



Armed Palestinian forces, militias and organizations handled by the Syrian regime in the Syrian civil war

March 12, 2018

Overview

In fighting the Syrian civil war, the Syrian army makes extensive use of armed Palestinian forces, militias and organizations, some of them in existence for dozens of years, some of them new, established during the war. The Palestinian forces have been used to defend the Palestinian refugee camps and as auxiliary forces for the Syrian army, which has suffered from a severe manpower shortage. The objective of this study is to map the various Palestinian forces, indicate their contributions to the Syrian army during the civil war and to examine the possibilities of operating them against Israel in the future.

► When the civil war broke out there were **about 650,000 Palestinian refugees living in Syria in 14 refugee camps**¹. During the years of fighting the number **fell to 438,000** (UNRWA website, September 20, 2017). **Many Palestinians have sided with the Syrian regime.** Some of them out of **pragmatic motives** (assuming that in the end the Syrian regime would defeat the rebels); some **because Syria is part of the "axis of resistance;"** and some who were **affiliated with leftist or national secular organizations** that traditionally supported the Syrian regime. However, there were also Palestinians who joined the rebel organizations, although apparently not in any organized or established way as did those who fought alongside the Syrian regime.

► Given Palestinian support for the Syrian regime, many refugee camps **served the Syrian army as reservoirs for recruiting and handling armed forces and militias.** In ITIC assessment, during the civil war **at least 10,000 Palestinian fighters have been operated by the Syrian regime, with various levels of military capabilities.** That was done for two main purposes: one, to prevent the Palestinian refugee camps from falling into the hands of the rebel organizations and to enforce law and order in the camps; and two, to integrate the Palestinian forces into the ranks of the Syrian army in the various combat zones around Damascus, Aleppo and the eastern part of the country. By January 2018, **at least 627**

¹Some of the camps are recognized by UNRWA and some are "unofficial" but receive support from the agency (al-Jazeera, October 3, 2004).

Palestinian fighters who fought for the Syrian army **had been killed** (Action Group for Palestinians of Syria,² March 1, 2018).

► The armed Palestinian forces and militias that have been operated by the Syrian army in the civil war can be **divided into two categories**:

◆ **New units established during the first years of the civil war:**

- **The al-Quds Brigade**, which is the Palestinian force with the highest level of military capabilities. It was established in October 2013, has about **3,500 fighters**. Most of them are Palestinian refugees living in the **al-Neirab refugee camp to the east of the city of Aleppo**. The Brigade has three battalions armed with weapons provided by the Syrian army. Initially they were operated to defend the refugee camps in northern Syria. Later **they were used for offensive missions**. The al-Quds Brigade fought in battles in the Euphrates Valley in **Deir al-Zor, al-Mayadeen and Albukamal** in eastern Syria. From eastern Syria the Brigade was transferred to the region of Aleppo and is expected to participate in the campaign for the takeover of the Idlib region. The al-Quds Brigade suffered heavy losses, with hundreds killed and many hundreds wounded. During the Syrian civil war the Brigade **acquired considerable military experience, and is considered the Palestinian unit most loyal to the Syrian regime**.



The al-Quds Brigade insignia on a Brigade uniform. The name appears on the background of the Syrian flag (al-Kawthar, September 9, 2017).

- **The Galilee Forces (Kuwat al-Jalil)** are a militia-like military force established in 2012. Their **several thousand fighters** come from the Palestinian refugee camps, mainly **the Khan Dannun camp, south of Damascus**. The

²A Palestinian organization operating in Britain that documents Palestinians killed and wounded in the Syrian civil war.

Galilee Forces operate battalions and companies, and are equipped with mostly light arms and a number of armored vehicles provided by the Syrian army. During the war they were operated in the Qalamoun Mountains along the Syrian-Lebanese border, where **Hezbollah played a central role**. Like the al-Quds Brigade, the Galilee Forces fought in the Deir al-Zor area in eastern Syria. When the Islamic State fell, the Galilee Forces were transferred to the region of the Abu al-Duhur military airbase south of Aleppo, as part of the campaign to take over the region around Idlib. The Galilee Forces have a Palestinian youth movement called the **Palestinian Youth Movement for Return**, which operates in the refugee camps in Syria.



