

## Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya (The Jaafari Force)



**Logo:** Image of the Sayyida Ruqayya mosque in Damascus

**Flag Text:** Above dome: “If God assists you no one can overcome you” (Quran 3:160); below dome in red: “The Jaafari Force”; below dome in yellow: “Sayyida Roqayya Brigade”; below dome in white: “Islamic Resistance in Syria, Military Media”

### FOUNDING

- 2012-2013

### KEY LEADERS

- Unknown

### SIZE

- Opposition source estimated 400 in late 2016

### POLITICAL WING

- None

### IDEOLOGICAL ALLEGIANCE

- Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

### ATROCITIES

- Unknown

### WEAPONS

- Has displayed Soviet-era weapons that were available in Syria prior to the war

### CONNECTIONS TO OTHER MILITIAS

- Trained by Lebanese Hezbollah, previously advertised a link to Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada

### AREAS OF OPERATION

- Damascus-based group that has operated across Syria, including Deraa and more recently eastern Syria as part of the offensive toward the U.S. base at Tanf and al-Bukamal

### CURRENT DESIGNATIONS

- None

### SOCIAL MEDIA

- Facebook



### CONNECTIONS TO THE IRGC

**Under command and control of the IRGC Quds Force, led by Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani**

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

The militia takes its name from the mosque in Damascus where Ruqayya, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> In the Iranian documentary, the brigade’s commanders claimed their real enemy was Israel, reflecting the group’s ideological affinity with the IRGC.<sup>5</sup>

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.

1. “(مسندت گروهان سيده رقيه (س))” (Sayyida Roqayya companies documentary), *YouTube*, March 23, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FE5JhfMZ3hU>). The Imam Sadiq neighborhood takes its names from Jaafar al-Sadiq, the sixth Shiite imam, hence Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya is also called “the Jaafari force.”

2. Ibid.

3. “الشيعة في سوريا...Liwa al Sayyida Roqayya, Kataib Seyyed al Shuhada,” *YouTube*, March 13, 2015. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHVDtRkgQ>); “(مسندت گروهان سيده رقيه (س))” (Sayyida Roqayya companies documentary), *YouTube*, March 23, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FE5JhfMZ3hU>); The Martyrs of Liwa Sayyida Roqayya - The Jaafari Force, *Facebook*, July 7, 2015. (<https://www.facebook.com/861462547280460/photos/rpp.861462547280460/864940090266039/?type=3&theater>); The Jaafari Force, *Facebook*, accessed January 17, 2018. (<https://www.facebook.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-1668194670086933/>); The Jaafari Force, *Facebook*, September 20, 2017. (<https://www.facebook.com/1668194670086933/photos/a.1668197590086641.1073741827.1668194670086933/1938131413093256/?type=1&theater>)

4. Amir Toumaj and Caleb Weiss, “Iran tests the US in southeastern Syria,” *FDD’s Long War Journal*, June 3, 2017. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/iran-tests-the-us-in-southeastern-syria.php>)

5. “(مسندت گروهان سيده رقيه (س))” (Sayyida Roqayya companies documentary), *YouTube*, March 23, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FE5JhfMZ3hU>)