

Saraya al-Wa'ad: Damascus Local Defence Forces Affiliate

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I have covered the Local Defence Forces (LDF) in previous posts. In brief, the LDF is not to be confused with the more familiar National Defence Forces (NDF). The LDF, set up and supported by Iran, is considered an official part of the Syrian armed forces, whereas the NDF does not enjoy the same status. Indeed, administrative measures earlier this year stipulated that personnel in the LDF who would otherwise have been arrested for evading compulsory service, deserting the army or evading reserve service should undergo *taswiyat al-wad'* ("sorting out of affairs") with their service in the LDF to be considered tantamount to military service.

The LDF is most prominent in Aleppo province. Since the recapture of Aleppo city and expansion into east Aleppo countryside by the regime and its allies, new LDF units have been created, such as Fawj Ra'ad al-Mahdi in the Manbij-Maskanah area and the Defenders of Aleppo Legion in Aleppo city, which in part undertakes some civil society work in a bid to restore normality to Aleppo city, something that is still a long way off. Moreover, note that the Syrian Hezbollah group Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja, based in the two north Aleppo Shi'i villages of Nubl and Zahara', is now described as a part of the LDF.

More obscure are LDF formations and branches outside Aleppo. According to a friend involved in the Syrian Hezbollah group Quwat al-Ridha, which primarily recruits from Homs and its countryside, there is a plan to integrate Quwat al-Ridha into the LDF. Further out in the eastern province of Deir az-Zor, no LDF branch exists yet, according to Abu Aboud, who is the leader of Liwa al-Imam Zain al-Abidin, which is described by Abu Abboud as independent but by his own admission is financed by Iran and his own wealth. However, Abu Aboud expects that an LDF branch will probably be established in Deir az-Zor since "many of the fighters" in the province "do not belong to any formation."

In this post however, I will focus on an affiliate of the LDF in the Damascus area: Saraya al-Wa'ad ("The Brigades of the Promise").



Emblem of Saraya al-Wa'ad. On top: an extended arm and rifle similar to Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) imagery, with the inscription "Kata'ib Khudam al-Aqila" ("Servants of al-Aqila Battalions"- referring to Sayyida Zainab whose shrine is in Damascus). On the circular Syrian flag: "The army and armed forces: Local Defence Forces in Damascus/ص. The Second Battalion: Special Assignments." In centre: "al-Asdiqa" ("The Friends"), referring to the Iranians. Beneath that: "Homeland, Honour, Sincerity." On very bottom: Saraya al-Wa'ad.

For this piece, I spoke at some length with the deputy of Saraya al-Wa'ad's leader. This deputy identifies himself as المتحدث العبد لله ("The spokesman al-Abd lillah") and he is originally from al-Amin street in Damascus but his family has origins in al-Nabatiya in south Lebanon. His testimony forms the main basis of the information here, including some interesting general insights on the LDF and the NDF.

The group's name can be read in two ways. One could see in it a reference to *al-wa'ad al-sadiq* ("The True Promise"), a phrase that has come to be associated with Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups (cf. the Syrian Hezbollah affiliate Quwat al-Wa'ad al-Sadiq and the Iraqi group Faylaq al-Wa'ad al-Sadiq). However, it can also be read as a reference to the group's leader Wa'ad Jaber Shalish, who is originally from Latakia and was a civilian prior to the war but comes from a family with a history of military officers.

Saraya al-Wa'ad is apparently not a new group. According to Shalish's deputy, the group was "formed from the first of the events and the global conspiracy against Syria": that is, at the beginning of the civil war in Syria, which would put the date of the formation of Saraya al-Wa'ad at some time in 2012 as the unrest had developed into full-blown armed

conflict by then. The original bases for Saraya al-Wa'ad were apparently in the Assad family's ancestral home of al-Qardaha, Salamiya in east Hama, Aleppo, Hatitat al-Turkoman and Hama military airport.

What is more recent is the affiliation with the LDF, which is only 6 months old. The group's operations were briefly suspended after Saraya al-Wa'ad's leader became afflicted with a serious illness, but he recovered.

In addition to the LDF affiliation, Saraya al-Wa'ad has contingents working in other larger military bodies: one contingent in the Russian-backed Fifth Legion (V Corps), and another in the air intelligence militia network. These contingents in the V Corps and air intelligence also answer to Shalish as the overall leader of Saraya al-Wa'ad, though the group inside the LDF seems to work more closely with him and appears to be the main contingent. The fact that divisions of the same group can be in an Iranian-backed structure (the LDF) and a Russian-backed structure (V Corps) at the same time casts into doubt the supposition of a hostile dichotomy between Russian and Iranian-backed forces in Syria. In reality, boundaries between forces can be nebulous, as can also be observed in the Lebanese-led V Corps affiliate Dir' al-Watan, which has clear familial ties with Hezbollah.

According to Shalish's deputy, prior to the LDF affiliation, Saraya al-Wa'ad had worked with a number of bodies, though these were not clearly specified. That said, he did make clear that Saraya al-Wa'ad did not work with the military intelligence (Arabic: *al-Amn al-Askari*). He also put some distance between his group and the NDF, affirming that Saraya al-Wa'ad only worked with the NDF "at the beginning of crisis by virtue of the fact there were no civilian formations besides it in those times."

