

REBEL GROUPS IN JEBEL AL-ZAWIYAH

The Assad regime managed to regain control of Damascus after a week of intense fighting, but the regime is unlikely to regain control of the whole country. Nowhere in Syria is this fact more apparent than in Jebel al-Zawiyah, where rebel groups have become so effective and well-resourced that the security forces are unlikely to muster the combat power required to defeat them.

The rebel-held regions in northern Syria are fertile grounds for developing more sophisticated tactics and organizational structure. One of the most important rebel strongholds sits amid the rural hills of Jebel al-Zawiyah between the cities of Hama and Idlib. While the Assad regime focuses its efforts on Syrian cities, border regions, and the coastal provinces, rebel groups in Jebel al-Zawiyah have built command-and-control structures and strengthened their offensive capabilities. Detailed study of the insurgent networks in Jebel al-Zawiyah reveals a shift in tactics that indicates a maturing operational planning capability. IEDs, small-arms fire attacks, and hasty ambushes are giving way to coordinated and sustained attacks against regime targets, particularly since the end of May 2012. In the most recent instance, fighters from a variety of militant groups traveled outside of their traditional areas of operation to conduct a combined raid on a fortified checkpoint on Syria's main north-south highway, overrunning the checkpoint and cutting off Aleppo from the south. The rebels demonstrated this mobility again when fighters from Damascus' northern suburbs travelled south to fight the regime in a five-day battle in the heart of the capital. This development is an example of the evolution of rebel capabilities from tactical small unit attacks to the operational attacks of an organized military force.

THE JEBEL AL-ZAWIYAH STRONGHOLD

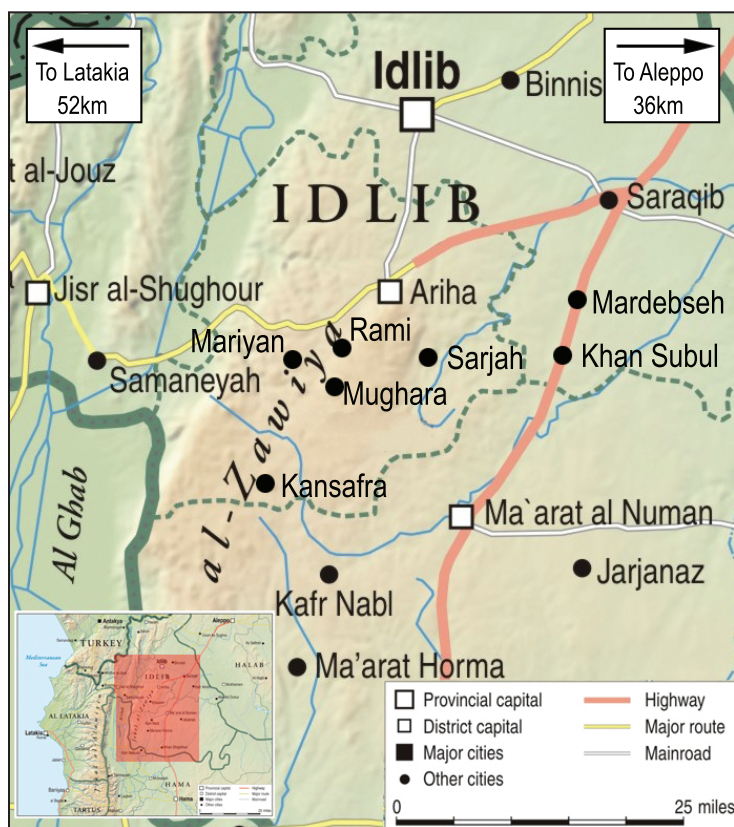
Jebel al-Zawiyah is an undulating region located southwest of Aleppo city between Idlib city and the plains of northern Hama. The city of Ariha, which straddles the main road linking Aleppo to the coast, is the gateway to Jebel al-Zawiyah, while the main north-south highway connecting Aleppo to Damascus lies roughly eleven kilometers to the east. Controlling Jebel al-Zawiyah means controlling this vital line of communication that connects Homs City and Damascus to the northern provinces. Jebel al-Zawiyah is also 30 kilometers from the Turkish border, which affords uninterrupted access to foreign support.

The dominant rebel groups in Jebel al-Zawiyah are the Suqour al-Sham Brigade based in the village of Sarjeh, 6.5 kilometers south of Ariha, and the Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion (also known as the Harmoush Battalion and the Jebel al-Zawiyah Martyrs Battalion), based in the region's central and southern hills.