Logo of the Galilee Forces.

V for victory over a black map of Palestine and rifles.

The upper Arabic inscription reads

"The Palestinian Youth Movement for Return"

(al-Bilad channel, November 26, 2018).

◆ **Established Palestinian forces and organizations operating in Syria for dozens of years and operated by the Syrian army:**

- Those organizations include the **Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA)**, established by the Arab Summit Meeting in 1964; the organization called **Fatah al-Intifada**, which split from Fatah during the First Lebanon War (1983) and became a Syrian-based organization operated by the Syrian army; and the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC)**, **Ahmed Jibril's organization**, which split from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) in 1968 and has since been based in Syria, operating with Syrian regime sponsorship. There are also **local Palestinian**

militias in the refugee camps operating in the service of the Syrian regime, whose operatives were recruited during the Syrian civil war.³

- The aforementioned Palestinian forces total about **5,000 operatives**. During the civil war they have operated both in the refugee camps (especially in the al-Yarmouk camp south of Damascus) and in fighting the rebels east of Damascus (in Eastern Ghouta). **The forces suffered heavy losses, their military capabilities are low compared to the new units established during the war, and several times problems surfaced regarding their loyalty to the regime.**

In ITIC assessment **the Syrian regime will try to retain the new Palestinian units, especially the al-Quds Brigade. That is because they are loyal to the Syrian regime, their military capabilities are relatively high and they have ties (forged during the fighting) with the Iranian Qods Force and Hezbollah.** In ITIC assessment, the Syrian regime may impose missions on the al-Quds Brigade (and other Palestinian units) **related to the conflict with Israel**, such as carrying out terrorist attacks from Syria or **operating Palestinian fighting forces from the Syrian front in a confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah.**

Appendices

► The following appendices deal with the Palestinian forces, organizations and militias operated by the Syrian regime during the Syrian civil war:

- ◆ **Appendix 1** – The al-Quds Brigade (Liwa'a al-Quds)
- ◆ **Appendix 2** – The Galilee Forces (Kuwat al-Jalil)
- ◆ **Appendix 3** – The Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA)
- ◆ **Appendix 4** – Fatah al-Intifada
- ◆ **Appendix 5** – The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC)

³For example, the local Palestinian militia called "Defender of al-Aqsa," which operates in the Jaramana refugee camp and apparently in other refugee camps as well. Its fighters fought alongside the Syrian forces in Ghouta, in eastern Syria.

Appendix 1

The al-Quds Brigade (Liwa'a al-Quds)

The al-Quds Brigade is a Palestinian military force operated by the Syrian regime as an auxiliary to the Syrian army. The Brigade was established in October 2013 and has about **3,500 operatives**. The Syrian regime has used it against the rebel organizations in various arenas for both defensive and offensive purposes. The Brigade gained considerable military experience, especially in urban warfare. Apparently it has the highest military capabilities of all the Palestinian fighting forces operated by the Syrian regime. **It may also be supported financially and logistically by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force.**



Al-Quds Brigade operatives on parade (YouTube, November 29, 2016).

► **The al-Quds Brigade was established by an engineer named Muhammad Ahmed Sa'id** in coordination with Ahmed Jibril's PFLP-GC. **Adnan al-Sayyid** has been Muhammad Ahmed Sa'id's second-in-command since the Brigade was established. The Brigade's fighters were recruited from among the Palestinians living in the refugee camps in Syria, especially the **al-Neirab camp in Aleppo**. The Brigade also has Christian fighters from the villages in the Aleppo region and fighters from the PFLP-GC. Of all the Palestinian fighting units, **the al-Quds Brigade is considered the most loyal to the Syrian regime.**



