



# **THE TIGER FORCES**

## **PRO-ASSAD FIGHTERS BACKED BY RUSSIA**

**GREGORY WATERS**

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## SUMMARY

The Tiger Forces is a Syrian Air Intelligence-affiliated militia fighting for the Syrian government and backed by Russia. While often described as the Syrian government's elite fighting force, this research portrays a starkly different picture. The Tiger Forces are the largest single fighting force on the Syrian battlefield, with approximately 24 groups comprised of some 4,000 offensive infantry units as well as a dedicated artillery regiment and armor unit of unknown size. Beyond these fighters are thousands of additional so-called flex units, affiliated militiamen who remain largely garrisoned in their hometowns along the north Hama and Homs borders until called on to join offensives as needed.

Despite a decentralized command structure, the Tiger Forces' capabilities far exceed any other unit currently fighting in the Syrian civil war. The main source of the unit's success stems from its two full-strength infantry brigades with dedicated logistical support and the ability to call on the Syrian air force—and after September 2015 the Russian air force—at will. While there is likely some degree of higher-than-average competence among the Tiger Forces' officer corps, this research demonstrates that the true power of the unit does not come from their alleged status as elite fighters but instead from their large size, supply lines, and Russian support.





## KEY POINTS

- \* The Tiger Forces is a pro-government armed faction in the Syrian civil war, founded, financed, trained, and commanded by Syria's Air Intelligence Directorate.
- \* The biggest transformation for the Tiger Forces came in September 2015, when the Russian military entered the war and quickly integrated alongside their chosen partner force.
- \* Brg. Gen. Suheil al-Hasan, the founder and commander of the Tiger Forces, reportedly expanded his control over all military assets in Hama throughout 2012. He soon commanded a mix of special forces units and Alawite militias.
- \* Groups and their affiliated subgroups are formed around strongmen or prominent families from specific towns or regions with the majority remaining in their native area.
- \* While the Tiger Forces' offensive units roughly number 4,000 infantry plus an unknown number of artillery and armor crewmen, the total number of affiliated individuals is likely much higher.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is based entirely on publicly available Facebook posts from the personal profiles of Tiger Forces commanders, fighters, and affiliates and from Facebook pages dedicated to posting media about specific Tiger Forces groups. To begin, the author searched in Arabic for posts regarding Tiger Forces groups known to him, followed by searching for information on other groups discussed in English-language media. Throughout this process, further groups affiliated with the Tiger Forces were identified. Lastly, the author searched on Facebook for variations of the search terms “group of the tiger,” “groups of the tiger,” and “regiment of the tiger.” These searches provided dozens of additional Facebook pages dedicated to Tiger Forces groups.

When a group was identified, all of their associated Facebook pages were fully examined for posts relating to deployments, commanders, subgroups, interactions with Tiger Forces central officers, and unit size. Next, the author searched variations of the group’s name on Facebook to find additional posts and information, as well as to find the earliest date the group was referenced online. Specific searches were conducted to identify commanders and subgroups, as well as the personal profiles of

commanders. These profiles were further examined for additional insights into the group.

While this methodology has led to the most comprehensive existing record of the Tiger Forces structure, it is limited due to its reliance on Facebook posts matching the author’s search terms. Therefore, it is entirely possible that additional groups were left undiscovered. However, the likelihood that these units play any major role in the Tiger Forces is limited, as they would almost certainly have been referenced in one of the hundreds of posts archived in this research.

## ORIGINS AND HISTORY

The Tiger Forces is a pro-government armed faction in the Syrian civil war, founded, financed, trained, and commanded by Syria’s Air Intelligence Directorate. Air Intelligence, widely regarded as the most powerful and most brutal of the four intelligence branches, has been run by Maj. Gen. Jamil al-Hasan since before the war.<sup>1</sup> As the initial protests spread in 2011, Brigadier General Hasan, then the commander of Air Intelligence Special Operations, was dispatched first to Damascus, then to Daraa, and finally to Hama.<sup>2</sup> Suheil has been implicated for war crimes during





this period, including giving orders to beat and torture protesters and later to shoot them in April 2011 in Moadimiyah, Damascus.<sup>3</sup> Suheil has also been accused of ordering the massacre of over 100 protesters near Saida, Daraa with the approval of Jamil al-Hasan, and killing over 200 protesters in Treimseh, Hama in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

Suheil, the founder and commander of the Tiger Forces, reportedly expanded his control over all military assets in Hama throughout 2012. He soon commanded a mix of special forces units and Alawite militias as well as the helicopters and planes based out of the Hama airbase and armor and artillery from the 11th and 4th Armored Divisions.<sup>5</sup> It was at this time that he began offensive operations against opposition-held towns in Idlib, first targeting Jabal Arba'in and Ariha in the summer of 2012. In late 2013, Suheil's mechanized militia joined the offensive to reopen the Damascus-Aleppo supply line by capturing Khanasir. A year later, his forces were deployed alongside an Alawite private militia known as the Desert Hawks to recapture the Shaer gas fields from the newly formed ISIS.<sup>6</sup> Throughout all of his battles, Suheil enjoyed absolute control over air and artillery assets.<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to understand the precise structure of the Tiger Forces in 2013 and 2014. It appears that at some point in 2012, Suheil merged his Air Intelligence special operations soldiers with remnants of Syrian Arab Army (SAA) armor units and Alawite militias, most likely from Hama. As will be discussed below, nearly all Facebook posts about the Tiger Forces' affiliated groups appear during or after 2015.

