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Sectarianism, Militias and Foreign Investment

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The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias and Foreign Investment

Omran Center for Strategic Studies

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An independent think tank and policy research center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region.

Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria.

Omran's work support decision making mechanisms, provide practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision makers, identify challenges within the Syrian context, and foresee scenarios and alternative solutions

Contributors

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Introduction

Questions about the fate of Syria's security and defense sectors continue to be some of the most important questions facing the country today. These questions have only grown in importance since the revolution, both because reforming these sectors was one of the main demands of protestors, and because Syria's security and defense institutions have undergone profound transformations in their structure and function. Most of these questions remain unanswered, as security agencies consider research in this field as acts "against security and defense." At the same time, the shortcomings in Syria's security and defense sectors that must be addressed are both numerous and old, and recent policies and practices have served to exacerbate these issues, transforming them into increasingly intractable dilemmas.

The current reality of the Syrian military establishment raises questions about the very nature of its existence and fate, especially given the changes in its social composition, power centers, and key actors. Given these substantial shifts, there is an urgent need for research to redefine Syria's military establishment and to understand how the changes in its structure will impact the restructuring process that is already underway. So far, this process is being driven by several conflicting agendas, but is entirely lacking any consideration of the crucial national dimension.

The role of the army and its impact on local interactions and shifts and on the dynamics of democratic transformation remain central questions facing the process of restructuring the Syrian military establishment. The structural and functional shortcoming and the identity distortions that have taken occurred in the military establishment have led it to constantly intervene in Syrian society and politics in a manner that both serves and fuels the philosophy of the ruling class. As a result of the ideological, organizational, and functional distortion of the security and defense establishments, these institutions have become completely alienated from Syrian society. They lack any sense of neutrality and are instead forces that are politically aligned with the regime.

The main challenges to restructuring Syria's military establishment include the implementation of the technical aspects of complex demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) programs, but also the specific features of the Syrian context, such as the partisan nature of the army and its doctrine, and the complete absence of a legal framework for civil-military relations.

In 2018, the Omran Center for Strategic Studies launched a research project on the transformations taking place in the Syrian military establishment and the challenges of change and reform. Omran has continued this course of research into 2019 and is pleased to present its second volume of research in this area: "The Syrian Military Establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias and Foreign Investment." This collection of papers focuses on the current reality of Syria's military establishment in 2019 and grapples with questions related to its organizational structure and the new networks forming within that structure. The subjects that are covered in the papers in this volume are as follows:

1. Sectarianism in the Syrian Army: A study of the social composition of the military:

2. Military Groups and Networks within the Syrian Army: Multiple Loyalties and Militia Mentality (paper).

3. The Role and Fate of Palestinian Forces and Militias Loyal to the Syrian Regime (paper).

4. New Military Corps in the Syrian Army (report).

5. Testing the Regime's Capacity for Restructuring and Reintegration (paper).

6. Non-Technical Challenges of Restructuring Syria's Military (paper).

7. Military Judicial System in Syria from 1950-2019 (report).

The research findings have been based on five focus group discussions organized by the Omran Center with defected officers of various specializations in a number of cities in southern Turkey to discuss two main

themes: 1) What remains of the Syrian army? and, 2) Inducing sectarianism and its mechanisms in the army. In addition to these focus groups, Omran researchers conducted dozens of one-on-one interviews with defected officers.

Ammar Kahf, Ph.D

Executive Director

Study

What Sectarianism Reveals about the Syrian Army

Ayman AlDassouky*

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What Sectarianism Reveals about the Syrian Army

Introduction

After its independence, Syria underwent long-term transformations in its social and institutional structures and in its political and economic conditions. These transformations are both an extension and a product of the policies pursued by France during its mandate over Syria. The most prominent feature of these transformations was the rise of the Syria's rural areas, which was shaped by social forces, particularly by minority groups.

The weakness of Syria's military establishment and its high level of politicization, along with ethnic, sectarian, partisan, regional loyalties within the army, all manifested in ever-changing and competing blocs that engaged in internal conflicts and international polarization. At the same time, the influence and weight of the traditional blocs, such as Sunni officers from Damascus and the Horan, began to erode. This cleared a path for the rise of a class of politicized officers from rural and minority backgrounds, such as Baathist Alawite officers, who have succeeded in dominating the armed forces since mid-1960s.

Hafez al-Assad held the position of Syrian minister of defense in 1966, and this post along with disputes within the Baath Party's military committee enabled him to a network inside the armed forces, which was a decisive factor in his assumption of power in 1970. Hafez al-Assad continued to empower his own network within the army using different tools and by relying on elite Alawite officers, specifically from his own clan, taking into account the need to maintain a sectarian balance in the leadership structure of the armed forces. The growing numbers of Alawites who joined the army, coupled with the reluctance of Sunnis to volunteer for the army since the events of 1980s, contributed to the dominance of Alawites within the army and the rise of sectarianism against Sunni officers.

Starting in the early 1990s, Hafez al-Assad began to reshape his networks in the armed forces and security agencies to make it easier for his son Basel to inherit the power. However, following the sudden death of Basel al-Assad in 1994, intensive work began to prepare Basel's substitute, Bashar al-Assad, to

take office, starting with the Republican Guard as an entry point. Many officers who were against the birthright inheritance of power in Syria lost their positions within Assad's network. On the other hand, the engineering officers who were Basel's colleagues in the Republican Guard and Bashar's comrades in his military training courses, came to occupy advanced positions in Bashar's emerging influence network within the armed forces and security agencies. Although the central mechanisms controlling the network remained as they were under Hafez al-Assad, the sectarian balance was disturbed due to the rise of Alawite officers, the increasing marginalization of Sunni officers, and the integration of Syrian Shiite officers into Bashar al-Assad's network.

The army was driven into the domestic scene following the attack on the military security platoon in Jisr al-Shughour in June 2011. This incident fueled sectarianism and distrust within the armed forces, which was expressed in different contexts and modes of behavior and practices, both implicit and explicit. The sectarian rift was exacerbated by the defection of many Sunni officers, and the increase of Alawite dominance in the ranks of commissioned and non-commissioned officers.

The army's depletion and its inability to suppress the protest movement, forced it to depend on auxiliary forces and the support of its allies, Russia and Iran. Thanks to those allies, the military was able to survive but was fragmented into networks made up of varying loyalties and identities that competed among themselves. This is reminiscent of the army in the 1940s and 1950s, which was weak, divided into competing blocs with multiple loyalties, and polarized by international and regional powers.

A Politicized and Ruralized Army

The weakness of Syria's military establishment and its high level of politicization, along with the ethnic, sectarian, partisan, and regional loyalties within the army after the independence of Syria in 1946, all manifested in ever-changing and competing blocs that engaged in internal conflicts and international polarization. As the traditional blocs of Sunni officers disintegrated, it cleared a path for the rise of a new class of politicized officers from rural and minority backgrounds.

Syria's first national government after independence from France inherited some of the military and security formations that were created by France during the mandate period. These formations were integrated into the army, and most of their members came from minority groups.[1] At that time, the military establishment was neither coherent nor effective. This observation can be drawn from the testimonies of Syrian politicians who lived that period, as well as many western reports, all of which reported the army's lack of organization and capacity. Then, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War drove the army into the field of politics and led to a rise in civil-military tensions, as parliamentarians accused army leaders of negligence and corruption.

In the post-independence period, after 1946, Syria witnessed intense political conflicts and became an arena for international and regional polarization. This context induced military coups, and contributed to the formation of ever-changing and competitive blocs of loyalties and affiliations within the army. Those blocs practiced mutual exclusion between themselves, contributing to the erosion of traditional blocs like the Damascene officers. At the same time, the presence of politicized officers from rural areas and minority backgrounds increased, a trend that started in the early 1950s.[2]

Officers from rural areas and minority backgrounds, especially members of the Alawite sect, were the most prominent of the emerging forces within the military establishment. This rise was a result of socioeconomic developments and political mobilization that took place in rural areas of Syria, both under the French Mandate and after independence.[3] Testimony from Colonel Abdul Hamid al-Sarraj, head of the Military Intelligence Office at the time, sheds light on the rise of Alawites within the military establishment. He stated that he was surprised that by 1955, at least 55 percent of non-commissioned officers were Alawites, in addition to the large number of Alawites in the ranks of ordinary soldiers. However, Alawites did not make up as significant portion of the ranks of officers compared to Sunnis.[4]

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[1] Bashir Zein al-Abdeen, The Military and Politics in Syria, al-Jabiya Publishing House, 1st edition, 2008, soft copy, p120.
[2] Raymond Hinnebusch, Revolution from Above, Riad al-Raees Publishing House, 1st edition, 2011, p81.
[3] Hanna Batatu, Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2nd edition, 2015, P300.
[4] Hanna Batatu, P303-304.

The rise of Alawites within the Syrian military establishment since the 1950s can be attributed to a number of interconnected factors that allowed Alawites to dominate the army decisively by the mid-1960s. In this context, the author and historian Patrick Seale said that the military mobilization of Alawites into the Special Troops of the Levant under the French Mandate contributed to establishing an Alawite military tradition that later became central to the rise of the sect.[5] Seale also described the economic factors explaining this rise, as the army was the only place that granted food, clothing, and salaries to volunteers, most of whom were from poor rural backgrounds. Alawite enrollment in the military also increased after the abolition of tuition fees at the Homs Military Academy in 1946.[6]

In contrast, the historian Hanna Batatu did not consider the presence of Alawites in the Special Troops of the Levant to be a factor explaining their rise in the military establishment. He did, however, agree with Patrick Seale on the importance of economic factors, where poor economic conditions led the Alawites to join the military in order to obtain stable income at a time when university education was unaffordable for them. The number of Alawite conscripts also increased because they were unable to afford the military service exemption fee after military service became mandatory in 1948, unlike Sunnis from major cities.[7]

Although the Alawite percentage among recruits and non-commissioned officers was high, the gradual increase in the number of Alawite commissioned officers was the factor that allowed them to take decisive control over the armed forces. This was due to their cohesion as they came from rural parts of the country, many from the same area, and being mostly Baathists after 1955. Their central and special positions as members of the Military Committee and the military organization of the Baath Party, meant that they started to play a major role in the army due to positions they assumed after 1963. This enabled them to carry out widespread exclusions and dismissals of Sunni officers, along with an increase of the numbers of officers from rural areas, especially areas inhabited by minorities within the ranks of

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[5] Patrick Seale, Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East, al-Matboat for Publications and distribution, 10th edition, 2007, soft copy, P37.
[6] Patrick Seale, P67-86.
[7] Hanna Batatu, P305.

the army, in addition to seizing control over the strongest military units responsible for the success or failure of military coups. By contrast, Sunni officers were divided politically, domestically and regionally. Their conflicts, excluding one another, and the dismissals that targeted them all contributed to the decline in their significance and presence in leadership positions in the army.[8]

Influence Networks with Limited Privileges

Competition within the Baath Military Committee ended when Hafez al-Assad, then Minister of Defense, assumed power in 1970. Hafez strengthened his network within the armed forces by several means, giving distinct privileges to Alawite officers, especially those from his clan. The events of 1980s contributed to the emergence of Alawite dominance and the increase of sectarianism in the army. The death of Basel al-Assad in 1994 required the urgent reconfiguration of Assad's network in the armed forces to support the succession of Bashar al-Assad.

