

Syrian Hezbollah Militias of Nubl and Zahara'

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August 15,
2016

Posted by Aymenn Al-Tamimi on Monday, August 15th, 2016

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The Syrian Shi'i towns of Nubl and Zahara' to the north of Aleppo city, like other Shi'i areas in Syria, have been associated with support for the regime from the outset. In addition, given that the religious affiliation (Twelver Shi'i Islam) happens to coincide with that of Iran and its Lebanese client Hezbollah that are leading backers of the regime, Nubl and Zahara' have become one of many areas for the building of the concept of a native Syrian Hezbollah and 'Islamic Resistance' (*al-muqawama al-islamiya*).

At least two Syrian Hezbollah militias I have documented elsewhere have recruited people from Nubl and Zahara'. One of these militias is the National Ideological Resistance (Jaysh al-Imam al-Mahdi, whose name translates as 'The Imam Mahdi Army'). The militia's home base is in the Tartous-Masyaf area, but it has also fought in the Aleppo area, recently claiming a 'martyr' in the latest round of engagements as the regime seeks to impose a siege on the rebel-held eastern parts of Aleppo city. Back in February 2015, the group claimed a 'martyr' originally from Zahara' as part of fighting in the Ratyan area just to the east of Nubl and Zahara'. The other Syrian Hezbollah militia of relevance here is Quwat al-Ridha (The al-Ridha Forces, named for the eighth Shi'i imam). Like the National Ideological Resistance, its recruiting base primarily lies elsewhere: in this case, in the Homs area. However, it has also recruited some people from other areas including Nubl and Zahara', as we will also see below.

Besides the aforementioned Syrian Hezbollah groups that have recruited people from Nubl and Zahara', there exist at least two formations that have a similar image but are specifically intended to recruit from these two towns. The older formation is called Junud al-Mahdi ('Soldiers of the Mahdi'), while the more recent formation is called Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja ('Imam Hujja Regiment', also a reference to the Mahdi). In terms of affiliation, there is no difference between these two groups. According to a person from Nubl presently residing in Damascus and another person from Nubl who was in Quwat al-Ridha but now works in Hezbollah's information portfolio and is currently in Iran, both Junud al-Mahdi and Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja are affiliated with Hezbollah. These groups will be documented below.

For further context, it should be emphasized that recruitment for militias is not the only evidence of Hezbollah activity in the area: there also exists a branch of the group's youth wing- the Imam Mahdi Scouts- that has apparently been operating since at least 2012. With organisation into area sectors as well as multiple contingents and sub-divisions, the

Imam Mahdi Scouts engage in outreach to the local youth with activities like swimming trips, hiking and religious lessons including the promotion of Iran's ideology of *wilayat al-faqih*. In March 2015, a leader in the Imam Mahdi Scouts from Nubl- Abdo Mahdi Saman—was killed in fighting. Interestingly, one source listing 'martyrdoms' among regime personnel in the Aleppo area at the time presented him as "from the men of the local defence," adding that he was killed on the front of the periphery of Aleppo international airport. The 'local defence' here refers to the Local Defence Forces (LDF), regime auxiliary forces specific to Aleppo with roots in a variety of pro-Assad networks in the province. The LDF was set up in 2012 by Iran, and one of the formations in the LDF comes from Nubl and Zahara'. Thus, here in the case of Saman is a notable case of apparent overlap in affiliations pointing further to the links between the LDF and Hezbollah that I have previously examined in looking at the LDF in-depth.



Emblem of the Imam Mahdi Scouts for the Nubl and Zahara' area. Note the Syrian flag in the emblem.

Junud al-Mahdi



A logo for Junud al-Mahdi. Besides the familiar extended arm and rifle associated with Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, a distinctly Syrian flavour is added through painting over the globe (which signifies the concept of the global Islamic Revolution envisioned by Iran) with the Syrian flag. The figures to the left of the arm and rifle are Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. On top: “The soldiers of the Mahdi are those who overcome” (a play on the concept of Hezbollah as “the party of God”- cf. ‘The party of God are those who overcome’- Qur’an 5:56). On bottom: “The Islamic Resistance in Syria.”

The exact date of the formation of Junud al-Mahdi remains unclear and open-source information on the group remains scarce, though one source currently in Nubl, who did not know the exact date of formation, said “possibly [the group dates] from the beginning of the Syrian crisis in Aleppo,” which would place its origins in 2012 if correct, perhaps around the same time Hezbollah set up the Imam Mahdi Scouts branch for Nubl and Zahara’. Clear references to Junud al-Mahdi can be found at least as far back as 2014. For example, a post from July 2014 mentions operations at the time against rebels to the northeast of Aleppo city (in particular the area of the industrial quarter of Sheikh Najjar and its vicinity) involving Junud al-Mahdi. In particular, there is mention of a “squadron of 100 persons from the elite of the youth of Nubl and Zahara’ under the name of Junud al-Mahdi, being aided by a group from Hezbollah.” Ultimately, these operations culminated in the rebels’ loss of the Sheikh Najjar area in early July 2014.

