



المركز السوري للإعلام وحرية التعبير  
Navenda Sûriyayî ya Ragihandîné û Azadiya Derbirîné  
Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression

# Shadow Armies

## (2)



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(2)

The **Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)** is an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit civil society organization registered in France in 2004, focusing on human rights and media development. It is governed by a non-remunerated board and has held a UN ECOSOC special consultative status since 2011.

SCM seeks to build a society that guarantees freedom of expression and belief, human rights, and justice. Since its inception in 2004, SCM has been dedicated to safeguarding human rights defenders, advocating for human rights and fundamental freedoms, empowering civil society and victims' associations, and fostering the growth of an independent and professional media sector.

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# Introduction

The second Shadow Armies report, published in 2024, provides an in-depth analysis of foreign fighter groups in Syria that meet the definition of mercenary forces. It further explores the involvement of private security firms and private military companies in various armed conflicts, with a focus on their role in Syria. The presence of diverse foreign forces, militias, and security entities not only prolongs the conflict but also hinders peaceful resolutions. The consolidation of militia and de facto authority power, coupled with their usurpation of state functions and resource control within war economies, has significantly weakened the already fragile state infrastructure. This shift in power dynamics, alongside the erosion of longstanding social structures due to forced displacements primarily targeting opposition areas, has altered societal power centers. Displaced populations flee to neighboring nations or further afield, leaving behind areas now dominated by militias and mercenary groups. These areas, critical to economic sectors, are now under the guard of military and security companies, particularly those protecting Russian interests and military bases in Syria.

Since the initial Shadow Armies report in 2022, the likelihood of resolving the conflict—whether through military or political means—has diminished. Concurrently, Syria faces escalating poverty and deteriorating economic conditions, affecting a vast portion of the population. This dire situation has led to an increase in mercenary recruitment. Media reports indicate that Syrians are now fighting as mercenaries under the banners of Russia and Turkey in various conflicts, including the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute in Nagorno-Karabakh, Libya,<sup>1</sup> northern Mali in Africa<sup>2,3,4</sup> Venezuela in South America,<sup>5</sup> and in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup> Iran has also entered the drive to recruit Syrian fighters,<sup>10</sup>

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1 “Shadow Armies - A report on the phenomenon of mercenary recruitment in Syria”, the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, <https://scm.bz/en/shadow-armies-a-report-on-the-phenomenon-of-mercenary-recruitment-in-syria/>

2 “Turkey transfers Syrian mercenaries from Libya to Mali”, Sky News, 26 Mar 2021 (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/4mru35d9>

3 “Rights group says Mali army, foreign fighters executed civilians”, Aljazeera.net, 24 Jul 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/24/rights-group-says-mali-army-foreign-fighters-executed-civilians>

4 “Libyan & Syrian Mercenaries Accused of Aiding Malian Army”, Libya Review, 18 Nov 2023, <https://libyareview.com/39343/libyan-syrian-mercenaries-accused-of-aiding-malian-army/>

5 Andrew Roth, “Russian mercenaries reportedly in Venezuela to protect Maduro”, The Guardian, 25 Jan 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/25/venezuela-maduro-russia-private-security-contractors>

6 Sultan al-Kanj, “Chechen fighters leave Syria to battle Russians in Ukraine”, Al-Monitor, 22 Oct 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/chechen-fighters-leave-syria-battle-russians-ukraine#ixzz8Wqllaj7>; Ben Hubbard, Hwaida Saad, Asmaa al-Omar, “Syrian Mercenaries Deploy to Russia en Route to Ukrainian Battlefields”, The New York Times, 31 Mar 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/middleeast/syrian-mercenaries-ukraine-russia.html>; James Snell, “Syrian Fighters May End Up on Both Sides of the Ukraine War”, Foreign Policy, 15 Mar 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/15/syrian-fighters-ukraine-russia-war/>

7 Hiba Mohammad, “The Syrian regime forces university professors, students, and employees to go out in solidarity marches with the Russian invasion of Ukraine”, Alquds Alarabi, 10 Mar 2022, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/46vxveve>

8 Pierre Bousset, “Syrian Mercenaries in Ukraine: Delusion or Reality?”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 Jun 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/87382>

9 “Over 40,000 Syrians reportedly register to fight for Russia in Ukraine”, The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 15 Mar 2022, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/243241/>

10 Mohamad Misto, Ethem Emre Özcan, “Iran boosting Yemeni Houthis with Syrian fighters: Local sources”, Anadolu Agency, 07 May 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-boosting-yemeni-houthis-with-syrian-fighters-local-sources/2233092#>



and through its recruitment center<sup>11</sup> offers them to combat alongside the Houthis in Yemen under three-year contracts, with civilians receiving up to \$1,000 monthly and military personnel \$1,200.<sup>12</sup>

This report, across its two editions, aligns within the established vision of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM) to address the human rights situation in Syria. This mission is part of a broader, sustained initiative to advance and embed human rights principles through multifaceted strategies. These include documenting, publishing, and mapping all human rights and humanitarian law violations within the Syrian conflict's scope. Additionally, the center focuses on combating impunity by holding perpetrators accountable and advocating for the use of judicial mechanisms to bolster accountability for these violations, extending across various legal jurisdictions, including international and universal jurisdictions.

On August 22, 2023 the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression filed a complaint with the National Criminal Investigation Service (NCIS) in Norway. The complaint targeted Hussein al-Hajimi, a former Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militia member and current Norway resident, accused of committing murder and serious violations while serving with the PMF in Syria, calling on the NCIS to open a thorough investigation into al-Hajimi's self-disclosed admissions which he shared on the social networking platform TikTok.<sup>13</sup> The NCIS confirmed its receipt of the SCM's complaint on August 21, 2023.

**Furthermore, the SCM, in cooperation with international partners, pursued legal action in the Russian judiciary against members of the Wagner Company, accusing them of crimes against Syrian citizens. Following the exhaustion of all legal venues in Russia, the SCM proceeded to file a lawsuit with the European Court of Human Rights.**

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11 Nabil Abdullah al-Tamimi, "IRGC smuggles foreign fighters into Yemen", Diyaruna.com, 28 Jul 2021, [https://diyaruna.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi.di/features/2021/07/28/feature-01](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi.di/features/2021/07/28/feature-01)

12 Ibrahim al-Jabin, "Iran enhances trust with the Arabs by recruiting Syrian mercenaries in Yemen", Alarab News, 1 Jun 2022, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/z7tk4u3x>

13 Videos of the suspect appeared on social media in which he confessed to committing murders and serious violations while fighting in Syria as part of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a militia that participated in the hostilities alongside the Syrian regime. In the videos, the suspect admits to killing numerous Syrian children, stating he cannot count their number, including an infant no older than a month, whom he killed while the child was in the arms of his mother, who was crying for help. He also made death threats against Syrians residing in Norway, according to his statements. <https://scm.bz/the-syrian-center-for-media-and-freedom-of-expression-files-a-complaint-against-a-former-member-of-the-popular-mobilization-forces-militia/>

# I. Mercenary Groups in Syria

## 1. Definition of Mercenaries

The concept of mercenaries, as recognized in international law, finds its foundational definition in the Hague Declaration of 1907.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent to this, the definition and legal framework regarding mercenaries have been refined and expanded through various judicial proceedings and international instruments. Notably, the Lunda Court in 1976,<sup>15</sup> and the International Commission of Inquiry on Angola in 1985 have contributed to this evolving definition.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, regional initiatives like the Organization of African Unity's Convention, which aims to ban mercenaries, reflect the international community's stance against mercenary activities. A significant milestone in the regulation of mercenary activities came with the adoption of the United Nations Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries in 1989. This convention, ratified by 37 countries—including four Arab nations: Qatar, Libya, Saudi Arabia,<sup>17</sup> and Syria<sup>18</sup> (which acceded on October 23, 2008)—represents a global consensus on the need to curb mercenary activities. In addition to this convention, both the Economic and Social Council<sup>19</sup> and the United Nations General Assembly,<sup>20</sup> along with the UN Security Council,<sup>21</sup> have issued resolutions aimed at prohibiting mercenary operations.

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14 Art. 4. Corps of combatants cannot be formed nor recruiting agencies opened on the territory of a neutral Power to assist the belligerents.

Art. 5. A neutral Power must not allow any of the acts referred to in Articles 2 to 4 to occur on its territory. It is not called upon to punish acts in violation of its neutrality unless the said acts have been committed on its own territory.

15 The ruling issued on June 28, 1976 regarding the trial of 13 mercenaries in Angola included a definition of mercenary as "all those who, for personal profit, enlist in a group or in forces intending, by military means, to counter the achievement of a foreign people's self-determination or, by the same means, to impose neo-colonial designs on them." George H. Lockwood, Report on the Trial of Mercenaries: Luanda, Angola - June, 1976,1977, CanLIIDocs 48, Manitoba Law Journal, <https://tinyurl.com/34h647y2>.

16 According to the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, a mercenary is any person who "is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict; b) does in fact take a direct part in the hostilities; c) is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and in fact is promised by or on behalf of a party to the conflict material compensation." <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%201490/volume-1490-i-25573-english.pdf>

17 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, adopted in New York, 4 December 1989, entered into force 20 Oct 2001, [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg\\_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=en)

18 Ibid.

19 Economic and Social Council Resolution No. 1986/43 in which the Council condemned the increasing recruitment, financing, mobilization, transfer and use of mercenaries.

20 Resolution No. 41/102 of 1986 regarding mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding peoples' exercise of their right to self-determination; Resolution Nos. 49/150 of 1994, 50/138 of 1995, 51/ and 15/83 of 1996, and 52/112 of 1997 regarding the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights.

21 Resolution No. 507/1982 condemns any state that permits the recruitment of mercenaries and provides facilities for them with the aim of overthrowing the governments of member states of the United Nations.

Resolution No. 1467/2003 adopts the statement on light weapons, small arms, mercenary activities and threats to peace and security in West Africa.



The First Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, in its Article 47,<sup>22</sup> defines a mercenary is anyone who:

- A. Is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;
- B. Does, in fact, take a direct part in the hostilities;
- C. Is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party;
- D. Is neither a national of a Party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a Party to the conflict;
- E. Is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict; and
- F. Has not been sent by a State which is not a Party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces.

Despite seemingly clear criteria set forth by the Protocol, legal analyses and jurisprudence have highlighted limitations within this definition, particularly its focus on financial gain as the primary motive for individuals engaging in mercenary activities. The International Commission of Inquiry in Angola,<sup>23</sup> for instance, pointed out that the reasons individuals may choose to fight can encompass a wide range of motivations beyond mere financial compensation. These motivations include the thrill of adventure, a penchant for sabotage, unemployment, a desire for psychological escapism, or as a response to social failure.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. Pro-Iranian Mercenary Groups

Iran has emerged as a prominent actor in the use of mercenary forces in Syria, working alongside its Iranian Revolutionary Guard to support government forces. Tehran has orchestrated the involvement of both local and foreign militias, some of which satisfy the criteria to be classified as mercenaries under international law. Notably, fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan form the bulk of the non-Arab mercenaries. These individuals are particularly vulnerable to recruitment due to the refugee status of some Afghans in Iran, making them an easier and less costly option for mobilization. They are often recruited to fight within various factions, including Iraqi or mixed groups, as well as within specific units like the Afghan Fatimayoun Legion and the Pakistani Zainabiyoun Brigade.

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22 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Additional Appendix (Protocol) I to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/additional-protocols-geneva-conventions-1949-factsheet>

23 United Nations Security Council, Commissions and Investigative Bodies, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/repertoire/commissions-and-investigative-bodies>

24 Hamad al-Asili Muhammad, The Legal Center for Prisoners of War in International Humanitarian Law, 1st edition, al-Maaref Publishing, Alexandria, 2005, p 249.

## 2.1. A general framework for Iranian mercenaries in Syria

Iran has expanded its influence across the Middle East by establishing and supporting transnational proxy militias under various pretexts, such as the “resistance axis” or protecting Shia sanctities. These paramilitary forces extend Iran’s geopolitical reach, and play a pivotal role in conflicts beyond their members’ countries of origin, effectively acting as instruments of Iran’s foreign policy in regional wars by proxy. Statements from high-ranking Iranian officials echo the strategic success Iran perceives in this approach. Former Iranian Minister of Intelligence Haider Moslehi<sup>25</sup> has remarked that, “In fact, Iran now controls four Arab capitals.” This was reiterated by General Hossein Salami,<sup>26</sup> Deputy Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who stated that, “Officials in Iran did not expect this rapid spread of the (Islamic Revolution) beyond the borders of Iraq to Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Bahrain, Yemen, and Afghanistan.”<sup>27</sup> As for Ali Younesi, an advisor to the former Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, he stated that, “Iran has returned to the status of an empire as it was throughout its history (...) with Iraq serving as its capital.” While Deputy Commander of the Quds Force, Major General Ismail Qaani<sup>28</sup> asserted that, “Iran continues to conquer the countries of the region. (...) The Islamic Republic has begun its control over Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, (...) and it is advancing today in its influence in the rest of the countries of the region.”