A Russian soldier places the national flag at the Abu Duhur crossing on the eastern edge of Idlib Governorate. *GEORGE OURFALIAN/AFP/Getty Images*

A November 2015 article by independent news site Syrian Observer on Suheil claimed that, alongside the Tiger Forces, the colonel operated a “private artillery force, consisting of a group of trucks from the Fourth Armored Division carrying around 130 large guns.”<sup>8</sup> The link between the 4th Division and Tiger Forces is further supported by a June 2014 Facebook picture of a fighter captioned: “The mujahid hero Aiser Mahfoudh of the heroes of the 4th Division and the Tiger Groups.” Additionally, Firas Issa, the commander and founder of the Tiger Forces’ Al-Komeet Groups, spent the first five years of the war fighting for the 9th Division in Daraa before transferring to the 4th Division and then to the Tiger Forces. Furthermore, on Dec. 26, 2017, a new Facebook page appeared called “News page of the Ali Sheli Hawks Forces, 4<sup>th</sup> Division.” The Ali Sheli Hawks have been members of the Tiger Forces since at least November 2015.<sup>9</sup> However, since December 2017, posts about the Ali Sheli Hawks regularly refer to them as members of the 4th Division, while the group’s original Tiger Forces affiliated page also continues to post information about them as if they are still associated with the Tiger Forces.

This case of dual affiliation is not without precedent. Throughout 2014 and early 2015, the Masyaf-based Shaheen/Hamza Groups fought as members of the Desert Hawks while their founders and commanders, Yousef and Suleiman Shaheen, maintained close ties to the Air Intelligence and Tiger Forces. Suleiman claims to have trained with Suheil in 2013. Even after the group officially joined the Tiger Forces in mid-2015, Suleiman remained in contact with Mohammad Jaber of the Desert

Hawks, working alongside the businessman-turned-warlord during the June 2017 eastern Hama offensive.<sup>10</sup>

The biggest transformation for the Tiger Forces came in September 2015, when the Russian military entered the war. Russian air, artillery, and special forces immediately supported the Air Intelligence-backed militia, a partnership that only grew deeper in the subsequent years. Russian generals, officers, and special forces soldiers have been pictured in the field alongside Tiger Forces fighters from Suheil to subgroup field commanders, indicating an intimate integration of Russian assets alongside their chosen partner force.<sup>11</sup> During the March 2018 Eastern Ghouta offensive, Alexander Ivanov, the spokesman for Russian forces headquartered at the Khmeimim airbase, wrote: “We will provide the necessary air support to the forces of Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan. ...We have real confidence in their ability to accomplish the mission.”<sup>12</sup>

## RESTRUCTURING

On Mar. 24, 2015, the newly formed rebel coalition known as Jaish al-Fatah launched a wide-scale offensive across Idlib and northern Hama. By mid-June, rebels controlled Idlib city and Jisr al-Shughur. The Tiger Forces had failed—after weeks of fierce fighting—to counter the rebel offensive and endured heavy losses. All of the available data indicates that it was during this period that the Tiger Forces underwent wide-scale restructuring and began to rely heavily on the incorporation of local militias, largely from Alawite communities.



Of the 24 groups identified in this research, only three had any presence on Facebook prior to mid-2015. The Seghati Groups, based out of the Bisin-Seghata areas of Masyaf, Hama, reported four Tiger Forces martyrs in Hama and Idlib between May 14, 2013, and Aug. 30, 2013. The group posted a picture of its founder and commander on Jan. 28, 2015, with the caption: "God protect our teacher the lion Seghati and protect the men of the Tiger," further indicating that the group both existed and had ties to the Tiger Forces at the time. A post on Oct. 25, 2014, on a Mirdash, Hama community page claims that the Talkalakh-based Cheetahs Groups took part in the Tiger Forces' operation to recapture Morek.

In late 2014 and early 2015, additional posts indicate that the Cheetahs Groups fought as members of the Tiger Forces in the Shaer campaign. Around the same time, the Shaheen/Hamza Groups from Masyaf, Hama fought with the Desert Hawks during the joint Desert Hawks-Tiger Forces offensive in Shaer, Homs. They then deployed with the Desert Hawks and Hezbollah to Jisr al-Shughur in late April 2015 where they lost more than 20 fighters in the rebel offensive on the city. Throughout this entire period, however, the groups' founders and commanders, Yusef and Suleiman Shaheen, were also affiliated with Air Intelligence. At some point during the months following this event, the Shaheen/Hamza Groups officially joined the Tiger Forces.

The Seghati and Cheetahs Groups and their affiliated offensive components are currently the strength of approximately one battalion (between 300 and 500 fighters), and were likely much smaller in 2014. They therefore made up only a fraction of the Tiger Forces units, most of which consisted of special forces units, Air Intelligence fighters, and volunteers. Many of the groups that currently form the Tiger Forces have ties to these original fighters and were often formed by Tiger Forces field commanders, but the groups themselves did not exist prior to mid-2015.

The Tiger Forces as they exist today are a majority Alawite militia with additional recruitment from towns with large Ismaili populations and the Christian city of Mahardah. There are also two groups and five sub-groups that consist of Sunnis: the small Abu Arab Groups from Harasta, Damascus; the Bani 'Az tribe-based Mubarak Groups from Abu Dali, Idlib; the Sahabat Regiment which partially recruits from Kawkab, Hama; the Ali Taha Regiment's Maskana Group from the mixed Sunni-Christian neighborhood in Homs; the Khattab, Ma'ardes; and Taybat al-Iman subgroups of the Tarmeh Regiment, each from their respective towns in north Hama.





