

Alternate Names: National Defense Forces (NDF)
Al-Quwat al-Difa' al-Watani
قوات الدفاع الوطني

Logo:



The Syrian National Defense Force (NDF) is a nation-wide paramilitary organization that supports the [Assad regime](#) by supplementing the ailing Syrian Arab Army (SAA) – which has been depleted through casualties, defections, and ennui – with much-needed manpower. The NDF is composed primarily of local community-based Shiite and minority fighters, and is estimated to have [100,000 men](#) or more.

The NDF was formed in late 2012/early 2013 with the restructuring and merging of existing pro-regime Popular Committees and ad hoc “[shabiha](#)” militias. It was set up under the [guidance of Iran’s IRGC](#) which [organized, funded](#), and (with the help of Iran’s proxy, [Hezbollah](#)) trained NDF units. The NDF is [modeled after](#) Iran’s own national militia: the [Basij Resistance Force](#). Under Iran’s tutelage it has become indispensable to Assad’s survival – by some accounts practically [replacing the SAA](#) – and has contributed to the considerable increase in [Iranian influence](#) over Damascus since the start of the war.

Local National Defense Force units vary in their level of autonomy and command structure. In addition to defending their hometowns, NDF fighters often serve as auxiliary forces to augment more professional/elite units. They are deployed [under the command of Hezbollah](#), the SAA, and [IRGC commanders](#) when needed during offensives. The NDF presents an attractive alternative for many young Syrian men who previously dodged Syria’s mandatory military service because it offers [higher salaries](#) and deployment close to home.

While some NDF units are better-trained and armed with more sophisticated equipment than regular Syrian soldiers, others are “[poorly disciplined semi-criminal or sectarian gangs in civilian attire](#).” Tension, at times escalating to the level of violence, has been reported between unruly [NDF groups and the Syrian military](#). Much like its informal precursor militias, the NDF has acquired a reputation for thug-like behavior and has been implicated in the commission of atrocities against civilians, including the infamous [Bayda and Baniyas massacres](#) in May 2013.

Although the NDF has played an important role in the survival of the Syrian regime, its future is becoming increasingly uncertain. Russia has sought to wield greater influence in Syria since it began its direct military intervention in September 2015, and the Iranian-backed NDF may no longer fit into Russia’s grand scheme. There are rumors that the Assad regime plans to dissolve the NDF and replace it with a Russian-backed “[Fourth Legion](#),” which will execute ground operations in coordination with Russian airstrikes. Several recent incidents lend credence to the idea that Russia is now training its own Syrian militia forces. In November 2015 Russia’s RT network [published a video](#) showing the graduation ceremony of Russian-trained Syrian “Self-Defense Forces” in Latakia. This was followed by a video [published by SANA](#) showing the second cohort of Self-Defense Force graduates in Damascus. Additionally, in December photos circulated of a local NDF commander in Hama [sporting Russian military attire](#) after being awarded a medal and rank by the Russian army.

How and if the NDF will continue to prop up the Assad regime will be decided in the coming days, as Russia and Iran vie to assert their influence in Syria.