Fighting in Jebel al-Zawiyah began after Syrian military forces violently dispersed protests throughout the spring and summer of 2011. That summer, small groups of fighters emerged in villages across the region, some led by military defectors such as Captains Ammar al-Wawi and Yousif Yahya who announced their defection in a joint statement in August 2011.¹ Capt. Yahya carried out an attack the following day. Early combat action took the form of intermittent hasty ambushes, IEDs, and small arms fire directed at checkpoints and patrols.

Rebels in the region held large armed demonstrations in November 2011, creating the impression that the regime was losing control of the area. The regime responded in December when an armored column drove a contingent of fighters and civilians out of Kansafra and Kafrouaid into a nearby valley. Regime security forces positioned themselves on a ridge overlooking the valley and fired on the villagers below for several hours, and then executed those who survived the ordeal.² The rebel decision to seek refuge in a valley was a tactical mistake they would not repeat.

Undeterred, the rebels continued their attacks in January 2012, planting IEDs and raiding checkpoints. In one prominent early January attack, the Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion raided a checkpoint in Kfar Haya, 6.5 kilometers southwest of Ariha. A video of the raid shows fighters loading ammunition chests onto the back of a pickup truck. The rebels seized dozens of RPGs, thousands of machine gun rounds, and night-vision goggles during the attack.³ The regime withdrew from Kfar Haya the following day, signaling a consolidation of forces elsewhere.⁴



MAP | JEBEL AL-ZAWIYAH

In early February, the regime pulled large contingents of its troops out of the area as it prepared for major operations around Homs and other urban centers. A video shot three kilometers to the east in Sarjeh on February 6 and later posted on the Suqour al-Sham website shows a convoy of regime security forces leaving the village. Suqour al-Sham fighters then gathered around the brigade's leader, Ahmed Abu Issa, to celebrate Sarjeh's liberation.⁵

The regime likely did not leave because of pressure from the rebels, who were yet loosely organized; nevertheless, the regime's drawdown from the region allowed the rebels to consolidate, reconstitute, and reorganize during the spring. This is one of the central dilemmas facing the regime. They are able to clear regions of rebel fighters but are unable to hold the territory because of pressing needs elsewhere.

Suqour al-Sham took advantage of its new breathing space by adding four new battalions. By late March, the Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion announced on its Facebook page the creation of the Ibrahim Hunanu Brigade with two other rebel groups. Colonel Afeef Suleiman formed a provincial-level military command called the Idlib Military Council during this period as well.

Despite the regime's focus elsewhere, controlling Ariha has remained a priority for the government because it sits on the main route that connects Aleppo to the coast. The regime has mounted armored offensives into Ariha every month

since March, but the rebels successfully resisted them all. Early in 2012 the regime maintained a garrison in the center of Ariha, but armored incursions in March and April failed to establish control of the city. In May, the regime tried again to clear the city, but was decisively defeated as rebels finally took the regime's downtown garrison.⁶ By mid-May the regime only occupied checkpoints outside the town. One soldier manning a checkpoint told a reporter in May that "We just stay here...if we go inside Ariha they will slice us up."⁷

On May 26, the Idlib Military Council called off the ceasefire declared in accordance with the Annan peace plan, citing the massacre in Houleh.⁸ The Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion echoed the announcement on its Facebook page shortly thereafter, demonstrating its close connection to the provincial military council.⁹ Two days later, as night fell on May 28, Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah and Suqour al-Sham attacked a checkpoint outside the village of Mughara in a sustained assault that lasted more than eight hours.¹⁰ By the morning of May 29, the rebels controlled the checkpoint along with a T-62 tank and a 'Shilka' anti-aircraft armored personnel carrier.¹¹ The same night, a smaller group named Qisas Baba Amr captured a checkpoint in the neighboring town of Mariyan.¹²

The attack showed that the militant groups in the region are capable of planning and executing joint operations based on decisions made at the provincial level. The Mughara and Mariyan actions forced the hand of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) leadership in Turkey, pushing them to terminate the ceasefire on June 1, shortly after FSA leader Riad al-Assad denied that the rebels planned on renouncing the cease fire.¹³ The raid effectively negated the Annan peace plan. It also demonstrated that groups inside Syria, and not exiles inside Turkey, drive rebel activity in Jebel al-Zawiyah.

