

Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir: Tribal Auxiliary Forces of the Military Intelligence

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The Syrian civil war has seen the rise of a number of factions claiming a tribal basis. One of the most prominent groups of this sort is Liwa al-Baqir, which is aligned with the regime. Based in Aleppo province, the militia traces its origins in Bekara tribesmen. Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir ("Forces of the Fighters of the Tribes"), the subject of this piece, is another pro-regime militia highlighting a tribal basis, as illustrated by its very name.



An emblem of Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir. On top: "Syrian Arab Republic. The Army and the Armed Forces- Intelligence Branch." On bottom: "Lions of the Jazeera. Forces of the Fighters of the Tribes."

Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir is led by one Sheikh Turki Abu Hamad, who is a member of the political office for the Arab Socialist Movement, which split off from the Ba'ath Party in 1963 but is today part of the National Progressive Front, a coalition of political parties led by the Ba'ath Party. In August 2016, the Arab Socialist Movement's secretary general- Ahmad al-Ahmad- died in Damascus.



Turki Abu Hamad



Another photo of Turki Abu Hamad.



Emblem of the Arab Socialist Movement

Turki Abu Hamad is of particular interest because his name suggests origins in the Albu Hamad tribe of Raqqa province. There is also a village by the name of Albu Hamad in the east of the province. Interestingly, an anti-Shi'i account dating back to 2007 on supposed Shi'i proselytization efforts in Raqqa province claims that the village was entirely Shi'ified thanks to the efforts of someone who went to Lebanon to work and then returned and spread the Shi'i religion in the village. Another account does not quite make such a sweeping assertion but offers a similar narrative, stating: "Among the villages in which some of the people became Shi'a is the village of Albu Hamad, and there were no Shi'a in it originally, but some of those who worked in Lebanon became Shi'a and this affliction was brought over from there."

Commonalities exist between Suleiman al-Shwakh (the leader of the militia Fawj Maghawir al-Badiya) and Turki Abu Hamad. Besides the fact that both are originally from Raqqa, their militias are also both affiliated with the military intelligence. Below is a profile of Turki Abu Hamad and his brother Ahmad Abu Hamad written by SANA correspondent Shahidi Ajeeb in April 2016:

"[I am in the photo] with the two brothers: Sheikh Turki from the Albu Hamad tribe in Raqqa who appears alongside me, and his brother the engineer Ahmad. The two men have fought with the Syrian Arab Army for more than four years after terrorism entered Syria.

The two brothers have participated with 1700 fighters from the sons of the tribes on multiple fronts, and they participated in regaining the Ithiriya-Khanaser route and also

fought alongside the army's forces that regained the city of Palmyra and recently they were participating in regaining the locality of al-Qaryatayn in the Homs countryside.

Sheikh Turki- the leader of the fighters of the tribes in Syria- says that he, his brother and his fighters from the Syrian tribes will head to the locality of al-Sukhna with the army to liberate it from the Da'esh [Islamic State] terrorists as there will be 3000 fighters from the rest of the tribes to receive them.

Sheikh Turki affirms that the matter will not stop at the liberation of al-Sukhna in the east Homs countryside, but rather will continue with the sons of the tribes to Deir az-Zor without stopping till his tow of Raqqa that he waits with yearning to enter with the men of the Syrian Arab Army."

Note that Ahmad serves as the military commander for Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir. He should not be confused with another Ahmad of the Albu Hamad tribe, who was executed by the Islamic State alongside an Ali of this same tribe in August 2014. Both men had been serving in the National Defence Forces of Deir az-Zor province, and in revenge for their deaths Turki Albu Hamad is said to have beheaded two Islamic State members. A photo exists showing Turki Albu Hamad holding two severed heads.

An assault to retake the town of al-Sukhna in the northeast Homs desert- as implied in Shahidi Ajeeb's profile- did not quite materialise. While there should be no doubt that retaking al-Sukhna and connecting with the Deir az-Zor holdings via a land route are important goals for the regime, attention in 2016 was primarily directed towards recapturing the entirety of Aleppo city: operations in which Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir actively participated, including both the encirclement of rebel-held east Aleppo city as well as the final assaults that retook those eastern neighbourhoods.



Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir insignia on a vehicle: "The Intelligence Branch: Muqatili al-Asha'ir."



Certificate of commendation for Turki Abu Hamad granted earlier this year by Zayd Ali Saleh, head of the security and military committee in Aleppo, for "excellent cooperation in combat operations." Note also the description of Zayd Ali Saleh as head of the 30th infantry division in the Republican Guard.

Here, a side-note on Saleh and his position as head of the 30th infantry division in the Republican Guard is necessary. This division is apparently a new creation, set up by order of the General Command for the Army and the Armed Forces in late January 2017 with Saleh appointed as its head. Saleh has also served as the deputy head of the Republican Guard, having been appointed to the position in January 2016, and in August 2016 he became head of Aleppo's security committee.

The idea behind this new 30th division seems to be that all formations operating on the ground in Aleppo province should have an affiliation with it: i.e. should be subjected to Saleh's command. Saleh has issued multiple decrees in the hope of dealing with real and potential problems caused by militias in Aleppo since the full recapture of the city. For example, in February 2017, he issued a statement to "all military, security, police, and auxiliary units (the friends)" warning against confiscation of transferred food goods as well as warning against detaining those who had evaded or deserted military service until 8 March 2017 as the deadline for *taswiyat al-wad'* ("sorting out of affairs") for such persons.