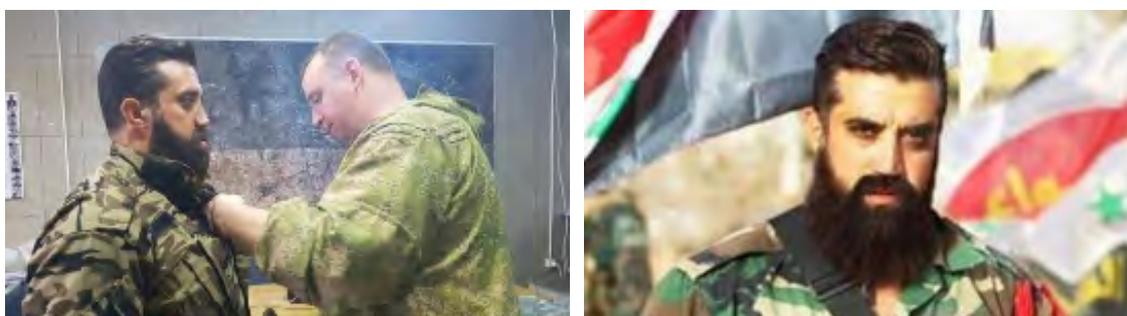
The Facebook page of the al-Quds Brigade. Right: The brigade logo. The Arabic above it reads, "The fedayoun fighters of the Syrian Arab Army;" below, "A country you do not defend is not worthy of being lived in"

(Facebook page of the al-Quds Brigade, January 15, 2018)

► **The al-Quds Brigade were founded on the basis of "popular committees" which were established in the al-Neirab refugee camp in Aleppo after the outbreak of the civil war.**

The committees' objective was to preserve order and security in the camp (Sama channel, interview with Muhammad Sa'id, October 15, 2017). Later the Brigade was established on the basis of the popular committees, eventually reaching a force of **3,500 operatives** (al-Etejah TV, October 5, 2016; Sputnik, December 26, 2017). The Brigade is composed of **three battalions armed with light, medium and heavy weapons**. Its **headquarters are in Aleppo** and its forces have fought on **several fronts**. According to an Iraqi anti-Iranian website, **the al-Quds Brigade is financially and logistically supported by the IRGC's Qods Force**. The site also reported that the Brigade's commander, Muhammad Mahmoud al-Sa'id, **has close personal connections with Qods Force officers** (Baghdad Post,⁴ November 28, 2016).

► Initially the al-Quds Brigade was given **defensive missions**, especially the defense of the al-Neirab refugee camp and the besieged Shi'ite villages of Nubl and al-Zaharaa' northwest of Aleppo. However, during the past two years **the Brigade has also received offensive missions from by the Syrian army**. It participated in the conquest of Aleppo, including the Palestinian refugee camp of Handarat northeast of Aleppo, a rebel stronghold. Brigade fighters later participated in battles in the **Euphrates Valley at Deir al-Zor, al-Mayadeen and Albukamal**. At the end of December 2017 the Brigade was transferred from the Deir al-Zor region to Idlib and Homs. Because of its participation in difficult battles, since its establishment it has suffered many losses, **estimated at hundreds of deaths and many hundreds of wounded**.⁵



Right: Muhammad Rafi', officer in charge of operations for the al-Quds Brigade, killed in the fighting east of Aleppo in November 2016 (Russia Today, November 27, 2016). Left: Muhammad Rafi' receives a medal from a Russian officer (Zaman al-Wasl, November 28, 2016).

⁴Baghdad Post is a national Arab Iraqi website opposing all foreign intervention in Iraq, especially Iranian intervention.

⁵According to one estimation, 300 of its fighters were killed and about 1,000 wounded (Eyn al-Madinah, July 5, 2017).