Rivalries between the key figures of the Military Committee started to emerge after a failed coup attempt by Nasserist officers in July 1962, ultimately splitting them into four distinct blocs, led by Major General Salah Jadid, Lieutenant General Amin al-Hafez, Major General Mohammad Omran, and Captain Salim Hatoum, respectively.[9] These four blocs employed all possible tools in their power struggle, including exploiting their **tribal and sectarian loyalties and personal connections**. The processes of demobilization, officer transfers, and new recruit admissions were pervaded by sectarianism.[10] With the exclusion of Major General Mohammad Omran in 1964, and then Lieutenant General Amin al-Hafiz and Captain Salim Hatoum in 1966, Major General Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad were the two left vying for power.

The position of defense minister to which Hafez al-Assad was appointed in 1966, gave him the opportunity to build his network within the military

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[8] Hanna Batatu, PP203, 306-308.
[9] Bashir Zein al-Abdeen, P387.
[10] Munif al-Razzaz, the Bitter Experience, Munif al-Razzaz Establishment for National Studies, 1st edition, 1986, soft copy, P159.

establishment and dismantle network of his rival. Assad benefited from the fact that Jadid dedicated himself to civil party work after his departure from the military's general staff (where he served from 1963-1965), taking advantage of the opening to enhance his own influence within the armed forces. Regardless of the various considerations, and the body responsible for the exclusions and dismissals, which intensified after February Movement (the coup of 23 February 1966), and their gravity and context, such conditions enabled Hafez al-Assad to expand his support base within the armed forces and were a decisive factor in his rise to power by 1970.

Alawite officers, particularly those belonging to the Assad clan, formed the cornerstones of Assad's network within the military establishment.[11] The Alawite character of the armed forces started to become manifest with the events of 1980s, which triggered feelings of fear and uncertainty among Alawites and drove them to join the military in larger numbers. This trend was reinforced by a social environment that encouraged volunteering for the army, protection networks, and the growing presence within the military establishment of relatives, friends, and acquaintances, in addition to preferred admission to the military academies.[12]

In contrast to the ascendance of Alawites in the Syrian military establishment, there was a gradual decline in the number of Sunnis joining the military as of the 1980s. This could be attributed to Sunni abstention from joining the military, especially those from major cities, and as a result of the deliberate exclusion of Sunnis from military academies.[13]

As a result of all of these trends, the Alawites continued to reinforce their presence in the armed forces and since the early 1980s they have constituted around 80-85 percent of every graduating military academy class.[14] The number of military divisions led by Alawite officers increased from two out

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[11] At least 61.3% of the 31 officers Hafez al-Assad selected between 1970-1997 to hold the key positions in the armed forces, elite military formations and security, and intelligence agencies, were Alawites. Eight of them were from his own clan and another four from the clan of his wife. Seven of those 12 are direct relatives of al-Assad. Hanna Batatu, P406.

[12] Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 2 March 2019.

[13] Phone interview between the researcher and a defected brigadier general from the special forces living in Reyhanli, Turkey on 23 January 2019.

[14] Hisham Bu Naseef, Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces: Second Grade Officers, 3 May 2016, available at: https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/34927.

of five divisions in 1973, to seven out of nine in 1992.[15] Sectarianism and discrimination in the army, mainly targeting Sunni officers, became increasingly visible, leading one officer to say: "the 1980s events constituted a turning point in terms of sectarianism in the armed forces; it became public, widespread and directed against Sunni officers who were classified as pro-Muslim Brotherhood, and they were harassed on that basis."[16] These practices and behaviors helped instill a sense of grievance among Sunni officers.[17]

Hafez al-Assad had mechanisms to control the balance within his network in the armed forces. He restructured this balance as required to support his interests and to preclude the emergence of new independent power centers that could threaten him. He also took into account the sectarian balance, as well as regional and tribal considerations in distribution of positions within his network.

The most influential and important mechanisms Hafez al-Assad used to wield power in the military establishment were the Department of Officers' Affairs, and officer's branches 293 and 291 of the Military Intelligence Agency, which were responsible for the transfer, appointment, and screening of officers. These tasks were the exclusive domain of Alawite officers trusted by Hafez al-Assad.[18] He also paid attention to the sectarian balance in organizing his network, while retaining clear privileges for some, not all, Alawite officers, and relying on his clan and his relatives.[19] Assad preserved the representation of Sunni officers in the higher leadership positions in army hierarchy, especially the Ministry of Defense and the general staff, and to a

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[15] Hanna Batatu, P422.

[16] Phone interview between the researcher and a defected brigadier general from the special forces living in Reyhanli, Turkey on 23 January 2019; Another defected captain from Aleppo said that he was punished by two senior Alawite officers when he was cadet in the military academy in 1990. They only asked the cadets who was from Aleppo and they punished him when he raised his hand. The captain explained that those two officers punished him because they never forgot the incident of the artillery academy in Aleppo and they desired revenge; Focus group conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey with a number of defected officers on 2 May 2019.

[17] For more about the grievances of Sunni officers see Hisham Bu Naseef.

[18] Skype interview with Major General Muhammad al-Haj Ali, the former chairman of the national defense academy, on 6 February 2019.

[19] There were specific percentages to represent sects and tribes within the armed forces in terms of admission, joining, promotion, and assuming positions within the military establishment. There was discrimination amongst Alawites themselves. Influential positions and privileges were given exclusively for the mountain Alawites, and in specific those from the Kallaziya clan. The Shirqawiya Alawites (who are from the east of Homs), and al-Ghab Alawites were seen as less worthy among Alawites in the military. Focus group conducted by Omran in Kirkihan, Turkey with a number of defected officers, on 2 March 2019.

lesser degree in influential operational positions like commanders of divisions and brigades. The hierarchy of all military units, from the smallest formation to the largest, was organized based on sectarian balance in a way that did not undermine the control of Alawite officers over decision-making processes.[20] That distribution contributed to the spread of distrust among officers in military formations, preventing the creation of independent power centers within them.

While Hafez al-Assad was ultimately in control of his network, his elite officers, especially the Alawites, had some room to exert influence within this network due to their positions and through various other mechanisms, like officer files and security reports, which were used as key elements for promotions, transfers, and placements.[21] Those officers also had the ability to form their own sub-networks of favoritism and patronage, a practice that was tolerated by Assad as long as they did not threaten his power, their gains were restricted to financial profit and societal prestige, and as long as it was easy to dismantle them with a simple order of transfer or dismissal of the responsible officers.[22] These sub-networks also performed the role of containing the Alawite tribes and maintaining a balance between them.

Many of Hafez al-Assad's elite officers lost their positions during the network restructuring that took place after the conflict between Hafez and his brother Rifat al-Assad. This process only increased during preparations for Basel to

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[20] The rule of sectarian balance: it is about representing all religious components of Syria in leadership positions within the military formations, giving more advantage to Alawites so Alawite officers hold the decision making positions within the military formations, even if they are not the commanders of those formations. The commander of a brigade could be a Sunni officer, but his deputy and the security officer would be Alawites, and therefore they would be the real decision makers within the brigade. Skype interview with Colonel Pilot Ismael Ayoub on 10 February 2019.

[21] The officer files are considered key elements in promotions and they are controlled by the commander of each military unit. The security file on the other hand is a more important element that is considered for assuming positions. It is normal for such a process to be controlled by Alawite officers, because they dominate positions within the military establishment and in the military and air force intelligence agencies. Focus group conducted by Omran in Kirkihan, Turkey with a number of defected officers on 2 March 2019.

[22] When an Alawite officer from a certain clan or region holds a position, he brings the commissioned and non-commissioned officers who are from his same village and clan to the unit he commands. For example, when the commander of Ble military airport, who was an Alawite from Baniyas, retired, he was replaced by a new commander from Jableh. Soon after his appointment, he changed his office manager and appointed a captain from Jableh into the position. The reason behind that was that the first major general was from a clan different from the clan of the other major general, and each one of them brought around them people from their clans. Skype interview between the researcher and a defected captain on 24 February 2019.

succeed his father in the early 1990s, and later in the preparations for Bashar al-Assad to be the heir after the death of his brother in 1994.

Erosion of the Old Era

With his father's support, Bashar al-Assad started weaving his network within the military after the death of his brother Basel in 1994, starting from the Republican Guard as a point of entry. When Bashar took office, officers loyal to him were placed in influential positions in the military and security establishments, while central mechanisms controlling the network remained unchanged. The influx of Alawite officers and the integration of Syrian Shiites into Bashar's network disturbed the prior sectarian balance within the military establishment.

Starting in the early 1990s, Hafez al-Assad began reconfiguring the security and military institutions to make family succession possible.[23] This process was preceded by the dismantling of Rifat al-Assad's networks within the armed forces and security services. Hafez al-Assad reconfigured the Republican Guard to become stronger, giving a prominent role within its staff and in the future "leader officers" program to his oldest son Basel, and then to Bashar after Basel's death.[24] Many officers who were against the succession process or likely to hamper it lost their positions within Assad's network. They were removed either after being accused of corruption or having their service terminated. Two of the most prominent officers removed in this manner were Major General Ali Haidar and General Hikmat al-Shihabi, who was described by General Mustafa Tlass as America's man in Syria. A number of members of the old guard who did not threaten the succession process were retained in service and in order to help contain the situation if things went wrong.[25]

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[23] Leon T. Goldsmith, Cycle of Fear, Syrian Alawites in War and Peace, Arab Scientific Publishers Inc., 1st edition, 2016, P243.

[24] Hanna Batatu, P438.

[25] General Mustafa Tlass was summoned by Muhammad Makhlouf to meet Hafez al-Assad before the latter's death, where Assad told Tlass that he was an old friend and a comrade that he trusted. Hafez mentioned to Tlas that he had prepared everything internally and arranged the matter with foreign actors for Bashar to take office. In case something unaccounted for happened, he asked Tlas to be responsible for taking Hafez's family to Moscow." Testimony of one of the officers participating in a focus group conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey with a number of defected officers on 16 March 2019.