The spread of Iranian-affiliated militias in Syria dates back to May 2011, that is, about a month and a half after the outbreak of protests against the Syrian government. Since then, Tehran has relied on a blend of mercenary groups, militias,<sup>29</sup> and to a lesser extent, local military and security forces under the IRGC’s direct command to support the Syrian government against opposition forces. A 2014 study by the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimated that over 35,000 fighters<sup>30</sup> backed by Iran and organized into 12 military formations and divisions, were active in Syria, in addition to 5,000 IRGC members.<sup>31</sup> Until 2018, when the numbers of fighters began to decline, intensity of military operations fluctuated,<sup>32</sup> the number of pro-Iranian fighters remained somewhat stable, and Iran was able to compensate for its manpower losses through recruitment driven by sectarian motives and financial incentives, using fighters directly contracted by the IRGC.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, the United Nations Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, estimated that Iran spent about \$6 billion annually in financial and military aid to support the Syrian government.<sup>34</sup>

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25 “Former Iranian Minister: We Control 4 Arab Capitals”, Al Arabiya, 20 May 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/rt3z3kjh>

26 “Senior Iranian Official: We Did Not Expect This Rapid Expansion of our Influence”, Aljazeera.net, 15 Mar 2015, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/bde6es4p>

27 “Advisor to Rouhani: Iran is an Empire Whose Capital is Iraq. We Protect the Region from Wahhabis, neo-Ottomans, and Atheism”, CNN Arabic, 9 Mar 2015, (Arabic) <https://arabic.cnn.com/world/2015/03/09/iran-iraq-younesi>

28 “Deputy Commander of the Iranian Quds Force Admits: The Houthis Were Raised by Us!” Alnowaten.net, 25 May 2015, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/4xffkzyk>

29 Navvar Saban, “Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria”, Atlantic Council, 5 Sep 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>

30 “Shiite militias in Syria”, Syrian Network for Human Rights, 5 Jul 2014, (Arabic) <https://snhr.org/arabic/2014/07/05/1578/>

31 “Shiite militias fighting in Syria”, Aljazeera.net, 6 Dec 2015, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/2s4h25jy>

32 Philip Smyth, “Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria’s Shia Militias,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2018, link: <https://bit.ly/3f3HWAS>

33 Manar Haddad, “Funding Iranian militias in Syria: do oil sanctions give an advantage to Russian militias?”, Iranwire, 14 Aug, 2020, (Arabic) <https://iranwire.com/ar/reports/86708/>

34 Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Iran recruits Pakistani Shi’ites for combat in Syria”, Reuters, 10 Sep 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pakistaniran/iran-recruits-pakistani-shiites-for-combat-in-syria-idUSKBN0TT22S20151210/>

Iran's intervention in Syria, officially framed as a mission to protect Shia holy sites,<sup>35,36</sup> especially notably the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab near Damascus, saw the deployment of IRGC forces alongside various mercenary groups. However, the operational scope of pro-Iranian forces extended far beyond the protection of religious sites, engaging in widespread hostilities across Syria including in areas devoid of Shia sanctuaries. The involvement of these militias in acts of aggression and, according to numerous reports, war crimes against civilians, has been widely documented.<sup>37</sup> These pro-Iranian militias have also been pivotal in implementing demographic changes within Syria, particularly around Damascus and other strategic locations. For instance, after imposing sieges on towns near the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, forces including the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, the General Command, Hezbollah, Badr Brigade, and Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib (LAAG) forcibly displaced civilian populations from towns such as Hujaira, al-Dhiyabiya, Babila, and al-Husseiniyah. These areas were subsequently transformed into strongholds for militia and mercenary forces and their families.<sup>38,39</sup> -

The operational command for these activities, including the management of military operations and the deployment of mercenary groups, is reported to be centralized at the General Command building within Damascus International Airport.<sup>40,41</sup> From this command center, pro-Iranian forces are strategically deployed across a vast network extending to the west towards Daraya, and to south reaching the west of al-Kiswah. These forces are also concentrated along the road linking Damascus to the Iraqi border to the east, passing through the al-Dumayr, al-Sin (Saqqal) Airbase, and the Sabaa Biyar area, all the way to the al-Bukamal border crossing with Iraq. Additionally, a number of these militias are deployed across air bases such as al-Shayrat, T-4, and the Aleppo International Airport, and in scientific research centers, especially in the Damascus countryside such as Jemraya, Sabboura, and Barzeh al-Balad areas, and in the Hama countryside in the Masyaf area. They are also deployed near the city of Aleppo around the Industrial Establishment of Defence in al-Safira, and in the southern regional command near Dumayr, the northern regional command near the city of Homs, and the coastal operations command near the city of Baniyas. However, the area that sees the largest concentration of militia forces, it is the triangle between rural Damascus, rural Daraa and Quneitra, with an area of 7 square kilometers.<sup>42</sup> These militias are regularly trained in camps inside Iran and in Syria.

In February 2017, the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MKO) organization,<sup>43</sup> which the Iranian authorities classify as a terrorist organization, revealed 12 mercenary training centers inside Iran, and that "the Revolutionary Guard Corps established a large directorate in the Quds Force, which

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35 Mohammad al-Salmi, "Iran and the Militarization of Shiism at Home and Abroad", Beni Suef University Publication, Jul 2021, (Arabic) [https://jocu.journals.ekb.eg/article\\_181405.html](https://jocu.journals.ekb.eg/article_181405.html)

36 Özdemir Behram Ömer, "Iranian-backed militias in Syria", Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 20 Sep 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/6ncwsm94>

37 "Hezbollah and Iran-handled Shi'ite militias are integrated into the Syrian army in its campaign to take control of south Syria", The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 9 Jun 2018, [https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2018/07/E\\_174\\_18.pdf](https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2018/07/E_174_18.pdf)

38 Martin Chulov, "Iran repopulates Syria with Shia Muslims to help tighten regime's control", The Guardian, 14 Jan 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/13/irans-syria-project-pushing-population-shifts-to-increase-influence>

39 "Demographic Engineering in the Course of Syria War: A consequence or cause", Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression, 2021, <https://scm.bz/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Demographic-engineering-in-Syria-EN.pdf>

40 Scott Lucas, "The Glass House: Iran's Operations Center", Syria Daily, 3 Jun 2020, <https://eaworldview.com/2020/06/syria-glass-house-iran-operations-center/>

41 Khaled al-Mutlaq, "Iranian-run militias in Syria", Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 29 Dec 2022, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/5cjt8bsn>

42 "Shiite militias fighting in Syria," Syrian Network for Human Rights, op. cit.

43 [Arabic.mojahedin.org/](http://Arabic.mojahedin.org/)

is the arm operating outside the Iranian borders, to implement part of the regime's strategy to expand its interventions outside Iran, especially in regional countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, and Afghanistan, in order to train its foreign mercenaries." According to what was reported from the Iranian opposition group, these camps are:<sup>44 45 46</sup>

1. Imam Ali camp for Theoretical Training
2. Lushan Special Training Barracks
3. Badinde Buramin Urban Training Center
4. Special Jamran barracks that train Afghan personnel and sends them to Syria
5. Amal Center (Malik Ashtar Camp) for survival training
6. Air Lift center training commando forces
7. Semnan Center for practical missile launch training
8. Abadan Marine Diving Training Center
9. Mashhad training center for Afghan personnel
10. Qeshm Island Center for Urban Warfare Training
11. Bazouki Training Center for Afghan personnel
12. Mirsad Center, Shiraz, for training foreign fighters

Mercenary groups are also undergoing training in camps inside Syria:<sup>47</sup>

- \* Yafour camp in the Damascus countryside, located in a military site belonging to the Fourth Division.
- \* Sayyida Zeinab camp in Damascus.
- \* Maysaloun School Camp, affiliated with Military Intelligence.
- \* Najha State Security Camp,
- \* Shahid al-Mihrab Camp in Aleppo.
- \* Al-Zahraa camp in Aleppo.

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44 Eric Shawn, "Opposition group claims Iran sponsoring new terror training camps", Fox News, 15 Feb 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/opposition-group-claims-iran-sponsoring-new-terror-training-camps>

45 Saleh Hamid, "Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps militia training centers", Alarabiya.net, 20 May 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/3s63d99e>

46 "Iranian Revolutionary Guard camps training terrorists worldwide", Yemen Press, 18 Jan 2021, (Arabic) <http://cutt.us/6t0vQ>

47 Hatem al-Falahi, "Iraqi Militias in Syria: Role and Future", Aljazeera.net, 1 Apr 2019, (Arabic) <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2019/04/190401092356143.html>

Iran's strategy of expanding its presence in Syria involves the discreet transport of mercenaries into the country using airports and land border crossings from Lebanon and Iraq. These movements are often disguised under the pretenses of pilgrimage to Shia holy sites or through the use of counterfeit work contracts and, in some cases, Syrian passports issued by the Immigration and Passports Department in Damascus.<sup>48</sup>

In the summer of 2018, a significant turning point occurred with the signing of a settlement agreement, under which the Syrian army and its allies, including Iranian-backed forces, regained control over southern Syria.<sup>49</sup> This agreement, facilitated by a prior accord signed in November 2017 by Jordan, Russia, and the United States, explicitly prohibited the entry of foreign forces into most areas of the Daraa and Quneitra governorates. In response to these diplomatic developments, Iranian-backed militias executed a strategic redeployment,<sup>50</sup> relocating many of their forces to Iranian bases in central and eastern Syria and circumventing the restrictions imposed by the agreement.

Parallel to these military and strategic maneuvers, Iran has ramped up its recruitment of Syrians, aiming to sustain its influence within the region. This has raised concerns about Iran's long-term intentions, suggesting a deliberate effort to cement its foothold through the creation of a network of military, financial, and social elites loyal to Tehran.<sup>51</sup> According to research by the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies<sup>52</sup> Iran encouraged the families of IRGC fighters to settle in Damascus and other Syrian governorates, facilitated by recent changes to Syrian real estate and foreign ownership laws.<sup>53</sup> This coincides with Tehran's social and cultural penetration into the Syrian fabric by promoting the Iranian-style Shia doctrine of Wilayat Al Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) and investing in the education sector, through which Iran aims to embed its ideological and cultural footprint in Syria. This is evident in the establishment of six Iranian universities within Syria and the proliferation of Farsi language centers.<sup>54</sup>

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48 "The Hidden Shiite Expansion and Occupation in Syria", Wassat Syria, 4 Apr 2022, (Arabic) <https://wassatsy.org/1336/>

49 "Russia Proves that the De-Escalation Zones were a Means to a Military End", Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 4 Jul 2018, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/De-escalation-Zones-Russian-Strategy-Military-Victory-Syria.aspx>

50 "Mapping Foreign Military Forces in Southern Syria", Jusoor for Studies, 24 Nov 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/2w6vknm>

51 "Expanding the circle of penetration: Iranian penetration tools and calculations in the regions of southern Syria", Emirates Policy Center (EPC), 20 Sep 2022, (Arabic) <https://epc.ae/ar/details/brief/adawat-altaghalghul-alirani-wahisabatuh-fi-manatiq-aljanub-alsuwri>; "Iran in Syria: From expansion to entrenchment" Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 30 Nov 2021, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/2vebf9br>;

"The Impact of Iranian Regional Policy on Arab National Security", Democratic Arab Center, 12 Jul 2016, (Arabic) <https://democraticac.de/?p=33848>

52 "Iran in Syria: From expansion to entrenchment" Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 30 Nov 2021, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/2vebf9br>

53 Law No. 11 was amended in 2021 to address the ownership of real estate in Syria by non-Syrians. This change coincided with Law No. 25 of 2013, which pertains to the Code of Civil Procedure, and another law ratified by the Parliament on November 30, 2023. The latter law concerns the management and investment of movable and immovable assets that have been confiscated based on a final judicial ruling. The amendments to Law No. 25 of 2013 now allow for defendants in a lawsuit to be notified through an announcement in a daily newspaper and on the court's bulletin board. This method aims to simplify the process of transferring ownership of land and real estate from displaced individuals and those opposed to the Syrian government, eliminating the requirement for in-person notification.

54 "A Sixth Iranian University in Syria: Deepening the Penetration Into Syria Minds", An-Nahar, 13 May 2022, (Arabic) <https://www.annaharar.com/arabic/news/arab-world/syria/12052022030234729>

## Child Recruitment

Iran's recruitment practices, particularly in the context of enlisting mercenaries for conflict zones like Syria, include the recruitment of minors, a policy that appears to have both official and semi-official sanction within the country. The Supreme Leader<sup>55</sup> acknowledged this, declaring in front of a crowd of teachers, "More than 36,000 of our students were martyred during the sacred defense of the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988, and without the ardent spirit of the teachers, it would not have been possible for the students to go to the front lines."

Human Rights Watch, in 2017, leveled serious accusations against the Revolutionary Guard for recruiting Afghan children, some as young as 14, into the Fatemiyoun Brigade—a unit composed primarily of Afghan refugees fighting in Syria.<sup>56 57</sup> The recruitment of these young fighters is reportedly incentivized with financial allowances and the promise of residency permits for them and their families, all under the guise of protecting Shiite shrines in Syria. The Revolutionary Guard's recruitment efforts extend to Iranian children through the Basij Students Authority,<sup>58</sup> an entity that ostensibly operates within the educational system but, in practice, serves as a recruitment hub for the Guard. This has been highlighted by sanctions imposed by the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control in 2018, which targeted Iranian institutions involved in these recruitment activities.

In Syria, Iran's influence is similarly extended to the recruitment and military training of Syrian children.<sup>59</sup> Reports from local agencies indicate that Iran has established six centers that train children under 16, providing courses on weapon handling and military tactics, as well as ideological indoctrination:<sup>60</sup>

- \* Al-Shaibani camp northwest of Damascus, guarded by the Lebanese Hezbollah militia.<sup>61</sup>
- \* The Liwaa al-Quds militia camp trains Palestinian and Syrian children in the Nayrab area, east of Idlib Governorate.
- \* A camp in Qusayr, south of Homs Governorate, also under the supervision of Hezbollah.
- \* A camp in al-Mayadeen, overseen by IRGC officers and Iraqi militias.
- \* A camp in Deir ez-Zor with 3 branches; one located in the Joura neighborhood, the second in the Ain Ali area, and the third in al-Qusour neighborhood.
- \* A camp in Al Bukamal.

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55 Ali Ranjipour, "Iran Grooms Child Soldiers Across the Country", 10 Feb 2020, IranWire, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/66696/>

56 "Iran: Afghan Children Recruited to Fight in Syria", Human Rights Watch, 1 Oct 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/01/iran-afghan-children-recruited-fight-syria>

57 Ibid.

58 "Child Recruitment in Iran: What Do We Know About the Basij Disciples Foundation?", Alhurra, 12 Feb 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/43f8efn7>

59 "Iran's Scouts: Camps to Recruit Syrian Children", ANA Press, 28 Feb 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/593ajs4t>

60 "A Network Reveals Centers for Child Recruitment by Iran in Syria", Iran Insider, (Arabic), <https://tinyurl.com/33zkjxhp>

61 "Lebanese Hezbollah leads a major campaign to recruit children from Deir ez-Zor, able to recruit more than 200 children, exploiting living conditions", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 14 Dec 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/2myya92t>



In the east Syria region, particularly in the eastern rural areas of Raqqa, the dire economic conditions facing that families has been exploited by Iranian militias to recruit children into their ranks.<sup>62</sup> Since 2011, the Iranian Embassy's Cultural Chancellery has opened several branches of the Scouts of Syria, branded as an educational entity designed to serve to students. Among these, the Wilaya Scouts located in the Sayyida Zeinab area of Damascus and the scouts in Deir ez-Zor have been specifically noted by the Harmoon Center for Studies in their report, "Institutions of Iranian Influence in Syria and Methods of Shia Conversion."<sup>63</sup> These organizations are purported to offer a range of activities, including exhibitions and recreational trips aimed at children from the southern regions of Damascus. The nature of the activities undertaken by these scouts, particularly the Imam Mahdi Scouts, deviates markedly from conventional youth associations. Organized brainwashing sessions are held, wherein children are congregated in halls equipped with projectors to view stories and films that vilify the Nawasib (a derogatory term used against Sunnis) and glorify the act of avenging Imam Husayn. These sessions are occasionally augmented by theatrical performances and clerical attendance. Furthermore, the organization's social media presence frequently features images of children donned in military uniforms, brandishing the Iranian flag, and engaging in Husseiniah rallies and processions.

