

Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya: Recruiting the Shi'a of Damascus

joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-al-sayyida-ruqayya-recruiting-the-shia-of-damascus

August 12,
2015

Posted by Aymenn Al-Tamimi on Wednesday, August 12th, 2015

By Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi



Emblem of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya: "The Ja'afari Force: The Islamic Resistance in Syria."

The rallying call of Shi'a jihadi groups to defend the Sayyida Zainab shrine in the Damascus area is well known, but it is not the only religious symbol used in the justification of shrine defence in Syria. The Damascus area is also home to the shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya, the daughter of Imam Hussein who was taken captive at the Battle of Karbala and died in captivity in Damascus. She is also known as Sakina/Sukayna, a name apparently also shared by one other daughter of Imam Hussein. There is also a Sakina known as the daughter of Imam Ali (Sakina bint Ali). Though there appears to be confusion in many accounts, the shrine in the south Damascus suburb of Darayya is that of Sakina bint Ali.

Shi'a militia formations sometimes have played up the importance of these shrines as a means to recruit fighters and present new 'martyrdoms'. For example, this summer, an Iraqi Shi'a militia called Kata'ib al-Muqawama al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq (The Islamic Resistance Brigades in Iraq) put up an advert for recruitment on social media to fight in Syria, urging those interested in defending the Sayyida Zainab and Sayyida Ruqayya shrines to get in touch via calling the listed phone numbers or using Facebook and Twitter messaging. Earlier this month, the Assad Allah al-Ghalib Forces in Iraq and al-Sham- previously Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib- announced a new 'martyr' who died defending/'liberating' the Sakina shrine in the Darayya area: Manar Muhammad Abu Sha'ar.