At the same time, there were a number of officers rising in status to form the core of Bashar al-Assad's military network. The most prominent among them were Major General Ali Aslan, who became chief of staff in 1998, and Major General Ali Habib, nicknamed the 'father of the army' who assumed command of the special forces in 1994. These two officers, together with Brigadier General Muhammad Suleiman, are considered the main engineers of Bashar al-Assad's network within the armed forces.[26] The core of that network was made up of engineer officers in the Republican Guard who had been colleagues of Basel, as well as the officers who were with Bashar during his military training during his service in the Republican Guard.[27] Those officers gradually assumed control of the security and military establishments after Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000.[28]

The elite officers of Hafez's network were substantially different from those in the network of his son, Bashar. While Hafez's officers considered themselves partners of the regime for the services, they provided and enjoyed a certain margin of independence in terms of appointments and promotions, Bashar's elite offices were created by the regime and relied on it entirely for their survival. Another major difference is that Hafez relied on the Alawites of Latakia, whereas Bashar relied on the Alawites of Tartous.[29]

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[26] Ali Aslan became chief of staff in 1998 as a successor of Hikmat Shihabi. New procedures were adopted and issued for promotions, which were known as: "promotion based on the position or the rank," meaning that the head of a branch could be promoted to the rank of brigadier general, but the head of a department could not be promoted to a brigadier general; the commander of a battalion was promoted to the rank of colonel; and the chief of staff was promoted to the rank of major general. Although the decision of "promotion based on the position" came into being because of the large number of officers in the military (around 2,000-3,000 new cadets in each military class), it was used to select specific figures for promotion and these selections favored Alawite officers. In contrast, Maj. Gen. Ali Habib was in charge of promotions, since he was trusted by Bashar al-Assad, and he was the one who established the rule of "the interview as a condition for appointment," to test and select officers for appointment to certain positions. All brigade commanders were only appointed after the approval of Ali Habib. Brig. Gen. Muhammad Suleiman held the position of the office manager for Bashar al-Assad and he was in charge of the appointments and transfers of officers, as well as other matters, after Bashar took office. Information comes from a remote interview between the researcher and a defected brigadier general from the special forces living in Reyhanli, Turkey, conducted on 23 January 2019. For more information on officers who were removed, see: Syria: Dynamics of the Internal Conflict in the Military Establishment and its Expected Consequences in 2019, Strategy Watch, 13 January 2019, available at: https://strategy-watch.com/wp-content/uploads/190113-Reports-and-Studies.pdf .

[27] Bashar al-Assad joined the Armored Vehicles Academy in 1995, he prepared for a staff officer course in 1997, then became battalion commander in the Republican Guard, then commander of Brigade 105 in the Republican Guard.

[28] Interview through social media platforms between the researcher and Maj. Gen. Muhammad al-Haj Ali, the former head of the National Defense Academy on 6 February 2019.

[29] Phone interview between the researcher and a defected brigadier general from the special forces living in Reyhanli, Turkey on 23 January 2019.

Bashar al-Assad continued to rely on the central mechanisms established by his father to control his military influence network and reconfigure it if necessary. The dominance of Alawite officers loyal to Bashar continued in the Military Intelligence Agency and its two central branches Officers' Branches 293 and 291, as well as the Department of Officers' Affairs, which was responsible for promotions and appointments. Unlike his father Hafez and his brother Basel, Bashar had a weak military background, his network within the armed forces was quite new, and he focused on foreign and economic policies. Alawite officers exploited Bashar's lack of experience to seize all of the positions in a number of combat units, including positions traditionally kept for Sunni officers. This was done through several mechanisms made available by their positions and the network of their relations within the armed forces and security services. The system of admission in the Military Academy was also manipulated to ensure that Alawites were given priority.

After Bashar took office, a decision was issued to allocate each governorate a certain percentage of the admissions spaces for the Military Academy. Alawites seeking to join the military could manipulate this system by changing the location of their civil records to governorates like Daraa and Damascus, with bureaucratic facilitation provided by their networks in the government, allowing them to be admitted to the Military Academy as locals of those governorates.[30]

Whether done for financial or sectarian reasons, deliberately or otherwise, that manipulation of admissions resulted in the collapse of the sectarian balance engineered by Hafez al-Assad in the command structures within the armed forces. It became very obvious for army officers, especially Sunnis, that Alawite officers dominated all leadership positions in a number of military units.[31] Additionally, the numbers of Alawite commissioned and

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[30] After taking office, Bashar al-Assad issued an order giving each governorate a percentage of admittance slots for the Military Academy. For that purpose, the civil registration of a number of Alawite applicants were transferred to governorates other than their original ones, such as Daraa, Deir Ezzor, and Damascus to facilitate their admission in the Military Academy. This manipulation led to a significant increase in Alawite officers within the armed forces;

In one of the cadet batches, 30 officers who applied from Damascus were Alawites, after they transferred their civil registry to Damascus. They were admitted to the academy. Focus group conducted by Omran in Gaziantep with a number of defected officers on 17 January 2019.

[31] "I was serving in Brigade 30 of Division 20 (al-Dumair Military Airport). From 2006 on, most positions in the brigade, including fleet commanders, the security officer, the political guidance officer and even the head of the

non-commissioned officers increased in military formations they had previously shown no interest in, like air defense and administrative affairs, further exacerbating sectarian tensions. One officer who was in the military at the time said about that "the rush of Alawite officers to monopolize all positions led to a state of surrender and numbness among Sunni officers, because notwithstanding their merits and no matter what they did, they would never be promoted to reach leadership positions in the military. The prevailing feeling was that Alawite officers had everything sorted for them."[32]

Bashar al-Assad reorganized his networks in the security and military establishments in the context of international pressures he came under that he felt were threats following the US invasion of Iraq. The removal of the old guard was completed by 2005 with the alleged suicide of Interior Minister Gazi Kanaan and before that, the 2004 retirement of Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlass.[33] The integration of the Shiite component of Bashar al-Assad's network into the security and military establishments became particularly evident after the invasion of Iraq and the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's Rafiq al-Hariri. This was demonstrated in the Shiite officers assuming senior positions and being promoted to high ranks, including the rank of major general. This development stood in contrast to the reign of Hafez al-Assad, who had not been to assign Shiite officers to leading positions in the security and military establishments.[34] A defected officer described the situation by saying: "Bashar al-Assad depended on Iran and Hezbollah to contain pressures stemming from the invasion of Iraq and the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, which made him lose independence compared to his father. This dependence was very clear in the

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petrol station were held by Alawites". Skype interview between the researcher and Colonel Pilot Ismael Ayoub on 25 January 2019.

[32] Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 2 March 2019.

[33] Bashar al-Assad made significant changes within the security and military establishment after he took office, including most importantly, dismissing a number of heads of security agencies for reaching the statutory retirement age in February 2004, as well as changes that affected about 40% of the leadership officers in Damascus, especially in the air force. For more, see: Syria: Dynamics of the Internal Conflict in the Military Establishment and its Expected Consequences in 2019, P5.

[34] Abdul Latif Yasin was a Shiite officer in the position of deputy commander of Division 15 under Hafez al-Assad. When the commander of the division retired, Abdul Latif Yasin was dismissed in compulsory retirement, so he would not become the commander of the division. Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 2 March 2019.

military and security establishments. For example, majors and lieutenant colonels were vetted in 2006-2007 in preparation for a transfer of some of them to the security services. Officers with Shiite backgrounds were given preference for those appointments."[35]

Bashar al-Assad gradually tightened his grip on the military and security establishments by removing competitors and dismantling independent power centers. The assassinations of several security and military leaders in 2008[36] and the subsequent reconfiguration of the National Security Council, which included the redistribution of positions and exclusion of some figures,[37] can be interpreted within this context. All of that, along with the outbreak of protests in 2011, which caused fragmentation in the Assad networks, led to the emergence of nascent networks that are still crystalizing.

Fragmentation and Reconfiguration during the Syrian Crisis

The Syrian army has managed to survive the conflict that began in 2011 despite the exhaustion of its material and human capacities thanks to its Iranian and Russian allies and its networks of auxiliary forces. However, the army fragmented into two competing networks aligned either of the regime's allies, each of whom has its own vision for restructuring the Syrian armed forces.

The attack on the military security detachment in Jisr al-Shughour in June 2011 was a turning point for the military establishment. After that incident, the security agencies stepped back and the army took the lead as the main force to deal with the protest movement. This incident also awakened sectarian fears and fueled mutual distrust within the armed forces, leading to explicit and implicit sectarian practices. One defected officer recalled an incident that happened to him around this time: "We were around 150 officers from different religious backgrounds in the morning meeting at the headquarters of special forces in Qaboun. Major General Jomaa al-Ahmad,

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[35] Among those officers were Maj. Gen. Abdul Salam Mahmoud, a Shiite from Fu'a who was head of the military committee in Hama in 2012, and Maj. Gen. Ahmad al-Omar, an officer in the air force intelligence. Focus group conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 16 March 2019.
[36] For more see: Leon T. Goldsmith, P309-314.
[37] For more see: Syria: Dynamics of the Internal Conflict in the Military Establishment and its Expected Consequences in 2019, P5.

commander of the special forces, spoke openly and explicitly saying: we took power by force and we will not give it up, even if none of us remains alive."[38]

Commanders in the army thought that they could to crush the protests and restore control swiftly, but decades of neglect, corruption, and nepotism had drained the military of much its combat capability and effectiveness. It was further weakened by the erosion of its ability to mobilize fighters, and the challenges to its national identity in light of the sectarian polarization and mutual mobilization, on top its exhaustion from having to fight battles all across Syria.

Despite the fact that the army did not completely collapse, it has fundamentally changed. Alawite representation has intensified among the ranks of officers at all levels of leadership, taking advantage of the vacuum created in the leadership structures by the defection of more than 3,000 Sunni officers. Those Sunnis who did not defect and remained in the army were excluded from influential field commands until they could prove their loyalty to the regime.[39] The growing number of Alawites joining the armed forces during the years of the crisis contributed to the reluctance of many Sunnis to do so, further exacerbating the dominance of Alawites in the ranks of commissioned and non-commissioned officers.[40]

To address its lack of capability, the regime resorted to creating and using paramilitary groups, or so called auxiliary forces, which it formed through informal local networks based on family and community connections. These groups were linked either to the regime's security agencies and the Republican Guard, or to the Assad family and its private institutions.[41] The absorption of these groups into the fragile structures of the formal military establishment, without a clear strategy or sufficient resources, has led to the

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[38] Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 2 March 2019.

[39] A telegram letter was sent by Maj. Gen. Jamil al-Hassan, head of the air force intelligence, stating that Sunni officers in the army are sleeper cells that pose security threat; so Sunnis in the army were put under surveillance and they were deprived of assuming positions. Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Reyhanli, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 15 February 2019.