# TIGER FORCES IN 2018

Today, the Tiger Forces offensive units are approximately the size of one-and-a-half to two full-strength motorized brigades. These brigades are made up of 24 loosely connected groups, most of which are between one company and one battalion in strength. Nearly all groups have subgroups, usually the size of a platoon, or 30 to 40 fighters. However, subgroups are sometimes the size of a section, or 15 fighters.

The Tiger Forces also operate an artillery regiment consisting of a mix of small and heavy guns alongside Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) as well as an armored unit of unknown size consisting of both T-90 and T-72 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles BMP-1 and BMP-2. Both the artillery and armored units appear to be distinct entities within the Tiger Forces, attached to groups when required. The artillery regiment is commanded by Lt. Col. Dourid Awad, a graduate of the engineering officers school. Each Tiger Forces group—the equivalent of motorized infantry units—relies mostly on a mix of unarmored and up-armored technicals, both for transport and for fire support. Some groups, like the Ali Taha Regiment, claim to also have their own mortar and artillery company.

Groups and their affiliated subgroups are formed around strongmen or prominent families from specific towns or regions. Ten groups recruit from Hama, eight from Homs, six from Tartous, four from Latakia, and one from Idlib and Damascus. Some groups recruit across governorates. This is partially due to several Sunni subgroups being commanded by Alawites from Tartous, as well as groups recruiting from regions bordering one or more governorate, such as the Salamiyah,

Hama, and north Homs area, and the Tartous-Hama-Homs border. In terms of manpower, Hama governorate provides the most fighters, closely followed by Homs.

It is important to distinguish between the Tiger Forces offensive units and what can be described as flex units. Many of the Tiger Forces groups—particularly those from Hama—have both local defense components as well as offensive units that deploy across the country. This research is based on the offensive units that make up the size estimate of one-and-a-half to two brigades. For example, in July 2018 a media representative of the Taha Regiment claimed his group is “2500 fighters. 1100 assault fighters with the Tiger: the remainder hold ground for the al-Ghab area.”<sup>13</sup> While these numbers should be taken with a large degree of skepticism, the division of labor is clear: Slightly more than half of the group’s employed fighters remain in their native area as a local garrison. Similarly, opposition sources place the strength of the Tarmeh Regiment at around 2,000 fighters recruited from the northern Hama towns of Qomhana, Khattab, Taybat al-Imam, and Ma’ardes. An unknown but substantial portion of these fighters also remain in northern Hama on permanent garrison duty.

While the Tiger Forces offensive units roughly number 4,000 infantry plus an unknown number of artillery and armor crewmen, the total number of affiliated individuals is likely much higher. The chart on page 8 shows the order of battle for the Tiger Forces. Groups are ordered by approximate size with the smallest groups—single platoons—on the top left and the largest groups—battalions—on the far right. Stacked icons indicate a size equivalent to multiple of those units, (e.g., the three stacked boxes of the Nuwasir Group equate to three companies).

Both the artillery and armor units are independent of all other groups, reporting directly to the Tiger Forces' officer corps. The size of the armor unit is unknown.

Included in this report is a list of the current living officers in Suheil al-Hasan's command headquarters and their chain of command. Interestingly, Lt. Col. Dourid Awad, the Tiger Forces' artillery commander, met with Qassem Soleimani in late Sept. 2016 in Aleppo. The Tiger Forces also appear to







































































































































coordinate with a department head in the Air Intelligence named Col. Yusuf, and report to the head of the Air Intelligence, Maj. Gen. Jamil al-Hasan.

This report ends with a detailed breakdown of each Tiger Forces group. Below each group's name is their emblem, if known, and a picture of the group's current commander. All of this data was acquired through Tiger Forces' supporting Facebook pages and profiles.