Later in 2014, a reference turns up for Junud al-Mahdi in relation to operations in a variety of locations in north Aleppo and Aleppo city, such as in Handarat, al-Jubeila and the cement factory area. Other formations mentioned at the time include a Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas contingent, and a Fawj Shuhada' Nubl wa al-Zahara' (Nubl and Zahara' Martyrs Regiment), which appears to be the same as the local LDF formation for Nubl and Zahara'. Turning to the current year, it is possible to find at least one reference to Junud al-Mahdi, as per below.



“From the land of battle live: the finest youth of Junud al-Mahdi: Ratyan.” For context, the person responsible for this post, Abbas Assaf, comes from the local Assaf family of Nubl. Similarly, my source from Nubl who was in Quwat al-Ridha is also from the Assaf family. As with many militias in the Syrian civil war, fighters from Nubl and Zahara' often come from the same families and households, as illustrated by recurring family names.

Graphic for the Assaf family of Nubl, incorporating the extended arm and rifle, playing on the idea of Hezbollah as the family's “military wing” (*al-junah al-askari*).



Information on ‘martyrs’ of Junud al-Mahdi likewise remains obscure. A page named for Junud al-Mahdi and active in 2015 named a number of people apparently as ‘martyrs’ for the group. Some of these individuals can be matched with some members of a series of six ‘martyrs’ who were killed in the Ratyan area in February 2015 but were only buried in June 2015 following an exchange of bodies between the regime and rebels. Their ‘martyrdom’ placards notably featured the flag of Hezbollah.



Nahad Ahmad Dib



Hussein Mahdi



On left: Taher Mustafa Khatib

Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja



Emblem of Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja. On bottom: "Nubl and Zahara'." As with the Junud al-Mahdi emblem, note the extended arm and rifle.

Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja is the newer Nubl and Zahara' formation affiliated with Hezbollah. According to my source from Nubl who was in Quwat al-Ridha, Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja was formed approximately 8 months ago, which would put its formation in January 2016. It may reasonably be asked what was the purpose in setting up this group at the beginning of this year considering the already existing Hezbollah affiliate for Nubl and Zahara' in Junud al-Mahdi. It is possible that Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja was set up to coincide with the intense push led by Shi'i militias at the time to break the rebel sieges of Nubl and Zahara', a goal that was achieved at the beginning of February 2016. More generally, there is a familiar *modus operandi* here in the creation of multiple linked groups that can help to create the impression of a bigger overall front.

A distinct flag and distinct insignia can be identified for Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja, as seen below.







Ali Abd al-Ghanni al-Taqi, a fighter from Nubl recently announced to have been killed fighting in south Aleppo countryside. With the breaking of the siege of eastern Aleppo by rebel forces in opening a corridor through Ramousah in the southwest of Aleppo city, additional forces from Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja and Fawj Shuhada' Nubl wa al-Zahara' have reportedly mobilized to participate in the fighting.

Similar to Junud al-Mahdi, an official page to track Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja is lacking, and so information on its activities must be compiled from patches of different source material. In April 2016, at least 11 people from Nubl and Zahara' were reported to have been killed fighting in the area of al-Eis in the south Aleppo countryside. From another source, at least 4 of the individuals listed can apparently be identified as members of Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja. The following month, it was reported that convoys from Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja, Fawj Shuhada' Nubl wa al-Zahara' and Fawj al-Tadakhkhul al-Khas were departing from Nubl and Zahara' to support the Syrian army in Aleppo city. In June 2016, following the

onset of Ramadan, another set of 'martyrs' from Nubl and Zahara' were declared (not all killed on the same day), at least one of whom was identified in another posting as a member of Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja (specifically one Mansour al-Abras), identified as "a new martyr in the series of martyrs of Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja." Finally, of note regarding the 'martyrs' of Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja, a commander called Ali Muhammad Mustafa Khalil (known by the nickname al-Zilzal) was announced on 9 July 2016 to have been killed. A more detailed biography subsequently emerged, which stated that he was from Nubl, was 34 years old and had two children. He had reputedly participated in the Aleppo fighting from the outset and eventually received a leadership position in Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja.

Conclusion

In terms of the building of the 'Islamic Resistance' in Syria, the Syrian Shi'i communities represent the most fertile ground for Hezbollah and Iran to give a native Syrian face to the concept, taking advantage of the shared religious affiliation and playing on the sectarian atmosphere, reinforced by sieges that the rebels have imposed on their villages. Though multiple local formations exist for the Nubl and Zahara' area, the boundaries between them are unsurprisingly not so clear-cut, and it can be difficult to tell individuals apart by affiliation. In the end though, Syrian Shi'a are still a very small minority in the country. A big question in assessing the potential to build a Syrian 'Islamic Resistance'/Hezbollah movement is how far there can also be successful outreach to other sects and components of society within regime-held Syria. In the predominantly Druze Suwayda' province, for example, there have been concerns- especially among more third-way circles- regarding Iranian/Hezbollah outreach and a suspected Shi'ification campaign. These issues of wider networking will be examined further in future posts.