

Liwa al-Baqir (al-Baqir Brigade)



Logo: Image of Bashar al-Assad

Flag Text: Above image: “Liwa al-Baqir the first auxiliary force of the Syrian Arab Army”; below image: “The lions of al-Baqir, men of al-Assad”

FOUNDING

- Group claims 2011, likely 2012 or later

SIZE

- Estimated at 3,000

KEY LEADERS

- Khalid al-Hassan (aka Khalid al-Mara'i, Khalid Baqir, al-Hajj Khalid) is the top commander
- Hamza al-Hassan (aka Abu al-Abbas, al-Hajj Hamza) is a commander of the militia's special unit
- National Assembly representative Omar Hussein al-Hassan

POLITICAL WING

- None

WEAPONS

- Has displayed Soviet-era weapons that were available in Syria prior to the war

ATROCITIES

- Possible role in civilian massacres

AREAS OF OPERATION

- Based in Aleppo province, has operated in in Hama and Raqqa provinces, participated in the 2017 offensive toward the U.S. base at Tanf

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER MILITIAS

- Frequently employs Hezbollah imagery
- Claims to coordinate military operations with Hezbollah
- Fought alongside Sunni Palestinian and pro-government group Liwa al-Quds, or Jerusalem Brigade, in Aleppo

CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

- None

SOCIAL MEDIA

- Facebook



CONNECTIONS TO THE IRGC

Part of the pro-Assad auxiliaries network known as the Local Defense Forces, which is backed by and reportedly answers to the IRGC

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Liwa al-Baqir is an Aleppo-based militia that is part of the Local Defense Forces (LDF) network, which Iran helped build. Liwa al-Baqir's members belong primarily to the al-Baqqara tribe, which is concentrated in Aleppo and in eastern Syria.

The tribe claims descent from the fifth Shiite imam, Mohammed al-Baqir, the brigade's namesake.¹ The al-Baqqara are historically Sunni, yet a significant number appear to have converted to Shiism, part of a pre-war Iranian proselytization effort.² This may explain why members of the tribe have joined an Iranian-backed force that displays portraits of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah.³ Al-Baqir also displays portraits of Bashar al-Assad and incorporates the Syrian flag into their imagery. This emphasis is consistent with the status of the LDF as technically part of the Syrian Arab Army.⁴

The brigade's origins are not entirely clear, yet it seems to have existed in some form since 2012. Public statements credit the group's current commander, Khalid al-Hassan, and his brother Hamza with establishing the group.

As of late 2016, the group claimed to have 251 “martyrs,” i.e. combat fatalities.⁵ One Western analyst describes Liwa al-Baqir as “the anchor of Iran's militia network in Aleppo,” consisting of roughly 3,000 fighters in early 2017.⁶

Components of al-Baqir currently operate in eastern Syria, where they became the target of U.S. air strikes launched in retaliation for an attack on forces belonging to the anti-Islamic State coalition. The strikes killed sons of a prominent al-Baqqara tribal leader.⁷

1. Nicholas A. Heras, Bassam Barabandi, and Nidal Betare, “Deir Azzour: Tribal Mapping Project,” *Center for a New American Security*, September 2017. (<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/deir-azzour-tribal-mapping-project>)

2. Carole A. O’Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, “Shiite Proselytizing in Northeastern Syria Will Destabilize a Post-Assad Syria,” *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, September 15, 2011. (<https://jamestown.org/program/shiite-proselytizing-in-northeastern-syria-will-destabilize-a-post-assad-syria/>)

3. Al-Baqir's Facebook page includes many such images. For a recent portrait of Khamenei, see: Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, *Facebook*, January 28, 2018. (<https://www.facebook.com/baqueru/photos/a.334127693653159.1073741827.334099843655944/517885905277336>)

4. The profile and cover photos on al-Baqir's Facebook page currently feature portraits of Assad. Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, *Facebook*, accessed February 22, 2018. (<https://www.facebook.com/baqueru/>)

5. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “The Local Defense Forces: Regime Auxiliary Forces in Aleppo,” *Syria Comment*, May 23, 2016. (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/18859/the-local-defence-forces-regime-auxiliary-forces>)

6. @tobiaschneider, “(5) Liwa Imam al-Baqir is a loyalist group of about 3,000 Baggara tribesmen - and the anchor of Iran's militia network in Aleppo,” *Twitter*, January 5, 2017. (<https://twitter.com/tobiaschneider/status/817148099353255936>)

7. عنصر جداشده پیشین حکومت در منطقه بیابانی سوریه با سپاه پاسداران انقلاب اسلامی ایران هم پیمان شده است.” *Diyaruna* (Egypt), July 31, 2017. (http://diyaruna.com/fa/articles/cnmi_di/features/2017/07/31/feature-01); Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir, *Facebook*, February 9, 2018. (<https://www.facebook.com/baqueru/photos/a.335191200213475.1073741829.334099843655944/523783604687566/?type=3>)