Perhaps most concerning is the initiation of a rigorous physical training regimen similar to military preparation at specialized centers set up by the organization. These centers are outfitted with equipment for a variety of intense exercises including jumping and crawling drills, which seem geared towards preparing these children for future roles as soldiers "in the service of Imam Mahdi."

## 2.2. Iraqi mercenary groups

During the first Gulf War,<sup>64</sup> despite potential sectarian solidarity, Iran was unable to significantly sway Shia soldiers within the Iraqi army—where they constituted over 80% of the forces—to its side.<sup>65</sup> Instead, Iran found allies among some members of the Shiite opposition parties. Notable figures such as Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization, aligned with Iran and fought alongside the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) against the Iraqi military. Another key figure, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, leader of the Hezbollah Brigades, collaborated with the IRGC as early as 1983 in Kuwait, conducting operations against the embassies of countries supporting Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war. The list includes a few other figures and, to many in Iraq, such collaboration with Iran was tantamount to high treason.

Following the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent collapse of the Baath regime, individuals and parties with ties to Iran returned from exile and began to assert their influence (and Iran's) amidst the political vacuum left by the dismantling of the Baath Party and its policies. Shiite religious parties, in particular, began to wield considerable influence over the public

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62 "Observatory: A Syrian Organization Supported by Iran Targets Youth of Raqqa for Recruitment", Alhurra, 16 Aug 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/yc58jza5>

63 "Institutions of Iranian Influence in Syria and Methods of Shia Conversion", Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 29 Apr 2018 (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/yshudmcs>

64 The Iran-Iraq War, referred to by the Iraqi government as Saddam's Qadisiyah and known in Iran as the Sacred Defense, was a conflict that erupted between Iraq and Iran in September 1980 and lasted until August 1988. It concluded without a clear victory for either side, leading both nations to accept an armistice.

65 Laith Kubba, "Truth, War, and Consequences", FRONTLINE, PBS, 11 Sep 2003, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/truth/interviews/kubba.html>; Farhang Rajayi, "The Iran-Iraq war : the politics of aggression", University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1993, <https://search.worldcat.org/title/44958154>

sphere. Simultaneously, Iran's religious establishment and intelligence apparatus targeted the poorest and least informed segments of the Shiite community in Iraq, promoting the notion of a shared destiny between Iraqi Shiites and Iran. This campaign was bolstered by Iran's historical and educational ties to the Iraqi Shiite community and Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), which garnered significant support among Iraqi Shiites for Iran's regional expansionist policies. Thus, Iraqi fighting groups became instrumental in furthering Iran's agenda in the region.

Within the constellation of Iran-affiliated groups in Syria, a distinct portion of Iraqi fighters qualify as mercenaries under international legal definitions. This category, however, does not include Iraqis who had been residing in Syria prior to the 2011 uprising, a subset of whom aligned with Iran-led fighting factions post-2011, driven by ideological or sectarian motives. In contrast, a significant segment indeed fits the criteria of mercenaries, particularly highlighted by the initial deployment of the Iraqi "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq" militia's sniper battalion to suppress the 2011 protests in Syria. Led by Qais al-Khazali, a key figure in Iran's network within Iraq, this group comprised approximately 800 trained snipers and combat veterans.<sup>66</sup>

By September 2016, the involvement of Iraqi fighters in Syria had escalated, with over a thousand additional fighters arriving in Aleppo to reinforce government forces.<sup>67</sup> This influx joined an existing contingent of about four thousand fighters, accounting for roughly half of the combatants in the area at that time. Recruitment of fighters is conducted via the offices of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, where recruitment efforts involve Shiite clerics, including Iranians, offering monthly salaries from \$300 to \$1,500.<sup>68</sup> The Syrian government supplies these fighters with food and accommodation, while the Iraqi Ministry of Transport and Communications arranges for the transportation of these individuals, using flights from Baghdad and Najaf airports under the guise of pilgrimage to the holy shrines in Damascus. Among the most prominent Iraqi groups in Syria are:

## Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas (LAFA)

Founded in Syria in 2012 to fight alongside the Syrian government forces under the pretext of defending the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in the Damascus countryside. This militia received a religious endorsement from some Shiite clerics in Najaf, legitimizing its operations in the eyes of its followers. The majority of LAFA fighters are Iraqi, drawn primarily from militias such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the Sadrist Movement, and the Hezbollah Brigades in Iraq. It also includes Syrian fighters, notably from the towns of Nubl and al-Zahra—with a prominent member known as Abu Ajib from Nubl—as well as fighters from Lebanon and various Asian nationalities. The total strength of the brigade is estimated to be around 4,800 fighters.



66 Khaled al-Mutlaq, "Iranian-run militias in Syria", Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 29 Dec 2022, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/5cjt8bsn>

67 Tamer El-Ghobashy, Maria Abi-Habib, "Iraqi Militias Complicate Aleppo Battle", Wall Street Journal, 5 Oct 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-militias-complicate-aleppo-battle-1475687051>

68 "Iraqi Militias in Syria: Role and Future", Aljazeera.net, 1 Apr 2019 (Arabic) <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2019/04/190401092356143.html>

The formal announcement to establish the LAFA was made on January 1, 2013, as documented by the Al Jazeera Encyclopedia.<sup>69</sup> Its stated mission was to defend the shrine of Sayyida Zainab from various perceived threats, including Takfirists, Wahhabis, the Free Syrian Army, and others considered “enemies of Prophet Muhammad’s family.” According to one of its leaders,<sup>70</sup> members of Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas are exclusively committed to fighting in Syria, countering any claims made by Syrian parties of the militia being active in Iraq.

In 2021, LAFA leadership oversaw the formation of a “Women’s Brigade.” Initiated by a woman closely associated with Adnan aSaudi (a.k.a al-Zouzou), a leader within the LAFA, this unit comprises the leaders’ wives, women from the Imam Mahdi Scouts, and members of certain relief associations financially backed by Iran.

Members of the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA) have been implicated in numerous human rights violations against Syrians, spanning murder, enforced disappearance, torture, and arbitrary arrest. The group has been responsible for orchestrating massacres in civilian-populated areas across Syria, with atrocities reported in the Khalidiya and Baba Amr neighborhoods of Homs, al-Bayda in Baniyas, as well as Daraya and Eastern Ghouta.<sup>71</sup> These include a heinous massacre in al-Nabek<sup>72</sup> in rural Damascus, in December 2013, which claimed the lives of 362 civilians, including 102 children and 92 women. More recently, on September 16, 2023, armed members of the LAFA arrested civilians as they passed through its checkpoint between the towns of Hajira and Sayyida Zeinab in rural Damascus whilst commuting to work, and took them to an unknown location.<sup>73</sup>

## Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN)<sup>74</sup>

Established in 2013 with Iranian support, Harakat Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN) aligns ideologically with the Lebanese Hezbollah while maintaining organizational independence from it, instead operating under the directive of the Quds Force. Known in Syria as the al-Nujaba Movement, the HHN includes three brigades: al-Hamad, al-Hassan al-Mujtaba, and Ammar bin Yasser, all under the leadership of cleric Akram al-Kaabi. With an estimated force of 8,000 to 10,000 fighters, HHN served as a spearhead in the ground offensive against Aleppo in 2016, supported by Russian air forces.



The composition of HHN’s fighters is diverse; some are driven by fervent religious beliefs, while many are impoverished Shiites from Iraq’s southern regions, attracted by the promise

69 “Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade”, Aljazeera.net, 10 Dec 2014, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/4n3nkysc>

70 “Disagreements and Thefts Afflict the Iraqi Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas in Syria”, The New Gulf, 7 Dec 2015, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/2p8tfa4>

71 “Profile: Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas”, The Washington Institute, 16 Nov 2023, (Arabic) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/lmht-amt-lwa-abw-alfdl-albas>

72 “Nine Years Since the Nabek Massacre, A Sectarian-Motivated Mass Murder”, Enab Baladi, 5 Dec 2022, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/bdhnbbwm>

73 Syrian Network for Human Rights on X (formerly Twitter): “Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Militia Arrests Civilians in the Damascus Countryside; Fears of Mass-Execution”, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/5n7trcna>

74 Babak Dehghanpisheh, “The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus”, Reuters, 22 Sep 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-nujaba/>

of payments up to \$1,500 a month from Iran. The fighters are flown to Damascus in via direct flights from Baghdad or Najaf, after having undergone a three-month intensive training program in southern Iraq focusing on heavy weaponry and sniper tactics. Others receive specialized training from Hezbollah in Lebanon, which includes mine clearance, communications, and drone operations, before entering Syria through the land border crossing. HHN operates Iranian Yasser-class UAVs and, thanks to Iranian funding, launched its own satellite TV channel, al-Nujaba Channel,<sup>75</sup> which broadcasts highly well-produced combat footage, news programs, and military anthems aimed at rallying their supporters.

On December 13, 2016, Robert Colville, the spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, specifically named the Iraqi al-Nujaba Movement in connection with the killing of at least 82 civilians, including women and children, in the Aleppo neighborhoods of Bustan al-Qasr, al-Firdaws, al-Kalasa, and al-Saliheen.<sup>76</sup> In March 2017, in a move symbolizing Iran's growing influence in Syria, HHN announced the formation of the Golan Liberation Brigade,<sup>77</sup> ostensibly to combat Israel. The United States, citing the group's involvement in acts of terror and violence, designated HHN as a terrorist organization in March 2019, banning all dealings with it.<sup>78</sup>

Among the other Iraqi Shiite militias fighting in Syria are:

- \* Badr Organization's Quwat Shahid Baqir (BOQSBS):<sup>79</sup> The military wing of the Badr Organization, which penetrated deep into the Iraqi state and from which many factions emerged and has close relations at the institutional level with the IRGC. The Badr Organization has sent groups of fighters to Syria to fight alongside government forces under the name Martyr Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr Forces. The number of its fighters ranges from 1,500 to 2,000, and it participated in many battles in the Sayyida Zeinab area, the Eastern Ghouta areas, and south of Damascus.<sup>80</sup>



75 Ibid.

76 "United Nations: A Massacre Against Civilians is Taking Place in Aleppo" Aljazeera.net, 13 Dec 2016, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/8msxpeyh>

77 Philip Smyth, "Iran Is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias," Washington Institute, 12 Apr 2018, (Arabic) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/ayran-ttfwq-ly-alsad-fy-alsytrt-ly-almlyshyat-alshhyt-fy-swrya>

78 "What is the Iraqi al-Nujaba Armed Group and What Is Its Role?," BBC News Arabic, 15 Aug 2019, (Arabic) <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-46470444>

79 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: Khamenei's Cannon: 50 Caliber Anti-Material Rifles & Shia Fighters in Syria", Jihadology.net, 24 Dec 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200311052704/https://jihadology.net/category/quwet-al-shahid-muhammed-baqir-al-sadr/>

80 "Profile: Badr Organization", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 Sep 2021, (Arabic) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/lmht-amt-n-mnzmt-bdr>

- \* Kataib Hizballah (KH):<sup>81-82</sup> A military formation that sent many of its fighters, numbering about 7,000, to Syria in 2013 under the leadership of Hashim al-Hamdani (Abu Alaa). It is supported by Iran and cooperates with Syrian Hezbollah in carrying out its operations, in addition to receiving military training in Lebanon.
- \* Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH):<sup>83</sup> An Iraqi paramilitary group that sent many of its fighters to Syria and has subsidiary headquarters in the Damascus countryside and Al Bukamal. It is accused of assassinating clerics and Sunni leaders in Iraq and Syria, and receives funding from Iran, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and conducts kidnapping operations for ransom.
- \* Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq (AWH):<sup>84</sup> An Iraqi militia headed by Muhammad Hamza al-Tamimi, nicknamed Abu Ali al-Najafi. Its strength is about two thousand members between Iraq and Syria, and its subsidiary headquarters is in the Damascus countryside. Its combat missions are concentrated in Damascus and Aleppo. The AWH recently recruited members from the towns of Kafriya, al-Fu'ah, and Ma'arat Maasrin in Idlib Governorate.
- \* Saraya al-Khorasani (Vanguard Companies of al-Khorasani):<sup>85</sup> An Iraqi formation founded in 1984 and headed by Ali al-Yasiri. It is considered the military wing of the Islamic Vanguard Party. It has about 5,000 fighters between Iraq and Syria. Saraya al-Khorasani receives financial and military support from Iran. Its main headquarters is in Najaf and has offices in Wasit, Karbala, and Basra in Iraq, and in the countryside of Aleppo and Damascus in Syria. One of the key tasks assigned to it is protecting Damascus International Airport.

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81 "Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq", Arab Center for Extremism Studies, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/5y4d72kt>; "Kataib Hezbollah Secretary-General Tries to Forestall U.S. Strikes", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 30 Jan 2024, (Arabic) <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/alamyn-alam-l-ktayb-hzb-allh-yhawl-mn-aldrbat-alamrykyt-fy-alraq-aw-ayran>

82 Joe Truzman, "Iran and its Network of Nineteen Terrorist Organizations on Israel's Borders", 1 Jul 2022, <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/fdd-visual-iran-and-its-network-of-nineteen-terrorist-organizations-on-israels-borders.pdf>

83 Ibrahim al-Miqdadi, Salem al-Hamid, Encyclopedia of Iran and Political Shiism - Part One, al-Mazmah Center for Studies and Research, 2018, p188; "Terrorist Militia: Who Are Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the Arm of the Criminal Iranian Regime?", People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, 1 Jan 2020, (Arabic) <https://arabic.mojahedin.org/73503>

84 Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, Michael Knights, "Profile: Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 Apr 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-alwiyyat-al-waad-al-haq>; "Iraqi Militias in Syria: Role and Future", Aljazeera.net, 1 Apr 2019, (Arabic) <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2019/04/190401092356143.html>

85 "Iran Bolsters the Role of Saraya al-Khorasani in Syria: What Are Its Goals?", Hafryat Media, 17 Nov 2022, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/yknv3s5w>; "Saraya al-Khorasani: Iranian Founding and Loyalty", Asharq Al-Awsat, 10 Jun 2016, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/2p8y3f9k>



## Several smaller Iraqi groups also operate in Syria: <sup>86 87 88 89</sup> - - -

- \* The Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades with around 700 fighters, their most notable participation being in the battles of the Sayyida Zeinab area and the battles of Eastern Ghouta.
- \* Assad Allah al-Ghalib forces in Iraq and the Levant: Its members number about 600 fighters.
- \* The Zulfiqar Brigade militia, of about 1,000 fighters, participated in battles in Sayyida Zeinab and along the Damascus Airport road, the battles of Adra in Eastern Ghouta, and the invasion of the city of Nabek.
- \* Kafeel Zeinab Brigade: Formed in 2013, and participated in the battles of Eastern Ghouta, Sayyida Zeinab, the Damascus Airport road, Qalamoun, and battles in Aleppo.
- \* Haider al-Karrar Brigades: A Syrian offshoot of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), numbering 800 members.
- \* Imam Ali Brigades: Headquartered in the Sayyida Zeinab area and operates in the city of Damascus and its countryside, and on the Iraqi-Syrian border; composed of around 1,000 fighters.
- \* Saraya Ashura: Operates Damascus and its countryside.
- \* Al-Mumal Brigade, affiliated with the Mahdi Army: Operates in Daraya and Sayyida Zainab.
- \* Youth Missionary Brigade: Operates in Aleppo and its countryside.
- \* Kafeel Zeinab Brigade - Sayyeda Zeinab, Airport Road - Eastern Ghouta, Aleppo, Qalamoun
- \* Liwa Asad Allah al-Ghalib - Damascus countryside, Qudsaya.