From a military command and control perspective, this attack demonstrated effective communications, operational planning, and coordination between separate rebel commands. A Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah video shows roughly 100 fighters streaming into a courtyard to organize before the attack. The fighters then broke into groups of roughly ten fighters, each group with a designated leader who briefed his unit on its specific mission. A Suqour al-Sham video shows roughly 40 fighters gathering before the fight and receiving instructions. Suqour al-Sham battalion commanders such as Abu Musab of the al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar Battalion took part in the fighting, and brigade commander Ahmed Abu Issa appeared celebrating atop a captured tank after the battle.

Furthermore, this attack demonstrated Suqour al-Sham's ability and willingness to conduct operations outside its



PHOTO | REBELS ATTACK A KHAN SUBUL BUNKER. SOURCE: YOUTUBE

traditional Sarjeh-Ariha area of operations. The central hills of Jebel al-Zawiyah where Mughara is located are dominated by the Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah, whereas Suqour al-Sham's territory lies several kilometers to the East. This is an important step in the transformation of the Syrian insurgency from a collection of local militias to a capable fighting force that is responsive to operational tasking. As the insurgency continues to progress, it will be important to consider the rebels' ability to conduct operations in attack zones that are distinct from their traditional support zones.

It is also important to note that the rebels' ability to conduct a sustained, eight-hour assault demonstrates their greatly increased supply of ammunition. Assaulting a defended position requires combatants to suppress the enemy position to allow for the advance of an assault force; whereas in an ambush, combatants need to fire for only a few minutes before withdrawing. The change in the style of attack demonstrates that rebels in Jebel al-Zawiyah have achieved access to a reliable supply of ammunition. The attack at Mughara coincides with western media reports of an increased flow of weapons over the Turkish border.¹⁴

In early June the regime tried to take Ariha again and was met with highly effective IEDs, one of which, planted by the Ibad al-Rahman Battalion, ripped the turret off a tank.¹⁵ Isolated reports of Explosively Formed Penetrators (EFPs), an advanced form of IED designed to defeat armored vehicles, appeared during this period in Jebel al-Zawiyah and Syria as a whole.¹⁶ Although no images of the devices have emerged, there are videos that some observers have flagged as possible EFP attacks. An early May video showed a projectile from an IED punch a hole in the side of a military bus in Idlib.¹⁷ On June 7, the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade posted a video of a tank in Ariha being struck by a device that cleanly penetrated the tank's armor and instigated a series of secondary explosions inside the tank.¹⁸ A week later, a reporter in Khan Shaykhun, just south of Jebel al-Zawiyah, reported that rebels in that city had begun receiving EFPs, but did not report seeing the devices himself.¹⁹ There is video evidence confirming that the rebels are producing shaped charges, which require

less precision and are capable of penetrating armor, though with less accuracy. Rebels in Jebel al-Zawiyah are capable of defeating armored vehicles with a single IED. Whether or not these IEDs are in fact EFPs has not been definitively established.²⁰

EFPs are best remembered for their role in Operation Iraqi Freedom, where they were associated with Iranian support to Shia militants. Within Syria, it is unlikely that EFPs are being produced domestically, as reports of EFP attacks have been rare. It is possible that some stray devices have made their way to Syria from Iraq, possibly by way of the arms trade. It is also possible that the shape charges observed in Syria are not EFPs after all.

At the end of June, the Jebel al-Zawiyah rebel groups expanded their attack zone by assaulting a fortified Syrian military garrison in the town of Khan Subul on the main north-south highway eleven kilometers east of Jebel al-Zawiyah. This again demonstrated that the rebels in Jebel al-Zawiyah are no longer limited to opportunistic attacks. They now carry out offensive operations that require traveling far from their traditional base of operations as well as effective planning and coordination.