# TIGER FORCES GROUPS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>Abu Arab Groups</b></li> <li> <b>Huwashim Regiment</b></li> <li> <b>Saba'a Groups</b></li> <li> <b>Shaheen al-Ali Group</b></li> <li> <b>Yarob Regiment</b></li> <li> <b>al-Yush'a Groups</b></li> <li> <b>al-Komeet Forces</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> 1st Storming</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Hadi Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Group 6</li> <li> Haithem Bakr Groups</li> <li> Hadi Storming Group</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Houreth Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Sari Makhlof Combat Group</li> <li> Support Group 33</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Mubarak Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Shahab Groups</li> <li> Lion Groups</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>Ali Sheli Hawks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Ali Sheli Hawks 2</li> <li> Ali Sheli Hawks 21</li> <li> Raqqa Hawks</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Sigati Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> al-Jibala Group</li> <li> Sighati Group 1</li> <li> Sighati Group 5</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>W'ad Makhlof Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Group 1</li> <li> Group 2</li> <li> Group 3</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Shawaheen Hawks Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Martyr Commander Osama Abbas Battalion</li> <li> Battalion 2/Abu Zainab Battalion</li> <li> Elite Forces/Salah Alasi Group</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>al-Zarif Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Group 1</li> <li> Group 2</li> <li> Group 3</li> <li> Group 4</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>Sabbour Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Hani Yassin Group</li> <li> Group 8</li> <li> Group 10</li> <li> Group 14</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Nuwasir Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Nasir 2</li> <li> Nasir 3</li> <li> Nasir 5/Haski Group</li> <li> Nasir 6</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Ali Taha Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Maskana Group</li> <li> Zeir Group</li> <li> Taha Storming Group</li> <li> Martyr Ali Qeirouz Company</li> <li> Martyr Hani al-Nashaf Group</li> <li> Artillery and Mortar Company</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Tarmeh Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Shaja'a Ibrahim Group/ Tarmeh 2 Storming</li> <li> Tarmeh Group 3</li> <li> Tarmeh Group 4</li> <li> Tarmeh Group Ma'ardis</li> <li> Tarmeh Group Taybat al-Iman</li> <li> Nabhan Assault Group 1</li> <li> Nabhan Group 2</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>al-Loyuth Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Storming Unit</li> <li> Leith 10</li> <li> Leith Support 14/Lieth 4</li> <li> Leith 21</li> <li> Leith 22</li> <li> Leith 23</li> <li> Leith 28</li> <li> Leith 54</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Haider Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Martyr Khader Yusuf Group</li> <li> Storming Group 1</li> <li> Storming Group 2</li> <li> Storming Group 7</li> <li> Storming Group 10</li> <li> Storming Group 13</li> <li> Storming Group 15</li> <li> Storming Group 16</li> <li> Storming Group 17</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>Shaheen/Hamza Groups</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Storming Group</li> <li> Shaheen 1</li> <li> Shaheen 2</li> <li> Shaheen 3</li> <li> Shaheen 4</li> <li> Shaheen 6</li> <li> Shaheen 7</li> <li> Shaheen 8</li> <li> Shaheen 9</li> <li> Shaheen 10</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Sahabat Regiment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Al Mnha Security Team</li> <li> Ali Radad Groups</li> <li> Group 1/Firas al-Adba Group</li> <li> Storming Group 1</li> <li> Storming Group 5</li> <li> Group 8</li> <li> Group 9</li> <li> Group 10</li> <li> Group 11</li> <li> Special Tasks Group</li> <li> Supply Groups</li> <li> Observation &amp; Reconnaissance Group</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>Cheetahs Forces</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> 2nd Storming Battalion/ Rami Hamadi Group</li> <li> Cheetah 1</li> <li> Cheetah 2</li> <li> Cheetah 3</li> <li> Cheetah 4</li> <li> Cheetah 6</li> <li> Cheetah 7</li> <li> Cheetah 8</li> <li> Cheetah 9</li> <li> Cheetah 10</li> <li> Cheetah 15</li> <li> Cheetah 16</li> <li> Cheetah 41</li> </ul> </li> <li> <b>Artillery</b></li> <li> <b>Armor</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Section</li> <li> Platoon/ Detachment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Company</li> <li> Battalion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Regiment</li> <li> Armor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Infantry (group)</li> <li> Combat support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Security</li> <li> Reconnaissance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Artillery</li> </ul>

## SUHEIL AL-HASAN'S COMMAND



Maj. Gen. Jamil al-Hasan  
Air Intelligence Director



Brig. Gen. Suheil al-Hasan  
Commander of Tiger Forces  
Commander of Air Intelligence  
Special Operations



Brig. Gen. Salah Abdullah  
Saba'a  
Military Liaison  
Fmr. 7th Division brigade  
commander



Col. Yunis  
Mohammed  
Military Operations  
Commander



Lt. Col. Dourid Awad  
Artillery commander



Capt. Sumir Mar'ai  
Special Operations  
Commander  
(coordinates  
operations between  
various "special  
tasks" and  
"storming" units)



## ABU ARAB GROUP

**Founder:** Dyab "Abu Arab" Afouf  
**Current Commander:** Dyab "Abu Arab" Afouf  
**Region:** Harasta, Damascus  
**Size:** Platoon  
**Earliest Post:** Jan. 4, 2017



**Notes:** The group's page began in January 2018. Dyab Afouf was born in Harasta and was referred to as a "shabiha," an Arabic term for Assad's government supporters used early in the war by local opposition pages. He and the Abu Arab Groups were placed in charge of the humanitarian crossing out of Harasta in March 2017. Dyab Afouf is credited with leading the reconciliation negotiations during that time.



## ALI SHELI HAWKS

**Founder:** Abu Hassan Ali Sheli  
**Current Commander:** Abu Hassan Ali Sheli  
**Region:** Salhab, Hama  
**Size:** Comapny  
**Earliest Post:** Nov. 22, 2015

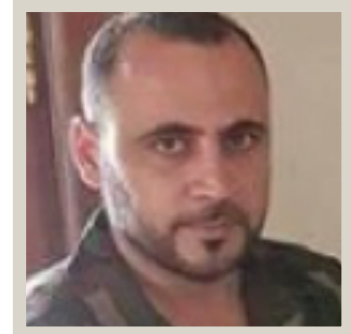


**Notes:** Ali Sheli was associated with the Tiger Forces as early as May 16, 2015. He was briefly arrested in January 2016 for robbing civilians at a checkpoint he operated on the Khanasir-Hama road.<sup>14</sup> As of late December 2017 the group appeared to be closely linked to the 4th Division.



## ALI TAHA

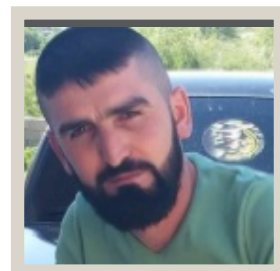
**Founder:** Ali Taha  
**Current Commander:** Ali Taha  
**Region:** Al-Ghab Plains, Hama;  
Maskana, Homs  
**Size:** Two to three companies  
**Earliest Post:** May 2016



**Notes:** Ali Taha became a Tiger Force field commander on Apr. 26, 2013. Although the date of the group's formation is unknown, it almost certainly existed prior to May 2016. The Martyr Ali Qeirouz Company regularly deployed with Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) fighters in late 2016 and early 2017 in Aleppo. While most of the group's fighters come from the al-Ghab Plains in Hama, one sub-group, the Maskana Group, is built around locals from the Maskana neighborhood of the city of Homs, a mixed Sunni and Christian area.