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86 "Mapping the Spread of Iranian Militias in Syria and Iraq", IranWire, 8 May 2020, (Arabic) [https://iranwire.com/ar/reports/84061/#google\\_vignette](https://iranwire.com/ar/reports/84061/#google_vignette)

87 "Fractured Iraqi Shia Militias in Syria", Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 22 Aug 2018, <https://agsiw.org/ar/fractured-iraqi-shia-militias-in-syria-arabic/>

88 "Militias and the Future of the Iraqi State", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (Arabic) <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/issue/1500?lang=ar>

89 "The Conflict Among Militias and Iran's Clout in Iraq", International Institute for Iranian Studies, No 14, Oct 2021, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/58ks7ukm>; "Mapping the Spread of Iranian Militias in Syria and Iraq", IranWire, 8 May 2020, (Arabic) [https://iranwire.com/ar/reports/84061/#google\\_vignette](https://iranwire.com/ar/reports/84061/#google_vignette)



## 2.3. Local and Mixed Groups

### Al-Baqir Brigade

The al-Baqir Brigade emerged in mid-2012, founded by Khaled al-Hassan and his brother Haj Hamza (Hamza al-Hassan), who were instrumental in its creation with the backing of Iran through financial, weapons, and training support. The Brigade's composition is primarily Syrian, drawing largely from the Sunni Baggara tribe, with the inclusion of a number of Shia converts from this tribe as well as Iranians and a select group of Iraqi mercenaries who assist in logistics, security, and advisory roles.



Engaged in combat operations against opposition forces in Aleppo from 2014 to 2016, the al-Baqir Brigade subsequently shifted its focus towards expanding its influence in Aleppo's southern and eastern countryside. This expansion was facilitated through a blend of religious and cultural programs financed by Iranian entities, alongside strategic acquisitions of property in the region. Members of the al-Baqir Brigade have been implicated in various human rights violations against civilians, and have engaged in the smuggling of oil, livestock, and stolen furnishings.<sup>90</sup>

The al-Baqir Brigade includes several units such as the Rapid Intervention Battalion, the Haj Shiro Battalion, the Haj Hamid Battalion, the Ashrafieh Battalion, the East Battalion, the North Battalion, the Handarat Battalion, the Deir ez-Zor Battalion, the 313 Battalion, the Mahdi Force, the al-Safira Battalion, and the Tarkan Battalion. Hundreds of its members underwent training courses in Iran in late 2018, in special camps operated by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>91</sup>

### Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein (a.k.a Imam Hossein Division)

This militia was formed in 2012 by Sheikh Amjad al-Bahadli, an Iraqi associated with the Sadrist Movement who resided in Syria prior to 2011. Upon his death in 2017, Asaad al-Bahadli assumed leadership of the division.<sup>92</sup> This militia is characterized by its multinational composition, drawing fighters from Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan, among other countries, alongside Syrian combatants. Its base of operations is located in the Sayyida Zeinab area,



90 Khaled al-Khatib, "Aleppo: How did the Baqir Brigade become a Stumbling Block in the Face of the Russians?", Al Modon, 21 Apr 2019, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/mrx76xzz>

91 "The moment Moghadam was killed" "Al-Baqir Brigade" militia during a shell fall on it in the Aleppo countryside (video)", Orient News, 4 Feb 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/424he3ut>

92 Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi, "Interview with the Commander of the Death Battalion of the Imam Hussein Brigade," 2 April 2019, (Arabic) <https://www.aymennjawad.org/22526/>

-serving as a launching point for military engagements against Syrian opposition forces, notably within the Eastern Ghouta region.<sup>93</sup>

Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein consists of a range of formations, including “special forces” units that are well-equipped with advanced weaponry, command, and logistical support structures. Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein’s arsenal is significantly supported through Iranian aid, utilizing cargo planes landing at Syrian airports, cargo ships docking at the port of Latakia, and container trucks traversing from Iraq into Syria. Newsweek magazine has described the Division as the most powerful Iranian-backed faction active in Syria,<sup>94</sup> noting its capacity to execute operations against American and Israeli targets. Training for the Division’s members is provided by the Quds Force and elite units from the Lebanese Hezbollah, while its supplies and logistics are provided directly from the Fourth Armored Division of the Syrian Army.

## Yemeni Saada Brigade

In 2013, the Saada Brigade was established under Iranian sponsorship and financing, incorporating fighters from the Houthi group in Yemen. These fighters were granted visas to enter Baghdad or Beirut, where they underwent training in specially designated camps. Following their training, they were deployed to Damascus to engage in combat.<sup>95</sup> This group includes seasoned members who have previously participated in conflicts against the Yemeni army. The Saada Brigade grew to comprise approximately 750 fighters, a number of whom were lost in confrontations in the Damascus countryside locations of al-Maliha and Jobar, as well as in Basra and Izra within Daraa Governorate. The majority of the survivors returned to partake in conflicts in northern Yemen, leaving about 100 fighters who subsequently integrated into the ranks of the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA).<sup>96</sup>

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93 Ahed Fadel, “The Imam Hussein Brigade’s militias in Ghouta of Damascus,” Al Arabiya, 12 March 2018, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/2y38jw62>

94 Tim O’Connor, “Iran’s Most Powerful Unit Yet in Syria Targets U.S. and Israel, Intel Finds”, Newsweek, 21 Jul 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/irans-most-powerful-unit-yet-syria-targets-us-israel-intel-finds-1814151>

95 “An official Yemeni source tells Al-Quds Al-Arabi: Houthis are fighting with the Syrian regime”,

96 [Iran and the militarization of Shiism at home and abroad](#)

## 2.4. Afghan and Pakistani Mercenaries

### Liwa Fatemiyoun

The Liwa Fatemiyoun, under the umbrella of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, traces its origins back to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. During this period, the Revolutionary Guard recruited hundreds of Afghans, capitalizing on their status as refugees within Iran,<sup>97</sup> initially forming what was known as the Abu Dharr Brigade.<sup>98-99</sup> The significant escalation of Iranian involvement in the Syrian conflict in May 2013 led Qasem Soleimani, the then-commander of the Quds Force, to announce the formation of the Liwa Fatemiyoun militia. This group draws its ranks from Afghan immigrant communities residing in Iraq and Syria, directly from Afghanistan, and includes some Afghans who came from European countries,<sup>100</sup> alongside a large number of Afghan refugees in Iran.



The brigade was involved in recruitment activities<sup>101</sup> targeting Afghans under the age of 18 contingent upon obtaining written consent from their parents, as well as recruitment targeting impoverished Afghan Hazara Shia communities in Iran and in Afghanistan. They are sent to Syria, after undergoing military training for about a month before being sent to fight on the front lines.<sup>102</sup> By integrating Afghan refugees into combat roles, Iran aims to alleviate the domestic pressures of hosting a large refugee population. Furthermore, these combatants are viewed as assets that can enhance Iran's strategic interests in the region, potentially serving as experienced fighters against the Taliban or other adversaries on Afghan soil following the withdrawal of American forces.<sup>103</sup>

**The Quds Force plays a key role in overseeing the operations of Liwa Fatemiyoun, providing financial support, arms, and strategic direction. Members of the militia receive monthly salaries that vary between \$500 to \$1,500, which is notably higher than the compensation offered to fighters in other militias, where salaries typically range from \$300 to \$700.**<sup>104-105-106</sup>

97 Lars Hauch, "Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life Through the Eyes of a Militia Member", Middle East Institute, 22 May 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/understanding-fatemiyoun-division-life-through-eyes-militia-member>

98 Ibid.

99 Ahmad Majidiyar, "After ISIS, Fatemiyoun Vows to Fight with "Axis of Resistance" to Destroy Israel", 22 Nov 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/after-isis-fatemiyoun-vows-fight-axis-resistance-destroy-israel>

100 Dr. Shadi Abdel Wahab Mansour: Fifth Generation Wars: "Implosion" Methods on the International Scene

101 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Afghan refugees in Iran being sent to fight and die for Assad in Syria", The Guardian, 5 Nov 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/05/iran-recruits-afghan-refugees-fight-save-syrias-bashar-al-assad>

102 Naomi Conrad, "Iran recruits Afghan teenagers to fight in Syria", Deutsche Welle, 5 May 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-recruits-afghan-teenagers-to-fight-war-in-syria/a-43634279>

103 Sune Engel Rasmussen, Zahra Nader, "Iran covertly recruits Afghan Shias to fight in Syria", The Guardian, 30 Jun 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/iran-covertly-recruits-afghan-soldiers-to-fight-in-syria>

104 "Iraqi Militias in Syria: Role and Future", Aljazeera.net, 1 Apr 2019, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/4421>

105 Eli Lake, "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad," Bloomberg, 9 Jun 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>; Babak Dehghanpisheh, "The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus", Reuters, 22 Sep 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-nujaba/>

106 Muhannad al-Haj Ali, "The Battle of Sayyida Zeinab: Gateway to Sectarian Hell," Now Lebanon, April 8, 2013, <http://goo.gl/rtS8X0>

In 2015, Fatemiyoun was elevated to corps status, and expanded its presence in northern and northeastern Syria, particularly in the Aleppo Governorate around Jabal Azzan near the headquarters of the IRGC base, the military academies area west of the city, and in the north of the industrial zone in Sheikh Najjar and the farmlands between the Central Prison and the Infantry Academy and Faysal Qassem camp to the north. After 2019, with the decline of the Syrian opposition in the northern Hama countryside, the now Fatemiyoun Corps expanded and its members spread to several areas on both sides of the Aleppo-Damascus international highway (M4) into the Syrian desert and the south of the middle Euphrates; in areas around Palmyra, east of Homs; and in more than one location on both sides of the Deir ez-Zor-Homs road, passing through al-Sukhnah to Al Bukamal on the Iraqi-Syrian border, where militia members are deployed and reside along with many of their families.

The Fatemiyoun Corps is reported to be in total control of the city of al-Mayadeen, even renaming its neighborhoods and extensively promoting IRGC and religious symbolism.<sup>107</sup> The Corps also made efforts to recruit young Syrian men into its ranks. In the first months of 2021 alone, it was able to recruit 710 people in Qamishli and Hasakah, 315 of whom were former members and leaders of the National Defense Forces (NDF), and 395 civilians and members of tribes. The Fatemiyoun Corps also acquired dozens of properties within areas of Syrian government influence in the city of al-Hasakah,<sup>108</sup> and also established its own detention center in the town of al-Tibni in the western countryside of Deir ez-Zor.<sup>109</sup> It also dissolved the Peasants' Union in the areas where it was located in the countryside of al-Mayadeen, and replaced it with its own affiliate agency that provides plowing and harvesting equipment to farmers at lower than market prices, and subsidizes agricultural production at its various stages in exchange for the exclusive right to purchase crops.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, members of the Fatemiyoun Corps were involved in violations against civilians in Syria in Damascus and its countryside, such as Qalamoun and Zabadani, including participation in sieges leading to civilian deaths from starvation, notably in Madaya, and involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ghouta and around Damascus International Airport, the southern Damascus countryside, extending to Daraa Governorate, and in Homs, Palmyra, Qusayr, and the Shaer gas field. It also participated in force in the battles to break the siege of Aleppo Central Prison.<sup>111</sup>

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107 "Fatemiyoun Brigade: Iran's Afghan Legion", Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara - IRAM, 8 Apr 2013

108 "Iranian Expansion in Syria in 2021 in Number", An-Nahar Newspaper, 29 Dec 2021, (Arabic), <https://www.annaharar.com/arabic/news/arab-world/syria/29122021092902208>

109 "After the Increase in Violations Against Syrian Civilians: Fatemiyoun Establishes a New Detention Center", Eye of Euphrates Media Network, 24 Mar 2021, (Arabic) <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2021/03/24/1487>

110 "Iran's militia continues its crimes: Reports and sources reveal Hezbollah violations in Syrian cities", Arab Mubasher, 10 Dec 2021, (Arabic) <https://arabmubasher.com/irans-militias-continue-their-crimes-reports-and-sources-reveal-hezbollahs-violations-in-syrian-cities>

111 "Fatemiyoun Brigade and Hezbollah" Iranian-affiliated Militias in Syria", The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 10 Dec 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yr8r5ksy>

## Liwa Zainebiyoun

Liwa Zainabiyoun is one of the least known mercenary militias operating in Syria and the least reported in the media, partly due to its relatively small number and limited contribution to the conflict, and because its fighters are more keen on secrecy and discreteness for fear of retaliation by the Taliban or Pakistani intelligence, on the other. Some sources reported the ineffectiveness of this brigade, which was known to participate in the battles to lift the siege of the cities of Nubul and al-Zahra, north of Aleppo, without affecting the outcome of the battle. This suggests that Tehran's utilization of Liwa Zainabiyoun primarily serves to furnish its fighters with combat experience, potentially preparing them for future regional conflicts, particularly in the middle and western parts of Asia.<sup>112</sup>



Iran's engagement with the Pakistani Shiite community dates back to the early years of the Islamic Revolution, marked by efforts to integrate into Pakistani society through the establishment of cultural centers, religious institutes, and sectarian universities. These institutions aim to attract Shiite students, many of whom receive Iranian citizenship annually, highlighting the depth of Iran's investment in cultivating influence within Pakistan's Shiite population. This influence extends to support for the extremist Shiite "Movement for the Application of Jaafari Jurisprudence" and the Lashkar Muhammad militia (or "Sepah Muhammadiyah"), both implicated in sectarian violence and assassinations during the early 1990s. Additionally, Iran has initiated training camps in the tribal regions of Parachinar, bordering Afghanistan, and has established recruitment centers to bolster the ranks of militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas in Iraq.

