



## Syria: Who are the Loyalist Forces on the Eastern Banks of the Euphrates?

**OE Watch Commentary:** The small strip of territory on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, directly across from the Syrian city of Deir Ezzor, is currently controlled by an estimated 3,000 soldiers, militiamen and mercenaries variously linked to Russia, Iran, and the Syrian government. This toehold is linked to Deir Ezzor on the western banks of the Euphrates via a metal bridge laid down last year by Russian military engineers. It is the only pocket on the eastern bank of the Euphrates that the Syrian government and its allies were able to control following the collapse of ISIS. According to the accompanying excerpted article, published in March 2018 on the Syrian opposition news website *Ayn al-Madina*, Iranian-backed militias make up the majority of the force in this pocket (1,200-1,500), while Russian military and private contractors are the best-equipped. Each unit has its turf, though they collaborate to secure al-Salihiyya at the edge of the territory under their control. The article describes how the armed groups contract “middlemen and influencers” to recruit volunteer fighters by offering truces to the displaced population. The article describes the truces, which have been successfully implemented by the loyalist camp in other parts of Syria, as “basically consist[ing] of the refugees turning themselves in and providing one family member to join up with the militia, in exchange for the cancelling of their prosecution order.” In good capitalist fashion, the author adds: “The middlemen compete with one another to bring in the largest number of recruits to the militia for which they work.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

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### Source:

جيب علي بابا في يسار الفرات (3) آلاف لص وقاطع طريق، من جنود النظام وأتباع إيران والروس

“Ali Baba Pocket in Euphrates Right Bank: 3,000 Thieves, Killers and Road-Blockers from the Regime Soldiers and Followers of Iran and Russia,” *Ayn al-Madina*, 10 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/Xu3G9E>

*There are three main types of forces deployed in the pocket nominally held by the regime on the right bank of the Euphrates River, which were identified to Ayn al-Madina by confidential sources, as follows:*

1. *Russian-linked forces. This includes units from the regular army and a large number of mercenaries. They all work under the command of an officer called “General Moul.” Their numbers are estimated to be 500 soldiers and fighters. These forces are well armed, with heavy weaponry including artillery, tanks and rocket launchers, in addition to APCs, mine-clearing equipment, armored vehicles and military engineering equipment.*

2. *Iranian-linked forces. These include Shi’i militias from the village of Hatlah led by Yassin al-Mayyuf and another led by Hassan Ali Moussa al-Moullah Ayad, who enjoys close relations with Lebanese Hizbullah and whose militia flies their banner. There is also the al-Baqir militia headed by “Hajj” Khaled al-Marai and Nawaf al-Bashir via his son Asaad. Each of them has a group they directly lead in these militias. Recently there has been a gradual turn by Nawaf al-Bashir from Iran’s Revolutionary Guard to the regime’s Republican Guard, although it has not yet reached the level of a defection from the Iranians. All of these forces operate under the command of a small Revolutionary Guard unit, estimated to number 100. The total number of Iranian-linked militias is estimated at 1200-1500, making them the most numerous as compared to their Russian and regime counterparts.*

3. *Regime-linked forces. This includes a group from the Syrian Army that belongs primarily to the so-called “5th Assault Corps,” supported exclusively by the Russians, in addition to smaller groups from the Republican Guard, Military Intelligence, and Air Force Intelligence, which seems to follow Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan. This in addition to groups from the soon-to-be-formed “Self-Defense Forces,” currently known as “Popular Committees,” led by Azzam al-Tair (Secretary of the Second Rural Branch of the Baath Party). In total there are estimated to be 1,000 fighters, with 300-400 of them reserve forces. They are commanded by two officers known by their first name, Brigadier General Jamal and Colonel Ibrahim.*

*Within the area nominally controlled by the regime on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River, there is distinct presence and influence depending on the forces in the area. The regime is relatively strong via the Russian-backed 5th Corps in the village of al-Hassiniyah. Shi’i militias control Hatla and Marat. Russian deployment is focused on the villages of Khusham and al-Tayiba, in addition to a small presence in the village of al-Salihiyya, as they opened a base and a coordination office there. Russian helicopters are used to secure logistical supplies to these forces from bases in the Military Airbase east of Deir Ezzor. Nearly all of them work together to control al-Salihiyya.*

*There is a similar distinction in terms of the roadblocks and main checkpoints. The Russians and the regime control the Halibiyya Roundabout checkpoint and control the main checkpoint in al-Salihiyya in conjunction with Iranian-backed militias, after which the SDF-controlled area begins. The regime and Iranian-backed militias together manage another checkpoint in al-Salihiyya, while Iranian-backed militias run 5 checkpoints in Hatla.*

*Immediately after crossing the Euphrates last September, regime and militia forces executed tens of civilians that they captured. Some of the victims’ rotting corpses are still strewn in the open til this day. There was widespread looting, to the extent that doors, windows, and copper electrical wiring were taken from the walls of houses. Members of the “Tribal Army” militia, which came from Raqqa as one of the militias linked to Air Force Intelligence and crossed the river before retreating, left vulgar messages on the walls of homes. These days, local middlemen and influencers linked to regime intelligence services and Iranian-backed militias work alongside military commanders. A middleman backed by the al-Bustan Foundation, owned by Bashar al-Assad’s cousin Rami Makhlouf, also has appeared alongside them. The middlemen in essence encourage refugees to return under a so-called “truce,” which basically consist of the refugees turning themselves in and providing one family member to join up with the militia, in exchange for the cancelling of their prosecution order. The middlemen compete with one another to bring in the largest number of recruits to the militia for which they work.*