On June 26, Suqour al-Sham and Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah anti-aircraft machine guns mounted on pickup trucks brought down a helicopter in Maardebseh.²¹ Jebel al-Zawiyah rebels consistently bring anti-aircraft guns to large engagements, forcing the regime to contend with a surface-to-air threat. Fighting intensified the following day three kilometers to the south in Khan Subul. A large contingent of fighters from four distinct rebel groups destroyed multiple armored vehicles and a Zil transport truck. As the day drew to a close, rebels streamed across an open field and overran a fortified bunker.²²

The battles in Maardebseh and Khan Subul demonstrated the increasing operational capacity of rebel groups in Jebel al-Zawiyah. An Ahrar Al-Sham video listed four

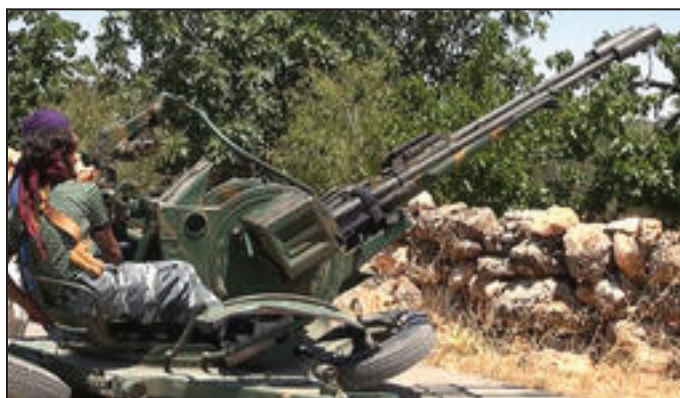
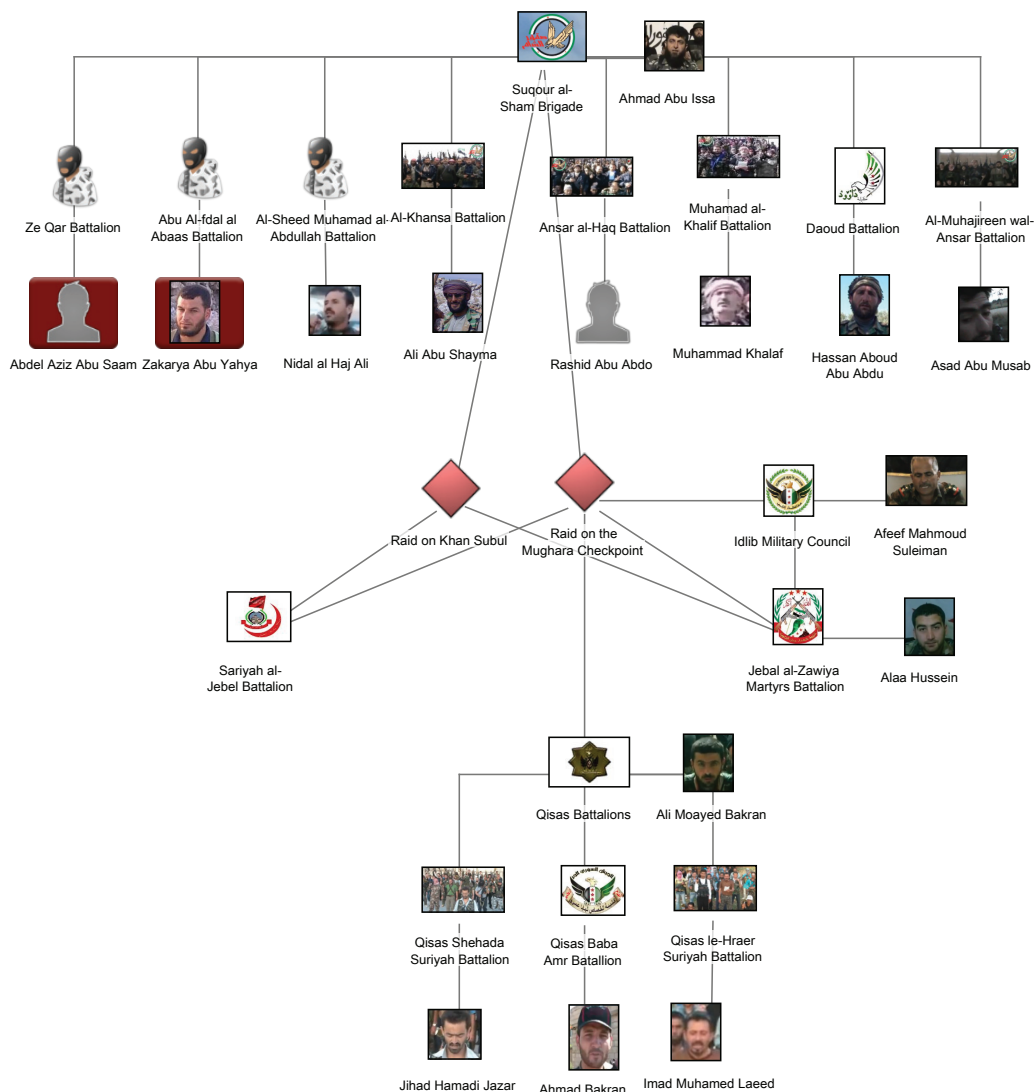