The IRGC also opened a recruitment and training center in the Iranian city of Mashhad to attract fighters from Pakistan and train as an elite attack force, then named Liwa Zainabiyoun announced in 2013. The first batch of them belonged to al-Mustafa International University, a religious institution in Qom with recruitment activity in Islamabad and Beirut, and to which the Islamic College in London, the Islamic College of Indonesia, and the University of Islamic Sciences in Ghana are affiliated.<sup>113</sup>

Later, Iran stopped recruiting fighters from inside Pakistan, after the Anti-Terrorism Court accused local leaders of the Pakistan People's Party, the party of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter, which is a center-left party with reported ties to Iran, of recruiting Shiite youth and sending them to Syria and Iraq.<sup>114</sup> Iran thus turned to recruiting Pakistani Shiite workers living in the United Arab Emirates, some of whom were deported in the wake of the Arab Spring revolutions.<sup>115 116 117</sup>

112 "Zainabiyoun and Fatemiyoun on the US sanctions list: What do we know about them?", Raseef 22, 25 Jan 2019, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/5n7rsxt8>

113 "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East", The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Nov 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/>

114 "The Pakistan People's Party Accused of Supporting Groups Recruiting Shiite Fighters for Syria", Arab 21, 28 Aug 2018, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/562rc565>; "Shiite Mobilization and the Transformation of Sectarian Militancy in Pakistan", Middle East Institute, 29 Mar 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/shiite-mobilization-and-transformation-sectarian-militancy-pakistan>

115 "Iran and Foreign Policy: Internal Betrayal", Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 23 Oct 2018, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/mryef9j9>

116 Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Proxies: In Syria and Beyond?" | The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 22 Aug 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-afghan-and-pakistani-proxies-syria-and-beyond>

117 Ali Alfoneh, "Using Syria as a Training Ground: The Case of the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun Brigade", The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 17 Jul 2018, <https://agsiw.org/using-syria-as-a-training-ground-the-case-of-the-pakistani-zeinabiyoun-brigade/>

## II. Private Military and Security Contractors

### 3. General Conceptual and Legal framework

Private military and security companies are private business entities that provide military and/or security services including, in particular, the provision of armed protection for persons, convoys, and critical infrastructure. In some cases, such contractors provide the maintenance and operation of weapons systems, the monitoring of detention centers, and consulting or training of local forces and security personnel.<sup>118</sup> Today, American research centers circulate<sup>119</sup> two main terms in this field, which are:

- \* Private Security Contractors (PSCs) focus on providing defensive services such as protection of individuals, convoys, buildings, and critical infrastructure. Their operations are primarily non-offensive, catering to both public and private clients in various settings, including conflict zones.
- \* Private Military Security Contractors (PMSCs) offer more comprehensive services that include armed support and operational assistance in conflict areas, often participating directly in hostilities.

The distinction between security and military companies is nuanced due to their intersecting operational domains. Typically, security companies provide protection services in times of peace and war for individuals and properties, and their services are generally defensive, albeit they sometimes carry out offensive combat missions. Military contractors, however, specialize in providing services primarily to governments and de facto authorities engaged in conflict or areas of high tension, with a focus on offensive operations. These companies are also divided into local companies that operate within the national scope and are subject to the laws in force within each country, and others that are crossborder. The emergence of PMSCs in the 1990s paralleled shifts in the nature of warfare and the privatization of traditional military functions,<sup>120</sup> such as supply chains and training programs.<sup>121</sup>

Perspectives on private military and security contractors vary widely. On one side, critics argue that PMSCs serve as modern conduits for mercenary recruitment, and that they are contractors with the aim of obscuring the accountability of the employing state for any human rights abuses committed by these entities.<sup>122</sup> This criticism is rooted in the belief that privatizing security inherently benefits those with the means to afford such services, undermining the universal right to security as outlined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Conversely, supporters and advocates argue that PMSCs, being legally established commercial entities, should not be indiscriminately labeled as mercenaries.

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118 "The Role of Private Military and Security Companies as an International Non-governmental Actor in International Relations", Al-Istiqlal University Research Journal, 1 Jun 2022, (Arabic) <https://journal.pass.ps/index.php/aurj/article/view/277>

119 "Security and Military Companies are Silently Growing in the Middle East", Jesr Press, 19 Apr 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/87fbuj2a>

120 Hassan al-Haj Ahmed Ali, "Privatization of Security and the Growing Role of Private Military and Security Companies, Strategic Studies", No. 321, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2002, p. 40.

121 Bjorn Moller, "Privatization of Warrant: the Regulation of Violence", Institute for History, International Studies.

122 Mustafa Ahmed Abu al-Khair, International Private Military Security Companies, a politico-legal study, ITRAK Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 2008.



From this viewpoint, the employees of these companies, especially in conflict zones, should be evaluated based on the specific nature of their operations. These proponents assert that PMSCs, when operating under the auspices of legitimate governmental or international authority and adhering to international conflict standards, represent a lawful and valuable component of contemporary security and military operations. They differentiate PMSC personnel from traditional mercenaries by emphasizing their adherence to legal and ethical standards, arguing that PMSCs can play a crucial role in humanitarian interventions and peacekeeping missions under international law. For instance, the use of PMSCs by Western countries for peacekeeping missions in Somalia has been rationalized as an efficient alternative to deploying regular military forces. Furthermore, the United Nations, acknowledging the evolving landscape of international security, has increasingly engaged PMSCs for logistical support, mine clearance, and the training of security personnel.<sup>123</sup> This engagement is regulated under specific conditions that ensure such activities are endorsed by, and conducted via bilateral agreement with, the host government.<sup>124</sup>

### 3.1. Definition of military and security companies

Due to their relatively recent emergence on the international stage, legal jurisprudence has not been able to formulate a comprehensive, unified definition of security and military companies and their personnel. The UN Special Rapporteur on the use of mercenaries, in a report to the Economic and Social Council on January 13, 1999, outlined them as entities providing a broad spectrum of assistance, training, and advisory services in the security field. This includes logistical support unrelated to direct military actions, armed security personnel, and involvement in both defensive and offensive military activities within armed conflict or post-conflict situations.

Additionally, the Draft of a possible Convention on Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs)<sup>125</sup> offers a more formal definition. Article 2 identifies a PMSC as a corporate entity created under the laws of a State Party, engaging in military and/or security services for financial compensation, facilitated by natural persons and/or legal entities, under a specific license.

### 3.2. Legal regulation of security companies and private military companies

Two attempts have emerged to ensure military and security companies' compliance with international humanitarian law, without the two attempts being binding. The first of these is the International Stability Operations Association (ISOA) Code of Conduct,<sup>126</sup> which was adopted in 2006 by companies operating in the context of armed conflicts involved in international peace operations to confirm commitment to ethical standards, international

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123 Patrick M. Regan, "Third Party Intervention and the Duration of Intrastate Conflicts", The American Political Science Association, 28 August - 1 September 2000.

124 David Beal, "The Price of Peace: The Political Economy of Peace Operations", The North-South Institute and The Pearson Canadian International Peacekeeping Centre, 30 Nov - 1 Dec 2001.

125 "Draft of a possible Convention on Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) for consideration and action by the Human Rights Council", 13 May 2011, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/707162?v=pdf>

126 "ISOA Code of Conduct", International Stability Operations Association, (formerly International Peace Operations Association (IPOA)), <https://stability-operations.org/page/Code>

humanitarian law, and human rights law. Likewise, the 2008 Montreux Document<sup>127</sup> outlines international legal obligations and good practices relevant to the operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict.

## Criminal liability of private military security companies

For members of PMSCs: Members of private military and security companies, regardless of their designation as “civilian-combatants” or as workers, are required to adhere to the national laws of the state in which they operate, as well as the rules of international humanitarian law applicable to armed conflicts. They bear individual criminal responsibility for any actions that constitute violations of national or international law, whether these actions are taken independently or under orders.

For states that hire PMSC services: The countries that engage the services of these companies also bear criminal and civil liabilities, particularly in terms of ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law. The Geneva Convention mandates that states must respect and enforce the principles of international humanitarian law, including establishing mechanisms to monitor adherence to these rules, not only by regular forces but also by any groups involved in military operations. Consequently, hiring states are tasked with closely monitoring the activities of private military-security companies and ensuring their continuous education and adherence to international humanitarian law.

The state is responsible for the actions of the PMSC that it contracts, because it has delegated part of its governmental functions to it, and it is responsible for violations of international humanitarian law committed by the company as long as it carries out tasks that are originally part of its tasks, that is, the state in the context of an armed conflict. According to Article 5 of the draft of the International Law Commission on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts of 2001:<sup>128</sup> “The conduct of a person or entity which is not an organ of the State under article 4 but which is empowered by the law of that State to exercise elements of the governmental authority shall be considered an act of the State under international law, provided the person or entity is acting in that capacity in the particular instance.”

This framework allows the attribution of responsibility for the actions of individuals in PMSCs to the states that contract them, and is only useful in that operational relationship, as it requires the delegation of tasks from the state based on the law. As for the relationship with the state in whose territory the PMSC operates, or the company’s state of origin, such responsibility is based on the text of Article 8 of the same draft, which requires the existence of a tangible connection of supervision, control or guidance in the relationship between contractors and the state: “The conduct of a person or group of persons shall be considered an act of a State under international law if the person or group of persons is in fact acting on the instructions of, or under the direction or control of, that State in carrying out the conduct.”

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127 “The Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies”, International Committee of the Red Cross, 11 Jun 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yxbckkzk>

128 Maria Tsvetkova, “Dying for a paycheck: the Russian civilians fighting in Syria”, Reuters, 21 Dec 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190424161115/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-fighters/dying-for-a-paycheck-the-russian-civilians-fighting-in-syria-idUSKBN1EF0RI>

Furthermore, the state of the company's nationality, establishment, or operational base must implement robust legal measures to exert control over PMSCs functioning abroad, ensuring adherence to international humanitarian law. Such measures may include legislative actions akin to those taken by South Africa, which established regulations governing the overseas activities of its nationals' companies, emphasizing the requirement for comprehensive oversight, training in international humanitarian law, internal disciplinary protocols, and specific licensing for operational contracts. These measures aim to ensure that PMSCs, regardless of their location, uphold the principles of international humanitarian law, with states imposing stringent conditions and penalties for non-compliance to maintain a degree of control and supervision over these private entities.<sup>129</sup>

While international law has made efforts to regulate the operations of security and military companies, it lacks a cohesive framework for their registration and governance. This gap complicates the attribution of responsibility and poses significant challenges for holding these entities accountable for violations and crimes committed by their personnel. Victims seeking redress for actions that breach human rights, violate international humanitarian law, contravene the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, or constitute crimes in the victim's home country, face a convoluted path with several theoretical avenues for legal action:

- \* **National Judiciary of the Company's Country of Registration:** Victims can appeal to the courts in the country where the company is registered, especially if the state where the company operates has conferred judicial immunity upon it.
- \* **National Judiciary of the Contractors' Home Countries:** Legal action can be taken in the home countries of the company's members or contractors, contingent upon the identification of those individuals.
- \* **Courts with Universal Jurisdiction:** Some national courts, particularly in Europe, can exercise jurisdiction over serious human rights violations, provided specific legal criteria for litigation are satisfied.

Moreover, international criminal justice mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), can adjudicate these matters if the prosecutor deems it appropriate to initiate a case. However, these theoretical avenues for accountability are fraught with challenges, as the intricate web of political considerations, state interests, and international agreements often impedes the pursuit of justice. Additionally, the clandestine nature of the operations undertaken by what are sometimes referred to as "shadow armies" further complicates efforts to identify and prosecute responsible individuals. This obscurity in operation and identification significantly hampers the foundational process of litigation or prosecution.

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129 Thomas Grove, "Up to Nine Russian Contractors Die in Syria, Experts Say", The Wall Street Journal, 18 Dec 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210225022216/https://www.wsj.com/articles/up-to-nine-russian-contractors-die-in-syria-experts-say-1450467757>

## 4. Russian Private Military Security Companies

### 4.1. General Framework for Russian Military Security Companies

- \* In early 2015, reports surfaced of Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict via mercenaries from private military companies fighting for the Syrian government.<sup>130</sup> By late October, it was reported that 3<sup>131</sup> to 9<sup>132</sup> Russian military contractors were killed in a mortar attack by Syrian opposition factions in the Latakia Governorate.
- \* Russian opposition outlets reported that, even before Russia's official military intervention in September 2015,<sup>133</sup> and according to a Ukrainian law enforcement official, Russian mercenaries were active in Syria, with an estimated 1,700 having been deployed. Many had previous combat experience in Ukraine,<sup>134</sup> and participated in and led offensive operations.<sup>135</sup>
- \* The first Russian law to regulate private security companies was passed in 1992. Boris Yeltsin later awarded contracts to protect Gazprom and Transneft's infrastructures, effectively militarizing these companies and transforming them into quasi-armies with thousands in their ranks.<sup>136</sup>
- \* Post-2000, PMCs became a cornerstone of Russia's foreign policy, serving as an unofficial army for Moscow. This strategy allows Russia to engage in military actions discreetly and without the involvement of its regular military forces, and thus maintain "plausible deniability" in many of its operations.
- \* Russian President Vladimir Putin described these companies as a "means to achieve national interests without the direct state participation."<sup>137</sup> In 2015, he issued Presidential Decree No. (3)<sup>138</sup> to amend the Armed Forces system, which provided for contracts with foreign citizens residing outside Russia's borders to participate in

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130 Mariam Karouny, "Three Russians killed in Syria: pro-government source", Reuters, 20 Oct 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200919175732/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia/three-russians-killed-in-syria-pro-government-source-idUSKCN0SE1YO20151020>

131 Vladimir Dergachev, Ekaterina Zgirovskaya, "Russian mercenaries in the battles for Palmyra", Gazeta.ru, 24 Mar 2016, (Russian) [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/03/22\\_a\\_8137565.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/03/22_a_8137565.shtml)

132 Maria Tsvetkova, Anton Zverev, "Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria", Reuters, 3 Nov 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190519042310/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12YOM6>

133 "Private Military Companies: History and Present Day", Militaryarms.ru, 13 Oct 2018, (Russian) <http://militaryarms.ru/armiimira/chastnie-voennye-kompanii/>

134 Maria Tsvetkova, Anton Zverev, "Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria", Reuters, 3 Nov 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190519042310/https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12YOM6>

135 Private military companies: history and modernity. Russian PMCs ("Private Military Companies: History and Present Day. Russian PMCs), Militaryarms, 13 October 2018, link: <http://militaryarms.ru/armiimira/chastnie-voennye-kompanii/>

136 Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Russia Enables Foreigners To Serve In Armed Forces", Defense News, 7 Jan 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2015/01/07/russia-enables-foreigners-to-serve-in-armed-forces/>