## CHEETAHS

**Founder:** Ali Ahmed Kna'an al-Hajji  
**Current Commander:** Ali Ahmed Kna'an al-Hajji  
**Components:** Second Storming Battalion/Rami Hamadi Group; Cheetah Group 1; Cheetah Group 2; Cheetah Group 3; Cheetah Group 4; Cheetah Group 6; Cheetah Group 7; Cheetah Group 8; Cheetah Group 9; Cheetah Group 10; Cheetah Group 15; Cheetah Group 16; Cheetah Group 41  
**Region:** Talkalakh, Homs  
**Size:** Battalion  
**Earliest Post:** Oct. 24, 2014

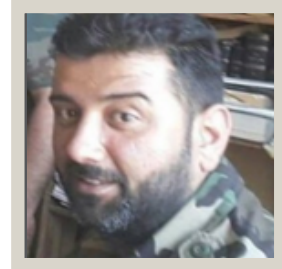


**Notes:** The group is also called Ali al-Hajji Groups and has a center in Masyaf, Hama as well. Three of the four historic commanders of the Cheetahs come from the al-Hajji family. The previous commander, Suleiman al-Hayek, has been implicated in war crimes in Aleppo.



## HADI REGIMENT

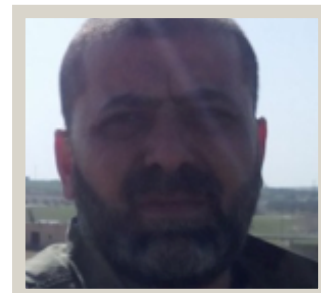
**Founder:** Bassel Ibrahim Asmar  
**Current Commander:** Mohammad Abu Samra  
**Components:** Haithem Bakr Groups; Hadi Storming Group; Group 6  
**Region:** Masyaf, Hama; Homs  
**Size:** One to two companies  
**Earliest Post:** May 14, 2015



**Notes:** The group has a possible origin in LDF, according to the second emblem pictured above. Bassel Asmar's martyr poster has Hezbollah and Khomeini pictures but he was Air Intelligence-affiliated by December 2016. A biography of him reads: "Bassel fought with Suheil since beginning of crisis." He later formed Hadi Regiment from own funds and has 2015 ties to SSNP, as seen through the fighter's SSNP patch.

## HAIDER

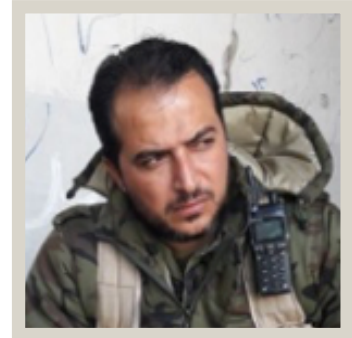
**Founder:** Samer Ismail  
**Current Commander:** Samer Ismail  
**Region:** Likely Homs  
**Size:** Three companies or one battalion  
**Earliest Post:** May 31, 2016



**Notes:** A November 2017 post claims a martyred fighter is affiliated with both the Tarmeh Group and the Shaja'a Ibrahim Group of the Haider Regiment. An August 2018 post also implies a relationship between Tarmeh and Haider. Many of the subgroups have a very minimal presence on Facebook and few clear current group commanders, implying that some subgroups either no longer exist or are small.

## HOARETH

**Founder:** "Uncle" Abu Nimr (Mahardah Air Intel commander)  
**Current Commander:** Kamal al-Mahmoud Abu al-Harith  
**Region:** Sari Makhlouf Combat Group; Support Group 33  
**Size:** Company  
**Earliest Post:** Dec. 14, 2015



**Notes:** The group was called Hoareth Groups in mid-2016 and seemed to have less Tiger affiliation in media output then. The group was founded by an Air Intelligence Mahardah commander in August 2016. Several field commanders have been pictured alongside Russian soldiers and officers more frequently than most Tiger units, likely due to heavy Russian presence in Mahardah.

## HUWASHEM

**Founder:** Yusuf Kna'an Abu Ja'afer  
**Current Commander:** Yusuf Kna'an Abu Ja'afer  
**Region:** Latakia  
**Size:** Platoon  
**Earliest Post:** Jan. 13, 2018



**Notes:** A very small group formed in late 2017 or early 2018.



## AL-KOMEET FORCES

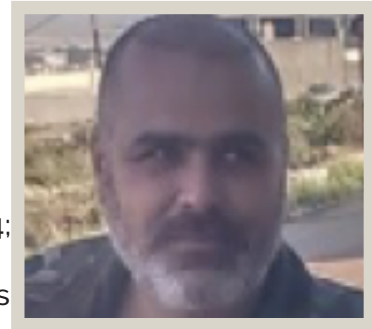


**Founder:** Firas Issa  
**Current Commander:** Firas Issa  
**Components:** Possibly First Storming Company  
**Region:** Tartous  
**Size:** One to two platoons  
**Earliest Post:** Jan. 22, 2017

**Notes:** Firas Issa fought in Shaer in 2014 and 2015 but his group seems to not deploy with the main Tiger Forces. Al-Komeet fought with Hezbollah in the Qaryatayn, Damascus campaign in January 2017 and was the only Tiger group participating in the south Badia offensive against ISIS in August 2018. Al-Komeet currently operates eight technicals and appeared to be affiliated with the Bustan Association and is linked to Hezbollah.