PHOTO | SUQOUR AL-SHAM ZU-23-2 ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN. SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.SHAMFALCONS.NET/EN](http://www.shamfalcons.net/en)

JEBEL AL-ZAWIYAH MILITANT NETWORKS



distinct rebel groups that participated in the operation and required that the rebels travel long distances to carry out a sustained attack. Video evidence confirms that the leaders of both Suqour al-Sham and Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah were themselves present for the battle. A video from the 27th showed Ahmed Abu Issa with his fighters enjoying a meal and recounting the day's battle.²³ Lt. Alaa Hussein, leader of Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah, appeared in a video in Khan Subul itself.²⁴ The central leadership of these groups traveled from the hills around Ariha, eleven kilometers to the east, to carry out coordinated attacks against the regime.

Maardebseh and Khan Subul are critical because they sit on the highway that connects Damascus to Aleppo, and the rebels' decision to mount a major offensive here represents strategic planning among Syria's armed opposition. The capture of Khan Subul has given the rebels control of a portion of the main north-south highway, cutting off Aleppo from the south at the same time that rebel control

of Ariha has cut off Syria's main economic center from the coast. The operation had a direct impact on the regime's ability to resupply its troops around Idlib. According to an activist in contact with Idlib rebels, the regime's last remaining concentration of troops around Idlib had to be resupplied by air throughout the beginning of July because the rebels controlled all the ground lines of communication to the north.²⁵

On July 13 an armored column accompanied by an attack helicopter pushed into the village of Rami. Rebel groups from across Jebel al-Zawiyah converged on the village to stop the advance. Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah positioned a mounted anti-aircraft machine gun on the edge of town while Suqour al-Sham deployed a ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft gun, forcing the helicopter to withdraw. Not long after, the rebels closed in on and destroyed the regime's armored vehicles in the center of town.²⁶

The rebels of Jebel al-Zawiyah possess anti-tank and anti-aircraft capabilities and coordinate offensive action across rebel commands. Since late May their freedom of maneuver and area of operations has expanded beyond the hills of southern Idlib province. If Assad falls, the political leadership in Jebel al-Zawiyah will likely be drawn from leading rebel figures. It is therefore important to understand the unique history, ideology, and leadership of the major groups.

JEBEL AL-ZAWIYAH REBEL GROUPS

Suqour al-Sham Brigade



The Suqour al-Sham Brigade formed in September 2011 under the leadership of Ahmed Abu Issa in the town of Sarjeh, 6.5 kilometers south of Ariha. The name means “Hawks of the Levant,” and the group is often called the Sham Falcons.

Like most rebel groups, Suqour al-Sham fighters are a mix of defectors and young civilians. The nucleus of fighters that would later form Suqour al-Sham emerged during the summer of 2011. As the regime violently put down peaceful protests, young males in Jebel al-Zawiyah coalesced to push the regime out of their villages. In Sarjeh, Ahmed Abu Issa and his brothers, Daoud and Abou el-Fadl appeared prominently in the early skirmishes. In the fall, after Daoud and Abou el-Fadl were killed, Ahmed organized fighters in the village into the Suqour al-Sham.

According to its website, the brigade has a civilian and a military wing. The civilian wing dominates and is run by a shura council headed by Ahmed Abu Issa, who is himself a civilian. This is uncommon among insurgent groups, as most leaders are military defectors. This wing acquires military supplies, food, and runs a media operation to raise its international profile. Toward this end, the brigade possesses an information office run by Ahmad al-Assi who writes reports on operations, conducts interviews with members of the group, and narrates YouTube videos. The military wing is independent, but acts on the advice of the civilian leadership and depends on the civilian wing for supplies.²⁷

Suqour al-Sham publically identifies itself as part of the FSA and recognizes the Syrian National Council (SNC) as the “chief representative of the revolution abroad;” however, the group does not view the SNC as an organization that