137 Metin Gurkan, "Private military companies: Moscow's Other Army in Syria", The New Khalij, 2 Dec 2017, (Arabic) <https://thenewkhalij.news/article/88636>

138 Jaroslaw Adamowski, "Russia Enables Foreigners To Serve In Armed Forces", 7 Jan 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2015/01/07/russia-enables-foreigners-to-serve-in-armed-forces/>

combat missions and battles fought by the Russian military, inside and outside the country, provided that those wishing to contract must submit a request to a Russian combat unit stationed in their place of residence.<sup>139</sup>

- \* Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, announced in November 2017 plans to reduce Russian military presence in Syria by the end of that year, due to armed clashes declining, and replacing it by private military companies with tactical military capabilities equivalent to modern armies.<sup>140</sup>
- \* According to a study by the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment (FFI),<sup>141</sup> the success of PMCs working for Moscow has been synonymous with increasing violence and human rights violations, including excessive use of force, killing of civilians, rape, torture, targeting of schools, and widespread looting<sup>142</sup> in Ukraine, Mali in Central Africa,<sup>143</sup> and in Syria, as documented by international reports. According to a former fighter in Wagner, members of the group beat the bodies of Syrian soldiers fleeing the fighting with heavy hammers and decapitated them, then photographed and published this footage in order to intimidate others.<sup>144</sup>
- \* Russian PMCs operate in a legal gray area, unregistered and untaxed, effectively unrecognized by Russian law,<sup>145</sup> which criminalizes mercenary activities under Article 359 of the Criminal Code, which states: “The recruitment, training, financing or other material provision of mercenaries, as well as their use in armed conflict or hostilities, shall be punished by incarceration for a period of between four and eight years.”<sup>146</sup>
- \* These companies do not meet the legal definition of PMCs, due to their subordination and commitment to the Russian leadership and its political objectives. They are by no means merely commercial enterprises aiming to make a return on investing in the recruitment and transportation of citizens independently of the government’s directions.
- \* These companies recruit widely, and beyond former army officers. Some of these companies use the internet to advertise, and some include in their ranks convicted

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139 “Russia allows foreign fighters to contract with its army”, Al-Araby al-Jadeed, 3 January 2015, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/4uvszs4>

140 “Security and Military Companies are Silently Growing in the Middle East”, Jesr Press, 19 Apr 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/87fbuj2a>

141 Åse Gilje Østensen, Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies: The Implications for European and Norwegian Security”, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 Sept 2018, [https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300\\_Pdf](https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300_Pdf)

142 “2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices”, US Department of State, 20 Mar 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>

143 Nick Turse, “Wagner Group Disappeared and Executed Civilian in Mali”, The Intercept, 24 Jul 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/07/24/wagner-group-mali/>

144 Eleanor Beardsley, “An ex-member of one of the world’s most dangerous mercenary groups has gone public”, NPR, 6 Jun 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/06/1102603897/wagner-group-mercenary-russia-ukraine-war>

145 Alexander Khramchikhin, “PMCs: Mercenaries or Agents of the Kremlin’s Will?”, Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie, 20 Apr 2018, [https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2018-04-20/1\\_993\\_chvk.html](https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2018-04-20/1_993_chvk.html); Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group”, Post-Soviet Affairs, Volume 35, 2019 - Issue 3, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>

146 The Criminal Code of The Russian Federation, No. 63-Fz, June 13, 1996.

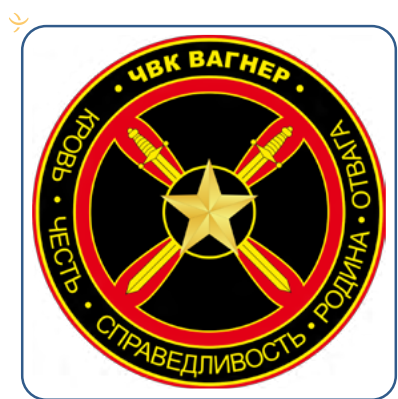
felons in Russian prisons.<sup>147</sup> According to a report published by the British newspaper Daily Mail,<sup>148</sup> one of the Russian mercenaries, enumerating the reasons that prompted him and others to travel and fight in Syria, said: “There are people who were sentenced to prison, and others who did not find work or did not have money in their country, and among them were former volunteers who arrived for military training in the city of Rostov.”

- \* With the decline in military ground operations after 2018, the Kremlin maintained forces in Syria - with two main bases in Tartous and Hmeimim.<sup>149</sup> PMCs demonstrated high organizational efficiency, which enabled them, with the decrease in the intensity of military operations, to reposition themselves and direct their activities to protect vital and economic installations, combining military and security activity.<sup>150</sup>

## 4.2. Russian PMCs in Syria

### Wagner Group

According to media reports,<sup>151</sup> Wagner Group is a company registered in Argentina or Hong Kong, or is affiliated with Concord for Administrative and Consulting LLC owned by businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, who was a close affiliate of the Kremlin. Due to its absolute commitment to the interests of the Russian state,<sup>152-153</sup> Wagner Group can only be described as a geopolitical arm used by the Kremlin to achieve objectives in locations where Russia sees its strategic interests as being threatened, or in regions where Russia's sphere of influence is expanding



147 Paul Goble, “Russian Nationalist Group, Acting as a Private Military Company, Worries Kremlin”, 15 Nov 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-nationalist-group-acting-as-a-private-military-company-worries-kremlin/>

148 Will Stewart, “Russian mercenaries secretly helping Assad in Syria are buying virgin ‘wives’ for £75 and beheading prisoners... just like the jihadists they’re fighting, ex-soldier reveals”, Daily Mail, 12 Oct 2017, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4973598/Russian-mercenaries-buying-virgin-wives-75-Syria.html>

149 “Russian Mercenaries in Syria”, Warsaw Institute, 22 Apr 2017, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-mercenaries-in-syria/>

150 “Private Military Companies: History and Present Day”, Militaryarms.ru, 13 Oct 2018, (Russian) <http://militaryarms.ru/armiimira/chastnie-voennye-kompanii/>

151 “It Planned to Assassinate the Ukrainian President: What Do We Know about the Russian Wagner Group?”, Aljazeera.net, 2 Mar 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/24935nh4>

152 Andrew Higgins, Ivan Nechepurenko, “In Africa, Mystery Murders Put Spotlight on Kremlin’s Reach”, 7 Aug 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/07/world/europe/central-african-republic-russia-murder-journalists-africa-mystery-murders-put-spotlight-on-kremlins-reach.html>

153 “Putin Says that Wagner is Entirely Funded by Moscow”, BBC News Arabic, 27 Jun 2023, (Arabic) <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-66035536>



## Establishment and Spread

Wagner Group was established<sup>154</sup> in 2014, by Dmitry Utkin, who was a member of the Moran Security Group and participated in the ranks of the Slavonic Corps in Syria. Wagner began its operations in Ukraine, where combat units were formed from mercenary groups under the strict supervision and control of Russian intelligence, with the Russian army providing training and armaments.<sup>155</sup> In 2015, the Wagner Group assumed ground combat missions with Syrian and Iranian forces in Syria.<sup>156</sup> Its scope of work would later expand to about 13 African countries.<sup>157</sup>

There are no official figures on the number of Wagner Group fighters in Syria.<sup>158</sup> According to the online publication newspaper Republic, citing Russian security sources, there were 2,500 Wagner members in Syria in March 2016, including 1,600 fighters, to whom a budget of \$350 million had been allocated since the start of the operation. Moreover, 40% of these recruits are reported to be felons arrested for committing serious crimes. However, their numbers decreased after many combat veterans were withdrawn from Syria to fight in Ukraine after the large-scale Russian invasion in 2022.

The Wagner Group played a significant role in supporting Syrian government forces to recapture the city of Palmyra from ISIS in spring 2016, losing 32 of its 2,500 participating members in the process. They were again involved in the recapture of Palmyra in 2017, this time equipped with heavy weaponry, including T-72 battle tanks, Grad multiple rocket launchers, and 122 mm howitzers.<sup>159</sup> Despite these efforts, Wagner experienced considerable losses in Syria, with the number of its members killed in 2017 reaching 200, in stark contrast to the 19 losses reported by the Russian army in the same period.

Wagner presence in Syria declined<sup>160</sup> since 2016, as the group's resources in Syria have decreased following tensions with the Russian Ministry of Defense, which was financing it and supplying it with weapons and equipment. This prompted Prigozhin to establish a company called Evro Polis which signed in December of the same year a contract with the Syrian state-owned General Petroleum Corp. The agreement stipulated the restoration of control over oil fields and infrastructure that were under the control of ISIS.<sup>161</sup> and providing protection, in exchange for 25% of production revenues for five years,<sup>162</sup> such that Evro Polis would pay the salaries of Wagner's mercenaries, which range between 200,000 and 300,000

154 "The Last Battle of the "Slavonic Corps"", The Interpreter, 16 Nov 2013, <https://www.interpretermag.com/the-last-battle-of-the-slavonic-corps/>

155 "St. Petersburg Sends Contractors to Syria", The Interpreter, 15 Nov 2013, <https://www.interpretermag.com/st-petersburg-sends-contractors-to-syria/>

156 Ibid.

157 Khalil al-Anani, "Wagner Mercenaries in the Service of State Terrorism", Aljazeera.net, 27 Jun 2023, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/333r7uzp>

158 "Syria cracked down on Wagner after mutiny in Russia: Report", Aljazeera.com, 7 Jul 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/7/syria-cracked-down-on-wagner-after-mutiny-in-russia-report>

159 Tor Bukkvolla, Åse G. Østensen, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies: The implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 11 Sep 2018, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security>

160 Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 July 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>

161 Amy Mackinnon, "Putin's Shadow Warriors Stake Claim to Syria's Oil", Foreign Policy, 17 May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/17/putin-shadow-warriors-stake-claim-syria-oil-energy-wagner-prigozhin-libya-middle-east/>

162 Kevin Maurer, "Special Forces Soldiers Reveal First Details of Battle With Russian Mercenaries in Syria", 11 May 2023, <https://thewarhorse.org/special-forces-soldiers-reveal-first-details-of-battle-with-russian-mercenaries-in-syria/>

rubles per month.<sup>163</sup> -<sup>164</sup> In March 2021, the Syrian government concluded a deal with the little-known Russian company Capital, which would later be revealed to be affiliated with the Wagner Group, for oil and gas exploration in a 2,250 square kilometer off-shore block. In late 2019, companies Mercury and Velada, also associated with Wagner Group,<sup>165</sup> signed three oil and gas contracts with the Syrian government.

According to media sources, between June 25 and 27 of 2023, immediately after the group's leader, Prigozhin, mutinied against the Kremlin,<sup>166</sup> Wagner fighters in Syria were asked to sign new contracts in which they would report directly to the Russian Ministry of Defense, and their salaries were reduced. Whoever refused these conditions was transferred on a plane to Mali. The Russian Ministry of Defense also withdrew<sup>167</sup> Wagner fighters from the oil and gas fields in the Syrian city of Palmyra, and replaced them with the "ISIS Hunters" special forces unit of the Syrian army.<sup>168</sup> As for Wagner Group's assets, and its share in the production of Syrian oil and gas fields, they have likely been repossessed by the Kremlin.

## Accountability Efforts for Wagner Group

Following the circulation of a disturbing video from 2017 depicting the brutal killing of a Syrian civilian, who the perpetrators claimed was associated with ISIS, by beating him with a hammer, dismembering, and burning him, the International Federation for Human Rights, the Russian Memorial Center, and the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression took legal action. They filed a lawsuit within the Russian judiciary system in 2021, seeking justice for the victim on behalf of his brother.

However, on January 18, 2022, the Basmany District Court in Moscow dismissed the case. The court's justification was that the prosecution failed to establish the crime's elements, and the involvement of Russian citizens in the murder was not substantiated. This decision was later affirmed by the Moscow Court of Appeal.

The dismissal of the case in Russia opens the pathway to pursue justice at the European Court of Human Rights. Although decisions by this court carry significant moral weight, their enforceability in Russia is compromised. This is due to a 2015 law passed by the Russian Parliament,<sup>169</sup> allowing the Russian Supreme Constitutional Court to review and potentially annul international human rights court decisions if they are found to be unconstitutional within Russia.

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163 "The Wagner Group fighters in Syria are a parallel tool for the Russian army", France24, 21 Mar 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/2h42w9sy>

164 Kevin Maurer, "Special Forces Soldiers Reveal First Details of Battle With Russian Mercenaries in Syria", 11 May 2023, <https://thewarhorse.org/special-forces-soldiers-reveal-first-details-of-battle-with-russian-mercenaries-in-syria/>

165 Amy Mackinnon, "Putin's Shadow Warriors Stake Claim to Syria's Oil", Foreign Policy, 17 May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/17/putin-shadow-warriors-stake-claim-syria-oil-energy-wagner-prigozhin-libya-middle-east/>

166 Suleiman al-Khalidi, Maya Gebeily, "Syria brought Wagner fighters to heel as mutiny unfolded in Russia", Reuters, 7 Jul 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/syria-brought-wagner-group-fighters-heel-mutiny-unfolded-russia-2023-07-07/>

167 Matthew Luxmoore, "Russian Private Military Companies Move to Take Over Wagner Fighters", The Wall Street Journal, 5 Sep 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russian-private-military-companies-move-to-take-over-wagner-fighters-a568f938>

168 "ISIS Hunters" is a special forces unit of the Syrian army formed in 2017 after the defeat of government forces in the Battle of Palmyra in December 2016, and consists entirely of volunteers. [RT - صيادو "داعش" .. لواء سوري لملاحقة الإرهابيين](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/17/isis-hunters)

169 "Putin Approves a Law that Obstructs Justice for Russian Victims of Human Rights Violations in International Courts", France24, 15 Dec 2015, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/3zcjmvn>

## Moran Security Group

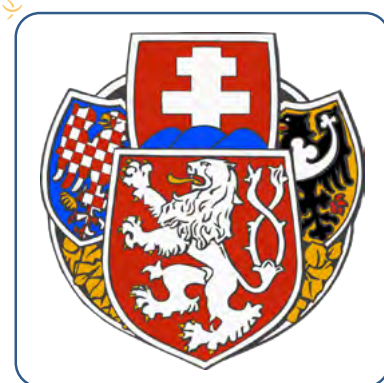
In December 2013, members of the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement discovered an identification card belonging to a Russian named Alexei Budikov, a mercenary with the Moran Security Group, issued in December 2012. This discovery predates the official Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, suggesting the involvement of Russian private security companies, such as Moran, in the Syrian conflict on behalf of government forces against opposition groups.

The Moran Security Group, as described on its website,<sup>170</sup> Moran Security Group presents itself as a Private Security Company (PSC) offering a variety of services including security, transportation, medical aid, rescue operations, and consulting. The company emphasizes its respect for the cultural norms and legal frameworks of the host countries where it operates, asserting full compliance with international, local laws, and regulations.