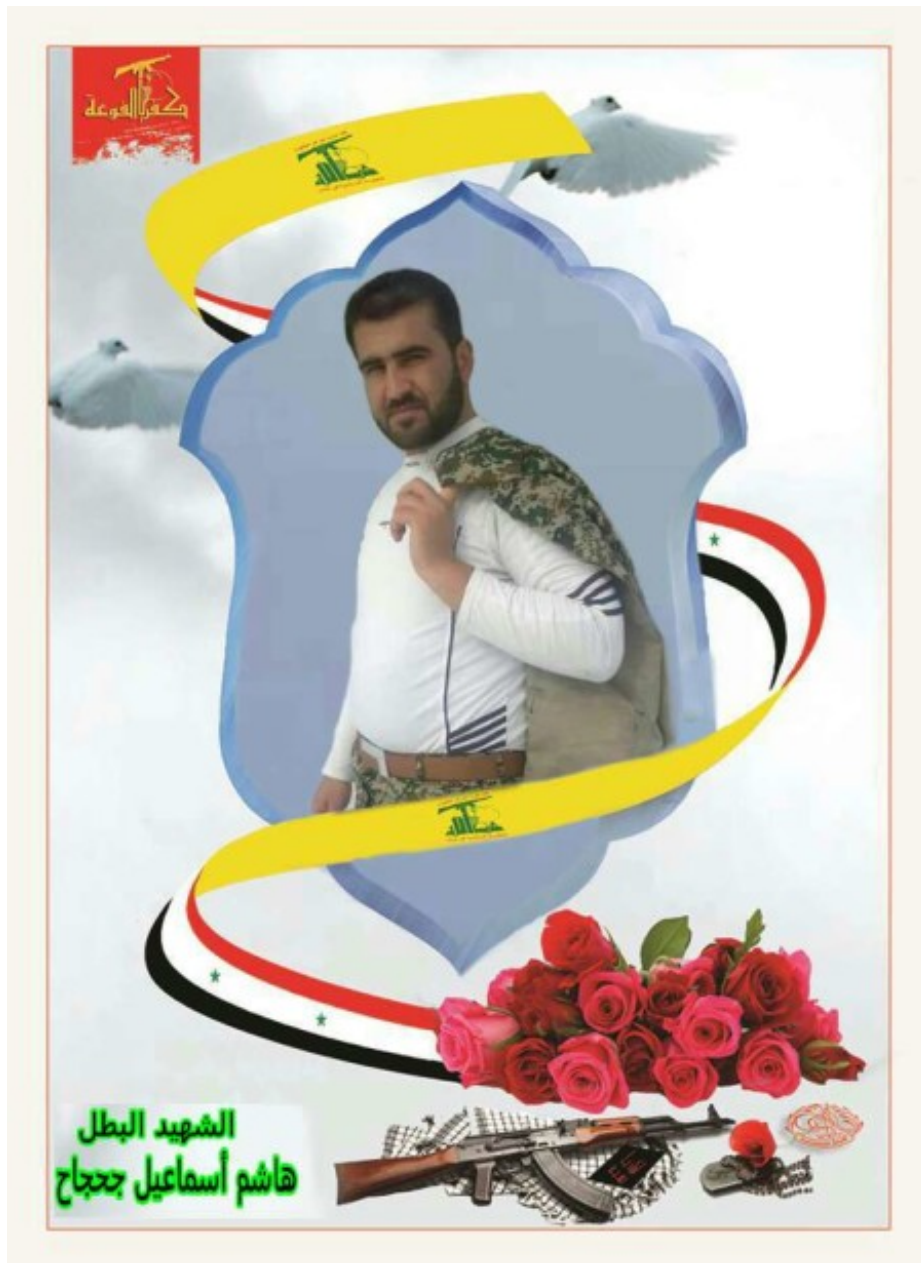
Manar Muhammad Abu Sha'ar

The existence of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya- seemingly linked most closely at present to Iraqi militia and Iranian proxy Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' that first emerged in Syria in 2013- fits into this trend, though undoubtedly Hezbollah has had a role in cultivating the militia too. Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' is one of several Iraqi formations that have an active presence in Syria despite the Iraq crisis, alongside Harakat al-Nujaba' (which, to be sure, exaggerates its capabilities in parts of Syria: most of the fighting to repel the Islamic State from Hasakah city was done by the Kurdish YPG, which as a result has taken over areas previously held by the Assad regime), Kata'ib al-Imam Ali, the Assad Allah al-Ghalib Forces, Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein, Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar and the Rapid Intervention Regiment. The latter four formations have very close links/overlap with each other and Aws al-Khafaji's Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces.

To be sure, Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya's existence can be traced back well before this summer. For example, as part of its coverage of the ongoing Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' presence in Syria that has seen the group participate in the unsuccessful Deraa' and Quneitra offensives in the late winter and spring to push back the rebels, the al-Anwar TV 2 channel featured a video of "Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya/Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada'." Note the distinct "al-Sayyida Ruqayya" armpatch below.



Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya is to be noted for its recruitment of native Syrian Shi'a from the Damascus area. This 'Syrianization' via recruiting of natives has already been seen extensively in Hezbollah formations like Quwat al-Ridha, which has recruited from Syrian Shi'a villages like Umm al-Amad in Homs province. Fighters from the Idlib Shi'a villages of Kafariya and Fou'a- the focus of negotiations for a ceasefire/exchange between Iran and the rebels represented foremost by Ahrar al-Sham- have also died and been advertised under the Hezbollah banner.



Hashim Ismail Jehjah, originally from Kafariya: died fighting in Aleppo. Death announced at the beginning of July 2015.



The Sakif [also spelled Askif] brothers, from Fou'a by origin. One can read a lengthy eulogy to Muhammad (right) [here](#). He supposedly took up arms after his younger brother Ali (left)- born in 1990- died fighting on 7 April 2014.



Muhammad Sakif.

In the case of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya, the recruits mainly seem to come from places in Damascus such as Zain al-Abidin and Imam Ja'afar al-Sadiq areas (Hawsh al-Salihiya and al-Jura respectively) that are known for their Shi'a populations, the latter being right beside Bab Tuma. The Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada link and question of areas of

recruitment are most clearly demonstrated in the case of recent 'martyr' Hassan Ahmad Kan'an, also known as 'Abu Ali Nibras' and originally of Imam Ja'afar al-Sadiq neighbourhood. His death was announced in late July and declared as follows:

"The people of Imam Zain al-Abidin and Imam Ja'afar al-Sadiq neighbourhoods, the al-Amin neighbourhood and the families of the Sayyida Zainab area, and the Islamic Resistance in Syria in all its factions and Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya (The Ja'afari Force) present to the Master of the Age and Era the news of the martyrdom of the mujahid martyr leader Hassan Ahmad Kan'an: (Nibras) Abu Ali."



Hassan Ahmad Kan'an: note the insignia of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya.



Procession for Hassan Ahmad Kan'an.