► **Muhammad Ahmed Sa'id, the al-Quds Brigade commander, is a Palestinian born in the al-Neirab refugee camp.** He studied structural engineering and worked as a contractor. Before the civil war he had **close ties with Syrian air force intelligence officers**, enabling him to receive construction and real estate benefits. When the war broke out he headed a militia operated by the Syrian regime whose objective was to suppress the rebels (*shabiha*). He then established the al-Quds Brigade to preserve security in the al-Neirab refugee camp. Later on the al-Quds Brigade was put into action during the takeover of Aleppo from the rebel organizations, and he exploited the opportunity to take property looted from residents of Aleppo.



Right: Muhammad Ahmed al-Sa'id, the commander of the al-Quds Brigade, during an interview (Sama TV, October 15, 2017). Left: Senior al-Quds Brigade commanders, with brigade commander Muhammad al-Sa'id (center) (website of al-Etejah TV, October 5, 2016).



Right: Muhammad al-Sa'id receives an award for the al-Quds Brigade from Syrian President Assad (al-Etejah TV, October 5, 2016). Left: A Russian officer pins a medal on Muhammad al-Sa'id (Mashreq, October 8, 2016).



Right: Fighters of the al-Quds Brigade in Palmyra (Twitter account of the al-Quds Brigade, June 22, 2018). Left: Fighters of the al-Quds Brigade taken prisoner by ISIS near the Abu al-Duhur military airbase, southeast of Idlib (Akhbar al-Muslimin, January 14, 2018).



Right: Fighters of the al-Quds Brigade wage urban warfare in Aleppo (YouTube, March 8, 2018).

**Left: Fighters of the al-Quds Brigade apparently in training
(YouTube, November 29, 2018).**

Appendix 2

The Galilee Forces (Kuwat al-Jalil)

The **Galilee Forces** are a Palestinian militia-like military force established in 2012. They number about **several thousand fighters recruited from the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, especially the Khan Dannun refugee camp south of Damascus**. The Galilee Forces are the military wing of the Palestinian youth movement sponsored by the Syrian regime called the "**Palestinian Youth Movement for Return**."



Facebook page of the Galilee Forces. The profile picture shows Assad at the right and the commander of the Galilee Forces at the left. The Arabic reads, "Victory in Syria – the liberation of Palestine" (Facebook page of the Galilee Forces, January 31, 2018).

► **The Galilee Forces are headed by Fadi al-Mallah (Abu al-Fidaa')**, 40, formerly an operative in Ahmed Jibril's PFLP-GC. They are composed of battalions and companies. One of the battalions is named for Basal, Bashar Assad's older brother, killed in a car accident in 1994. The Forces' weapons are mostly light arms provided by the Syrian army. The Syrian army apparently also provided a number of tanks and armored vehicles. According to a Syrian opposition website, the Galilee Forces are **trained by Iranian and Hezbollah officers** (Einab Baladi, September 19, 2016).



Right: Fadi al-Mallah, commander of the Galilee Forces (YouTube, March 21 2016). Left: Fadi al-Mallah standing next to a Syrian tank (Facebook page of Fadi al-Mallah, April 13, 2016)

► **During the civil war the Galilee Forces acquired military experience.** Their most important role was fighting the jihadist organizations in **the Qalamoun Mountains, along the Syrian-Lebanese border.** Hezbollah played a central role in the fighting on the front, and it can be assumed the fighting of the Galilee Forces was coordinated with it. In June 2016 it was reported that Galilee Forces' fighters had begun fighting alongside the Syrian forces at **Deir al-Zor.** On November 23, 2017, the Galilee Forces were reported fighting in **the area of al-Duhur, Syrian army airbase south of Aleppo,** as part of the campaign for Idlib.



Galilee Forces fighters (microsyria.com, January 26, 2017)

► In addition to the Galilee Forces, in 2012 the Syrian regime established a Palestinian youth movement called the **Palestinian Youth Movement for Return.** It operates in the refugee camps in Syria to **promote the ideology of armed struggle against Israel through "resistance."** Members of the **Palestinian Youth Movement for Return** serve as a reservoir for potential Galilee Forces fighters.