Established in 1999, Moran has a history of providing security services, particularly in maritime protection around the Bab al-Mandab strait and the Arabian Gulf. It also has a background of operations in Iraq, both prior to and following the American invasion. Based in St. Petersburg, Russia, Moran is managed by Lieutenant Colonel Vyacheslav Kalashnikov of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), which suggests connections between the company and Russian intelligence services.

## Vega Strategic Services Ltd

In January 2019, the security company Vega (or Vegacy) published a series of [promotional videos](#) depicting its activities in Syria, and published pictures of training exercises conducted by the company in the Syrian regions. A video clip shows a Russian trainer from the company addressing fighters from the Palestinian al-Quds Brigade, which is fighting alongside the Syrian government forces. The brigade's fighters were undergoing a training course at the hands of trainers from the company amid the ruins of one of the destroyed villages in the Aleppo countryside.



In the [promotional video](#), posted on [the company's official website](#), clear shots appear fighters from the company accompanied by members of the [Palestinian al-Quds Brigade](#). [Other photos](#) show a fighter from the company in military uniform standing in front of the Palmyra Roman Theater, [and another picture of fighters](#) believed to be taken in southern Syria.

The company's official website explains that it was founded in 2012 in Cyprus by veterans and former employees of naval, army and special police units in Ukraine, Russia and Greece. The company defines itself as "an international company that provides a wide range of specialized services, mainly aiming to identify and prevent potential security threats to personnel and infrastructure in vulnerable areas, and is one of the few security companies that uses its own weapons, advanced technologies and security equipment from major manufacturers and developers.

170 [Moran-group.org/en/about/index](http://Moran-group.org/en/about/index)

## Slavonic Corps<sup>171</sup>

The company, which was established by former members of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in 2012, recruits former military personnel with combat experience to work outside Russia in exchange for \$5,000 monthly wages, \$20,000 compensation in the event of disability, and \$40,000 death compensation.

In 2013, the Syrian government contracted with the Russian Moran Security Group, to guard infrastructure and provide protection services for VIPs. Moran was also engaged in missions against ISIS and to regain control of oil facilities from the extremist organization's fighters, but it was not up to the assigned task. Thus, a decision was made to establish the Slavonic Corps company,<sup>172</sup> registered in Hong Kong in 2013 by two employees of Moran Company, to carry out the mission. 250 of its members were trained in offensive operations in the city of Latakia and then sent to guard oil fields in Deir ez-Zor. But after suffering heavy losses in clashes with the Islamic State/ISIS as a result of coordination problems with the Syrian government and logistical issues related to their receiving old weapons in insufficient numbers, the company's activity in Syria was halted.<sup>173</sup>

According to the Slavonic Corps website, the company provides defensive and preventive services to protect economic facilities, oil refineries, ports, factories, buildings, and protect logistical convoys. This is contrary to the evidence indicating that its members actively participated in ongoing fighting in Deir ez-Zor Governorate in 2013, in addition to guarding the oil fields.

## United People's Communal Partnerships (E.N.O.T Corps)<sup>174</sup>

Founded in 2011 by the Russian nationalist Igor Mangushev, E.N.O.T was active in the Russian war on Ukraine in 2014, in addition to its military activities in Syria,<sup>175</sup> and the Karabakh region, which Azerbaijan regained from Armenia. E.N.O.T Corps was based in the Ukrainian region of Donbass and, since 2015, the company has had training camps in Serbia and Belarus, and has recruited fighters of all ages, including children between the ages of 12-18. Its relationship with the Kremlin soon became strained, and a number of its officials were arrested in Russia, most notably its financial officer, Vladimir Morozov, on charges of extortion. In addition to the trial of Roman Telenkevich, the leader of the organization, by 2022. Roman Telenkevich, was sentenced to prison on charges of organizing a criminal community, extortion, and threatening to kill or cause serious bodily harm. In early February 2023, Mangushev himself was fatally shot in the back of the head while inside Ukraine.

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171 Rhys Dubin, "Russia May Soon Allow Foreigners to Officially Serve in Its Military", Foreign Policy, 11 Oct 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/11/russia-may-soon-allow-foreigners-to-officially-serve-in-its-military/>

172 "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State", The Center for Strategic & International Studies, 21 Sep 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>

173 "Turkish security expert: Moscow will increase its dependence on Russian mercenaries in Syria after its withdrawal", Turk Press, 2 Dec 2017, (Arabic) <https://www.turkpress.co/node/42533>

174 Paul Goble, "Russian Nationalist Group, Acting as a Private Military Company, Worries Kremlin", 15 Nov 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-nationalist-group-acting-as-a-private-military-company-worries-kremlin/>

175 Dmitry Nikitin, Rostislav Bogushevsky, Alina Volchinskaya, "The FSB began detaining members of the PMC E.N.O.T", Dailystorm.ru, 9 Nov 2018, (Russian) <https://dailystorm.ru/obschestvo/fsb-nachala-zaderzhivat-uchastnikov-chvk-e-n-o-t>

## Redut-Antiterror<sup>176</sup>

Redut was established in 2008,<sup>177</sup> composed of former Russian military personnel<sup>178</sup> from the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, the Air Force, units of the Ministry of Defense, who have previous combat experience abroad, and peacekeeping forces. Redut was active in the Ukrainian theater, and participated in many operations in the Ukrainian Donbass region, in addition to activities in Iraq, Somalia, Caribbean countries, and Indonesia, to secure oil and military facilities and Russian diplomats. Redut has armored personnel carriers, light and medium weapons, and light military equipment to perform rapid combat missions. However, it suffered major losses in the Ukrainian war, which weakened its capabilities compared to other companies, most notably Wagner Group. The US Treasury designated the Redut as a Russian mercenary force and placed it under the sanctions, prohibiting the transfer, export, or withdrawal of any funds or property on the territory of the United States belonging to the company. Redut participated in Syria by guarding the facilities established by Gazprom, which the Kremlin acquired from the billionaire Gennady Timchenko. The company is actively recruiting on Russian social networks, and requires applicants to be at least 25 years old and to have military expertise, or experience in law enforcement agencies.<sup>179</sup>



## Antiterror-Orel Group<sup>180</sup>

Founded in 2003 by former soldiers in the Russian army, Antiterror-Orel Group began its operations in Iraq to clear mines and protect energy infrastructure. In 2013, its members established the Slavonic Corps PMSC company, which served as a precursor to the Wagner Group. This group was also part of the establishment of Wagner Group, and formed the nucleus of another company, Redut-Antiterror.

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176 Matthew Luxmoore, Benoit Faucon, "Russian Private Military Companies Move to Take Over Wagner Fighters", The Wall Street Journal, 5 Sep 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russian-private-military-companies-move-to-take-over-wagner-fighters-a568f938>

177 <http://www.ffi.no/en/>

178 Nicholas Chkhaidze, "PMC Redut: The Wagner Group's Potential Replacement", Geopolitical Monitor, 30 Aug 2023, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/PMC-redut-the-wagner-groups-potential-replacement/>

179 Mark Krutov, Sergei Dobrynin, "Who's Who Among Russia's Mercenary Companies", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 23 May 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-other-mercenary-companies-ukraine/32424520.html>

180 Filip Bryjka, "Russian 'Contractors' In the Service of the Kremlin", Warsaw Institute, 14 Aug 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-contractors-in-the-service-of-the-kremlin/>

## RSB-Group<sup>181,182</sup>

Officially registered in Moscow in 2011 as a non-profit organization, RSB-Group was established by a mixture of former Russian military intelligence and FSB officers.<sup>183</sup> The company participated in protecting naval ships in African waters off the shores of Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea, and worked in mine clearance operations in Libya. It also participated in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

## Turan Group

In October 2017, the media circulated a Russian newspaper interview<sup>184</sup> with a fighter who claimed to have fought in Syria for a private military company called Turan. According to this source, along with Wagner, Turan Group is the most important Russian private military and security company in Russia. He also described Turan as a battalion of Muslim fighters from Central Asia and the North Caucasus. Turan means “the land of the Turks”, and generally refers to Central Asia. Despite this, there is a lot of uncertainty about Turan, as some question its existence and consider it a Russian media hoax.



## Shield

The Russian security company known as Shield emerged as the last private company to play a role in military activities in Syria in June 2019, following the killing of three of its members as a result of a bombing 50 kilometers from the Tuinan gas field in Homs Governorate.

According to a report by the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, The number of members of the Shield in each location in Syria is between 25 and 30 individuals, with no more than 200 or 300 members, while the rotation period for each crew is three months, subject to renewal, in exchange for a monthly salary that amounted to 180,000 rubles (about \$2,800) last year, before it was reduced by a third.<sup>185</sup>

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181 “Private Russian military companies are multiplying - and so are the Kremlin’s problems”, France24, 16 Jul 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230716-private-russian-military-companies-are-multiplying-%E2%80%93-and-so-are-the-kremlin-s-problems>

182 Tor Bukkvolla, Åse G. Østensen, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies: The implications for European and Norwegian Security”, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), 11 Sep 2018, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security>

183 [Rsb-group.org](http://Rsb-group.org)

184 Ruslan Leviev, “Turan - a new private military company fighting in Syria or an elaborate hoax?”, Conflict Intelligence Team, 6 Jan 2018, <https://citeam.org/turan-pmc/?lang=en>

185 “Russian private military security companies are active in Syria”, Daily Sabah, 1 Aug 2019, (Arabic), <https://tinyurl.com/yc49jr7v>



The first news that circulated about the Shield Company was in 2018,<sup>186</sup> and its headquarters are located on the outskirts of Moscow, according to Novaya Gazeta sources. Its tasks are limited to guarding five sites of the Russian company Stroytransgaz, owned since 2008 by businessman Gennady Timchenko, which has been operating in Syria since 2000 and whose projects include phosphate mines east of Palmyra, two gas refineries, and a 139 km long gas pipeline.

Shield does not have any tanks, artillery weapons, or missile systems. Rather, its equipment is limited to heavy firearms with a caliber not exceeding 12.7 mm. It also does not participate in active combat operations, but rather performs “conventional guard” tasks for security companies.

## 5. Non-Russian Security and Military Companies

### 5.1. Turkish Security and Military Companies

#### SADAT Defense

Founded in 2012 in Istanbul, SADAT initiated its operations in Syria within the same year. A 2020 report by the French website Africa Intelligence highlighted SADAT’s role in training Syrian opposition fighters, suggesting that groups trained by this company might develop stronger allegiances to Turkey and Erdogan, potentially at the expense of Syria.<sup>187</sup> Following Turkey’s Euphrates Shield military operation in northern Syria in 2016, SADAT assumed responsibility for overseeing the training and preparation of the Syrian National Army (SNA).



Contrary to the common perception of private military companies (PMCs) as entities driven primarily by financial gain,<sup>188</sup> SADAT’s operations in Syria align closely with Turkish governmental interests and policies. It restricts its services to the armed and police forces of nations that are friendly or allied with Turkey. Adnan Tanriverdi, the founder of SADAT, articulated that the company’s establishment aimed to assist Islamic countries beyond the reach of the Turkish Armed Forces, positioning the company as serving a broader ideological goal rather than merely seeking profit. This mission includes shifting the power balance in favor of Islam.<sup>189</sup>

186 “We were afraid of disrupting the operation to free the survivors: After the Ministry of Defense announced the death of Russian officers who disappeared in Syria on February 22, Novaya publishes details of what happened that day”, Novaya Gazeta, 27 Mar 2019, (Russian) <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2019/03/26/79999-my-boyalis-sorvat-operatsiyu-po-osvobozhdeniyu-vyzhivshih>

187 “Border protection: Turkish military company SADAT’s discreet charm offensive”, Africa Intelligence, 1 Nov 2022, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2022/11/01/border-protection-turkish-military-company-sadat-s-discreet-charm-offensive.109840510-art>

188 Matt Powers, “Making Sense of SADAT, Turkey’s Private Military Company”, War on the Rocks, 8 Oct 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/making-sense-of-sadat-turkeys-private-military-company/>

189 “Turkish SADAT: Between the Grip of Accusations and the Dream of an Islamic Confederation”, Noon Post, 18 Jan 2023, <https://www.noonpost.com/46312/>

SADAT's official website describes its mission as providing military training, defense consulting, and ammunition procurement internationally, explicitly stating it operates no military forces nor engages in illicit activities. While some perceive SADAT as a covert armed wing of the Turkish government, it could also be viewed as an evolution of the unofficial units associated with Turkey's "deep state" in the pre-Erdogan era.<sup>190</sup>

## Malhama Tactical

Malhama Tactical, a private military company, announced its establishment in May 2016,<sup>191</sup> and has since experienced significant growth in its combat, training, and advisory roles within territories held by the armed opposition in Syria. Securing several contracts with groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly al-Nusra) and the Turkestan Islamic Party,<sup>192</sup> Malhama Tactical operates out of Uzbekistan and caters exclusively to Sunni jihadist factions. The company specializes in military and weapons training, with its personnel including experienced fighters from elite forces. In 2017, Malhama Tactical notably trained members of the Ahrar al-Sham groups in the use of anti-tank missiles and coordinated team-based offensive and defensive operations.<sup>193 194</sup>

## 5.2. American PMCs

Media reports have highlighted the U.S. military's reliance on civilian contractors, especially after the U.S. administration decided to reduce its troop presence in northeastern Syria in 2019. The founder of Blackwater suggested that private military companies (PMCs) could potentially take over the roles of U.S. army units withdrawing from Syria,<sup>195</sup> aiming to secure U.S. allies, notably the Syrian Democratic Forces, and to counteract Iranian influence in the region.

