

On the Frontline of the Battle for Syria's Lebanese Villages



Hussein is a typical member of the Popular Committees. He and 18-year-old Amjad (borrowed name) are tasked with nighttime guard duty. (Photo: Haytham Al-Moussawi)

By: [Firas Choufi](#) ^[1]

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On the Syrian side of the Assi River Basin, there are 15 majority Lebanese villages and another 20 that are mixed. These towns have become a battle zone as opposition fighters attempt to seize control of the area.

It was not long ago that the media was buzzing with [reports](#) ^[2] about battles between Hezbollah and opposition fighters in the villages of the Assi (Orontes) River Basin, where approximately 30,000 Lebanese citizens reside.

The area is a strategic point for the opposition as it tries to open up a route to Lebanon's [Wadi Khaled](#) ^[3] in the north, which has become an opposition support base, providing them with fighters and weapons. The Lebanese villages in Syria, the residents of which are a mix of Shia and Alawis are obstacles to their progress.

He describes a recent battle where 300 opposition fighters attacked them using 14 heavy machine guns mounted on the back of pickup trucks.

After the opposition [al-Nusra Front](#) ^[4] and the Farouq Brigades managed to take control of several villages in the basin, the Lebanese villages began to organize themselves into armed Popular Committees.

The fighters of the Popular Committees are hardly the seasoned and well-trained fighters of Hezbollah, as the media portray them. Many are farmers and ordinary residents who have only recently taken up arms to protect their villages.

Hussein (borrowed name), a 22-year-old, is but one example. During the day, he works on his family's farm tending to a modest herd of goats and sheep. After sunset, he goes home to pick up his Kalashnikov and put on a military vest.

Hussein is a typical member of the Popular Committees. He and 18-year-old Amjad (borrowed name) are tasked with nighttime guard duty, spending their evenings in a foxhole overlooking a field that separates them from the Syrian opposition fighters.

One Popular Committee official in the village of Hammam, where the media reported heavy fighting involving Hezbollah last week, explains that the attack on the village came after the Syrian army managed to route opposition fighters along the international road to the east, forcing them to flee toward Hammam.

He describes a recent battle where 300 opposition fighters attacked them using 14 heavy machine guns mounted on the back of pickup trucks. "We were able to repel them with 50 men," he says, with a mix of exhaustion and confidence.

Fearing that the opposition fighters would commit a massacre in their village, they managed to kill 31 and injure 55 from the other side, while losing only three fighters from Hammam, according to Popular Committee sources.

How did this religiously diverse area reach this point? Residents of the nearby village of Aqrabieh – where Lebanese constitute 18 percent of the population – tell of the dozens of kidnappings and murders in the surrounding villages.

“Say hello to Beirut for me,” he tells us, “I think I will die here.”

The worst case was the kidnapping of over 300 residents of the majority Christian village of Rableh during the apple picking season.

In the villages around Aqrabieh, the Popular Committees have started to merge with the newly formed National Defense Forces (NDF). The idea behind the NDF is to unite the various Popular Committees – which tend to be of one color in terms of religion or sect, depending on the village – into a single mixed formation in order to prevent sectarian divisions from becoming institutionalized in the area.

The NDF are organized along the same lines as the Syrian army, divided into groups of 30 that are then dispersed throughout the basin’s villages.

Rawad (borrowed name) is a new recruit to the NDF. Like many Syrian laborers in Lebanon, he was working in an aluminum workshop in Beirut, when he decided to drop everything to come here. “Say hello to Beirut for me,” he tells us, “I think I will die here.”

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.

Firas Choufi