## AL-LOYUTH GROUPS



**Founder:** Shadi Yusuf Ismail  
**Current Commander:** Shadi Yusuf Ismail and Firas Raslan  
**Component:** Al-Loyuth Groups Storming Unit; Leith 10; Leith 4; Leith Support 14; Leith 21; Leith 22; Leith 23; Leith 28; Leith 54  
**Region:** Qardaha and Jableh, Latakia; Tartous; Talkalakh, Homs  
**Size:** Three companies or battalions  
**Earliest Post:** Aug. 18, 2015

**Notes:** Most fighters are from Qardaha and Jableh, Latakia. An October 2016 post called for volunteers to report to "the Tartous center," although it is not clear that there is any substantial recruitment from the governorate. Firas Raslan appears to be the current ground operations commander while Shadi Ismail still holds overall command of the group.



## MUBARAK

**Founder:** Sheikh Ahmed Mubarak al-Darwish

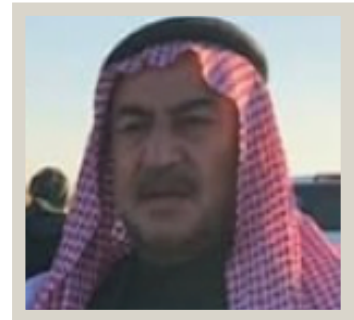
**Current Commander:** Sheikh Ahmed Mubarak al-Darwish

**Components:** Shahab Groups; Lion Groups

**Region:** Abu Dali, Idlib

**Size:** Company

**Earliest Post:** Feb. 11, 2016



**Notes:** Also known as Sheikh Ahmed Mubarak Group, it rose to prominence during the Raqqa offensive in mid-2017. The group consists of Bani 'Ezz tribesmen from the Abu Dali area of Idlib and Hama led by Sheikh Ahmed al-Darwish. Sheikh al-Darwish attended the Sochi conference in January 2018. It's unclear if the Shahab Groups survived the opposition attack on Abu Dali in early October

## NABHAN

**Founder:** Ahmed Nabhan

**Current Commander:** Ghassan Abu Naasan

**Components:** Nabhan 1 Assault Group, Nabhan Group 2

**Region:** Qomhana, Hama

**Size:** Company

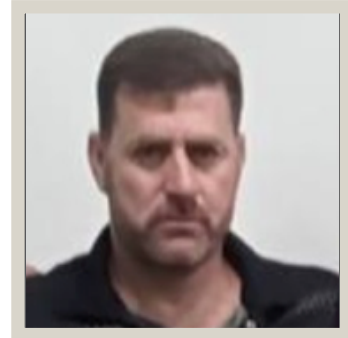
**Earliest Post:** Jun. 1, 2017



**Notes:** The group is connected to or part of Qomhana Defense Forces. The group was based around the Nabhan family of Qomhana and appeared to have originated in the Tarmeh Regiment of Qomhana where Ahmed Nabhan fought before founding the Nabhan Groups. Nabhan died on Feb. 25, 2018. On Jul. 20, 2018, the Nabhan Groups re-emerged with the Tarmeh Regiment and were placed under the command of Ghassan Abu Naasan, a field commander in the Tarmeh Groups 2/Shaja'a Ibrahim Group.

## NUWASIR

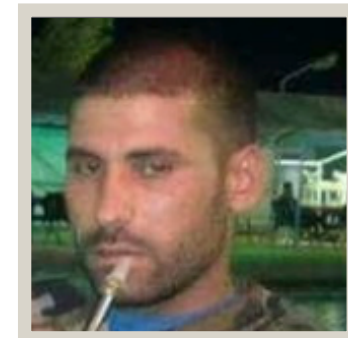
**Founder:** Mahmoud Khanat al-Nuwasir  
**Current Commander:** Mahmoud Khanat al-Nuwasir  
**Components:** Nasir 2; Nasir 3 Storming; Nasir 5/Haski Group; Nasir 6  
**Region:** South Tartous and northwest Homs (mostly Talkalakh)  
**Size:** One to two companies  
**Earliest Post:** Nov. 26, 2015



**Notes:** The group's full name is Mahmoud Khanat al-Nuwasir Groups. A Facebook post by an individual affiliated with the group claimed: "The martyr Hassan Adnan Samoun from the village of Ain al-Sudi, Tartous was in the Cheetahs Groups and after the martyrdom of Muhammad al-Hajji and Ali Dala (previous Cheetahs Group commanders, killed on Apr. 20, 2016, and May 18, 2017, respectively) we moved to the Nuwasir Groups and formed a group called Nasir 5. A month later (on Dec. 4, 2017) [Hassan Adnan Samoun] was martyred in Deir al-Zour on the river Euphrates (his father was killed in Jobar, Damascus)." The group includes fighters from both Alawite and Christian towns.

## SABA'A

**Founder:** Unknown  
**Current Commander:** Mahmoud Yusuf al-Zami  
**Region:** Homs  
**Size:** Large Platoon  
**Earliest Post:** Apr. 1, 2016



**Notes:** The group may have origins in Homeland Shield as Shaheen al-Ali posted a picture of himself in an April 2016 meeting at the office of the al-Saba'a Groups (Homeland Shield). However, it is not clear that this is the same al-Saba'a Groups as the Air Intelligence-affiliated group. It is difficult to find information on this group, as searching for al-Saba'a Groups mostly shows posts about Brig. Gen. Salah Abdallah al-Saba'a.