From the propaganda video of the Palestinian Youth Movement for Return.
The Arabic reads, "To Palestine there is only one route - through a rifle barrel"
(YouTube channel of the Palestinian Youth Movement for Return, December 1. 2012).

Appendix 3

The Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA)

► **The Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA)** was established at the Arab Summit Meeting in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1964. The objective was to establish a regular, organized force that would serve as a channel for Fatah recruitment. The PLO hoped the PLA would serve as its military wing, but **in reality the PLA was controlled by the various Arab states** and its soldiers were subordinate to the local Arab armies. The PLA was composed of four brigades, including **the Hattin Brigade in Syria**.



Right: PLA logo (al-Bilad channel, November 26, 2017). Left: PLA fighters on parade (Sama, October 1, 2017).

► After the signing of the Oslo Accords, many PLA soldiers were integrated into the security forces of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and allowed to enter PA territories. Of the PLA brigades established by the Arab states, the Hattin Brigade in Syria was the only one that remained active. **Palestinian refugees living in Syria were recruited to the ranks of the PLA.** In the Syrian civil war the **PLA was integrated into the Syrian army and has fought against the rebel organizations.** Using them against the rebels was met with protests which were severely dealt with by the Syrian regime.⁶

► The PLA commander in Syria is **General Muhammad Tareq al-Khadraa'**, who was born in Safed, Israel, and has a BA in history from Damascus University. He has written many articles published by the Syrian and Palestinian media. In November 2015 he survived an attack on his life, apparently carried out because of his support for the Syrian regime.

⁶For example, on February 25, 2015, it was reported that the Syrian regime executed five PLA officers who refused to send their soldiers to fight against the rebels in Dara'a. The officers claimed it would not serve the liberation of Palestine, for which the PLA was established (Orient News, February 25, 2015). Brigadier General Anwar al-Saqa, who served in the PLA brigade, was killed near his car by rebel organizations in Damascus in June 2012 (Wikipedia, Sama June 5, 2012).



PLA commander General Muhammad Tareq al-Khadraa'
(al-Ekhbariya al-Suri, September 8, 2015)

The PLA brigade operated by the Syrian army has about **6,000 fighters, of whom about 3,000 are soldiers fighting alongside the Syrian army**. PLA activity in the civil war has focused on the region of Damascus, and to a lesser extent the regions of Homs, Aleppo and Silmiyah. The PLA has suffered at least 230 deaths since the beginning of the war.



Right: PLA fighters in the Silmiyah area (about 20 kilometers east of Hama) fire mortar shells at rebels (YouTube, October 18, 2017). Left: PLA mortar fire in the Silmiyah area (Sama, October 1, 2017).

- In January and February 2018 the PLA participated in the fighting, which still continues, in Eastern Ghouta (the region east of Damascus), and suffered losses. Apparently during the fighting in Eastern Ghouta **there were protests in the PLA**. The families of the PLA fighters killed reported that the Syrian regime forced them to fight in Eastern Ghouta against their will (Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, February 26, 2018).



Right: Qassem Darwish, PLA fighter, killed in January 2018 fighting the rebels in Eastern Ghouta in Damascus (name, January 14, 2018). Left: Mustafa Mahmoud Saleh, PLA fighter, killed in the fighting in Eastern Ghouta (Facebook page of the PFLP-GC media unit in the Dara'a region, February 19, 2018)

Appendix 4

Fatah al-Intifada

► **Fatah al-Intifada** is a small Palestinian terrorist organization operating under the aegis of the Syrian regime. It split from Fatah during the First Lebanon War in the wake of a confrontation between the Syrian regime on one hand and Yasser Arafat and Fatah on the other (1983). The leader of the rebels against Arafat was **Colonel Muhammad Sayid Musa Muragha (Abu Musa)**, a Jordanian army officer, who deserted to Fatah. After the First Lebanon War the organization continued to exist, sponsored by Syria. It has a small military force in the Palestinian refugee camps in Syria (with a presence in Lebanon and Jordan), but with **no real influence on the internal Palestinian arena**.



