

Profile: Aleppo Defenders Legion

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Part of a series: Militia Spotlight: Profiles (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight-profiles)

or see Part 1: How to Use Militia Spotlight: Profiles (/policy-analysis/how-use-militia-spotlight-profiles)

An Aleppo-based militia umbrella group that serves as an auxiliary unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in north Syria.

Name: Failaq al-Modafeen Aan Halab (Aleppo Defenders Legion, or ADL)

Type of movement: A Syrian *fasail* (armed group) primarily engaged in kinetic paramilitary operations targeting any opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime in and around Aleppo. Their mandate extends to centralizing and managing all law enforcement and legal activities in that area, effectively functioning as the regime's primary local enforcement entity. Their operational tactics reportedly include arson, murder, and physical assaults on opposition members.

History:

- Established** (https://www.alestiklal.net/ar/view/11475/dep-news-1639228150) on February 27, 2017, the ADL brought together the majority of local militias supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Its formation occurred shortly after regime-backed militias took control of Aleppo city's eastern neighborhoods. The umbrella group includes formations that emerged in the first quarter of 2017 as the regime expanded at the expense of the Islamic State in the eastern Aleppo countryside. Membership in the ADL is also open to civilians.
- The ADL has divided Aleppo city into four sectors referred to as "squares," with the "Second Square" considered the most influential, located in the central district of al-Telfon al-Hawaei. These squares act as the governing authority in each area, exercising control over local leaders and neighborhood councils that consist of individuals close to the ADL. The legion is also represented in Aleppo's provincial and city councils. Each square has sub-offices that directly oversee the provision of services related to education, culture, religious affairs, and other matters.
- The legion is considered the successor to the Local Defense Forces in Aleppo, previously led by Col. Haitham Naif, who was reportedly killed in a traffic accident on the Khanaser road in May 2018.
- The ADL **sponsors** (https://ayn-almadina.com/tags/%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%82%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86%20%D8%B9%D9%86%20%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7/) responsible for trafficking drugs through areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), specifically Manbij, Tal Rifaat, and the Aleppo countryside adjacent to Afrin.

Objective:

- This group's main objective appears to be exerting control over Aleppo's military and civil affairs in ways that serve the Assad regime's strategic interests, using massive support from the IRGC-QF. It pursues this goal in large part by taking over local governance structures and engaging the local population in activities that it believes will foster support and loyalty.



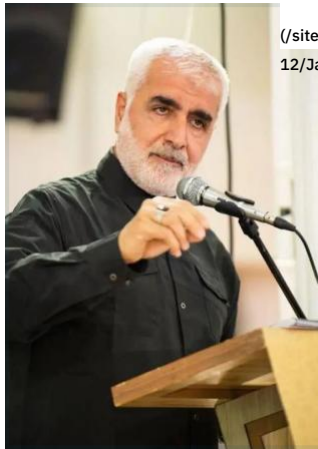
Aleppo Defenders Legion logo



Figure 1: Aleppo Defenders Legion members holding signs reading "Death to America and Israel."

Chain of command:

- **Saber Rameen:** An Iranian national and IRGC-QF commander fluent in Arabic, Rameen took command (<https://www.syria.tv/%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%87%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%9F>) of the ADL in November 2021 following the departure of IRGC Brig. Gen. Javad Ghaffari, a key leader for local and tribal pro-Iran militias in Aleppo. Rameen's public appearances in Aleppo marked a new phase of Iranian influence and made him the first openly feted IRGC-QF figure in the area.



(/sites/default/files/2023-12/Javad%20Ghaffari.JPG)

Figure 2: Javad Ghaffari, IRGC-QF commander in Syria until November 2021.

