



The Quds Brigade: Palestinian Militia Emerges as Key Russian Partner in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: The Syrian “Quds Brigade” (“Liwa al-Quds” in Arabic, also translated into English as the “Jerusalem Brigade” and not to be confused with a similarly named group in the Gaza Strip) is a Palestinian-majority pro-government militia that has been in the spotlight recently, as attested by the accompanying excerpts from Arabic-language media. The attention stems from the Quds Brigade’s role as Russia’s strike force in its ongoing anti-ISIS campaign in the Syrian desert, which was launched last August following the killing of a senior Russian officer by an IED in eastern Syria.



Syrian desert.

Source: Thekhan, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ea/Syrian_desert.jpg
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The first accompanying passage, published in late August by the opposition media outlet *Syria TV*, highlights the history of the Quds Brigade. Among others, the article draws on testimony from a rebel commander in Aleppo, who identifies the Quds Brigade as “the only group formed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the regime that was able to defend the [Aleppo] airport from Free Syrian Army attacks” in 2012. As the article explains, the Quds Brigade comes from Nayrab, a Palestinian camp/neighborhood on the eastern edge of Aleppo, adjacent to a strategic complex housing a military airbase and Aleppo’s airport. After becoming a formal militia, with backing from both Syrian Air Force Intelligence and the IRGC, the group’s influence spread to Syria’s other Palestinian camp/neighborhoods, most importantly in Damascus (Yarmouk) and Lattakia (al-Ramel). Since then, the Quds Brigade has been deployed to Syrian flashpoints in Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Idlib provinces; it is now said to include “fighters from various regions, including Daraa, rural Damascus, Hama, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa.” Amidst constant manpower shortages in the loyalist camp, the Quds Brigade has – according to opposition sources cited in the accompanying passage – stood out for “its ability to absorb numerous casualties due to its relatively large number of fighters, their lack of combat experience and the fact that they are given narcotic pills that affect their mental states.”

As the article from *Syria TV* recounts, the Quds Brigade garnered support from the IRGC’s Quds Force in the early stages of the Syrian conflict, thanks to its leaders’ connections with government security services and with Hezbollah, which established a presence in Aleppo after a wave of Lebanese refugees settled there following the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war. Relations between Russia and the Quds Brigade developed quickly following Moscow’s 2015 intervention and blossomed after the 2016 retaking of Aleppo from opposition forces, in which the Quds Brigades played a major role. A 2017 photo showing Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, alongside Quds Brigade leader Mohammad Saeed, likely helped cement the partnership. Since early 2019, Aleppo’s two main Palestinian neighborhoods (Nayrab and Handarat) have hosted Russian-supervised Quds Brigade training camps, from which fighters have been drawn to be the “tip of the spear” of Russian anti-ISIS operations in eastern Syria. A journalist cited in the first accompanying passage calls the brigade “a Russian proxy that can strike anywhere,” while one cited in the second one calls it “the face of Russian influence in eastern Syria.”

Initially held together by what one of the articles characterizes as Palestinian “solidarity” (‘asabiya), the Quds Brigade now enjoys what media reports describe as extensive Russian support, including the provision of training, equipment, salaries and other perks that are superior to those received by Iranian-backed militias. According to the accompanying Arabic-language media reports, in recent years the Quds Brigade has occasionally clashed with Iranian-backed forces in Aleppo province, the Syrian desert and along the Euphrates. While opposition media tends to describe the Quds Brigade as having shifted from Iranian to Russian patronage, as with much else that involves Russian-Iranian competition in Syria the devil is in the details. A commentator cited in the *Syria TV* report, for instance, describes the situation in northern Syria as follows: “The Quds Brigade can be said to have left the Iranian mantle in terms of support and training, but it has not been able to fully sever the relationship. It actually needs flexible relations given that the military and geographical weight in northern Syria favors the Iranian militias, which control 85% of territory, while Russian militias, including the Quds Brigade, control and influence only 15% of it.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“...[The Quds Brigade] has become the face of Russian influence in eastern Syria, Russia’s counter to Iranian influence...”



Continued: The Quds Brigade: Palestinian Militia Emerges as Key Russian Partner in Syria

Source:

“(Quds Brigade... Russian Militia Beyond Aleppo’s Borders),” *Syria TV*, 25 August 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/y5fnmeoy>

لواء القدس.. ميليشيا روسية خارج حدود حلب

[Mustafa Berro, commander of Aleppo’s Fastaqim Kama Umirt rebel group] noted that the Quds Brigade, which tricked the Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions and relied on “Palestinian solidarity,” was the only group formed by the IRGC and the regime that was able to defend the airport from FSA attacks... The displacement of thousands of Lebanese to Aleppo after the July 2006 war was the key to the tight relationships between [Quds Brigade leader Mohammed] Saeed and Hezbollah. Saeed was active in relief operations and in receiving displaced Lebanese, and the city became a destination for party leaders to coordinate efforts to help the Lebanese in the city. Journalist Manar Abd al-Razzaq pointed out that with the start of the demonstrations in the city of Aleppo, Air Force Intelligence assigned Saeed security tasks to control the Palestinian camps in Aleppo. With the beginning of military action, he approached the Iranians and became an arm of the Iranian Quds Force. He received logistic and military support from them and participated in several operations rooms alongside Hezbollah in Aleppo...