[40] Out of the 2,400 officers that graduated from the Military Academy in 2018, only 150 of them (6%) were from non-Alawite sects in Syria, while the rest (94%) were Alawites. Interview with the defected Brigadier General Abdul Majeed Dbeis, former deputy head of the Artillery Academy, interviewed in Hatay, Turkey on 17 December 2018.

[41] Kheder Khaddour, Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience, Carnegie Middle East, 14 March 2016, available at: https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/ar-pub-62969.

emergence of a hybrid military structure with interconnected networks between regular and irregular forces.[42]

Thanks to the vital support provided by Iran and Russia, the regime managed to survive, but Russia and Iran each have different approaches to supporting the survival of and restructuring the military. Accordingly, their interventions contributed to the creation of networks loyal to them and competing with each other within the military establishment.

Iran had relations with a number of officers in the Syrian army during the reign of Hafez al-Assad. Those relationships grew stronger after Bashar al-Assad came to power and leaned on Iran and Hezbollah to face the pressures imposed on his regime by the international and regional environment. Iran has worked to strengthen its relationship with Syrian officers, some of which have gone through specialized training courses in Iran. Iran has also worked directly with Syrian officers in the field in Syrian military units such as the Air Defense Academy, the Electronic Warfare Academy, and most importantly, the Scientific Studies and Research Center.[43] Brigadier General Muhammad Suleiman, who was assassinated in 2008, was one of the most prominent officers who had close relations with Iran and Hezbollah.[44]

According to some accounts, it was Iran that persuaded Bashar al-Assad and his security and military elite to use force to deal with the protests, just like Iran did to crush the Green Movement in 2009.

The role of Iran has gradually shifted since 2012, from the provision of technical support, consultations, and carrying out some security tasks, to directly engaging in the establishment of informal networks of local militias

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[42] Kheder Khaddour, Syria's Troublesome Militias, 7 November 2018, available at: https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77664.

[43] Student officers started to be sent to Iran for specialized training courses in 2005. Iran started its movement within the army using the Air Force Academy and the Electronic War Academy as its entry points earlier in 2004. Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Kirikhan, Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 16 March 2019.

[44] Brig. Gen. Muhammed Suleiman was in the same class as Basel al-Assad and a close friend of his. After Basel's death, he was brought close to Bashar and assumed the position of the special office manager of the president. He was the most powerful figure in Bashar al-Assad's circle of the elite officers based on the issues he was in charge of, most notably the nuclear and chemical issues and the relationship with Iran and Hezbollah. Suleiman and Imad Mughniyeh along with a group of Iranian experts used to pay visits to Regiment 45 in Masyaf, Hama. They used to land in the helicopter in a military camp of the Special Forces in Hama, then go through a rugged mountain road to the camps of Sheikh Ghadban and al-Harra. Unauthorized Syrian officers were prohibited to approach those military camps. As soon as Mughniyeh and Muhammad Suleiman died, these camps disappeared. Phone interview between the researcher and a defected brigadier general from the special forces living in Reyhanli, Turkey on 23 January 2019.

in parallel to the army and the recruitment of additional foreign militias. The first step in this process of Iranian militia building was the establishment of the National Defense Forces (NDF), built on sectarian foundations. One former officer described that: "it was not easy to join NDF at the time, as it was subject to certain criteria and conditions, such as volunteers having to be known for their sectarian affiliation and ability to keep secrets."[45] Later, the Iranian role expanded to sponsoring local and tribal militias with membership open to all members of Syrian society, known as the Local Defense Forces (LDF).

Iran has also built its network within the armed forces by establishing relations with officers of the army's special units such as the Republican Guard and the 4th Division. This is reflected in the joint leadership model of the NDF where command is shared between the Republican Guard officers and Iranian officers who are called pilgrims (*Haj*). Additionally, officers and personnel in these units are granted special Iranian funds.[46]

Following the Russian intervention in Syria, Iran sought to reorganize its informal militias networks and integrate them in one way or another within the formal structures of the army. Some of Iran's militias have been operating within the structures of the armed forces, especially in the Republican Guard and the 4th Division. The LDF was also legalized and organized within the general structure of the armed forces under the name of the Popular Army, although its leaders remained Iranian and it had its own system of functioning, training and funding.[47] The status of Shiite conscripts who were serving with Hezbollah was settled by integrating them into Syrian army units and giving

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[45] An interview through social media platforms between the researcher and an NDF member on 5 November 2018.

[46] Iran gave a sum of 10,000 SYP, which is called the "ten thousand combat grant" to the military personnel deployed on the fronts. Officers and personnel of the Republican Guard and the 4th Division benefited in particular from the grant because they were deployed the most in the field. Iran also gave some sums of money as temporary gifts, known as the "Iranian Grant," every two or three months only to Republican Guard personnel. The grant varied by military rank. The conscripts received 23,000 SYP every three months, while officers of the rank of colonel received 50,000 SYP on top of the ordinary salary they received from the army. This grant stopped after the end of the battles of Eastern Ghouta. An interview through social media platforms between the researcher and an NDF member on 5 November 2018.

[47] How Iranian Militias are Integrated into Regime Forces, al-Modon Newspaper, 4 May 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2UXaKQV.

them military ID cards, even though they were not actual part of the military formations and they remained under the authority of Hezbollah.[48]

Russia has maintained long-standing relations with the Syrian military by arming it and training its officers. Moscow continued to support the Syrian military during the years of crisis by supplying it with ammunition and providing field military advisors.[49] Russian support took a different form following its direct intervention in the fall of 2015, when it provided the aerial cover that was critical to the success of military operations by the army and allied forces.

Following its military intervention in September 2015, Moscow began an intensive effort to build its network within the dilapidated Syrian armed forces by restructuring them. First, Russia selected army officers and assigned them to the Hmeimim base to train them to be Russia's men in the army.[50] It also pressured the regime to carry out extensive appointments, transfers, and dismissals of officers in the armed forces and the military intelligence who did not cooperate well with the Russians.[51] More importantly, Moscow sponsored the formation of new military units of local paramilitary groups on regional and tribal bases as Russian-funded corps and under its command. These forces were legalized and linked to the formal structures of the army in a pattern similar to that followed by the LDF. It is noteworthy that the corps formed by Russia have different number of fighters, different weaponry, and different geographical deployment.

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[48] Shiite conscripts serving in Syrian military units who are affiliated with Hezbollah's authority receive salaries from Iran of at least 150,000 SYP a month. Iran occasionally provides financial grants as well, in addition to the salaries they receive from the army. The Syrian Shiites have their requirements for compulsory military service settled through Hezbollah, as they are accompanied to the army for the settlement of their status and to receive regular military IDs. They work on per diem-basis and "the salary received from the Syrian army is calculated according to the actual number of active duty days." In addition to the salary from the army they receive 20,000 SYP from Iran as well as other financial grants. An interview through social media platforms between the researcher and an NDF member on 8 November 2018.

[49] Russian officers participated in the field in the regime's military offensives on Daraya in 2014. They were staying in the Officers' Club near al-Umawyeen Square. Interview through social media platforms between the researcher and a defected brigadier general currently living in Idlib on 1 February 2019.

[50] Focus group discussion conducted by Omran in Kirikhan – Turkey, with a number of defected officers on 16 March 2019.

[51] Maj. Gen. Tala Makhlouf was suspended from work and prevented from undertaking any official tasks for 10 days before being transferred from the command of Republican Guard to the command of the 2nd Corps. This was because of his resistance to Russian orders. Interview through social media platforms between the researcher and a local source living in Damascus on 30 December 2018.

Conclusion: Army with a New Look

The Syrian crisis brought the army back into the domestic scene as a major player, after decades of exclusion in favor of the security agencies. The regime relied on the army as a tool to confront its opponents and mobilize loyalists. The exhausted army however, was able to survive only due to the decisive support of Iran and Russia, as well as the networks of locally formed auxiliary forces. As a result, the army has changed substantially, as its reliance on the allied and auxiliary forces undermined its independence. The intervention of both Russia and Iran in the armed forces and the security establishment, as well as their competition to restructure these establishments with different approaches to integrate auxiliary forces into the military's formal structures, has weakened Bashar al-Assad's central network of within the armed forces. This has happened despite Assad's efforts to control and manage the emerging networks and to reinforce his own network through the process of integrating auxiliary forces by linking them with the regime's special military networks, such as the 4th Division and the Republican Guard.

All of the processes described above led to the emergence of new networks with different loyalties and identities, competing with each other and polarized between Russia and Iran. The growing competition and polarization within the armed forces is demonstrated by the increased infighting between the allied and auxiliary forces, the split among officers between those who prefer Russia and others who are closer to Iran, as well as the exclusions, dismissals and transfers within the military and security establishments. It is clear that the regime's limited resources and the weak institutional nature of the army, as well as the increased Iranian and Russian roles within the armed forces, all make the regime less likely to achieve success in its ambitions.

The national identity of the army has eroded and the lines of sectarian division within it became heightened, with Sunni officers feeling more excluded. They saw their numbers decrease and their influence diminishing following the defection of many Sunni officers and the rush of Alawite officers to consolidate their presence among the ranks of commissioned and non-commissioned officers and dominate the leadership positions in the armed forces.