- **National Defense Forces:** ADL armed battalions, including Fawj al-Safira, Fawj Hadher, and Fawj Azan, are affiliated (https://effect-network.blogspot.com/2020/04/blog-post_86.html) with the National Defense Forces, the umbrella group for regime irregular units established after Assad's forces reestablished control in the southern Aleppo countryside in 2015. Tellingly, the ADL includes the phrase "National Defense Forces" in the top half of its logo.
- **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps:** The IRGC contributed (<https://www.syria.tv/%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%87%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%9F>) to the ADL's establishment and has since supported the legion, providing salaries, equipment, and logistical assistance. Some members have been sent to Iran to learn Persian. Additionally, the IRGC assured certain recruits that their service would fulfill their mandatory military obligations for the Syrian army. Many members have also been sent to Iran for training in closed camps, not only for military fighting skills but also for civil defense, mine clearance, rapid intervention, and riot control.
- **Assad regime:** The ADL maintains a strong connection with the regime, regularly sharing (https://t.me/f_m_aleppo/34699) propaganda and government media releases through its Telegram account and presenting many of its events under Assad's patronage. Furthermore, ADL leader Saber Rameen has held numerous meetings (<https://www.syria.tv/%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%87%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%9F>) with local Baath Party officials. The legion's logo appears to show that it is aligned with (or part of) the Syrian Armed Forces, and its slogan, "Homeland, Honor, and Sincerity," is mirrored in the official SAF's flag.

Affiliate relationships:

- **Liwa al-Baqir (/node/18453):** The ADL maintains strategic connections with the militia Liwa al-Baqir, as demonstrated through public endorsements and expressions of condolences on various social media platforms. In **September 2018** (https://t.me/f_m_aleppo/10884), the ADL's Telegram channel defended Liwa al-Baqir after one of its members murdered an army captain, hailing the militia as the primary reserve force for the Syrian army and expressing steadfast support for its commitment and sacrifices in safeguarding the nation.
- **Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (/node/18486):** In 2018, ADL members helped (https://t.me/f_m_aleppo/11061) the engineering corps of the pro-regime militia Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas remove explosive devices and shells left by armed groups in Aleppo's Salah al-Din al-Hashkal neighborhood.
- **Lebanese Hezbollah:** The ADL has demonstrated its affiliation with Hezbollah through vocal social media support (https://t.me/f_m_aleppo/41392) during the latter's 2023 border clashes with Israel.
- **Liwa al-Quds:** The ADL's strategic affiliation with the pro-regime militia Liwa al-Quds is evident in their mutual expressions of support on social media and high-level meetings between their leaders. In January 2022, the Facebook page for the Liwa al-Quds political wing posted (https://www.facebook.com/qdspolitical/posts/3086724511570879/?locale=hi_IN&paipv=0&eav=AfbMLCcMxrXHYPtWWh8B4QDB9HVIHS6wlmxqyT-TCeffXp5f5igMM43bRnwL8Y1iYVZw&_rdr) a picture of its leader, Muhammad al-Saeed, meeting with Saber Rameen to discuss "the Holy Trinity of Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and the Iskenderun District, and how their path to liberation lies behind the wise leadership of President Bashar al-Assad."

Subordinate relationships:

- The ADL differs (<https://www.syria.tv/%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8>) from other Iran-backed militias in Aleppo because it encompasses various factions and is structured much like a regular military formation. ADL sub-units have distinct spheres of influence within the city (governed by the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth command "squares") and the surrounding rural areas (e.g., the Safir Square, Deir Hafir Square, and al-Hadher Square). Some brigades are directly under the legion's command, such as the subordinate Liwa al-Baqir factions Fawj al-Safira, Fawj al-Mahdi, and Force 313.
- At one point the ADL formed a brigade named "Sayed al-Shuhada," the majority of whose members were child and youth recruits.
- The ADL is active on Facebook with multiple associated accounts, most of them affiliated with specific "squares" in Aleppo. The group's activities are also broadcast on individual Facebook profiles by individual members as well as residents of Aleppo.
- The ADL maintains an active presence on Telegram with a small subscriber base of just over 300. This channel disseminates information pertaining to the militia's engagements, shares Syrian regime propaganda, and posts endorsements of affiliated militias in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

- The ADL also maintains a YouTube channel (with very few subscribers and last active in 2019) and Instagram page (with little activity and few followers).



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