## SABBOUR

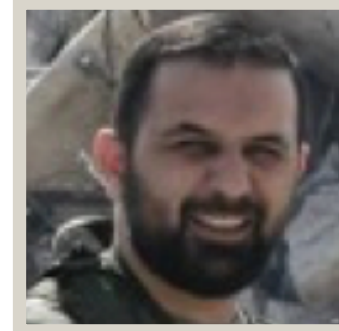
**Founder:** 'Araf Khalouf Abu Shaban  
**Current Commander:** 'Araf Khalouf Abu Shaban  
**Components:** Hani Yassin Group; Sabbour Storming Group; Sabbour 8; Sabbour 10; Sabbour 14  
**Region:** Homs  
**Size:** One to two companies  
**Earliest Post:** Feb. 14, 2016



**Notes:** A Facebook post on Nov. 22, 2016 states "al-Sabbour Groups, the men of Sari Makhlouf" implying that at the time the group had an affiliation with the Sari Makhlouf Groups, which is currently a sub-unit of the Hoareth Regiment.

## SAHABAT

**Founder:** Ali Mhna  
**Current Commander:** Ali Mhna  
**Components:** Ali Mhna Security Team; Ali Radad Groups; Group 1/Firas al-Adba Group; Storming Group 1; Storming Group 5; Group 8; Group 9; Group 10; Group 11; Special Tasks Group; Supply Groups; Observation and Reconnaissance Groups  
**Region:** Kawkab, Hama; Tartous  
**Size:** Battalion  
**Earliest Post:** Feb. 13, 2015



**Notes:** The group is mostly comprised of Kawkab fighters with Tartousi leaders. The unit is also known as Ali Mhna Groups and al-Sahab Groups. This is the only group which lists "supply groups" and "observation and reconnaissance groups," although most of the other battalion-sized groups likely have these units as well.

## SHAHEEN AL-ALI

**Founder:** Shaheen al-Ali  
**Current Commander:** Shaheen al-Ali  
**Region:** Safita, Tartous  
**Size:** Platoon  
**Earliest Post:** Dec. 20, 2015

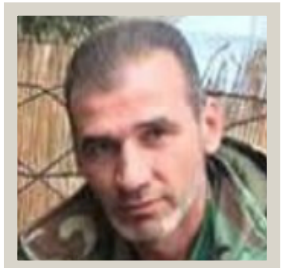


**Notes:** There are very little pictured connections to other Tiger Force units aside from one picture of Ali with Ali Mhna on Mar. 19, 2018. The group appears to almost exclusively guard northern Hama and has only one known sub-commander.



## SHAHEEN/HAMZA

**Founder:** Abu Haidra Yousef Shaheen and Abu Hamza Suleiman Shaheen  
**Current Commander:** Abu Haidra Yousef Shaheen and Abu Hamza Suleiman Shaheen  
**Components:** Storming Group; Shaheen 1; Shaheen 2; Shaheen 3; Shaheen 4; Shaheen 6; Shaheen 7; Shaheen 8; Shaheen 9; Shaheen 10  
**Region:** Masyaf, Hama  
**Size:** Battalion  
**Earliest Post:** March 2015

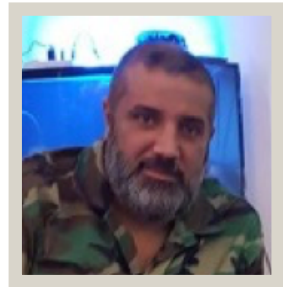


**Notes:** Yousef Shaheen and Suleiman Shaheen are two brothers from Masyaf, Hama who were members of Air Intelligence before forming the Hamza Groups and joining the Desert Hawks in 2014. Group was referred to as Suleiman Shaheen Group in 2015. Sometime between the rebel capture of Jisr al-Shoughur in April 2015 and the government offensive on al-Ghab plains in August 2015, the Hamza Groups officially joined the Tiger Forces. By mid-2016 they were referred to as Shaheen Groups. Yousef Shaheen's role appears to be more office-oriented while Suleiman Shaheen is more frequently pictured on frontlines. Suleiman was briefly arrested in late 2017 and early 2018 for speaking out about Tiger Forces' combat losses and failures. The group has the only known female sub-commander in the Tiger Forces.



## SHAWAHEEN HAWKS

**Founder:** Suleiman Shaheen Abu Hassan  
**Current Commander:** Suleiman Shaheen Abu Hassan  
**Components:** Martyr Commander Osama Abbas Battalion; Battalion 2 / Abu Zainab Battalion; Elite Forces / Salah al-'Aasi Regiment  
**Region:** Zahra, Homs; Masyaf, Hama  
**Size:** One to two companies  
**Earliest Post:** Oct. 8, 2016



**Notes:** Syrians have referred to this group as “very nasty” and “sectarian.” Sub-commander Talal al-Daqaq is known for the 2018 video of him feeding a live horse to his pet tiger. The Elite Forces/ Salah al-'Aasi was a component of the Desert Hawks in January 2016 and now appears to be company-sized.

## SEGHATI

**Founder:** Ahmed Seghati  
**Current Commander:** Ahmed Seghati  
**Components:** al-Jibala Group; Seghati Group 1; Seghati Group 5  
**Region:** Bisin, Seghata, and Hama City, Hama  
**Size:** Company  
**Earliest Post:** Jan. 28, 2015



**Notes:** The group fought with the Tiger Forces since at least May 2013 when it lost a fighter in Halfaya, Hama. The group's self-published autobiography from March 2018 claims that 1,200 fighters joined initially, but the largest group picture shows 72 men in July 2016. The al-Jibala Group is only referenced once, in the martyrdom announcement for its commander in June 2016. The subgroup likely became defunct after this and was rolled into another subgroup. Similarly, no references for “Group 1” can be found after 2016.



