

Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi: East Aleppo Militia Expansion

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The Local Defence Forces network, set up and supported by Iran, has tens of thousands of people under its wing in Syria, going by the numbers given in internal documents. The statistics indicate that the network is most prominent in Aleppo province, where there has also been the most social media publicity for the Local Defence Forces. As the regime has expanded its control through the Aleppo countryside, most notably seizing large swaths of the rural eastern areas from the Islamic State (IS) that has culminated in IS' expulsion from its last notable Aleppo town holding of Maskanah earlier this month, so too has the Local Defence Forces network expanded. Indicative of this expansion of the Local Defence Forces is the creation of a new unit called Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi (The Thunder of the Mahdi Regiment), also known as Fawj Asha'ir Manbij (Tribes of Manbij Regiment).



Insignia of Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi,

The group was originally announced at the end of March 2017 by its leader Mua'mmar al-Dandan (aka Abu Fatih), who :

"By God Almighty's help, Fawj Asha'ir Manbij/Ra'ad al-Mahdi has been formed...under the leadership of the fighter Mua'mmar Abu Fatih, and the formation includes a number of the youth of Aleppo and Aleppo countryside and the training has been done at the hands of an elite of the officers, the Hujjaj and the asdiqa', and by the Almighty's help, the first contingent of the regiment has been graduated, and we are trying through this formation to spread into all the lands of Syria, including the Sanjak of Alexandretta and the beloved Golan."

For context here, Hujjaj is the plural of Hajj, a title often associated with commanders in Hezbollah who act as overseers of other armed formations. Asdiqa' means 'the friends' and usually refers to one or both of the two main foreign backers of the Syrian

government: Iran and Russia. In this case, considering the Local Defence Forces' connections, it is evident that the Iranians are meant here. The group's name additionally points to the Iran link, with the reference to the Imam al-Mahdi associated with Shi'i Islam in particular.

At the same time, Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi wishes to convey a Syrian nationalist image, issuing the following statement on 3 May 2017 in response to negative coverage from pro-opposition outlets:

"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. We- the leadership of Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi/Asha'ir Manbij make clear that we are a faction affiliated with the auxiliary forces for the Syrian Arab Army/the People's Army/the Local Defence Forces. Operating in the faction are people from all sects and religions, and all of them are Syrians. No distinction is made between anyone, and our slogan is 'religion is for God and the homeland is for all' [a slogan of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, a Druze notable who led the Great Syrian Revolt against the French colonial occupation]. And we will not allow or let off anyone letting himself be seduced to characterize us with sectarianism or play on the string of sectarianism in order to sow resentment and hatred among the sons of the one homeland. And if we have sought help in the friend, the Islamic Republic of Iran, we have sought help in those who bear the banner of Islam, whereas they have sought help in the Zionist entity. And today we are in a decisive battle in which Syrian blood of all types and kinds has been mixed, and what they prattle on about will not turn us away from liberating every inch of the lands of Syria. Victory is coming, coming, coming. Eternity be to the martyr, and victory be to the fire of his blood."

In multiple conversations, Mua'mmar al-Dandan likewise employed nationalist rhetoric in speaking to me. When asked about his clan origins in a conversation in early May 2017, for example, he said: "I am from the clan of the lovers of the homeland. Please don't speak like this [i.e. inquire on tribal/clan origins]. We do not distinguish between this or that. The blood of any fighter is like my blood...if you notice from the first statement for the regiment I did not mention the surname. We are all children of one clan, it is the united Arab Syria."



Mua'mmar al-Dandan

Beyond this rhetoric, it was possible to pick up on some concrete information. Mua'mmar al-Dandan, who says he was in the regime's security apparatus and had previously been wounded, confirmed the Local Defence Forces affiliation of Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi and clarified on the distinction between the Local Defence Forces and the more familiar National Defence Forces: "The National Defence relies on the Syrian command in everything and constitutes groupings of the popular committees, whereas the Local Defence constitutes auxiliary forces for the army working under the command of the army with Iranian support." Elaborating further on the concept of Iranian support, Mua'mmar explained with regards to salaries for fighters, which he put at around \$100 per month for each fighter: "Currently we take [money] from the state but frankly we don't know the financing, but this [that it is provided by Iran] is what has been said." As of May 2017, Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi consisted of six squadrons: two from the graduation of the first contingent, four from the graduation of the second contingent. Most of these fighters come from the eastern Aleppo countryside.