The Alawite officers are not a unified sectarian bloc as they seem to be, but rather regionally and tribally divided and polarized between the two Syrian allies. Preliminary indicators show a shift of the center of gravity within the Alawite community away from its traditional base in Latakia, which means the erosion of the traditional sectarian arrangements that prevailed during Hafez al-Assad's time. The above could lead to enhancing the formation of blocks within the military similar to those that prevailed in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

Annex

1. Sectarian Denominations of Syrian Ministers of Defense and Chiefs of Staff (2000-2019)

z	*Denomination*	*Chief of Staff*	*Denomination*
Gen. Mustafa Tlass	Sunni	Gen. Ali Aslan	Alawite
Gen. Hasan Turkmani	Sunni	Gen. Hasan Turkmani	Sunni
Gen. Ali Habib	Alawite	Gen. Ali Habib	Alawite
Gen. Dawoud Rajiha	Christian	Gen. Dawoud Rajiha	Christian
Gen. Fahd Jassem al-Freij	Sunni	Gen. Fahd Jassem al-Freij	Sunni
Gen. Ali Ayoub	Alawite	Gen. Ali Ayoub *The position has been vacant since early 2018	Alawite

2. Sectarian Denominations of Leaders of Elite Units and Military Intelligence (2000-2019):[52]

Military Unit	Commander	Denomination
Republican Guard	Maj. Gen. Ali Mahmoud al-Hasan	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Nour Eddin Nakkar	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Shuaib Ali Suleiman	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Badea Mustafa Ali	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Talal Makhlouf	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Malek Alia	Alawite
4th Division	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Ammar	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Ali Dargham	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Zahi Deeb	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Maher al-Assad	Alawite
The Special Units	Maj. Gen. Ali Habib	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Subhi al-Tayyeb	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Raeef Balloul	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Juma al-Ahmad	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Fuad Hammouda	Alawite

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[52] These tables were developed by the researcher based on the information made available by defected officers as well as a number of studies issued in this regard, including: Hisham Bu Naseef, Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces: Second Grade Officers; Azmi Bishara: Sect, Sectarianism and Imagined Sects, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, first edition, 2018

	Maj. Gen. Muhi Eddin Ramadan Mansour	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Rafiq Saeed	Unknown
The Military Intelligence	Maj. Gen. Hasan Khalil	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Assef Shawkat	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Abdel Fatah Qudsiyeh	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Rafiq Shehadeh	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Mahla	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Kifah Milhem	Alawite

3. Sectarian Denominations of Corps Commanders in the Syrian Army (2000-2019):

Military Unit	Commander	Denomination
1st Corps	Gen. Ahmad Abdul Nabi	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Munir Adanov	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Abdul Kader al-Sheikh	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Jihad Hawash Jabr	Ismaili
	Maj. Gen. Ali Ayoub	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ahmad Tlass	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Salim Barakat	Alawite
2nd Corps	Gen. Ibrahim Safi	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ahmad Ibrahim al-Ali	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ahmad al-Jojo	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Amin Zeidan	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muwafaq al-Asaad	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Izz Eddin Issa	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ali Dargham	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ali Aslan	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Talal Makhlouf	Alawite
3rd Corps	Gen. Shafiq Fayyad	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Mudar Youssef	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Fahd Jassem al-Freij	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Munir Jbour	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Naeem Suleiman	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Wajeeh Yahya Mahmoud	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ahmad Jamil Ibrahim	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Luay Maalla	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Barakat Barakat	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Khaddour	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Hasan Muhammad Muhammad	Alawite
4th Corps**[53]	Maj. Gen. Shawqi Youssef	Sunni

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[53] The ** symbol indicates that this unit/military formation was established during the crisis.

	Maj. Gen. Hasan Merhej	Alawite
5th Corps**	Maj. Gen. Abdo Ibrahim	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Zaid Saleh	Alawite

4. Sectarian Denominations of Division Commanders in the Syrian Army (2000-2019):

Division	Commander	Denomination
1st Division	Maj. Gen. Munir Nasr	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Jihad Sultan	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Youssef al-Assad	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Zuheir Tawfiq al-Assad	Alawite
3rd Division	Gen. Shafiq Fayyad	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Naeem Suleiman	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Salim Rasheed Barakat	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Luay Maala	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Adnan Jamil Ismael	Alawite
5th Division	Maj. Gen. Ali Ammar	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Badea Ali	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Wasel al-Uwaid	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Abdul Majeed Muhammad Ibrahim	Alawite
7th Division	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Mousa Khayrat	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Ramadan Ramadan	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Hikmat Salman	Alawite
9th Division	Maj. Gen. Jawdat Nazeer Shabo	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ahmad Tlass	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Ahmad Younes al-Okda	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ramadan Ramadan	Alawite
10th Division	Maj. Gen. Omar Jibbawi	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Jamal Qassem Suleiman	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Fayez Abbas	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Salim Dawoud*	Alawite
11th Division	Maj. Gen. Naseeb Abu Hammoud	Druze
	Maj. Gen. Jihad Dayoub	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhsen Makhlouf	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ali Muhammad Hussein	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhi Eddin Salama	Alawite
14th Division	Maj. Gen. Abbas Hussein	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Suweidan	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ali Hammad Arifi	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Mufid Hasan	Alawite
15th Division	Maj. Gen. Ali Ahmad Asaad	Alawite
17th Division	Maj. Gen. Isbir Abboud	Christian
	Maj. Gen. Badr Aqel	Alawite

	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Khaddour	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Hasan Muhammad Muhammad	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Ghassan Salim Muhammad	Alawite
18th Division	Maj. Gen. Wajeeh Mahmoud	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Azzam al-Masri	Sunni
	Maj. Gen. Hasan Muhammad Muhammad	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Muhammad Sabah	Alawite
8th Division**	Maj. Gen. Hasan Merhej	Alawite
	Maj. Gen. Jamal al-Younes	Alawite

5. Sectarian Denominations of Commanders of the Marine and Air Forces (2000-2019):

Marine Forces	Denomination	Air Forces	Denomination
Maj. Gen. Taleb Barri	Alawite	Maj. Gen. Ali Mahmoud	Alawite
Maj. Gen. Yasser Mustafa al-Haffi	Alawite	Maj. Gen. Hazem al-Khadra	Sunni
		Maj. Gen. Ahmad al-Ratab	Alawite
		Maj. Gen. Issam Hallak	Sunni
		Maj. Gen. Ahmad Balloul	Alawite

Analysis Paper

Military Groups and Networks within the Syrian Army: Multiple Loyalties and Militia Mentality

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Military Groups and Networks within the Syrian Army: Multiple Loyalties and Militia Mentality

Introduction

As the pace of fighting on most fronts in Syria has declined, post-war questions have begun to arise, both in terms of organizational and restructuring processes, and regarding the fate of the large number of militias that have supported the regime and the 'reconciled' opposition factions. There are also questions related to the future of the emerging military establishment, and the role of control as the regime tries to tighten its grip over the military as a means of creating the conditions for its empowerment and sustainability. These conditions run contrary to the processes envisioned by the regime's allies for reengineering and rebuilding the military. Both Russia and Iran are working to find the best way to take advantage of the available manpower, each imposing its own visions on the Syrian army's structure and decision-making processes in support of their respective strategies and objectives. Although these strategies and objectives have often coincided during the war, will are likely to vary and increasingly to diverge in the post-war period.

In the short term, these questions related to the fate of the military will remain open and will continue to be linked to developments on the ground. In this paper, we will test the hypothesis that structural and functional dysfunction of the military institution, which has required it to seek the support of foreign and local forces and militias, will influence the process of reconfiguration and the military's ultimate fate. The army is likely to remain hostage to hybrid and fluid network structures, which will drain much of its independence and effectiveness unless and until there is a new political moment that can reconstitute the conditions of social support for the military reconfiguration process and ensure that it takes national requirement into account.

This paper presents an overview of the Russian and Iranian roles in strengthening this hybrid format, which tends to reinforce the creation of a major militia, instead of a national army that undertakes its duties according to the constitution and the principles of protecting citizens and safeguarding their rights.

Iranian Networks: Networks of Horizontal Control

The tools and qualities of Iran's military intervention in Syria were modified based on the nature of each phase of the conflict. Although these tools helped improve the relative effectiveness of the regime's military response, after the successive defeats of the regime's forces from the first quarter of 2015 through the third quarter, these tools became increasingly ineffective at propelling the Syrian military to victory or even maintaining the status quo, so that led Iran to ask Moscow to intervene.[1]

This scenario made all Iranian gains precarious. The US-Iran nuclear deal, which mitigated the financial pressure Iran was under and helped funding its militias in Syria, did not manifest in any practical improvement in the military position of Iran and its allies in Syria. Even the strategic enclaves that Iran tried to control remained unstable because of the multiplicity of local actors, and their diverse affiliations and military capabilities. In addition, Syria, where Tehran directed all its arms in the region, had become a zone of great depletion, particularly from Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias. These developments made it increasingly likely that Iran's intervention in Syria would adversely impact its interests in Lebanon–which is politically unstable–and Iraq. Furthermore, there was an ever-growing risk of potential military disputes between the different Iranian affiliates across Syria.

After the Russian intervention, which was necessitated by the critical political and military situation in Syria, Moscow and Tehran pursued a political and military approach based on military domination, restoration of territory, and targeting the Syrian opposition, then turning their military advances into political gains used to promote their narrative and definition of the Syrian issue. In this context, Moscow followed the same military strategy pursued by the regime and Iran, namely the 'zero-sum solution' in Syria. The Russian-Iranian alliance was reinforced both by necessity and by a shared military purpose. With Russian forces in the air and Iranian militias on the ground, they first targeted pockets of coastal areas controlled by revolutionary forces,

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[1] For more information on these indicators see: Muhsen Abu al-Nour, Muhammad, Implications of the Russian Intervention on Iran's Role in Syria, International Politics, 11 May 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/7Xjm8n.

driving them out of 'useful Syria' through a strategy of displacement, until they regained control over eastern Aleppo.

Russia and Iran's military efforts were accompanied by continuous obstruction of any action ordered by the UN Security Council, except for UNSC Resolution 2328 (2016) regarding the deployment of international monitors to oversee the eastern Aleppo evacuation process, since it supported the goals of the regime and its allies to reinforce their permanent control over the city. This development later led to the reinvigoration of the Astana track, through which Tehran came to rely on the Russians to respond to the regional ambitions of US President Donald Trump, whose most important claim was to curtail Iran who is causing regional tension and instability. The Astana process was also a significant point of entry for Tehran to improve its relationship with Turkey, as a significant influential actor for the Syrian political and military opposition, and as way for Iran to confront the international sanctions against it.[2]

Iran has faced many challenges in Syria, despite the conflict shifting in the regime's favor and the improvement of political conditions both through the outcomes of Astana process and through the 'reconciliation track' (their term for forced displacement). Perhaps the most significant challenge to Iran's presence in Syria has been the continuous Israeli attacks on their assets. Additionally, the need to limit the Iranian presence in Syria became a common goal of multiple actors–particularly the US, "Israel," and Saudi Arabia–and a source of pressure on Iran's Russian allies. **However, the policy of seeking domination that Iran pursued throughout the conflict gave it influence over most circles of governmental and non-governmental power in Syria. This has led Iran towards a strategy of repositioning and creating local alliances, integrating itself into Syrian networks, particularly in the military and security structures of the state.**

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[2] Challenges of the Syrian Opposition after the Loss of Aleppo and "Moscow Declaration," Omran for Strategic Studies, 26 December 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/2ZwVda.

Legitimizing Iranian Network Positioning

Iran bet on the capacity of the Syrian security establishment to confront the protests that erupted in Syria in 2011. Based on that conviction, it provided the security services with expertise in suppressing protest movements (gained, for example, during the Iranian security forces' successful suppression of the Green Movement in 2009), logistical support in the form of equipment, and offered advice and technical support to help Syria monitor communications networks and the internet and to restrict the activity of opposition activists on social media. Syrian security forces failed to crush the protest movement and gradually lost control over a number of cities and towns as the armed opposition grew, supported by regional and international powers. This forced Iran to scale up its support for the regime by sending some Iranian Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) troops to support the regime in its fights against the Syrian opposition.

