

Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain: Building a 'Resistance' in Eastern Syria

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Banner of Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain. On top: "The Syrian Resistance" (*al-muqawama al-suriya*). On bottom: Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain ("The Imam Zain al-Abidain Brigade").

In analysis of militiafication on the Assad regime side, one of the most understudied fronts is that of Deir az-Zor province in eastern Syria, as the regime maintains an outpost in parts of Deir az-Zor city, the military airport and some of the surrounding areas, with no supply routes by land in existence. Despite the regime's rather precarious situation, the Islamic State (IS) has not yet completely wiped out the regime presence in the way that it took the regime's isolated bases in Raqqa province by storm in the summer of 2014.

Though reporting commonly just refers to the Syrian army in Deir az-Zor province, there exist a number of supporting militias. The latest of these militias to have been set up on this front is Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain, named for the fourth Shi'i imam. For context, it

should be noted that there are a number of militias on the regime side that have adopted the moniker of Zain al-Abidain. For example, there is another Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain that has most notably fought on the Ithiriya front as advertised in late 2015. According to someone who was in the Republican Guard and then joined this Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain, the group was formed around 2-3 years ago. A notable leading figure in this Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain is one Zaher Hasan al-Asad, who is particularly interesting because he is also a member of Mihrac Ural's group known as The Syrian Resistance (*al-muqawama al-suriya*), which should not be confused with the Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain of Deir al-Zor that is the main subject of this piece and also bears the moniker of "The Syrian Resistance." Hasan Zaher al-Asad's affiliation with Ural's group was confirmed by a source in the latter last month, who also mentioned that a squadron from Hasan Zaher al-Asad's Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain was in Aleppo.



The Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain of Zaher Hasan al-Asad. The top of the emblem reads: "The Resistance Support Forces."



Zaher Hasan al-Asad. Note his insignia from Mihrac Ural's Muqawama Suriya.



Zaher Hasan al-Asad with his Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain members, posing in front of a banner that reads: "God's peace be upon you oh Hussein." The reference is to Imam Hussein, a key figure in Shi'i Islam. For similar sloganeering, see [here](#).

Indeed, the leader of Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain in Deir az-Zor- a petroleum engineer by occupation who is originally from Deir az-Zor and goes by the name of Abo Abod- told me that the name of Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain exists among formations in various parts of Syria, including Ithiriya (likely referring to the presence of Zaher Hasan

al-Asad's group), Palmyra and Quneitra. He mentioned this fact in response to a query as to why this name was chosen for the group. He added that there were connections "with all the formations."

More specifically on his own group in Deir az-Zor, he mentioned that it has been operating for four months (i.e. first set up in May-June 2016). Officially describing his group as independent, he affirmed that it was one of the supporting militias for the regime in Deir az-Zor. By his account, other militias that have participated in fighting on the Deir az-Zor front, according to Abo Abod, have included:

- The National Defence Forces.

- The Lions of the Eternal Leader: a militia whose name refers to Hafez al-Assad: affiliated with the Military Intelligence (*al-Amn al-Askari*: cf. [here](#)) and led by al-Hajj Azra'il, originally from the Shi'i village of Nubl in north Aleppo.

- The Lions of the Euphrates: affiliated with the *Amn al-Dawla* ("State Security") intelligence agency.

- The Lions of the East: a tribal militia mainly drawing on Sha'itat tribesmen, who work closely with the Republican Guard and Issam Zahr al-Din, a Druze general in the Republican Guard who plays a leading role on the Deir az-Zor front, having recently returned to the front after a visit to the Quneitra frontlines that currently involve a rebel offensive that has pushed towards the area of the Druze village of Hadr, prompting a large Druze mobilization to defend the area. Together, under Zahr al-Din, members of the Republican Guard and members of the Lions of the East constitute the *Majmu'at Nafidh Assad Allah* ("Nafidh Assad Allah Group," referring to a nickname for Zahr al-Din).

- The Ba'ath Brigades.

