ahmad al-Khalil, "Icon of *Tarfiq* Companies Belongs to Maher al-Assad: Exclusive Details on 'Castle Security and Protection LLC'" (in Arabic), *Eqtsad*, 18 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZYuRnr>

<sup>73</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Ahmad Ali Taher" (in Arabic), accessed 31 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3cYFWbP>

<sup>74</sup> Castle Security and Protection LLC, "The Visit of the Chairman of the Board of Directors, Mr. Khodr Taher, to Castle Security and Protection LLC Pavilion" (in Arabic), Facebook, 5 September 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Mfao5v>

<sup>75</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Usama Hasan Ramadan" (in Arabic), accessed 31 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2zOvrsS>

<sup>76</sup> Castle Security and Protection LLC, "Media Interview – Watani Press" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/36LqwoO>, accessed 18 March 2018.

<sup>77</sup> Alkhabar TV, "Alkhabar TV Correspondent for Homs: Candidate Muhammad Saleh al-Rai Wins Elections" (in Arabic), Facebook, 1 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XWrRqh>

<sup>78</sup> Al-Khalil, "Icon of *Tarfiq* Companies."

<sup>79</sup> Facebook interview conducted by the author with a former Castle Security and Protection LLC employee, 8 August 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Aleppo Branch of the National Company for Protection and Guarding, "Together to Elect Mr. George Bakhsh for Membership of the People's Council for Aleppo Governorate" (in Arabic), Facebook, <https://bit.ly/3gMj1Td>

<sup>81</sup> Al-Khatib, "Syria: 75 Private Security Companies with Multiple Loyalties."

<sup>82</sup> Syrian Reporter, "After Foreign Militias: Security Companies Deploy their Members in Damascus" (in Arabic), 19 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/3cnt1ig>

important banks and private companies. Castle Security and Protection LLC is also deemed the most effective company in terms of money, weapons and personnel since the majority of its members were volunteers in the Fourth Division. Its members carry cards bearing the name of the Fourth Division's Security Bureau, which is headed by Maher al-Assad. These cards enable them to move freely through security and military checkpoints.

The company controls smuggling crossing points with Lebanon and Iraq. Along with the Fourth Division it also controls crossings between areas held by the regime and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). It likewise protects the transit of goods coming from Turkey through the Awn al-Dadat crossing and other crossings in north-western Syria at Qalaat al-Madiq, Morek, Abu Dali, al-Ays and al-Mansoura. Castle Security and Protection LLC also controls the Nassib border crossing with Jordan, where it imposes illegal fees on those crossing and on traders on the pretext of protecting their goods while they are in transit. In addition, the company oversees the secure passage of goods from the port of Tartous to Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. On 27 October 2019, the company expanded its activities to the Damascus countryside in accordance with a decision by the Ministry of Interior.<sup>83</sup> Through its media office, the company explicitly states that it seeks to provide job opportunities for young people and to reduce unemployment, especially among relatives of martyrs,<sup>84</sup> which explains why so many of its personnel are former National Defence members.

In late 2018, complaints from traders and industrialists in Aleppo about Castle Security and Protection LLC and the fees it imposed on factories and commercial convoys multiplied, to the point that a dispute broke out into the open. In a TV programme on the al-Ikhbariya channel on 24 February 2019, the head of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, Fares Shehabi, described the owner of Castle Security and Protection LLC as a war mafioso,<sup>85</sup> saying that smuggled materials were entering Syria from Turkey through uncontrolled border crossings run by thieves and major figures in the Syrian state. He named Abu Ali Khodr as one of them and accused him of imposing fees on factories and harming the plastics industry in Aleppo, describing him as a thief, smuggler and former criminal. Shehabi added that such individuals now had militias that the customs police were unable to confront.<sup>86</sup> Shehabi's attack was supported by a decision by the Interior Minister, Major General Muhammad Khalid Rahmoun, prohibiting dealings with Khodr al-Taher and receiving or communicating with him. The minister reversed the decision two weeks later. This posed a great challenge for the minister, a senior Air Force Intelligence officer and former head of the Political Security Department, who is considered the regime's most prominent minister.<sup>87</sup> The challenge reflected the extent of the support and backing enjoyed by al-Taher by the Fourth Division, its Security Bureau and its boss.<sup>88</sup> Having thus succeeded in challenging the Interior Minister, al-Taher was confirmed as a component of Maher al-Assad's economic network and everyone then avoided him.