As the Syrian army grew weaker due to defections and confrontations with armed opposition groups, **Iran was compelled to adopt a strategy of working outside of the formal military and security frameworks. It brought in Shi'ite militias from outside Syria, and more importantly, it formed auxiliary military and security structures including the National Defense Forces (NDF), Local Defense Forces (LDF), and Self-Defense Forces.** These formations were either managed by the IRGC as is the case with the LDF, by Hezbollah as is the case with the self-defense forces, or by a joint command of both as is the case with NDF, where a Syrian Republican Guard officer is assigned to oversee these forces alongside an Iranian official known as a Haj. In all cases, a military liaison officer and a security liaison officer were assigned to coordinate between these formations and the regime's military and security institutions.[3]

Iran further tried to infiltrate Syrian security apparatuses and establish relations with them by building personal relationships with their

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[3] An interview with a group of defected officers, Reyhanli, Turkey, December 2018.

commanders, particularly the military and air force intelligence department, with special focus on the southern region.[4]

Iran realized the needs to legitimize its militias and integrate them into the Syrian military and security establishment, drawing on the experience of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Accordingly, Tehran started putting pressure on the regime, as it feared being replaced by Russia. In 2017 Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the former commander-in-chief of IRGC, called on the Syrian government and the People's Assembly to vote on a law recognizing the legitimacy of the NDF.[5] While the regime refused to pass this Iranian law,[6] probably as a result of Russian pressure, it did issue a military decision to regulate auxiliary Iranian forces and settling the status of their personnel. It accomplished this by integrating the militia members into the ranks of LDF and signing two-year volunteer contracts with those working with the Iranians, while allowing Iran to retain command of the LDF in coordination with the Syrian army until a new decision is issued or the crisis is over. An additional military decision was issued banning the harassment of personnel holding LDF identification cards until their final status is settled.[7]

Iran has worked to reinforce its relationships with special forces in the Syrian army, especially the 4th Division and Republican Guards, by granting a monthly financial bonus of 10,000 SYP to personnel fighting on the frontlines in these units. In addition, it offered some funding to the Republican Guards specifically in the form of a financial bonus offered every two or three months, known as the 'Iranian grant.' The Iranian grant differed based on military rank. Conscripts, for example, would receive 23,000 SYP every three months while a colonel would receive 50,000 SYP. These grants were suspended after the battles of Eastern Ghouta ended.[8]

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[4] The Officer's Killer and the one who Detained 100,000 Syrians, Zaman al-Wasl, 9 November 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/EGvcti.

[5] Tehran Urges Damascus to Legitimize NDF, RT, 23 November 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/kto8Mh.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Administrative Decisions on Local Defence Forces Personnel: Translation & Analysis, Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi, 3 May 2017, available at: http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/05/administrative-decisions-on-local-defence-forces.

[8] Rashid Hourani, The Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: Motivations and Local, Regional and International Implications, Media Monitor, 25 February 2019, available at: https://goo.gl/xTK3q6

Similarly, in order to guarantee Iran's influence within the army, Iran regulated the status of combatants from the LDF, the regular Shiite soldiers, within the Syrian army. These fighters were issued regular military identification cards by the army even though they were not operating under the umbrella of the army, but were still working for Hezbollah, and received their salaries from Iran on top of their salaries from the Syrian army. The Shia individuals within the reserve troops, on the other hand, had their status settled through the facilitation of Hezbollah and were given regular military ID cards. They worked on per diem basis and their salaries in the Syrian army were based on the number of actual days of service, on top of a salary that they received from Iran.

Iran's Investments in Militias: Dynamics and Current Status

As Russia has taken the lead in Syria, and the launch of Astana track, along with the US withdrawal from the Iranian necluer deal, Iran realized that in order to maintain its vital interests, supporting its military activities, and ensuring its presence in Syria in the long run, it would have to replicate its military and security experiences from Iraq and Lebanon.[9] Therefore, Iran sought to reintroduce its local and foreign militias in Syria by integrating them into military units affiliated with the Syrian regime's army,[10] or hiring their personnel into the private security companies that Iran began to run starting in mid-2012.[11]

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[9] Iran has experience in creating and supporting militias, through al-Quds Force, the external branch of IRGC which undertakes the tasks of supporting, training, and funding militias, making use of its powers and economic capabilities. The IRGC sponsored the establishment of Hezbollah in 1982 and a number of Shiite militias in Iraq such as the Hezbollah battalions and the Badr Organization.

[10] Iran resorting to creating and supporting militias can be explanation in a number of factors, including: Ideological reasons: such as the desire to export the Islamic revolution and to encourage Shiite minorities that share the sectarian identity with Iran (those in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Yemen) to create militias that can be used as tools to export and protecting the Islamic revolution; Pragmatic reasons: like undermining hostile states (like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), increasing its regional influence, maintaining the ability to impact events outside of its borders (such as employing Hezbollah and Hamas to influence the Arab-Israeli conflict), employing the militias as a deterrent against its rivals (Israel and the US), and sustaining its regional influence in unstable countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria) by preventing the formation of hostile strong central governments in such countries. Decision makers: some observers interpret Iran's reliance on militias as a sign of the growing influence of hardliners, especially the IRGC, within Iran's foreign policy and national security bureaucracies. The hardliners prefer to use militias as a tool for deterring enemies, increasing Iran's influence, and exporting the Islamic revolution.

[11] Detaining 48 Iranians affiliated with IRGC in Syria, Youtube video, 5 August 2012, available at: https://goo.gl/YGZ9WA.

To better understand the policies pursued by Iran, we need to have an overview of the local and foreign forces backed by Iran in the last several years of the Syrian revolution:

1. **Afghan militias:** The IRGC recruited Afghan Shiites residing in Iran and Afghanistan, and created the Fatemiyoun Brigade, which was first publicly visible in Syria in November 2012. Some of the leaders of the Fatemiyoun Brigade were former fighters in the ranks of the IRGC's Abu Dhar Brigade during the Iran-Iraq war, as well as in the Army of Muhammad, which was active during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It is estimated that the Fatemiyoun Brigade had between 3,000-14,000 fighters in 2014 distributed across three battalions stationed in Damascus, Aleppo, and Hama.[12]

2. **Pakistani Militias:** The IRGC recruited Pakistani Shiites, and used them to create the Zainabiyoun Brigade, which first became visible in Syria in early 2013. The brigade is estimated to have between 1,000-5,000 fighters who are stationed in Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa, and Hama.[13]

3. **Iraqi Militias:** Iran has directed Iraqi Shiite militias in support of the Syrian regime that first began to appear in Syria late 2012. The most prominent of these militias are: Dhu al-Fiqar Brigade, Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, Assad Allah al-Ghaleb Brigade, Imam Ali Battalions, al-Nujaba Movement, Imam Hussein Brigade, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. A number of those militias had to return to Iraq to counter the expansion of ISIS after it took control of Mosul in June 2014. The number of fighters of the Iraqi militias was estimated to be about 5,000 fighters in 2016,[14] they were mainly deployed in Damascus, Deir Ezzor, and Aleppo.

4. **Lebanese Militias:** Hezbollah intervened in the Syria crisis as early as May 2011, providing training and technical support for the Syrian army and security forces. Hezbollah has participated in combat operations in

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[12] The Afghani Shiite make up fifteen percent of Afghanistan's population and 70 percent of them are from the Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups; Phillip Smyth, Iran's Afghan Shiite Fighters in Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 3 January 2014, available at: https://goo.gl/s9QNJT.

[13] Zainabiyoun Brigade has more than 1,000 Pakistani Shiite fighting to the side of Assad, Shaam News Network, 20 December 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/NT1e4g.

[14] Distribution of Iran-backed Shiite Militias in Syria, al-Quds al-Arabi Newspaper, 12 May 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/2eqLT4.

Syria since 2013.[15] The number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria is estimated to be between 5,000-8,000 fighters as of the beginning of 2019. They are deployed mainly along the Syrian-Lebanese border, in Deir Ezzor, Daraa, and Aleppo, under the name of the Eastern Unit which includes: special forces known as al-Radwan Battalion, and permanent forces from all units, part-time fighters, and new conscripts.[16]

5. **Syrian Militias:** Iran encouraged the Shiite minority in Syria to create its own militias. Iran has also recruited Syrian Sunnis, especially tribes in the governorates of Aleppo, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor. In general, Syrian militias supported or created by Iran can be categorized into:

a. **National Defense Forces:** The NDF was established in 2012 with the support and instruction of Iran.[17] The NDF is based in Homs and has a headquarters in every governorate. Its members come from all Syrian communities, including Sunnis, Alawites, and Druze. The NDF is considered the largest and most prolific Syrian militia in,[18] with an estimated 40,000 fighters in 2015.[19] Iran has demanded that the Syrian regime legitimize these forces, in a manner similar to the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and integrate them into the military establishment.[20] That demand came after a series of decisions made by the regime to dismantle the NDF.

b. **Syrian Shiite militias:** Iran recruited members of the Shiite minority in Syria,[21] to create a number of Syrian Shiite militias with an estimated 5,000-8,000 fighters as of the beginning of 2019. The most prominent of these militias were: the Imam al-Hajja Regiment, al-

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[15] Jeffrey White, Hizb Allah at War in Syria: Forces, Operations, Effects and Implications, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1 January 2014, available at: https://goo.gl/zddFsv.

[16] Nadav Pollak and Hanin Ghaddar, A Transformative Experience: Understanding Hezbollah's Involvement in Syria, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 August 2016, available at: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-transformative-experience-understanding-hezbollahs-involvement-in-syria.

[17] For more see: Bassam Youssef, NDF. The Assadi Basij, All Syrians, 1 October 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/wxMij1.

[18] Kheder Khaddour, Securing the Syrian Regime, Carnegie Endowment, 3 June 2014, available at: https://goo.gl/qbGXjW.

[19] Oytun Orhan, The Shiite Militias in Syria and Political Solution, Orsam Review Of Regional Affairs, 26 June 2015, available at: https://goo.gl/itUfEV.

[20] Tehran Urges Damascus to Legitimize NDF, RT, 23 November 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/kto8Mh.

[21] Percentage of Shiite population in Syria increased from 0.5 percent in 2011 to 2.4 percent in 2016; Sinan Hatahet & Ayman Aldassouky, Forced Demographic Changes In Syria, Alsharq Forum, 26 September 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/jc9Wj6.