- al-Hashd al-Sha'abi: "Popular Mobilization"- undoubtedly taking its name from Iraq's militia phenomenon that goes under this moniker- but not related, rather affiliated with the Syrian regime's military commander for Deir az-Zor city.

- Lebanon's Hezbollah.

This list of auxiliary forces more or less correlates with that compiled by the anti-IS and anti-regime group Deir az-Zor is Being Slaughtered Silently (DZBSS). Most notably, DZBSS correctly points out in addition the role of the Palestinian militia Quwat al-Jalil ("The Galilee Forces"), which actually claims the bulk of its 'martyrs' from fighting in Deir az-Zor. Despite some occasional claims that have surfaced on social media, little reliable evidence points to the presence of Iraqi Shi'i factions on the Deir az-Zor front, something denied by Abo Abod. It should also be noted that Abo Abod clarified that the Lions of the Euphrates militia has been dissolved by the Amn al-Dawla, with fighters distributed to other formations. According to him, al-Hashd al-Sha'abi has also been dissolved.

As might be expected, Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain in Deir az-Zor primarily draws on local people from Deir az-Zor as recruits, though Abo Abod was keen to emphasize as wide a manpower base as possible in terms of origins, claiming fighters from Albukamal (in eastern Deir az-Zor on the border with Iraq), Raqqa, Hasakah, Qamishli Damascus and Deraa. He put the monthly salary per fighter at \$200, which he said was partly used

to support civilians in Deir az-Zor. Concomitant with the wide range of origins, Abo Abod was also keen to put forth a cross-sectarian image for his group. “Do you know that I have Christian youth in the brigade?” he asked rhetorically in a bid to impress me. He added that “some of them are from al-Deir [Deir az-Zor] and some have come down with me from al-Sham [Damascus].”



Photo of Abo Abod

The photo of Abo Abod above, with the “Labbayk ya Hussein” (“At your service, oh Hussein”) insignia, may raise the question as to whether he is Shi’i himself. To this question, he gave a rather interesting response: “I belong to all sects. I wage war on all who wage war on the Shi’a. I serve [/revere] the Al Bayt [Prophet Muhammad’s family] and my lineage is Husseini.” He then elaborated: “Do you know that Deir az-Zor is Shi’i in character? The black abaya, the al-Abbas bread, Allah wa Ali, all of them are from the customs of the people of al-Deir.”

These kinds of remarks touch on an issue I raised in my previous article profiling Liwa Sayf al-Haq Assad Allah al-Ghalib, a militia affiliated with the Republican Guard and based in Sayyida Zainab in Damascus. That is, whether or not there is formal conversion to Shi'i Islam, many pro-regime militias have displayed increasing affinities with Shi'i Islam and associated slogans and symbols, undoubtedly influenced by the extensive intervention of Iran and client Shi'i militias in Syria. Indeed, as Abo Abod told me, "The youth I have- Sunni before Shi'i- have adopted Labbayk ya Hussein, out of love and desire. We in the brigade deal with each other as one family and one house. Muhammad is our Prophet, Ali is our lord, Hussein is our leader....All demanded it [the slogans/symbols]. They said: 'Hussein, Ali, Zainab and Fatima- peace be upon them- are our lords.'"



Photo of a person bearing the Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain flag.

So far, Abo Abod only claims 5 'martyrs' for his formation, a recent example being one Nasim Muhammad al-Hamid, killed in fighting to retake Tel Baruq near the 137th brigade base. In the recent U.S. airstrikes in Deir az-Zor that erroneously targeted regime positions, there were no reported or confirmed deaths for the ranks of Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain.

Analytically, it could be as my friend Tobias Schneider suggests to me that Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidain is a project analogous to Hezbollah's *Saraya al-Muqawama* ("The Resistance Brigades") project in Lebanon that is designed to outreach to non-Shi'i constituencies. Though Abo Abod said his group is independent, such a claim should probably be taken as formal distancing. In any case, the study of this militia in Deir az-Zor offers useful insight into regime dependency on auxiliary fighting forces even out on this front, and how apparent cross-sectarianism can still contribute to antagonistic sectarian dichotomies.