## TARMEH

**Founder:** Wael Saleh Ibrahim

**Current Commander:** Haidar al-Naasan

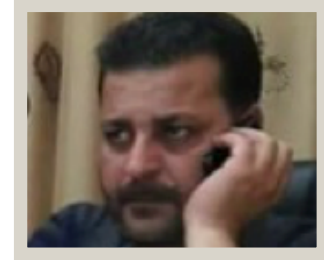
**Components:** Shaja'a Ibrahim Group / Tarmeh 2 Storming; Tarmeh Group 3; Tarmeh Group 4; Tarmeh Group Ma'ardes; Tarmeh Group Taybat al-Iman

**Region:** Qomhana and Ma'ardes, Taybat al-Iman, and Khattab, Hama

**Size:** Three companies

**Earliest Post:** November 2015

**Notes:** This group, a misspelling of Taramih, originated in Qomhana but the subgroup Shaja'a Ibrahim Group, also known as Tarmeh Group 2, is largely comprised of Khattab fighters. The group appears to be the central unit for incorporating Sunni fighters from the north Hama area, as three of the five sub-units are formed around strategically important towns in the region: Khattab, Ma'ardes, and Taybat al-Iman. Some displaced men from Idlib also fight within the previously mentioned subgroups. An October 2017 martyrdom announcement for three Tarmeh 2 fighters also refers to the Haider Regiment, implying a relationship between the groups. On Jul. 20, 2018, the Nabhan Groups were merged into the Tarmeh Regiment making the group battalion-sized.



## YAROB

**Founder:** Yarob Ali Jadid

**Current Commander:** Yarob Ali Jadid

**Region:** Latakia and Tartous

**Size:** Platoon

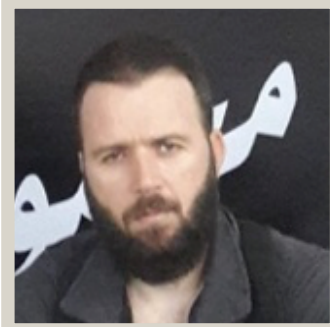
**Earliest Post:** October 2016

**Notes:** Yarob Jadid is from Latakia while the group's top field commander is from Tartous. Most of the people who like the unit's page are also from Tartous. One current fighter previously fought in the Desert Hawks and formerly worked in Branch 217 of the Syrian Military Intelligence Directorate.



## AL-YUSH'A

**Founder:** Samir Asad "al-Yush'a Yush'a"  
**Current Commander:** Samir Asad "al-Yush'a Yush'a"  
**Region:** Masyaf, Hama  
**Size:** Platoon  
**Earliest Post:** Jan. 10, 2017

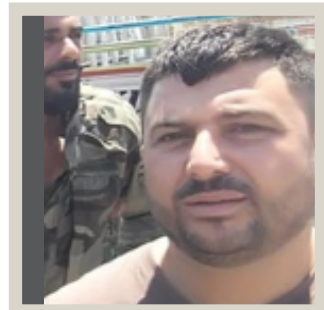


**Notes:** This appears to be a relatively new group which likely formed around the time of the Aleppo offensive in late 2016. Current media shows less than 30 fighters and a core of individuals from Masyaf, Hama. Despite its small size, Samir Asad has been pictured alongside every core officer in the Tiger Forces.



## W'AD MAKHLOUF

**Founder:** W'ad Makhlof  
**Current Commander:** W'ad Makhlof  
**Components:** W'ad Makhlof Group 1;  
W'ad Makhlof Group 2; W'ad Makhlof  
Group 3  
**Region:** Qardaha, Latakia  
**Size:** Platoon or Company  
**Earliest Post:** June 2018

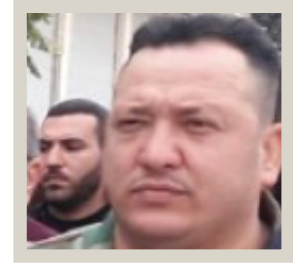


**Notes:** The group's commanders are from Qardaha, Latakia. The group had no presence on Facebook prior to 2018, although W'ad's personal Facebook profile shows a Tiger Force affiliation as early as January 2016. One August 2018 post references W'ad Makhlof Groups 1 through 3, although no other posts can be found referencing these groups. It is likely a platoon or company sized unit.



## AL-ZARIF

Founder: Abu Ali Samir Al-Zarif  
Current Commander: Abu Ali Samir Al-Zarif  
Components: Group 1; Group 2; Group 3;  
Group 4  
Region: Salamiyah, Hama; Homs  
Size: One to two companies  
Earliest Post: October 2016



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the University of California, Berkeley's Human Rights Center, who has hosted me throughout this project, and specifically Mahshad Badii and Lina Craighill, who assisted me in much of research. Huge thanks to Marcus Moody for making the Tiger Forces organization of battle chart and to Nathan Ruser for making the recruitment map.



# ENDNOTES

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**Cover photo:** Member of the Russian military police standing guard between the portraits of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin hanging outside a guard-post at the Wafideen checkpoint. LOUAI BESHARA/AFP/Getty Images

**Photo 2:** Members of the government forces, including Colonel Suheil al-Hassan who is known as the 'Nimr', Arabic for Tiger, cross a retractable military bridge on the eastern outskirts of the Syria's northern embattled city of Aleppo. GEORGE OURFALIAN/AFP/Getty Images

**Photo 3:** Syrian government soldiers burn an opposition flag while flashing the victory gesture at the Nassib border. YOUSSEF KARWASHAN/AFP/Getty Images



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregory Waters received his B.A. with Honors in Political Economy and Foreign Policy in the Middle East from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2016. Since then he has researched and written about the Syrian civil war and extremist groups, primarily utilizing Syrian community Facebook pages for his projects. His past work has involved tracking combat death in Syria. He works as a research consultant at the Counter Extremism Project, has previously been published by Bellingcat and openDemocracy, and currently writes about Syria for the International Review.

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