While official estimates indicated that American troop numbers in Syria were around 900 soldiers, General James P. Jarrard mentioned in 2017 a figure closer to 4,000, likely including American PMC contractors in his count.<sup>196</sup> A 2018 Pentagon report acknowledged for the first time the presence of U.S. civilian contractors in Syria, noting approximately 5,500 contractors across Iraq and Syria, with about half being U.S. citizens and the rest third-country nationals, primarily in support and non-combat roles.<sup>197</sup>

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190 Mahmut Cengiz, Layla Hashemi, Vladimir Semizhanov, "Alternative Ways to Seek Regional and Global Influence: How Shadowy Organizations Serve the Interests of Turkey, Iran, and Russia", Small Wars Journal, 04 Jul 2022, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/alternative-ways-seek-regional-and-global-influence-how-shadowy-organizations-serve>

191 "Global Disruption of Three Terror Finance Cyber-Enabled Campaigns", US Department of Justice, 13 August 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/global-disruption-three-terror-finance-cyber-enabled-campaigns>

192 Yavor Raychev, "Malhama Tactical: A New Disturbing Trend in Jihad Conflicts", 27 Nov 2017, [https://www.academia.edu/37814133/MALHAMA\\_TACTICAL\\_A\\_NEW\\_DISTURBING\\_TREND\\_IN\\_JIHAD\\_CONFLICTS](https://www.academia.edu/37814133/MALHAMA_TACTICAL_A_NEW_DISTURBING_TREND_IN_JIHAD_CONFLICTS)

193 Alessandro Arduino, Nodirbek Soliev, "Malhama Tactical: The Evolving Role of Jihadist Mercenaries in the Syrian Conflict", INSIGHTS No. 262, 22 Jun 2021, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Insight-262-Alessandro-Arduino-and-Nodirbek-Soliev.pdf>

194 Sean McFate, "Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today", National Defense University Press, 4 Dec 2019, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2031922/mercenaries-and-war-understanding-private-armies-today/>

195 Richard Hall, "US troops in Syria could be replaced by private contractors, Blackwater founder Erik Prince says", The Independent, 15 Jan 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-us-troop-withdrawal-private-contractors-blackwater-erik-prince-trump-military-a8729121.html>

196 Ted Galen Carpenter, "Syria episode shows how contractors still used to fight America's wars", Responsible Statecraft, 31 Mar 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/31/syria-episode-shows-how-contractors-still-used-to-fight-americas-wars/>

197 Joshua Keating, "Forever Wars Don't End. They Just Go Corporate", Slate, 24 Jan 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/01/military-contractors-iraq-kenya-syria.html>

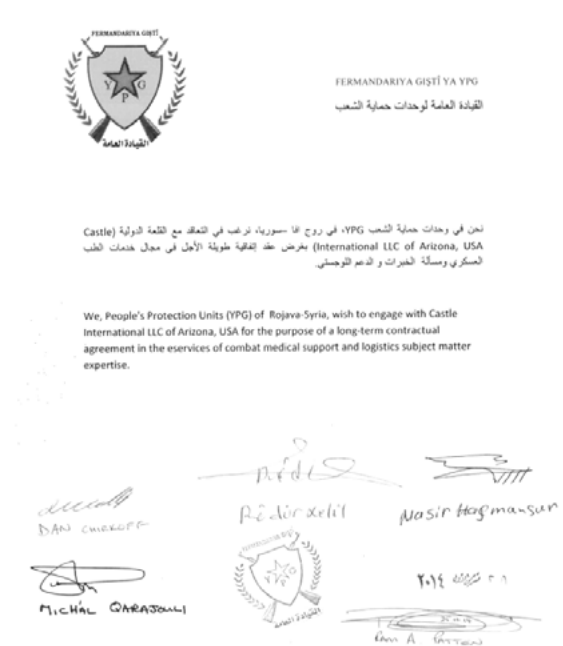
By February 2021, the number of U.S. security and military contractors had surged to 1,413 companies, with over 90% engaged in supportive, non-combat functions.<sup>198</sup> Data from the fourth quarter of 2022 revealed 941 security contractors in Iraq and Syria, with no armed PMCs reported.<sup>199</sup>

In response to an attack that killed an American contractor and wounded five service members in March 2023 in a drone strike against a Coalition base near Hasakah in the northeast of the country, the U.S. conducted air strikes on Iran-affiliated targets in Surba.<sup>200</sup> Despite these developments, the identities of American military companies operating in Syria remain largely undisclosed, with Castle International being one of the few exceptions publicly acknowledged.

## Castle International

Castle International, headquartered in Scottsdale, Arizona, entered into a training contract with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in 2014.<sup>201</sup> On its website, Castle International positions itself as a leading provider of military services on the international stage. Its Special Projects Group is active in regions such as Africa, Iraq, and Syria, engaging in services tailored to high-risk areas across the Middle East and beyond. The company is known for employing experts who offer specialized services, including evacuations and medical assistance in conflict zones.

A report by Anadolu Agency highlighted a document found on Castle International's website concerning its agreement with the YPG. The document outlines the YPG's intention to "establish close relations with Castle International for combat medical aid and logistical support," indicating a desire for a long-term partnership.<sup>202</sup>



198 Ted Galen Carpenter, "Syria episode shows how contractors still used to fight America's wars", Responsible Statecraft, 31 Mar 2023, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/03/31/syria-episode-shows-how-contractors-still-used-to-fight-americas-wars/>

199 "Defense Primer: Department of Defense Contractors", Congressional Research Service, 17 Jan 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10600>

200 Courtney Kube, Peter Alexander and Mosheh Gains, "U.S. contractor killed, 5 service members and contractor wounded in suicide drone strike in Syria", NBC News, 24 Mar 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-contractor-killed-service-members-wounded-suicide-drone-syria-rcna76453>

201 Ersin Çelik, "US sends Castle International mercenaries to fight alongside YPG/PKK in Syria", Yeni Şafak, 17 Sep 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/us-sends-castle-international-mercenaries-to-fight-among-ypg-pkk-in-syria-3441294>

202 "Castle International. Small bipod in the Syrian game, or the new American PMC", Topwar.ru, 22 Sep 2018, <https://en.topwar.ru/147319-castle-international-melkie-soshki-v-sirijskoj-igre-ili-novaja-amerikanskaja-chvk.html>

## 6. Security and Protection Companies

In Syria, local private security companies have played pivotal roles in ensuring the supply, support, and logistical services for international security and military companies, as well as in the recruitment of Syrians to fight abroad, notably for Russia. Iran has also utilized private security companies to solidify its influence and sustain its presence in strategic Syrian locales, including the Baghdad-Damascus highway and Damascus city itself.<sup>203</sup>

These companies began to proliferate in Syria with the country's shift toward a market economy post-2000, venturing into the security and guarding sector. Initially, these emerging entities had to secure licenses from local governorates and the Ministry of Commerce, alongside approval from the Political Security Division of the Ministry of Interior, with their operations largely confined to protection duties within Damascus.

By the end of 2007, Damascus had seven registered security companies, with Aleppo hosting two.<sup>204</sup> late 2007, as well as two such companies in Aleppo. In 2008, al-Bustan Company joined it to provide security for the "Damascus Capital of Arab Culture" festival. The landscape changed dramatically post-2011; over 15,000 police officers, primarily from the Internal Security Forces, defected from the Ministry of Interior, when the number was around 43,000 police officers according to the 2011 census.<sup>205</sup> With the subsequent escalation of military and security operations and the increasing need for additional forces, Legislative Decree No. 55 was issued<sup>206</sup> enabling militias to utilize military force under contract without coordinating with security directorates, provided they were registered with the Ministry of Interior's Private Protection Companies Office. The decree mandates that licenses for security companies are valid for one year, with the possibility of renewal. It requires that these companies must exclusively import weapons after securing approval from both the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense. The approval process allows for the importation of light weapons or, in cases where the facilities requiring protection are located in remote areas outside of cities, medium weapons. Additionally, the decree categorizes companies based on the size of their workforce: Category 1 includes companies with over 800 personnel, Category 2 including those with 500 to 300, and Category 3 for companies with fewer than 300 personnel.

A 2021 survey by SCM researchers revealed a significant rise in the number of licensed security companies, reaching between 75 to 80, registered with the Ministry of Interior. However, the commercial registration of certain companies, like Alpha Protection, guarding, and security systems, and Falcon for systems and services, had been annulled. Notably, a security company associated with the Makhoul Group faced economic sanctions. The survey also showed the diversity of tasks, characteristics, and financial revenues of these companies.

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203 Navar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria", Atlantic Council, 5 Nov 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>

204 Manhal Baresh, "Private security companies in Syria: new agents at the regime's service", Technical Report, Middle East Directions (MED), Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, December 2020, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/68315>

205 Sasha al-Alou, "The Syrian Ministry of Interior: Reality and Necessities of Reform", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 22 Jan 2020, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/4uw4br3n>

206 People's Assembly of Syria, "Legislative Decree 55 of 2013 granting a license to private protection and guarding services companies", 5 Aug 2013, (Arabic) <https://tinyurl.com/mr2cjewv>

The most prominent companies involved in recruiting fighters for combat missions in Syria, or mercenaries outside, are:

<b>Company Name</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Information</b>	<b>Tasks and services</b>
Castle Protection, Guarding and Security Services C.S.P	Damascus - Homs - Latakia - Tartous	Category 1 PSC Personnel: 800+	Several sources confirmed Iranian role in the company, as company personnel work to protect Iranian visitors.
Al Fajr Protection	Damascus - Homs - Latakia - Tartous	Launched in 2018, licensed by the Ministry of Interior by Resolution No. 21 C.N	Managed by Lawrence Halawa, and directly linked to the Military Intelligence Directorate.
Shorouq Company for Protection and Guarding	Damascus - Homs - Latakia - Tartous	Shorouq Company for Protection and Guarding	Licensed in 2005, owned by Maher Desouki, a close affiliate of Maher al-Assad.
Al-Areen Security Services Company	Damascus -Homs - Latakia	Name changed to al-Jabal Company for Protection and Guarding Services	Managed by Osama al-Maliki, who has ties to the General Intelligence Directorate.
Al-Jabal Company	All governorates	Formerly al-Areen Security Services Company	Managed by Osama al-Maliki, who has ties to the General Intelligence Directorate.
National Company for Protection and Guarding	Damascus - Homs	Provides its services to public and private entities and various sectors and economic activities.	Protection of facilities (laboratories - oil facilities - commercial establishments) Money transfer - escorting convoys of goods and oil derivatives
Al-Maham Company for Protection and Security Guards	Aleppo	Katerji International Group	Owned by Ghiath and Abdullah Katerji, who are close to the security services and involved in committing violations.

Proguard	Damascus	Provides security consultations.	Owned by Raef Hilal and his son Hussam Raef Hilal.
Al-Derea Company for Guards and Security Services	Latakia-Tartous		Owned by Samer Foz, who has close ties to the Syrian security services and is subject to economic sanctions.
Aleb Security Consulting	Aleppo	Owned by Katerji Group	Owned by Hussam and Muhammad Katerji, and directly managed by the leadership of the 4th Armored Division - Operations Office.
Qasioun Security Services	Damascus - Latakia	Managed by Raymond Ain Chaiba.	Owned by Rami Makhoul Commercial Group, which is subject to sanctions.
Al-Hosn Guarding and Security Consulting Services	Damascus - Latakia	License revoked	Owned by Rami Makhoul Commercial Group, which is subject to sanctions.
Falcon Security Services Company	Damascus - Latakia	License revoked	Owned by Rami Makhoul Commercial Group, which is subject to sanctions.
Alpha Security Services	Damascus - Latakia	License revoked	Owned by Rami Makhoul Commercial Group, which is subject to economic sanctions.
Al-Sayyad Security Services Company	As-Suwayda - Tartous - Hama	Specializes in the recruitment of men from Suwayda Governorate to send to fight in Libya	Owned by Fawaz Mikhail Girgis, a resident of the city of Mharda, Hama Governorate, who was decorated with a medal by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2018 and is closely linked to Wagner Group.



# Recommendations

## Syrian Government

Acknowledging the crimes and harm inflicted on civilians by the recruitment and use of mercenaries in Syria. Promptly implement measures for compensation, restitution, and both structural and psychological rehabilitation to ensure victim satisfaction.

Enforcing a prohibition on all forms of propaganda, recruitment, and community activities by mercenary groups, particularly in the provinces of al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor.

Revoking Legislative Decree No. 55, which permits licensing for private protection and guarding services. A new law should be enacted to regulate these entities, including mandatory training in international humanitarian law and human rights for members as a prerequisite for legal registration.

Facilitating the visit of the working group on the use of mercenaries to Syria, allowing comprehensive access to review Ministry of Interior records, aviation logs, and to study recruitment and transportation methods. This should aim to identify individuals responsible for mercenary use and their impacts on human rights, culminating in appropriate legal accountability and compensation.

## The United Nations and International Organizations

For the United Nations to draft a new international convention aimed at criminalizing the use of mercenaries, including a unified and comprehensive definition that encompasses emerging forms such as cyber mercenaries.

For the International Law Committee of the United Nations General Assembly and the International Committee of the Red Cross to revise Article 47 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions. This amendment should extend beyond merely depriving mercenaries of prisoner status and assigned protections to outright criminalizing mercenary use.

For the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prioritize and enhance awareness regarding the adverse impacts of mercenary and private military and security company activities on human rights. Highlighting their role in state destabilization and the obstruction of national sovereignty is crucial, particularly in contexts of armed conflict where such entities operate.

## The International Community

Emphasize the responsibility of states for the actions of their affiliated private military companies and ensuring that military cooperation and consulting services provided by such entities do not result in human rights violations or infringements.

Develop a more nuanced understanding and framework to oversee mercenary activities through national, regional, and international mechanisms. Enhancing bilateral, regional, and international collaboration is crucial, particularly in border management and monitoring, alongside analyzing the political, economic, and social drivers that fuel mercenary activities.

Advocate for legal action at the state or regional level against individuals with credible evidence of involvement in using or recruiting mercenaries. This includes applying individual sanctions, freezing bank accounts, and leveraging global jurisdiction or relevant national laws to hold these individuals accountable.

## Syrian civil society organizations

Unify efforts among human rights centers and organizations documenting Syrian human rights violations to conduct a thorough survey of mercenary groups, security, and military companies engaged in recruiting and using mercenaries nationally. Preserve physical evidence and visual materials to establish their accountability.

Implement transitional justice mechanisms as a form of institutional collective therapeutic justice in addressing the issue of mercenaries and foreign fighters. This approach aims at reparations and compensation to foster social cohesion, restore balance, and meet Syrians' collective demand for justice, thereby rebuilding trust among victims towards the state. This includes offering medical treatment for survivors of detention, disappearance, and torture, alongside psychological support, rehabilitation programs, and establishing a fund to finance reparations and compensation for victims and their families impartially.

Ensure that transitional justice programs, while holding perpetrators accountable, also involve restitution and compensation for human rights violations resulting from mercenary recruitment. It's vital to differentiate compensation from social protection obligations owed to families who have lost their primary earners, safeguarding the rights of affected individuals and their families to seek judicial redress and compensation for any subsequent psychological and physical harm.

Promote and instill values of diversity, freedom, equality, and a cohesive national identity that transcends cultural, identity, and political divisions. This effort is aimed at countering regional endeavors and the resurgence of sub-identities that undermine Syrian national cohesion.

Increase awareness about attributing responsibility to the perpetrators of crimes, avoiding generalizations, accusatory rhetoric, and anything that detracts from national unity. Affirm that Syria is a nation of free and equal citizens, where communal rights are recognized regardless of religious, sectarian affiliations, fostering a unified national identity that embraces all societal components.



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