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The Hajji

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Like most of the fighters here, the 44-year-old Hajji has a short beard, though unlike the others', his has been recently trimmed. Hajji - as he was called by his acquaintances even prior to the revolution - now leads the

“Sa’d bin Ubadah al-Khazaraji Brigade”. He is married to two women and used to run a highly lucrative Hajj and Umrah travel agency.

I asked him: why did you get involved with the revolution?
He replied: why did you get involved?!

During our first encounter, Hajji was unenthusiastic about being interviewed. I asked him whether I could take notes while we chatted but he first wanted to know more about me. I supposed that I had given him sufficient information about who I am and what I do, but then felt obliged to say more. I added that I was a former Leftist political prisoner and a secularist. As I was telling him this, Hajji was talking about evening prayer, but following my last comment, decided to refer me to his brother-in-law and the brigade’s media officer, who was a well-built, clean-shaven 32-year-old nicknamed Abul-‘Izz.

Abul-‘Izz was equally sceptical of my motives but was nonetheless interested in what I had to say. He escorted me to the nearby media office where we would wait for Hajji to return from prayer. I asked him to google my name so that he could learn more about me. He did so, and was satisfied with what he found. We drank very sweet tea, as people do here in the Ghouta. Hajji then joined us. Having finished his prayer, he seemed much more relaxed.

Hajji joined the revolution in order to fight oppression. After all, as the hadith says, God has forbidden oppression for himself and has made it forbidden amongst his servants.

When the Libyan Revolution erupted, Hajji would tell those around him that Qaddafi is “one of God’s allies compared to what we have here!”. He adds: “We weren’t allowed to

think, to make, or to learn...International Zionism and Freemasonry wants those who govern us to govern us as they please at the expense of industry and education". Today, Hajji manufactures improvised mortars that can simultaneously fire six rounds. He is interested in "arms manufacturing and qualified people", and surrounds himself with capable men: university students, electricians, and experts in machining, turning, and metalworking. He says defiantly: "If the regime had mortars more accurate than ours then I would quit altogether." He adds: "But we need a lot of money to develop our project".

During the first six months of the Revolution, Hajji worked on supplying Thuraya mobile satellite handsets and pen cameras to activists in Der'aa, Tibat al-Imam in Hama, and the Damascene neighbourhood of Al-Qadam.

"The regime tried to quell the demonstrations by firing at the people, so it became necessary to protect the demonstrators. We gathered those activists who were wanted by state-security forces and put them up in safe-houses in Deir al-'Asafir. There was dozens of them. We organised them soon after and formed an unnamed battalion which we deployed in the neighbourhood of Shifoniyyah. The battalion grew in size when Abu Uday and twelve others defected from the regime and joined us. We posted them to Deir al-'Asafir. This would have been in November or December of 2011. It was around this time that the "Battalions of the Mothers of Believers" was established; two battalions, "Hafsa Battalion" and "'A'isha Battalion" were active here in Mlaha with the participation of Abu Khalid al-Ghizlany and others. We struck reserve unit 129 in Shab'a and the battalion in Nawla. We would seize whatever weapons and ammunition we could find and walk

away. We did not liberate or settle in these areas.”

Hajji participated in many battles. He was wounded twice; the most severe injury, from which he still suffers, was sustained in his chest during the campaign to liberate the Ghouta last autumn.

“When Colonel Abu al-Walid defected in the beginning of 2012, he came and stayed with me. This was when I became wanted by the state-security so I kept a low profile. Despite that, I did not leave the country even when others did. I worked hard on uniting the people and persuading them to overcome their sectarian and ideological differences. Forget about these words: Salafism, secularism, Sufism. Let us put our hands together in order to rid ourselves of oppression and of this Pharaoh...”