Also affiliated with the Fourth Division are the al-Maham for Protection and Private Guarding and Alep for Consultancy and Technical Solution LLC companies, both owned by the al-Qaterji family.

---

<sup>83</sup> The Ministry of the Interior expanded the operations area of Castle Security and Protection LLC based on Decision No. 16 /N. Q., which granted the company the right to operate in the Damascus countryside after the region was added to the fifth provision of Article No. 1 of Resolution No. 30/Q., 25 November 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Document published by the media office of Castle Security and Protection LLC, explaining the company's objectives and orientation, <https://bit.ly/32syUJm>

<sup>85</sup> AlSouria, "'Aleppo's Ghawar' Forces, Most Violent of Assad's Ministers to Revoke a Decision Made against Him; Who Is He?'" (in Arabic), 11 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Mf142X>

<sup>86</sup> Murad Abd al-Jalil, "Khodr Taher: Emerging Businessman who Forced Syrian Interior Minister to Back Down" (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 17 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/32tB5fW>

<sup>87</sup> Zaman al-Wasl, "Who is the Man that Defied the Regime's Minister of the Interior?" (in Arabic), 12 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/3cmKcQW>

<sup>88</sup> Aldassouky, "The Economic Networks of the Fourth Division."

Al-Maham is based in Aleppo and was licensed on 15 March 2017.<sup>89</sup> The company is part of the Qaterji Group, which has acted as a special task group subordinate to Military Intelligence and is owned equally by Ghiath bin Muhammad Qaterji and Abdallah bin Muhammad Nizar Qaterji.<sup>90</sup> The company, which has also been active in Deir ez-Zor,<sup>91</sup> works in the field of providing protection and guarding services for installations, property, documents and individuals, and moving money, jewellery and precious metals,<sup>92</sup> in addition to its operations protecting and guarding gas, oil, wheat and barley convoys coming from east of the Euphrates.

Alep for Consultancy and Technical Solution LLC obtained a licence on 2 August 2016 and is part of the al-Qaterji International Group owned by the Qaterji brothers. Thereafter, the company, chaired by Husam Qaterji, worked as a security company in an attempt to legalise the activities of the Qaterji Forces militia. In addition to fighting alongside the Fourth Division in battles against Islamic State (IS) in eastern Syria and against opposition factions in Aleppo and Idlib, it guarded certain gas fields and escorted oil tankers moving from former IS territory and areas currently controlled by the SDF into regime-held regions. The Qaterji brothers are considered economic front men for the Fourth Division.

## 2.5. Companies Close to Russia

Russia views its military presence in Syria as a top priority and is seeking to rebuild the country and reconstruct the Syrian security system in a manner that contains Iran's expanding influence. To this end it has established official military forces subordinate to the Syrian army, such as the Fifth Corps and the 25th Division, which have achieved the goal of reorganising the Tiger Forces militia making them more orderly. Security companies subordinate to Russia differ in terms of training and mission, being more of a special or elite force overseen by the Wagner Group. This group trains the companies' recruits and joins them in combat. The companies' mission, however, is to preserve the resources and assets that Moscow has obtained from the Assad regime. They provide no guarding or protection services outside the scope of Russian interests, and so remain outside the competition for the tasks of the other private security companies. The group includes only two companies, namely IS Hunters and Sanad Protection and Security Services LLC, which operate in areas in which Russia has invested in the Syrian Badia (desert) and Deir ez-Zor in order to protect the oil, gas and phosphate fields from attacks by IS.