In discussing the current status and LDF affiliation of Saraya al-Wa'ad, Shalish's deputy was clear about the Iranian role. Indeed, in his opening characterization of Saraya al-Wa'ad, he declared that "Saraya al-Wa'ad is a military formation working with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard [IRGC] in all areas of the Syrian Arab Republic to wage war on the takfiris and terrorists, and to anchor in place the authentic Islamic Shari'a of Muhammad."

Likewise, in clarifying the distinction between the LDF and the NDF, he characterized the latter as something that was Iranian-supported in the beginning but lost favour over time: "The NDF at the beginning of its formation was a project for the Revolutionary Guard, but many mistakes happened and it has become an auxiliary force for the Syrian Arab Army led by a group of assigned officers from the leadership of the army and retired officers. As for the LDF, it is a force working with the friends (Revolutionary Guard-Hezbollah) and is affiliated administratively with the Defence Ministry and is considered to be within the Syrian Arab Army, and not an auxiliary force for it." Further, whereas "the brothers from the Islamic Republic aid us in salaries, war material and mujahideen," the NDF "no longer has any support" from Iran "because of the many mistakes that have happened and continue to happen."



Wa'ad Jaber Shalish (Abu Ali)

While he did not exactly clarify what the NDF 'mistakes' were, it is likely a reference to corruption in the ranks and lack of discipline. It may also refer to difficulties for Iran and Hezbollah to exert ideological influence over larger NDF units. Some NDF personnel did go on to become Syrian 'Islamic Resistance' formations: witness Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya and the original Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas of Abu Ajeeb in Damascus as examples. In addition, some members of Quwat al-Ridha were originally embedded in the NDF. But these cases hardly constitute major portions of the NDF. While one may see the testimony of Shalish's deputy as merely trying to disparage a rival formation, one must ask: if the NDF is still so close to Iran and equivalent to its Basij, then why were NDF personnel not included in the administrative measures applied to the LDF earlier this year?



al-Hajj Abu Hussein, leader of the Saraya al-Wa'ad forces deployed in the surroundings of Palmyra.

What of Saraya al-Wa'ad's military engagements and personnel? According to Shalish's deputy, throughout the whole course of its existence, the group has fought in all of Syria except Raqqa and Hasakah, and has lost around 150 fighters. In the present LDF affiliation, Saraya al-Wa'ad has fought "in the surroundings of Palmyra, Deir az-Zor, near al-Mayadeen and al-Tanf, and the east of Suwayda' province reaching to al-Dumayr." These engagements of course go against my previous line of thought that LDF units would only fight in their local areas as the body's name implies. In this context one should also note that Liwa al-Baqir, arguably the most important Aleppo LDF group, has been fighting in Deir az-Zor, recently losing a high-profile commander there.



al-Hajj Muhammad, leader of Saraya al-Wa'ad's fighting force in al-Hamima, southern Deir az-Zor/far eastern Homs desert.

As for the membership composition of Saraya al-Wa'ad, Shalish's deputy claims that the group has members from all of Syria's provinces and does not discriminate on a sectarian basis. As he put it, "For we want Syria to return to what it was before the crisis, and before the crisis, no one would mention his sect, and all people were brothers and loved ones. but the takfiris are the ones who have worked to plant sectarianism.

Therefore we as the leadership of Saraya al-Wa'ad encourage brotherhood among all members regardless of their sects." At the same time, he made clear that the group also has foreign members in its ranks, with fighters from Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq.

In sum, the case of Saraya al-Wa'ad presents some wider conclusions of relevance. First, the supposition of a hostile relationship between Russia and Iran in building up forces to support the regime is questionable when you have overlap as in the case of Saraya al-Wa'ad, which seems to have its main force inside the LDF but also has a contingent in V Corps. Second, the frequent comparison of the NDF to the Basij should be brought into question. Just because a group received initial financing, training and organization from the Iranians and Hezbollah, it does not follow that relations between that group and the Iranians and Hezbollah will always remain strong. As the testimony of Shalish's deputy indicates, clearly there have been problems. Instead, the LDF seems to be a far more appropriate body to compare to the Basij, since there is an Iranian/Hezbollah ideological influence over many strong LDF units and units that will become affiliated with the LDF (Liwa al-Baqir, Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja, Quwat al-Ridha etc.). Not all LDF units share those ideological affinities, but it seems that the LDF is to be an important avenue for the wider Syrian Hezbollah movement to endure and be integrated into the state security apparatus if/when the war ends, at which point the LDF's affiliation with Iran is officially supposed to end. This does not mean Syria is going to become the next Islamic Republic, but the influence of that Syrian Hezbollah movement will be there.

As I have outlined before, the LDF administrative measures were put in place by the regime partly to ease financial burdens in the war-ravaged economic environment and reduce some problems relating to draft evasion/desertion. But the LDF has also given Iran the chance to develop a client network for the long-term. In short, both parties benefit.

Update (21 May 2019): At present, Saraya al-Wa'ad is only affiliated with the V Corps.