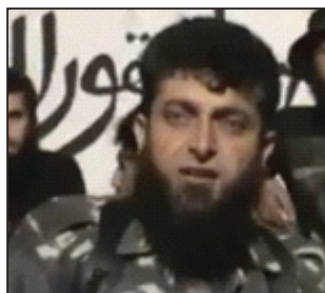


PHOTO | AHMED ABU ISSA



PHOTO | AHMAD AL- ASSI (BACK ROW, 2ND FROM LEFT) WITH THE SUQOUR AL-SHAM BRIGADE. SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.SHAMFALCONS.NET/EN](http://www.shamfalcons.net/en)

can legitimately issue orders.²⁸ Also, there is no indication that they are directly tied to the Idlib Military Council, led by Col. Afeef Mahmoud Suleiman. Suqour al-Sham does, however, coordinate and operate in conjunction with groups that do operate under the provincial military council, like Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah, as evident in the raid in Mughara in late May.

As the brigade has grown in prominence, units in neighboring regions such as Aleppo city and northern Idlib have declared themselves members of Suqour al-Sham. The central leadership has sometimes recognized their affiliation, but the amount of coordination with these groups is assessed to be low. This includes a group called the Shuhada Halab al-Muham al-Khasa Battalion that has kidnapped a number of Shabiha.²⁹ Their videos are not posted on the Suqour al-Sham website, but the website does state that groups in Aleppo are “linked” to the brigade.

Other groups deemed inappropriate for the Suqour al-Sham brand have been rejected. In one instance, a woman in Aleppo named Thuwaiba Kanafani declared her unit a part of Suqour al-Sham.³⁰ Abu Issa quickly released a statement denying that there were any female fighters in his brigade.³¹ There are, however, eight subordinate units that do work closely and consistently with Abu Issa and the Suqour al-Sham leadership.

The Daoud Battalion, led by Hassan Aboud and named for Abu Issa’s deceased brother, is the brigade’s most effective battalion, in large part due to their impressive IED capabilities. IED attacks began to appear in Jebel al-Zawiyah in October 2011, shortly after Suqour al-Sham was founded. The use of IEDs increased steadily in the region from January through March 2012. During this time period the battalion struck checkpoints with an ingenious form of VBIED.

The battalion put captives and suspected spies into cars secretly rigged with explosives. When the vehicles stopped at a checkpoint, often those on the outskirts of Idlib city,

Daoud Battalion fighters remotely detonated the explosives.³² These attacks provide mobility, surprise, and a large kill radius, without sacrificing Daoud Battalion fighters or taking the ideological step of suicide attacks. In videos of these attacks, the group has been careful to note that despite their appearance, they are not “martyrdom operations.”³³ The group also engaged in roadside IED attacks such as an early February attack on an APC at the edge of an olive grove east of Nayrab.³⁴

Suqour al-Sham’s religious ideology has generated concern amongst observers who fear radicalization. In a sermon delivered in a mosque in late April, Abu Issa called on the Syrian people to turn toward their religion and to view politics as a vehicle for elevating God’s word. He also said that Muslims had lost their honor because they had abandoned Jihad, replacing aspirations for martyrdom with a fear of death.³⁵ Though this sermon, which was posted on Islamist websites, may have sounded radical by Western standards, an interview he gave in mid-June provided a more balanced view.

When asked about his vision for post-Assad Syria, Abu Issa said that he wanted to establish a moderate Islamic state “without imposing it on society.” He also said that he was “against the idea of conducting operations near civilian homes...There is no rule in Islam saying that the ends justify the means.”³⁶ It should also be noted that the group has not carried out any suicide attacks as of mid-July 2012. These statements suggest that while Suqour al-Sham is Islamist, in that its leadership is religious, it is not a part of the global jihadist movement of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. However, how a group portrays itself on the internet affects the nature of the external support it attracts.³⁷

Suqour al-Sham secures arms from a variety of sources, predominantly domestic. Most of the groups’ arms come from the Syrian military itself, from raids of checkpoints as well as defectors who take their weapons when leaving their units. More weapons come from sales by corrupt officers still serving. Ahmed Abu Issa told a reporter in early June that “These officers sell to us not because they love the revolution but because they love money. Their loyalty is to their pockets only, not the regime.”³⁸

There are also international arms networks providing weapons to Suqour al-Sham. In May, a group named Dara’a al-Rahma (*Shield of Mercy*) posted a video of roughly two dozen RPGs and machine gun belts with a sign that said the arms were destined for Suqour al-Sham.³⁹ Suqour al-Sham also has a sufficient cash flow to pay its roughly 1,000 fighters monthly salaries of \$25, and more to those with families.⁴⁰

Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion



Capt. Yousif Yahya announced the formation of the Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion in December 2011 while sitting next to Lt. Alaa Hussein in front of roughly 150 armed men.⁴¹ Yahya was a prominent early defector and the leader of the Free Syrian Officers Movement before it joined the FSA in September 2011.