With full Russian funding and military support, the IS Hunters company was established in the town of al-Suqaylabiya in Northern Hama Province. On 16 March 2017 it obtained a commercial licence from the Directorate of Internal Trade in Hama under the name al-Sayyad Company for Guarding and Protection Services Ltd. It is owned by three partners: Adib Amin Touma, Yasar Hussein Ibrahim and Fawaz Mikhail Gerges, who was appointed its manager. The latter is a doctor and teacher at Tishreen University close to Moscow. His wife is Russian and his son was awarded a medal by the Russian president in 2018.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Al-Maham for Protection and Private Guarding" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2ByBfaD>

<sup>90</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Ghiath bin Muhammad Qaterji" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2AWWsvb>; and "Abdullah bin Muhammad Nizar Qaterji" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2zYHGTY>

<sup>91</sup> The company posted vacancy notices in al-Hawdh Street in Deir ez-Zor's al-Qusur neighbourhood in September 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Pro Justice, "Muhammad Qaterji" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3eylCie>

<sup>93</sup> Father Fadi Sankari, "Al-Suqaylabiya Awarded a Medal by Russian President Vladimir Putin" (in Arabic), Facebook, 12 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2WoRVsU>

Since its establishment, the company has operated under the name IS Hunters and it is overseen entirely by the Wagner Group, which set up a training camp in the Hama countryside and participated with the company in battles against IS in Eastern Hama Province. In summer 2017 the company notably began protecting oil and gas fields west of Palmyra, phosphates in the Khnayfis field and the main warehouses near the Tiyas Airbase (also known as T4). IS Hunters also had a significant role in controlling Palmyra and was entrusted at the time with protecting the Palmyra-Homs road.<sup>94</sup>

In autumn 2017, the Wagner Group and IS Hunters began advancing into the oil fields on the eastern banks of the Euphrates, where the company took over certain small islands in the river and captured 250 IS militants. However, on 7 February 2018 the US air force killed approximately 250 Wagner fighters, IS Hunters and soldiers in the regime's army and allied militias. Around 20 of the dead were IS Hunters. Although the last military operation conducted by the IS Hunters was in Ghouta in April 2018, the militia continues to operate as a security guard company and has moved its main headquarters to the Badia regions, where it guards Russian investments in oil and gas fields. Since 2019, IS Hunters has been managed by the engineer Ahed Mikhail al-Wakeel, who is very close to Russia.<sup>95</sup>

The second security company founded by Russia is Sanad Protection and Security Services LLC, which was established on 22 October 2017.<sup>96</sup> The company obtained a licence from the Ministry of Internal Trade a month after its establishment in a partnership between Ahmad Khalil and Nasser Deeb, each of whom owned 50% of the company's shares.<sup>97</sup> Both men are obscure with no known history of commercial activity. Their names surfaced only after the licensing of their company, and it later emerged that Deeb was one of Abu Ali Khoder's partners and money men. It is notable that the two men also founded the Syrian Company for Metals and Investment in 2018, which is based in Damascus.<sup>98</sup> Sanad remained no more than ink on paper despite its licence until Russian extraction of phosphates, oil and gas began in Eastern Homs Province and Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor Provinces.

Russia merged the nascent company with the Military Security's Sanad Forces militia, which had appointed Brigadier General Ruslan Esper as its commander, a senior Alawite hailing from the village of Junaynat Ruslan in eastern Tartous governorate. Photos published by Sanad Forces members indicate their presence in a semi-desert area near the phosphate plants in Khnayfis and Palmyra and on the road between Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. Media sources believe the Sanad Forces also maintain positions in the Hamima region between the Homs desert and Deir ez-Zor, the vicinity of the Taym field in Deir ez-Zor's southern desert, the Shula desert, Faydhat ibn Muwaina, the second oil pumping station (T2) and the Akhdar May area in the al-Mayadin desert.<sup>99</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> RT, "Video: IS Hunters Doing their Job in Palmyra" (in Arabic), 6 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/30xSKSM>

<sup>95</sup> Al-Wakeel studied engineering in Odessa in Ukraine when it was still part of the Soviet Union. He speaks Russian.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Sanad Protection and Security Services LLC" (in Arabic), 22 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fCtVtR>