Fatah al-Intifada logo. It is similar to the Fatah logo but with the addition of the upper inscription, which reads "Fatah al-Intifada."

► During the Syrian civil war the regime recruited operatives from Fatah al-Intifada to what was defined as "the defense of Syria and Palestine." They were also recruited to the Palestinian al-Quds Brigade. During the civil war Fatah al-Intifada operatives fought against the rebels around Damascus, especially in the **al-Yarmouk refugee camp** (about ten kilometers – six miles – south of Damascus) and **al-Husseiniya refugee camp** (about ten kilometers west of Damascus' international airport). They also fought in the town of **Harasta** (about 10 kilometers east of Damascus) and in other sites in **Eastern Ghouta**.



Fatah al-Intifada operatives during combat in the al-Yarmouk refugee camp (YouTube, October 18 2015).



Fatah al-Intifada operatives in the al-Yarmouk refugee camp (Facebook page of the Lions of Fatah al-Intifada, December 13, 2017). Most of the refugee camp is controlled by ISIS, and organizations loyal to Syria control only a small part of it.



Death notice issued by Fatah al-Intifada for Second Lieutenant Samir Adnan al-Khaza'ai, "killed while carrying out his national duty in defending Syria and Palestine" (Facebook page of the Lions of Fatah al-Intifada,, November 26, 2017). Left: Death notice issued by Fatah al-Intifada for Major Muhammad Hussein Muhsen Abu Walid, killed in combat in the Syrian city of Harasta "while carrying out his national duty" (Facebook page of the Lions of Fatah al-Intifada,, January 2, 2018).

Appendix 5

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC)

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC) is a small Palestinian terrorist organization with little influence on the internal Palestinian arena. The organization is **operated by the Syrian regime** and headed by **Ahmed Jibril**, a former captain in the Syrian army, who was expelled from the army in 1958 on suspicion of having Communist tendencies. In 1967 Ahmed Jibril joined the nationalistic Marxist fighters headed by **George Habash**, who established the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). In 1968 Jibril left the PFLP and established the PFLP-GC, which operates in Syria.



Right: PFLP-GC logo (YouTube, April 13 2015). Left: Ahmed Jibril interviewed during the Syrian civil war (Syrian TV, June 10, 2013)

- ▶ Ahmed Jibril's organization became notorious for a series of deadly showcase terrorist attacks, including blowing up a Swiss Air flight that took off from Zurich for Israel (February 21, 1970; 47 killed); a mass-killing attack in Kiryat Shemonah (April 11, 1974; 18 dead); the "night of the hang-gliders" (1987, an attack on an IDF base in northern Israel in which terrorists infiltrated on hang-gliders; six IDF soldiers killed). During the First Lebanon War the PFLP-GC captured three Israeli soldiers, who were released in return for 1,150 Palestinian terrorists who had been imprisoned in Israel in what became known as the "Jibril deal."
- ▶ **During the Syrian civil war the PFLP-GC was operated by the Syrian army.** Its fighters also enlisted in the ranks of the al-Quds Brigade. The organization's main theater of operations was the **al-Yarmouk refugee camp** south of Damascus. Ahmed Jibril, interviewed by Syrian TV, said his organization had fought in the al-Yarmouk refugee camp although it had limited means. He said more than 100 of his fighters had been killed in combat and about

300 had been wounded (Syrian TV, June 10, 2013). His organization, and other Palestinian organizations operated by the Syrian regime in the al-Yarmouk refugee camp, were unsuccessful and most of the camp fell into the hands of ISIS.



Jibril Front fighters in the al-Yarmouk refugee camp (al-Alam TV, April 15, 2015).



Rada Samara, PFLP-GC operative, killed in the fighting in the ranks of the al-Quds Brigade in Deir al-Zor (Facebook page of the information unit of the PFLP-GC in the Dara'a region, February 19, 2018) .