Mahdi Troops, al-Mahdi Army in Nubl and al-Zahraa in Aleppo, Sayida Ruqaya Brigade in Damascus, al-Wad al-Sadeq Corps in Idlib, Imam al-Rida Forces in Homs, Zein al-Abideen Brigade in Deir Ezzor,Brigade 313 in Bosra al-Sham in Daraa, and al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi in Latakia and Hama.[22] In 2014, Iran organized the abovementioned militias under a new name: Hezbollah in Syria.[23]

c. **Local Defense Forces:** Iran recruited fighters from Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, and Raqqa governorates under the umbrella of the LDF, which is estimated to have approximately 50,000 fighters. The most prominent militias in the LDF are: al-Nayrab Battalions-Special Operations, al-Safira Regiment, al-Baqir Brigade, the Nubl and al-Zahraa Regiment,[24] and al-Katerji Forces. LDF fighters are considered to be personnel in the Syrian army.[25]

The de-escalation of military operations on most fronts in Syria, following the de-escalation agreements and restoring control of a number of areas by the regime late 2018, early 2019, has served to highlight the wide deployment of Iranian-backed local and foreign militias, making them more vulnerable to targeted Israeli and American attacks than in earlier years.[26] Iran has therefore resorted to completely reintroducing and reintegrating its militias, using the following entities:

1. **The Local Defense Forces and their differences from the National Defense Forces**

The NDF militias were established in 2012 under the direct supervision of Iran as an auxiliary force for the Syrian army. Sources indicate that Hilal al-Assad, Bashar's cousin, was the first who proposed the idea in Latakia.[27] By

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[22] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, Liwa al-Mukhtar al-Thiqfi: Syrian IRGC Militia, Syria comment, 8 March 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/3o7U6u.

[23] Phillip Smyth, How Iran Is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 March 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/GVwK7j.

[24] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, The Local Defence Forces: Regime Auxiliary Forces in Aleppo, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog, 23 May 2016, available at: https://goo.gl/344QGm.

[25] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, Saraya al-Ra'ad: Idlib Local Defence Forces Affiliate, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog, 26 December 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/2VFy8S.

[26] The Most Prominent Israeli Strikes and their Objectives in Syria, Aljazeera, 12 January 2019, available at: https://goo.gl/pquTdG .

[27] NDF, "ground monster troops" with the cost of 144 billion SYP, a report by the investigations team of al-Hal website, 17 September 2016, available at: https://bit.ly/2WHjn2J

the end of 2017, a different group of militias similar to the NDF was established in Aleppo, specifically in its eastern countryside. This similar group was called the LDF and it consisted of a number of small local militias operating directly under the supervision of Iran, but whose activity in Syria had no legal status in the beginning. When Iran established and supported the LDF, it linked the group's structure to that of the Syrian army in order to avoid the mistake it made when establishing the NDF, whose members were asked to settle their status and join the Syrian army, following the Russian intervention, without having their service in the NDF counted towards part of their mandatory military service time.

On 6 April 2017, a document was submitted to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Armed forces, Bashar al-Assad, by the Division of Organization and Administration – Organization and Armament Department, with a plan to regulate the relationship between "Syrian civilian and military personnel working with the Iranian side," and to manage their administrative affairs throughout the crisis. The document was signed by the head of the Organization Division, Major General Adnan Mehrez Abdo, the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Armed Forces, General Ali Ayoub, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Armed Forces and the former Minister of Defense, General Fahd Jassem al-Freij. President Bashar al-Assad approved and signed the document on 11 April 2017. [28] See annex 1 for more information about the most prominent combat groups

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[28] According to the document, the committee has studied the organization of those forces in terms of organization, leadership, combat, and material supplies, in addition to the rights of the killed and wounded, and the status of dodgers, deserters, and civilians working with the Iranians. The committee made the following suggestions:

1. Organizing all civilian and military personnel fighting with the Iranians into the LDF regiments in the governorates. An annex to the document showed a table with the numbers of conscripts in each governorate who dodged the military service and reserve calls, as well as deserters, civilians, and those who went through settlement of status. The total number of those forces is 88,733 fighters.
2. Settling the status of deserters, summoned conscripts, draft dodgers and either transferring them, appointing them, or adjusting their summons to call them into the regiments of LDF in the governorates, in addition to including any service member whose status has been settled and is working with the Iranians within LDF regiments. The document includes a table that shows 51,729 fighters falling into these categories.
3. Preparing two-year contracts for the willing civilians working with the Iranians with the Armed Forces – the Popular Amy, regardless of the joining conditions applicable in the armed forces. The document stated that the total number of civilians working to the side of Iranians is 37,400 civilians.
4. For the Officers' Affairs Administration to settle the status of the batch 69 officers in service, and those currently serving with the Iranian side in Aleppo, the total of 1,650 people.
5. For the leadership of LDF regiments in the different governorates working with the Iranians to remain for the Iranians, in coordination with the General Command of the Army and the Armed Forces, until the end of the crisis or until a new resolution is issued.

2. **Brigade 313 in Daraa**

Iran has continued its attempts to expand into southern Syria despite international agreements aimed at curtailing its role in the region. In particular, Iran has been circumventing the US-Russia Hamburg Agreement, which required that Iranian forces and affiliated militias stay at least 30 kilometers away from the Syrian-Jordanian border.[29] At the end of 2017, the IRGC established a special military force affiliated with the Syrian army in south, called Brigade 313. That same year, the brigade opened a recruitment center in the city of Izraa in Daraa Governorate and the brigade attracted more than 200 young men from Daraa governorate during that year, most of whom had reconciled with the regime in July 2018.

Recruitment takes place at the headquarters of Brigade 313 in Izraa city, which is operating from the headquarters of Brigade 12. New brigade members receive an identity card bearing the IRGC logo, which ensures their ability to pass through regime checkpoints. Two weeks after they join, recruits are enrolled in training camps in Izraa and Sheikh Miskeen. The Brigade 313 headquarters is located about 30 kilometers from the borders with Jordan and is about 45 kilometers from the borders with Israel. For this reason, the brigade's location poses a direct threat to the agreement between Washington and Moscow.

Russian Corps: Vertical Control as an Entry Point to the Construction Process

Russia intervened in the activities of the Syrian army and gained influence by restructuring it through the creation of new units to support the Syrian army under Russian supervision, training, and management. Russia also provided

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6. All kind of material and combat supplies for Syrian civilians and military personnel serving with the Iranian side should be provided by the Iranians, after organizing them in LDF regiments in the different governorates in coordination with the competent authority.
7. The provision of financial rights of martyrs, the wounded and the missing persons who were serving with the Iranians since the beginning of the events should be the responsibility of the Iranians.
8. Issuing organizational instructions that include executive regulations, for civilians and military personnel, working with the Iranians, after organizing them in LDF regiments in the governorates.
   For more information, see the following source: Omran for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Military Establishment in Syria: Challenges of change and Reconfiguration, December 2018, P90-93

[29] Hamburg Agreement between Russia and the United States on Syria: Objectives and Implications, Arab 48, 11 July 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/hW4GAr

these new units with military equipment. By doing this, Russia aimed to build military units that it could command that were not influenced by the the sectarian structures that characterized the army before and during the crisis, while also attempting to exclude militias affiliated with Iran. Russia is also seeking to create a new 6th Corps in areas far from the presence of Iranian militias. This new corps will be located in the bases of the 3rd Division.

In 2018, with the launch of military offensives against the de-escalation zones, Russia found some new military manpower that it could make use of, namely the opposition forces who refused to be displaced to northern Syria. Russia then concluded special agreements with specific military formations, such as Jaysh al-Tawhid from the northern countryside of Homs, and Jaysh Shebab al-Sunna in Daraa, to have them join the 5th Corps. In 2019, Russia works towards creating a 6th Corps, which will be made up primarily of former opposition forces from the southern front.

The following are overviews of the military corps created by Russia in Syria:

1. **The 4th Corps**: Part of the work Russian advisors undertook in 2015 was creating the 4th Assault Corps, headquartered in Latakia. The 4th Corps differs from other formations in that service in the corps does not exempt volunteers from compulsory military service.

   The 4th Corps was formed of veterans, an association of officers whose service was terminated by the force of law, and of others who had left the army for one reason or another. The Corps included civil servants who continue to receive salaries from their original employment places in addition to a new allowance, indicating that the unit is well funded. Until the fall of 2015, the 4th Corps was composed of six local brigades and the 103rd Brigade that is affiliated with the Republican Guard, and which was used as a base and a warehouse for heavy equipment. The 4th Corps achieved some successes in offensive operations in Latakia in 2015 and 2016.

2. **The 5th Corps:** After ISIS took control of Palmyra, an urgent need emerged for the formation of a strong and well-trained infantry military entity composed of volunteers. In November 2016, the Syrian army announced the formation of the 5th Corps composed of elite volunteers.

The unit was created with Iranian and Russian support and it first attracted media attention in early 2017. The 5th Corps currently has around 10,000 troops, according to the estimatates of the information unit within Omran Center, and is headquartered in Latakia. The units of the 5th Corps are deployed between Hama and Palmyra. Upon its establishment, the 5th Corps participated in thwarting the attacks of ISIS on al-Tiyas airbase despite its lack of its experience.

3. **The 6th Corps. A deterrent force against Iranian influence:** More than a year after the formation of Russia's 5th Assault Corps, Russia today is seeking to form the 6th Corps, which although it is nominally affiliated with the regime's army, it will in reality be completely loyal to Russia. Russia is active in the 3rd Division of the regime's army, stationed in the city of al-Qutaifah in eastern Qalamoun in the Rural Damascus countryside. In the same manner, the Russians, made structural modifications to the 81st Brigade and created inspection committees for combat units within the 3rd Division. Russia aims at turning this division into the new 6th Corps. This step confirms Russia's efforts to restructure the Syrian army in accordance with its own vision, agenda, and ideology.[30]

4. In addition to creating these Corps, Russia also invested in some **local militias**. In early 2019 Russia sought to recruit the remnants of local militias. Specifically, it trained fighters of the Palestinian al-Quds Brigade through the private security company Vega.

The General Command of the Army and the Armed Forces issued a military bulletin containing the transfer and promotion of a number of Syrian army officers by the end of December 2018. This seems to be part of an ongoing process pushed by Russia since early 2018 aimed at restructuring the regime's security and military institutions.

There has been a notable level of change among commanders of the most prominent and central formations in the Syrian army, such as the Republican Guard, the 4th Division and the 5th Corps. It is noteworthy that these transfers were ordered after the change of the leaders of two security branches: the

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[30] Sada al-Sham, Syrian Army with a Russian Agenda, 9 February 2019, available at: https://goo.gl/Zi6uRF.