At the same time, Mua'mmar al-Dandan complained to me more than once of lack of material support for his group: "We severely lack material support," he said to me this month. The previous month, he stated that "we do not have any support: no cars or anything to empower us but light weapons." According to him, no assistance was provided by the likes of Liwa al-Baqir- a formation of Aleppo-based Bekara tribesmen that has been featured prominently in the Aleppo Local Defence Forces- or other Local Defence Forces groups in the creation of Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi: "I relied on myself in everything. There were even attempts to make it fail and foil it, but despite this, I remained steadfast." Mua'mmar al-Dandan did not specify who exactly tried to foil his project of Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi: "Persons, brother, persons." As for the reason for these alleged initiatives against Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi, he put the motives down to the fact that "our foundational aim is...distancing interests from work." Could it be that some other formations in Aleppo- including perhaps Liwa al-Baqir- see in Mua'mmar al-Dandan's

initiative something that threatens the opportunity to expand client networks and patronage into the east Aleppo countryside? It is perhaps better not to speculate too far on this matter for lack of clear evidence.



Mua'mmar al-Dandan holding a replica of the Dhu al-Fiqar, the legendary sword of Imam Ali.



On left: Mua'mmar al-Dandan. Photo as part of a series put up by him proclaiming the return to his home village as part of the Maskanah operations.

Militarily, Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi has so far only participated in the operations that cleared IS from Maskanah. Mua'mmar al-Dandan explained that this participation was not an assignment given to his group: "We were not entrusted with an assignment, but rather we entered voluntarily." In relation to the Maskanah operations, Mua'mmar al-Dandan has also pointed to the participation of the regular Syrian army and the air-intelligence-affiliated Tiger Forces ('the tigers').

Alongside the entrance into the Maskanah area has come allegations of Shi'ification and recruitment attempts in the area by Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi (though the pro-opposition outlet All4Syria does not appear to realize that what it calls the "al-Dandan/Mahdi battalion" is actually the same Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi). For his part, Mua'mmar al-Dandan

denies recruitment in the Maskanah area or Shi'ification: "We have never thought in this way [to Shi'ify people]. Also are the Shi'a a different religion? Are they not Muslims? Our creed is that religion is for God and the homeland is for all."

In keeping with the regime's line, Mua'mmar al-Dandan repeatedly stresses the idea of claiming every inch of Syrian land. As he told me in May 2017: "The aim is to liberate all the lands of Syria. We observe the international agreements and respect the opinion of the Iranian and Russian friends regarding the ceasefire, ceasefire pact and resolutions but the sovereignty of the state or partitioning any inch of the Syrian lands is a red line." Where then does this stance leave the town of Manbij itself, which is presently under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces? No answer was provided.

As the regime and its allies continue to expand eastward, the Local Defence Forces is likely to be an important mechanism for the raising of some forces of local origin, which, if they do not participate in the operations themselves to recapture the various places still under IS control, will at least act as partial holding forces in the aftermath. Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi is one case of how such trends already play out on the ground further to the west of the country: another indicative case from Aleppo is the ongoing recruitment for a formation called the Legion of the Defenders of Aleppo, a project overseen by the Local Defence Forces and the 'friends.' Given the recent administrative measures involving the Local Defence Forces and the issue of army service, these arrangements benefit both the regime and Iran: the former can have at least some forces of local origin to help maintain security and claim some basis of legitimacy without incurring too high a financial cost, while the latter can expand its networks of patronage and influence inside Syria. It will of course be interesting to see if the various formations that do arise end up competing with each other and/or existing militias and armed units and what kind of problems that competition may spark. The case of Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi seems to point to some rivalry at play behind the scenes, though it remains difficult to pinpoint details beyond such a general statement.

(Update 10 May 2019): This unit was dissolved some time ago. Some members joined Saraya Fursan al-Basil (another Local Defence Forces unit). Others joined the air intelligence and the military intelligence's Liwa al-Shamal.