

Syria's Lebanese Rebels: Trying Their Hand at Revolution



A man rides his motorbike on a dirt road on the Lebanese-Syrian border in east Lebanon's Bekaa Valley region of al-Qaa on 21 October 2011. (Photo: AFP - Joseph Eid)

By: [Afif Diab](#) ^[1]

Published Tuesday, October 16, 2012

Some Lebanese “seasoned” fighters and arms traders see in the Syrian crisis an opportunity to put their skills to work, but in many cases they are doing more harm than good.

Lebanese smugglers and fighters, particularly from border villages connected to Syria through

family and trade ties, are playing a growing role in the Syrian civil war.

Ahmad, a self-styled Lebanese revolutionary, sits with a group of Syrian militants on the outskirts of Masharih al-Qaa, a border town in northern Bekaa. He is barely 20 years old.

Ahmad draws a plan of attack against a Syrian army position for five Syrian fighters. Using a small knife, he etches on the ground the route he thinks they should follow to storm their target and then fall back to Lebanon. The five men listen very attentively to Ahmad.

"We must help them." When confronted with the possibility he may have led five men to their deaths, he exclaims: "They did not understand me!"

He repeats the details of his plan. They inquire about some ambiguous parts of his plan, prompting him to explain one more time. When night falls, the group sets off to carry out the attack. Less than half an hour later, gunshots are heard, with the rebels and army exchanging fire not very far from the village of Rabla on the Syrian side.

Ahmad tries to contact the group, but gets no answer.

"Maybe they were martyred," he says. "They did not follow my plan!"

We asked Ahmad about his military knowledge and combat experience. The young man, who is eager to topple the Assad regime, admits his experience is limited to working the smuggling routes and playing with a Kalashnikov rifle alone in the hills surrounding his village.

"The Syrians are helpless – they know nothing," he insists. "We must help them." When confronted with the possibility he may have led five men to their deaths, he exclaims: "They did not understand me!"

Lebanese supporters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) claim the Syrians need Lebanese military expertise. *Al-Akhbar* recently toured these training camps, and saw nothing to convince an observer that the Lebanese are anything but a burden on the Syrian uprising.

Ahmad does not conceal his complete ignorance when it comes to combat, but sees no shame in learning on the job, although this might lead to the deaths of young Syrians who are eager to fight.

Some dissident Syrian officers are working on putting an end to what they call the "folly" of some Lebanese interlopers.

Captain Amjad, one such officer stationed along the Falita-Ersal axis, said that while his group included fighters from Lebanon, "We only allow them to take on logistical roles."

"We decide where, when and how we carry out attacks against Syrian army positions," said Amjad, pointing out that there are also Syrian and Lebanese armed groups operating on their own, attacking the Syrian army positions without coordinating with his group.

Indeed, ragtag commanders like Ahmad are present at many border points under the control of Syrian and Lebanese fighters who are not affiliated with the FSA.

Groups of fighters and modest training camps can be found along approximately 90 kilometers

of the Lebanese-Syrian border, most within 2 kilometers of the border. This frontline extends from Masharih al-Qaa to the border village of Tufail, through the hills of Ras Baalbeck and Ersal, and all the way to the villages of Asal al-Ward, Hawsh Arab and Rankous on the Syrian side.

Some fighters claim to have carved out a pocket of control more than 25 kilometers wide along the border.

Abu Haitham, a Syrian colonel who defected from the regular army, said that raids by Syrian warplanes near Tufail a few days ago had not succeeded in cutting off rebel supply lines.

The dissident colonel claimed that the areas adjacent to Tufail on the Lebanese side, all the way to Asal al-Ward, Hawsh Arab, Rankous and the small farms there “are practically under our military control.”

He went on to say the FSA “would soon seize a strip along the border with Lebanon that would help them expand southward and eastward, and break the siege.”

According to a Lebanese fighter near the border village of Maaraboun, however, the groups and camps along the Lebanese side “cannot be said to have any significant military value.”

Rather, he said, these positions are considered “staging grounds or resting areas [for the fighters] before crossing into Syrian territory,” adding that they are not static.

“We usually cross into Syria to carry out attacks against the regular army, and then retreat to Lebanese territory before we carry out another attack,” he said.

Lebanese providing assistance, whether material, strategic or military, to the Syrian opposition appear to be motivated by both conviction and money.

Meanwhile, Lebanese and Syrian fighters taking shelter in the rugged hills of Ras Baalbeck said that they are able to cross into the Damascus countryside day and night thanks to Syrian army soldiers who receive bribes.

Unlike the other fighters who spoke to *Al-Akhbar*, this group said their operations are mostly limited to smuggling guns, ammunition, and foodstuffs.

“Sometimes, we attack a patrol if it tries to stop us,” one of them said.

Lebanese providing assistance, whether material, strategic or military, to the Syrian opposition appear to be motivated by both conviction and money.

“We do not deny that smugglers are exploiting the situation in Syria,” said one Lebanese fighter from Ersal. “But we and the FSA need the expertise these smugglers have to offer.”

Another Syrian opposition supporter from Ersal who goes by the name Abu al-Qaqaa emphasized that he and like-minded Lebanese are motivated by their “religious-sectarian duty” but that “common interests” require them to deal with smugglers, “even if they meddle in military affairs that they are not well versed in.”

Meanwhile, several Lebanese and Syrian fighters are stationed in a natural enclosure in the southeastern hills of Ersal. They often cross into Syria under cover of darkness. Three of them

were killed, including one Lebanese national, in a firefight with the Syrian army near Mazraat Qara on the Syrian side recently.

One of the Syrian militants who is not in the Free Syrian Army admitted that they receive a lot of help from Lebanese smugglers. But how did the latter come to lead camps to train rebels?

“We were brought together by calamity,” said the Syrian fighter, known as Abu Walid. “We all want to overthrow Assad.”

Here, a man from Majdal Anjar, who has devoted himself to helping the Syrian rebels, jumps in to deny that he is a smuggler.

“I used to serve in the Lebanese army. I have vast military experience. I am not a smuggler,” he said, adding in an angry tone: “Even today, I carried out several attacks against Assad’s army.”

He also claimed to have given 30 Syrians hand-on weapons training so far.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.