The battalion, whose geographic focus is the hills of central and southern Jebel al-Zawiyah, had its first major battlefield success in late December when it destroyed an APC. Capt. Yahya’s brother, Alaa Yahya died in the fighting, but the engagement proved the battalion’s potential.⁴² A few days later, the battalion carried out the raid in Kfar Haya and seized large amounts of military equipment.

Capt. Yahya last appeared in a Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah video on January 19. He left the group shortly thereafter to found a group named the Saiqa Battalion in mid-February. On January 27, the younger Lt. Alaa Hussein appeared alone in a video for the first time. He is now the face of Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah and is probably the primary operational leader as well.

In late March, not long after Suqour al-Sham’s February expansion to eight battalions, and around the same time that the Idlib Military Council was formed, The Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion joined with the Dareq bin Zayd Battalion and the Aqba bin Nafaa Battalion to form the Ibrahim Hunano Brigade, named for a nationalist leader of the resistance against the French occupation.⁴³ The UN ceasefire began shortly thereafter, giving the new rebel structure time to establish itself and show its effectiveness in late May.

Whereas Suqour al-Sham is not considered part of the Idlib Military Council’s network, the Shuhada Jebel Al-Zawiyah Battalion is very closely tied to the provincial military commanders. On May 21, the battalion used Facebook to call on its followers to support the council.⁴⁴ As the Mughara checkpoint burned on the night of May 28, one Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah fighter called out the name of the Idlib Military Council in celebration, giving it a measure of credit for the attack.⁴⁵

On June 10 Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah posted a link on Facebook that allowed followers to nominate members of the Idlib Military Council’s Bureau of Political Affairs and Bureau of Relief. The announcement proclaimed that the council opened nominations to the public in order to create a “truly representative body.”⁴⁶

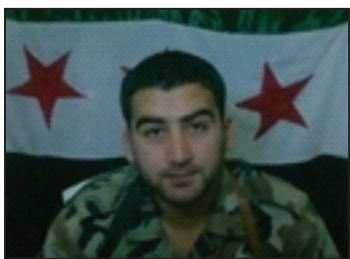


PHOTO | LT. ALAA HUSSEIN

Though Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah leaders have not publicly outlined a political-religious ideology, it is possible to infer their orientation from their statements and tendencies. First, it is clear that they are tied to Idlib Military Council,

a structure that represents an interface with the grassroots political movement and its parallel representative structure, the revolutionary councils. Affiliation with a military council thus signifies a rebel group's appreciation for a broader nationalist vision, and not just an operational victory. Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah is the most powerful group in Jebel al-Zawiyah to placed itself under the umbrella of the Idlib Military Council. It is also significant that Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah is part of a brigade named after Ibrahim Hunanu, an early twentieth century Syrian nationalist leader, while many other groups have named themselves after Islamic heroes. This does not mean that Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah is a strictly secular group; however, it suggests that they will be less likely to align with extremist organizations than groups such as Suqour al-Sham, the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade, and the Farouq Battalion.

Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah is likely part of the Idlib Revolutionary Council arms network. This network held a meeting in Turkey in mid-July to discuss persistent distribution problems and accusations of favoritism on the part of distributors in Turkey.⁴⁷ The council released a list of attendees that included an "envoy of the Jebel al-Zawiyah Brigade." There is no known rebel group with this name and it is possible that this was a reference to the Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion. The network includes Muslim Brotherhood members based in Jeddah as well as powerful rebel groups in northern Idlib, such as the Shuhada Idlib Brigade, and smaller groups in Jebel al-Zawiyah, such as the Qisas Battalions.⁴⁸

