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MUSTAFA SEJARI: A RISING STAR IN NORTHEAST SYRIA'S MILITANT OPPOSITION

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The United States military and its coalition allies are working to expand the number of local Arab Sunni armed opposition groups that are participating in the anti-Islamic State campaign in Syria. One of the first and most effective U.S.-supported, anti-IS Syrian armed opposition coalitions is Liwa al-Mutasem, which is active in the country's northwestern Aleppo Governorate (Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office [Marea], June 30; Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office, June 16; Zaman al-Wasl [Marea], June 8). Liwa al-Mutasem has over 1,500 fighters and is beginning to receive substantial U.S. military assistance to fight against IS in the front-line area centered around the strategic town of Marea, northeast of the city of Aleppo (Viber Interview). [1] The head of the Political Office of Liwa al-Mutasem is Mustafa Sejari (a.k.a. Assad Islam), who is one of the most important, and increasingly powerful, U.S. military-backed Syrian armed opposition leaders.

Sejari, 32, was born and raised in the city of Aleppo, and moved to the city of Lattakia in 2004. Shortly after he relocated to Lattakia in 2004, Sejari joined an underground youth protest movement against the al-Assad government, Shabab Tghayr (Youth for Change), which met clandestinely and which printed and distributed pamphlets and painted graffiti calling for greater political and civil rights (Viber Interview). In 2006, Sejari was arrested by the al-Assad governments' security forces. He was held in solitary confinement in a local prison run by the Lattakia Political Security Department until his release from prison in 2008 (Viber Interview).

Following the start of the Syrian Uprising in March 2011, Sejari was arrested on four separate occasions while participating in anti-Assad government demonstrations in Lattakia city (Viber Interview). In May 2012, after a cycle of particularly violent repression of the local protest movement in Lattakia city by the al-Assad government, Sejari and several of his activist colleagues left the city for the resort town of al-Haffah in the Sahyoun Mountains, located twenty miles east of Lattakia city (Viber