Mustafa Berro, the rebel group leader, said that the Quds Brigade was different from other regime militias because of its ability to absorb numerous casualties due to its relatively large number of fighters, their lack of combat experience and the fact that they are given narcotic pills that affect their mental states. This was evident in the regime’s battle to besiege the city of Aleppo, launched from the Nayrab Airbase and for which the Quds Brigade was the tip of the spear. Berro explained that the Quds Brigade relied on a tactic of attacking in waves, pushing group after group of its fighters along the offensive axis until finally being able, under heavy cover from airstrikes and artillery, to control the area... Toward the end of the Aleppo battle the brigade numbered 6,000 fighters, according to Mustafa Berro... After that, the Quds Brigade expanded to the Yarmouk Camp south of Damascus and the al-Ramel camp in the city of Latakia, in addition to opening headquarters in the central region as a launching pad and supply center for its forces in the Syrian desert all the way to Deir Ezzor... [Journalist Khalid] al-Khattib added that since early 2019, the Quds Brigade has established two training and preparation centers under Russian supervision, one in Handarat north of Aleppo and the other in Nayrab, to the east of the city. With Russian support, more fighters have joined its ranks and their salaries have become more formalized. It is here that competition between them and the Iranian militias began, and several clashes have occurred in Aleppo’s eastern neighborhoods, in which they have lost a number of fighters... Journalist Khalid al-Khattib, who closely follows regime militias in Aleppo, believes that the Quds Brigade has today become a Russian proxy that can strike anywhere, after being supplied with all types of military equipment and growing in numbers. It participated significantly in the Idlib battle and was a pivot in the operation alongside the Tiger Forces. These days, it is the tip of the spear in operations against ISIS as well as in competition with Iranian militias in the Syrian desert, specifically the Hama and Aleppo deserts, which is to say areas between north and central Syria reaching Damascus. Al-Khattib pointed out that “The Quds Brigade can be said to have left the Iranian mantle in terms of support and training, but it has not been able to fully sever the relationship. It actually needs flexible relations given that the military and geographical weight in northern Syria favors the Iranian militias, which control 85% of territory, while Russian militias, including the Quds Brigade, control and influence only 15% of it.”

Source:

“(Iranian Militias Withdraw... Quds Brigade Fights ISIS Alone),” *al-Modon*, 1 September 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/yyzl9wvo>

المليشيات الإيرانية تنسحب.. لواء القدس يقاتل داعش وحيداً

The Quds Brigade brought hundreds of new volunteers into the battles against ISIS in the Syrian desert, after they finished training for new volunteers early and quickly joined military operations. The door to joining (volunteering in) the brigade remains open with support from the Russian forces, which have turned the Quds Brigade into the tip of the spear of their revenge military operation, called “White Desert,” against ISIS, following the killing of a senior Russian general in rural Deir Ezzor in mid-August. Hundreds of new volunteers from the Quds Brigade arrived in the Syrian desert to participate in the military operations against ISIS. The brigade’s training camps in Handarat, north of Aleppo, and Nayrab to the city’s east, dispatched a number of military convoys after the training suddenly ended, something that was repeated in the camps in Deir Ezzor, with the aim of filling the shortfall in the brigade’s ranks, which have suffered heavy losses in recent confrontations with ISIS...

The brigade provides its fighters with a \$200-dollar monthly salary, which is twice the salary that volunteer members in Iranian militias receive, in addition to perks such as protection, leave and food benefits. These factors have made it easier for the brigade to draw large numbers into its ranks since early 2020. The list of those killed in the brigade recently points to its not inconsiderable sway and presence in its heartland of Aleppo, as well as the fact that it has fighters from various regions, including Daraa, rural Damascus, Hama, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa...

Media activist Ahed Sulaibi, from Deir Ezzor, told al-Modon: “Russian support to the Quds Brigade in the desert and specifically Deir Ezzor makes it a force to be reckoned with in the area. It has become the face of Russian influence in eastern Syria, Russia’s counter to Iranian influence, which is represented by a large militia deployment along the southeastern Euphrates river, from Raqqa and Deir Ezzor all the way to Albu Kamal along the Iraqi border.” Sulaibi added that Hadi Mohammed Hadid, nicknamed “the Cameroonian,” directs the brigade’s military operations in direct coordination with Russian forces. The Central Command of the Quds Brigade is located in the Villas (al-Filat) neighborhood in the city of Deir Ezzor, and to a lesser extent in the southeastern and northwestern suburbs of al-Tebni and others, all the way to the outskirts of Ma’dan.

ISIS attacks in the Syrian desert target Russian and Iranian militias alike, but the latter succeeded in reducing its losses after redeploying and adopting the strategy of gathering forces in specific and fortified central points in the main cities and towns, rather than broad deployment of fixed and mobile groups in open areas. Meanwhile, the Quds Brigade and other Russian-backed supporting formations fell into ISIS’s trap. ISIS has had unprecedented success in its lightning attacks, which opened its appetite for a tactical shift focused on holding fortified areas bordering military sites, oil fields, and cities and towns that the brigade has turned into staging posts for its offensive operations against ISIS...