BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Founded in 2012 or 2013, Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya is a Syrian Shiite militia that has recruited primarily from the Shiite neighborhood of Imam Sadiq in Damascus.¹

The militia takes its name from the mosque in Damascus where Ruqaya, the daughter of the Shiite martyr Hussein, is believed to be buried. According to fighters interviewed for an Iranian documentary about the brigade, its members initially took up arms to defend Shiite shrines in Damascus, a motivation cited by many Iranian-backed militias.²

The fighters also reported being trained by Lebanese Hezbollah, a trend among Iranian proxies. Until 2015, the militia often advertised the banner and flag of Kataib Seyyed al-Shuhada (KSS), an Iraqi Shiite militia also sponsored by Iran.³ The group’s logo also bears a strong resemblance to that of KSS. The disappearance of KSS’ insignia suggests there may have been a break or dispute between the groups.

During the war in Syria, Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya has fought under IRGC command on various fronts, including its role in the 2017 operation directed toward the U.S. base at Tanf near the Iraqi border in southeastern Syria.⁴ In the Iranian documentary, the brigade’s commanders claimed their real enemy was Israel, reflecting the group’s ideological affinity with the IRGC.⁵

Iran’s establishment of a Syrian Shiite militia is a replication, on a smaller scale, of the IRGC’s creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon. By sponsoring militias composed of local Shiites, Iran seeks to present itself as their protector from Sunni extremists, although Iran also stokes the sectarian tensions that create this insecurity.