In March 2017, he issued another statement to all forces in Aleppo, announcing new regulations in light of "acts of theft, plunder, stealing and attacks on public property, the freedoms of citizens and their private property." The statement ordered in particular for the Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir contingent of 500 fighters to be transferred east from Aleppo city to the al-Khafsah area and the water pumping station there by the Euphrates River, towards which the Syrian army and its allies (including Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir) had been advancing, partly to regain control of a crucial resource from the Islamic State but also to block further advances for Turkey's Euphrates Shield project. More generally,

Saleh's statement ordered for the auxiliary factions' leadership bases to be transferred to an appropriate place. Yet Saleh also issued a follow-up clarification affirming his praise for Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir in particular.

The recruitment basis and geographical spread of operations appear to be diverse, with contingents and deployments ranging from Aleppo and Hama to the eastern regions, including Qamishli and Deir az-Zor. In an interview with Russia Today's Arabic channel in June 2016, Turki Abu Hamad seemed to affirm that most of the recruits were from the wider eastern region of Syria. In any case, the gaining of new recruits has been advertised by Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir in media, as was the case with a new contingent of recruits from the Homs province locality of Maran al-Fawa'ira advertised in September 2016. The recruitment occurred following the recapture of the area and *taswiyat al-wad'* for the relevant persons.

In at least one other instance though, recruitment has proved to be more controversial. In June 2016, a story emerged of a number of youth from the primarily Druze province of Suwayda' who had joined Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir. They had reportedly joined the group on the (monthly) basis of a salary of 110,000 Syrian pounds and a schedule of 20 days of work and 10 days of leave. This Suwayda'-origin contingent for Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir went by the name of Bayraq al-Suwayda' and took part in fighting in the wider Palmyra area in the direction towards al-Sukhna, losing at least 3 fighters in the process. However, as the recruitment promises had not been kept, the group decided to abandon Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir, but they were detained under threat of arms at the hands of Turki Abu Hamad's group, prompting an intervention from the Suwayda' National Defence Forces' head Rashid Saloum to bring the fighters back to their home province in two buses.

The existence of Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir raises broader analytical points. Contrary to the long-standing assumption that the regime's interest has only been in western Syria (also called "useful" Syria), militias under the command of persons from places like Raqqa province with recruits from wider eastern Syria do point to a regime interest in reclaiming those areas, which constitute important economic holdings anyway. It seems likely that there will be attempts to bolster the likes of Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir and Fawj Maghawir al-Badiya as regime pushes towards the east intensify. The Russians seem to have been particularly keen from the outset to promote these groups, whose affiliations are to intelligence agencies. Indeed, the Russians have bestowed awards on both Turki Abu Hamad and his brother Ahmad Abu Hamad, just as they bestowed an award on Suleiman al-Shwakh. Turki Abu Hamad in particular seems to have tight and friendly relations with the Russians.

In short, expect Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir and similar groups to come to greater prominence once the regime's campaigns for Raqqa province, Deir az-Zor province and the remaining areas of the Homs desert are at the forefront of operations.

(Update 3 May 2018): Subsequent accounts of Turki Albuhamad describe him as being part of the Abu Sha'aban tribe (cf. [this pro-opposition article](#) noted by Elizabeth Tsurkov). The Albuhamad part of his name more specifically refers to his origin from the village of Albuhamad in Raqqa. For example, note [this important interview](#) with him from last year by Sputnik, which describes him as a "sheikh of the Abu Sha'aban tribe."
Notable highlights of the interview:

- Besides owning agricultural lands, he also worked in the business of car dealership with his cousins. He says he was in his village of Albuhamad when the insurgents first entered. They took his cars and began looking for him. Thus, along with some family members, he left for Deir az-Zor province, and with the Islamic State takeover of most of Raqqa province in 2014, his house was blown up after being emptied of its possessions.
- After entering Deir az-Zor, he set up Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir, initially with 200 fighters from the Albuhamad tribe, conducting operations with division of personnel into contingents of 25 fighters each. Disguising themselves as insurgents, they would kidnap members of insurgent factions and hand them over to the security apparatuses.
- Turki Albuhamad was then sent to Damascus while his fighters stayed in Deir az-Zor. From there he was sent to Homs to set up another force of tribal fighters. With this force, he participated in the battles to retake Palmyra from the Islamic State as well as battles in the al-Qaryatayn and Mahin. His group also participated in the battle to recapture Aleppo city from the rebels. He subsequently sent a force of 300 fighters in coordination with the Russians to participate in the second battle to recapture Palmyra (the Islamic State had recaptured Palmyra in December 2016).
- He set up another force to participate in the campaign to push towards al-Tanf in 2017.
- Claimed Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir has around 5000 fighters, receiving training from both the Russians and Hezbollah, with arming and financing coming from the Russians and Syrian army in addition to self-funding. The Syrian army at the current time, he says, does not have the capacity to conduct training operations.
- Turki has seven children, the oldest of whom leads the machine gun squadrons in Quwat Muqatili al-Asha'ir.
- He claims to have very good relations with the Russians, who have bestowed on him 15 honours, in addition to an honorary doctorate in military sciences.