<sup>97</sup> Al-Iqtisadi, "Ratification of Sanad Protection and Security Services LLC Primary Statutes" (in Arabic), 19 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/2XtaXPO>

<sup>98</sup> Albin Szakola, "War Trader in Syria Connected to Unidentified Pro-Russia Security Company" (in Arabic), *Akhbar al-Aan*, 4 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Bk92Ej>

<sup>99</sup> Bilady News, "'Sanad Protection and Security Services LLC': A Security Company after it was Militias in Syria" (in Arabic), May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3cnyQMI>

## Conclusion

The emergence of Syria's private security companies was a response to a pressing need to bridge the large security gap created by the war and a shortage of civil police manpower. The companies also represented an opportunity to absorb tens of thousands of disbanded fighters from pro-regime militias, which were systematically dismantled, and relatives of militiamen killed or injured.

The forms of these companies' ownership and the nature of the relationships between businessmen and the security forces indicate that the companies operate to a large extent in the service of the regime. The regime is also an active partner in these companies through the various businessmen who founded them together with security agencies or people who had patronage relationships with Rami Makhlouf or Maher al-Assad. As such, the companies pose no threat to the regime, especially as their licences require annual renewal by the Ministry of the Interior, which binds them into the system. Their personnel, moreover, are approved by the security apparatus and their loyalty is absolutely assured. It is also the same security apparatus that controls the companies in legal terms, since it can revoke their licences at any time should they ever pose any danger to the regime, as has happened with companies close to Makhlouf in recent months. Additionally, top-ranking regime military and security commanders exercise control over them through their shares in them and their appointments of loyalists in them.

Nonetheless, even if the security companies are not in competition with the regime for power, they do compete with one another. The al-Hisn Firm for Security Protection and Guard Services, for example, competes with al-Nour Trading, while other companies licensed as charities, such as the al-Bustan Foundation, have competed with the Customs Directorate for convoy protection services. In 2013, other military groups also moved to operate in the convoy protection business, such as the pro-regime Qaterji Forces and the National Defence militia. Russian influence in this regard remains minimal, being confined to a small number of companies deployed in areas where there are oil or gas resources in the desert and in Deir ez-Zor, where they guard Russian economic interests.

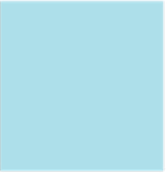
The private security companies also play an economic role for the regime in that they contribute to no small extent to bringing foreign currency into the country since most of their contracts are in US dollars while the salaries of their personnel are paid in Syrian pounds. Similarly, the companies are another means of evading sanctions since they are owned by front men and clients subordinate to individuals on the US and EU sanctions lists but nonetheless win contracts with UN agencies and other international organisations. Shorouk, for example, works with most of the UN agencies in Damascus, while in 2017 Qasioun signed a contract worth 105,043 USD with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).<sup>100</sup>

Despite the official licensing procedures which the companies must abide by, it appears that only a few of them are open about the true nature of their operations and allow the Ministries of the Interior and Internal Trade access to their contracts. In late 2017, for instance, even though eleven companies were granted licences, the ministry was aware of only 75 work contracts between them and their clients,<sup>101</sup> which is a very small number compared to the scale of the companies' activities. Shorouk alone states that it has 3,000 guards. This indicates the extent to which the companies escape scrutiny and the ministries' inability to monitor most of their activities due to their affiliations with the Fourth Division, Rami Makhlouf or Military Intelligence.

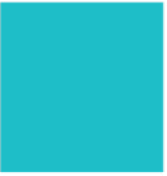
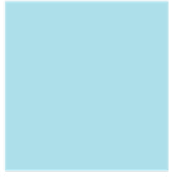
---

<sup>100</sup> Kambiz Foroohar, "How Assad's Allies Got USD 18 Million From the UN," *Bloomberg Business Week*, 1 August 2017, <https://bloom.bg/33ukmYO>

<sup>101</sup> Farzan, "11 Private Security Companies."



Research Project Report  
10 September 2020  
2020/12



ISBN:978-92-9084-929-2  
doi:10.2870/585375