SMALLER AND EMERGING UNITS

In late March, a new group emerged in Jebel al-Zawiyah named Qisas Baba Amr, (*Revenge of Baba Amr*). The group selected its name to honor the neighborhood in Homs that the regime cleared in February through indiscriminate shelling.⁴⁹ The brigade's leader, Ali Moayed Bakran, was a decorator in an architecture firm in Beirut when the fighting broke out in Syria. He returned to his home village of Mariyan in Jebel al-Zawiyah and formed the Qisas Baba Amr Battalion, buying weapons from corrupt Syrian military officers and arms traders near the Iraqi border. During an

interview with a reporter in early May, Bakran claimed that his group had captured 35 government soldiers and executed 10 of them after the regime refused a prisoner exchange. He shot three of the prisoners himself and emphasized that both Sunnis and Alawites were executed.⁵⁰

The first major operation carried out by Qisas Baba Amr was the attack on the checkpoint in the village of Mariyan on the same night Suqour al-Sham and Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah took the Mughara checkpoint in a neighboring valley. In a video shot the following day, Ahmad Bakran, a leader of the group, said that their aim was to create a haven for the FSA in Jebel al-Zawiyah.⁵¹

In mid-June, shortly after the Mariyan attack, the group expanded its structure by creating the Qisas Battalions, including the Shuhada Suriyah Battalion led by Jihad Hamadi Jazar, the Qisas le-Hraer Suriyah Battalion led by Imad Muhamed Laeed, and the Qisas Baba Amr Battalion under the leadership of Ahmad Bakran.⁵² All told there are approximately 100 fighters among the Qisas Battalions.

The Qisas Battalions are part of the Idlib Revolutionary Council arms network.⁵³ Bakran personally attended the mid-July meeting in Turkey, where he complained of not receiving sufficient weapons and how his group must pay for its supply.⁵⁴

Another smaller group operating in the Ariha area is the Sariyah al-Jebel Battalion. Sariyah al-Jebel is a local affiliate of the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade, a loose network of Salafist groups spread throughout the country. The battalion emerged in late March, carrying out IED and sniper attacks around Ariha. They were among the three Ahrar al-Sham battalions that participated in the seizure of Khan Subul in late June, demonstrating their cooperation with the main Jebel al-Zawiyah militant groups.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

In under a year, the rebels of Jebel al-Zawiyah have evolved from isolated bands of militants into a complex network capable of major offensive operations directed at strategic targets. They have held territory against the regime's limited armored incursions and defeated main battle tanks and helicopters. Though the groups demonstrate a range of ideologies, they collaborate offensively and in defensive action against armed incursions. Travel outside of traditional support zones to attack regime targets is a practice that has recently emerged in other parts of Syria. For example, rebel groups from Douma, north of Damascus, traveled 12 kilometers to the Midan neighborhood in the heart of the capital to fight the regime July 15-20. Similarly, when the

Shuhada Idlib Brigade attacked Armanaz on June 21, over one hundred fighters traveled in a convoy of minibuses and vans to assault the city.⁵⁶ The increased availability of munitions has also been essential to the rebels' increase in operational capacity. Idlib rebel groups are able to sustain contact with the regime for hours and even days. Recent fighting in Damascus also reflects this growing operational capacity, as the six days of continued fighting in Midan demonstrated. The Syrian insurgency is maturing into a capable fighting force increasingly able to neutralize the regime's combined arms advantages and to strike at strategic targets that undercut Assad's increasingly tenuous grip on Syria.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition," Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

² "Syria unrest: Jabal al-Zawiyah 'massacres'" BBC, January 19, 2012.

³ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk_hScRRJtU&feature=related, January 15, 2012.

⁴ Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion Facebook Page, <http://www.facebook.com/djabal.Alzawia.martyrs>, January 2, 2012.

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oCUtf81bP7U&feature=player_embedded#!, April 28, 2012.

⁶ "Syrian rebels releasing prisoners in bomb-rigged cars," *New York Daily News*, June 21, 2012.

⁷ Mariam Karouny, "Soldiers wary as residents rage in Syria's Idlib," Reuters, May 10, 2012.

⁸ Idlib Military Council Facebook Page, <http://www.facebook.com/m.r.e.council>, May 26, 2012.

⁹ Shuhada Jebel al-Zawiyah Battalion Facebook Page, <http://www.facebook.com/djabal.Alzawia.martyrs>, May 26, 2012.

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¹³ Mariam Karouny, "Syrian rebels say no longer committed to Annan plan," Reuters, June 4, 2012.

¹⁴ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "Syrian Rebels get Influx of Arms with Gulf Neighbors' Money, U.S. Coordination," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2012.

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