More from the procession for Hassan Ahmad Kan'an: note the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' flag.

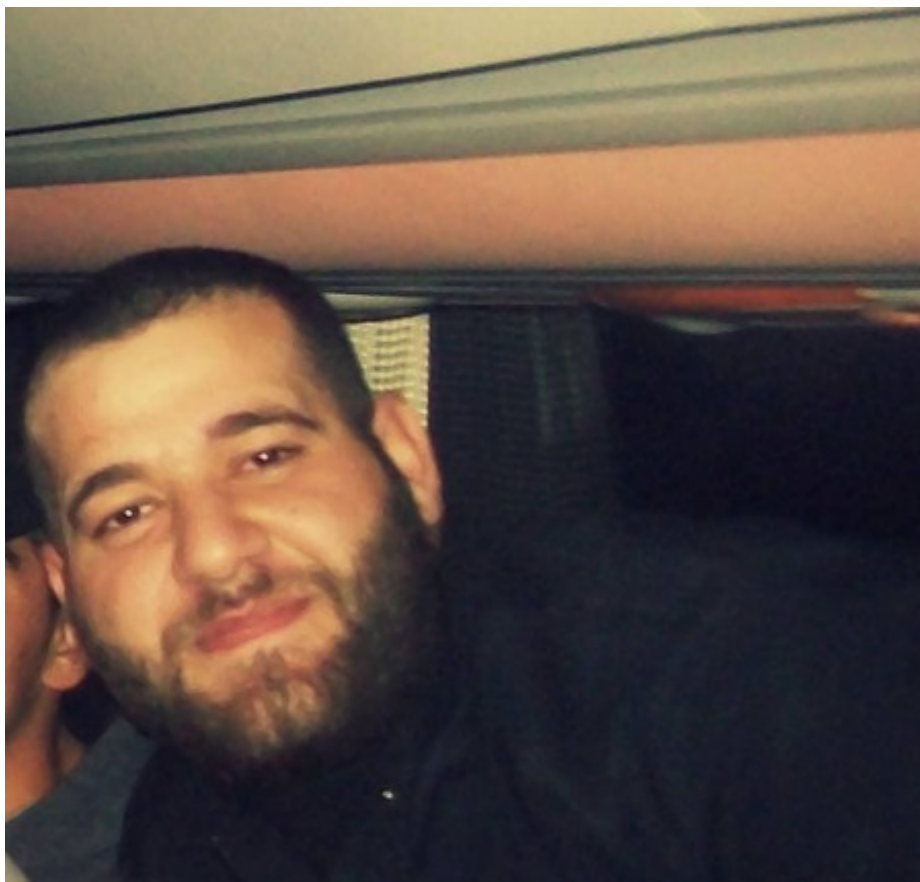
More generally, a graphic has been uploaded featuring the 'martyrs' of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya also bearing the Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' emblem, as per below.



Below are some of these 'martyrs' declared for Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya. Note though that at least some of the earlier 'martyrs' appear to have been presented at the time under different brands. For comparison, some of the Quwat al-Ridha fighters who were killed in Homs were presented as National Defence Force [NDF] 'martyrs' at the time:



Ala' Mohsen Kuwayfati, originally of Imam Ja'afar al-Sadiq neighbourhood. Note the insignia including one of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' in the middle photo. He was killed on 14 June 2014 in al-Mleha. His daughter is pictured as a baby (middle) and visiting his tomb (right).



Ahmad al-Nihas, who was actually killed on 14 August 2012 and was reputedly one of the first to die defending Sayyida Zainab.



Ahmad Halawa al-Buni, featured here in an official NDF video.



Hussein Ala' al-Din and Ahmad Halawa al-Buni: "Guardians of Sayyida Ruqayya: The Ja'afari Force."



Ala' Zahwa: besides his “Guardians of Sayyida Ruqayya” insignia, note the “Liwa Ansar al-Hussein” insignia too, illustrating overlap of brand names.

In sum, the existence of Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya attests to the common phenomenon of overlap among Shi’a militia formations and the ongoing internal Sunni-Shi’a polarization as Syrian Shi’a are recruited to these militias espousing other notions of Shi’a shrine protection concomitant with defending Sayyida Zainab. Nor should Hezbollah alone be seen as cultivating and developing this phenomenon: all the Shi’a militias of foreign origin with deployments in Syria are likely playing a role.