“But for the most part it was “Al-Islam Brigade” which stood in the way of our attempts to unify the rebels. 4 or 5 months after joining the “Battalions of the Mothers of Believers” we formed the “Sa’d bin Ubadah al-Khazaraji Brigade”. (It is believed that Sa’d bin Ubadah, a companion of the Prophet, is buried here in Mlaihah, and there is a mosque and a school that bear his name). There were 60 or 70 of us, and at the start of 2012 we worked for a period of 4 months alongside “Al-Islam Brigade”. We then stopped co-operating with them because of their lack of support during the “Mortars Battle” in Mlaihah Farms; they supplied us with not a cent, nor a bullet, nor a gun, nor a man. Huge sums of money are sent to their leader Zahran ‘Alloush from the Saudi-based cleric ‘Adnan al-‘Ar’our, and one time state-security forces seized their ammunition depots in Douma...”

“After leaving “Al-Islam Brigade” we worked on our own for about a month before joining “Tahrir al-Sham Brigade” under the leadership of Captain Firas Bitar. We purchased weapons through donations given to us by Syrians living inside the country and abroad. We then left “Tahrir al-Sham Brigade” during the first stages of the battle of Jobar in late February 2013 and became a brigade in our own right. We are one thousand strong today and participate on the frontlines of al-Hajar al-Aswad, Mlaha, Jobar, ‘Utayba, Hujaira, and Sitt Zaynab.”

I asked Hajji what the reasons are for the shifting of alliances amongst rebel groups. He responded by saying that the many sources of financial, logistic, and military support means that certain conditions and allegiances are imposed on rebel groups. These financiers do not necessarily reside outside the country; many of them live in Syria. For example, Mohammad Hamsho, who is said to be a long-time front for Maher al-Assad’s shady business deals, now finances and imposes certain demands on some rebel battalions often rendering them inactive along the frontlines.

Hajji proposes that Hamsho is only interested in saving himself after being a crony of the regime for such a long time, though I find this explanation unconvincing. I told Hajji that Hamsho is intent on saving the regime and destroying the revolution. Hajji did not disagree with me, on the contrary, he reaffirmed what I had said by invoking a belief common around these parts, that Hamsho is not pro-regime, rather he is the regime and one of its main pillars!

“We are independent and do not subscribe to anybody,” said Hajji, who went on to point out that part of the

disorganisation within the many rebel units is caused by the fact that many people are joining the Free Syrian Army. Hajji worries about the Syrian youth, resents complacency, and despises disingenuous support. He is not too worried about violence after the regime falls because “our people are sensible,” yet he does not discount this prospect either. He expresses his concerns about our society “turning into a jungle, where the strong eat the weak. Many people do not want this situation to end because they are living a good life and making money out of it”. He is equally concerned about the rise of Salafism. He detests “Al-Islam Brigade” and says that they are more dangerous than Jabhat al-Nusra, because according to him, the latter group will move elsewhere, to another hotspot, as soon as things simmer down in Syria.

“I hope that God will return religion into our hearts” he says, “and that we don’t wrong anybody. I also want to return to my business”. Jokingly, he adds that he wouldn’t mind having a third wife either, as long as she is beautiful.

I expressed my doubts about his desire to return to his previous life after having had a taste of power. He responded officiously that it is only natural to want to boast, but continued: “We were forced to take up arms. I couldn’t even slaughter a chicken before the Revolution...And how are we different from the regime if we behave like it does?!”

Hajji sees that, with the exception of a few good, but albeit ineffective people, all of the political formations against the regime have to answer to some foreign country or another. He concludes, “things are not easy, but we will no-doubt prevail in the coming months”.

In the following day, I learnt that Hajji's brother, Abu Saleh, is the military police chief in the "Sa'd bin Ubadah al-Khazaraji Brigade." He oversees all of its operations in Mlaiha and even deals with petty crime in the town such as theft and drug-dealing. He primarily and frequently resorts to falaqa (foot whipping) as an interrogation method!

Later, I joked with Abul-'Izz about the fact the Hajji is the leader of the brigade, his brother is the military police chief, and his brother-in-law is the media officer. "Just like Bashar, Maher, and Assef Shawkat" I said. Abul-'Izz took my joke in good humour. He said that he was an active participant in anti-regime demonstrations long before he became the brigade's administrator and media officer, and that his "relationship to Hajji has nothing to do with this".