Administrative Branch No. 291 and the Officers' Affairs No. 293, in October 2018. Informed sources indicate that these transfers and promotions have been pushed by Russia in order to bring pro-Russian officers into those positions and to contain remnants of the old guard, pro-Iran officers, and others who do not collaborate with Moscow. In this regard, informed sources noted that Major General Talal Makhlouf, commander of the Republican Guard, was suspended from duty for 15 days before being dismissed and reassignment as commander of the 2nd Corps. It is said that this was because he was not cooperating with the Russians, who complained about his independence.[31]

An analysis of the regional and sectarian backgrounds of the new leaders of the most prominent military formations suggests that they all come from among the coastal Alawites, particularly from al-Qardaha, which means that the Alawites will continue their dominance over influential power centers in the Syrian army. The Russians are likely to complete the process of restructuring the Syrian army in the near future by pushing the regime to issue new promotions for a number of major generals to the rank of general–given that the last promotions to the rank of general in the Syrian army were in 2012–and for the appointment of a chief of staff, as the position has been vacant since the beginning of 2018.

Moscow supported the regime's decision to abolish the call for reserves in hopes of encouraging Syrians abroad to return to Syria, and urged the international community to engage in reconstruction. However, Russia later changed its position and supported re-mobilizing young men in light of the weak response of Syrians to the abolished call for reserve forces and the amnesties provided, as well as the reluctance of western countries to support reconstruction efforts. It seems that Moscow has rearranged its priorities and intensified its focus on the process of restructuring the Syrian army, especially in the current period of calm, in order to prevent any further expansion of Iran and to enhance the capability of the army to undertake military tasks independent of Iran and its militias in the coming period. Russia also seeks to improve the army's ability to deploy throughout all Syrian territories,

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[31] The information here was drawn through the work of the information unit in Omran for Strategic Studies, which is based on monitoring all the news related to the transfers report, whether on social media or other special sources.

especially after the anticipated American withdrawal from east of the Euphrates. This Russian interest can be seen in the Russian patronage and supervision of the process of settling the status of draft dodgers and violators of the call for reserves, as was the case in the western countryside of Daraa and the northern countryside of Homs.

Russia's Ambition to Control the Restructuring Processes

Russia's aspiration to control the restructuring process of the Syrian military aims to stop the deterioration of the Syrian army and build its capabilities in order to reduce the cost of Russian involvement in Syria, although Russia is aware of the difficulties they face in this endeavor. The Syrian army has lost two important tools required for military action: its ability to make any strategic decisions and its ability to maintain military gains as a result of the deterioration of its professional military structure. The Russians also realize that its ambitions will clash at some point with the policies of Iran, which has penetrated and spread in most of the key decision military and security decision-making circles in Syria.

The above understanding of Russia's desire to control the restructuring process is confirmed in a study conducted by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), which tackled the evolution of the Syrian armed forces, its trends, and its main problems, resulting in the following conclusions:[32]

- Syrian armed forces lack discipline, centralization, technical and organizational modernization, and authority;

- The Syrian army cannot be said to be a real army due to the multiplicity of pro-government irregular armed groups;

- Without an army, Syria will not be able to restore its full sovereignty and secure an environment conducive to political transformation and reform. That is why it is imperative to reform the armed forces;

- These factors requires Russia to rehabilitate the armed forces from scratch, which will run into a number of difficulties, including the fact

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[32] Alexey Khlebnikov, Evolving Syrian Armed Forces: Tendencies and Key Problems, Russian International Affairs Council, 7 December 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/BMwkQk.

that the army is neither in control of the entire territory of Syria nor does it have a monopoly over the control of weapons in the country. Additionally there is the large number of armed groups created by Iran, which will be both difficult to integrate in the Syrian army structures and equally as difficult to dissolve and remove them from the country.

By monitoring the movement within the Syrian army's divisions and formations, whether in terms of its organization, restructuring, or the rehabilitation of its infrastructure, Russian support and supervision can be seen through Russian officers working with the Syrian General Staff and the Military Intelligence Department. Russian officers are working on the rehabilitation of all brigades, battalions, and military installations and fortifying them and providing them with technical and combat equipment. Senior Russian military officers periodically inspect military units in different areas of Syria, especially the strategic ones, and they observe and identify the needs of these formations and send their observations to the Russian leadership in Moscow. In the past year, dozens of Syrian officers were sent to Russia and China for training courses as part of the plan to rebuild the Syrian army.[33]

With Russian support, the Syrian Military Intelligence, since 2018, has carried out unscheduled searches led by the newly appointed head of the Officers' Affairs Section of the Military Intelligence. These raids take place in the headquarters of battalions, brigades, and divisions in the Syrian army to assess the situation on the ground and ensure compliance with instructions. Russian experts were able to entirely restore the 61st Infantry Brigade, which is the largest and most important combat brigade in the Syrian army and the one most seriously impacted by the war. The Russians paid attention to every tiny detail in the 61st Infantry Brigade, even the type of glass used in the administrative offices. The same type of inspection was conducted on the 52nd Brigade in al-Harak in the western countryside of Daraa.[34]

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[33] Kamel Saker, By the Support of Russian Forces, the Syrian Army Begins the Largest Internal Restoration After the War, al-Quds al-Arabi, 28 October 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/FWXBrg.
[34] Ibid.

According to a report issued by Strategy Watch, Moscow pursued a number of steps to enhance its supervision over the restructuring process, including the following:[35]

1. Integrating the Division of Organization and Management with the Department of Officers' Affairs under the new name the Department of Human Resources. This allowed them to take control of training by authorizing a Russian officer to oversee the training and equipping of newly formed units, and selecting officers loyal to Russia to attend advanced military courses in Russia.

2. Taking control of the conscription sector by establishing a Department for Public Conscription and by opening conscription offices to recruit young men who went through 'settlement' processes.

3. Restructuring the 1st Armored Division under the command of Major General Zuhair al-Assad, and renaming it the 1st Mechanized Division.

4. The General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation approved a plan to restructure the 3rd Division.

5. Enhancing the offensive capabilities of the Tiger Forces with high quality weapons, including T90 Tanks, BM-30 rocket launchers, and Ballistic Tochka missiles.

6. Increasing Russian control over the air force and aerial defenses.

Russia has also invested heavily in the reconciliations it carried out with opposition factions, including with Shabab al-Sunna in Daraa. This faction, which controlled the city of Bosra al-Sham, reached an agreement with the Russian delegation in Daraa in July 2018, accepting the Russian conditions of joining the 5th Assault Corps. Although the Crisis Management Team, which was created by the revolutionary factions and local actors in Dara, rejected Russian conditions during the meeting held in Bosra al-Sham, Shabab al-Sunna, through its leader Ahmed al-Awda, reached an agreement with the Russians accepting their conditions. These conditions included handing over heavy and medium weapons to the Russian military police, the

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[35] For more information on these procedures, see: Russian Efforts to Control the Armed Forces in Syria in 2018, a report issued by Strategy Watch, 23 December 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/egU73u.

deployment of these police into Free Syrian Army (FSA) areas, providing the coordinates of FSA faction stations to the regime, handing over control of Nasib city and the Nasib border crossing to the regime forces, and the commitment that personnel of the Jaysh al-Sunna would participate in battles against ISIS enclaves in al-Badiya desert.

Another example of the Russian involvement in reconciliations is Jaysh al-Tawheed in the northern Homs countryside. In May 2018, Jaysh al-Tawheed which has around 2,500 fighters, refused to be displaced to the north and chose to remain in their strongholds in Talbiseh, al-Rastan, and Tier Maala, after receiving guarantees from the Russian officer Alexander Zorin that that they would not be subjected to harassment by the regime forces and security agencies, provided that they would later join the 5th Corps.[(36)]

In general, Russian efforts face many obstacles, varying in severity and implications., but all of which could render the nascent reconfiguration process unstable. These obstacles include: **obstacles related to the eroded army structure,** which evolved into something akin to a big militia because of the structural and organizational dysfunction and the human attrition of both conscripts and army personnel, especially after the legitimization of local and foreign militias within its administrative framework. **Obstacles related to Iran,** as Russia is still unable to control Iran because of its clear infiltration of the core structures of the regime. At the same time Russia needs to take the parameters set by USA concerning the security of Israel into account, most likely by curtailing Iran and putting it back under control. In addition to the above, there are **obstacles related to political imperatives.** However, excluding real opposition forces from the reformation processes will make the most likely approach is reconfiguring the regime, which would keep the cost for such a process open.

[(36)] Jaysh Al-Tawheed Opposition Faction Will Not Leave the Northern Countryside of Homs!, Rozana FM, 8 May 2018, available at: https://goo.gl/FEs9bw.

Influence Networks Functioning Under the Cover of Private Security Companies

Before May 2013, the tasks and activities of private security companies in Syria were limited to securing shopping malls, banks, and musical concerts. However, the need to increase the presence of legal armed forces, unbound by military legislations, led to the issuance of Legislative Decree No. 55. This decree gave the regime's allies, Iran and Russia, the opportunity to mobilize some militias under the legal framework of private security companies.

Iran has used private security companies to increase the Iranian influence in Damascus without worrying about whether they can maintain their presence in the future, because private security companies are legally registered in Syria. It also used these security companies to maintain its presence on the strategic Baghdad-Damascus highway, in the eastern desert of Syria.

Russia has benefited from private security companies by using them to legitimize some of the local militia fighters it recruited due to the lack of manpower in the Syrian army. After the reconciliations extended to some FSA factions in eastern Qalamoun, Russia faced limited options on how to use these fighters. Initially, Russia used the 5th Corps, but that led to disputes because many Syrian army forces refused to fight alongside former FSA fighters. These disputes forced Russia to instead use private security companies, such as the "ISIS Hunters," to mobilize and make use of former FSA fighters.[37]

Active Private Security Companies in Syria in 2019 are highlighted in the following table:[38]

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[37] Navvar Saban (Oliver), Profiling Top Private Security Companies in Syria, Omran Center, 11 February 2019, available at: https://goo.gl/gUp3Qh.
[38] Ibid.

Name	Date of Creation	Location/ Headquarters	International Affiliation
Professionals Company	29 April 2012	Damascus	Independent
Shorouk Company	12 November 2012	Damascus	Independent
Al-Husun Company	23 March 2013	Latakia	Independent
Qasioun Company	28 October 2013	Damascus	Iran
IBS	27 November 2013	Damascus	Iran
Al-Watania Company	28 March 2016	Damascus	Russia
ISIS Hunters	16 March 2017	Hama	Russia
Al-Qalaa Company	10 October 2017	Damascus	Iran
Al-Areen Company	19 October 2017	Damascus	Russia
Sanad Company	22 October 2017	Damascus	Russia
Fajr Company	2 January 2018	Aleppo	Iran
Alpha Company	15 February 2018	Aleppo	Iran
Al-Hares Company	8 May 2018	Damascus	Iran
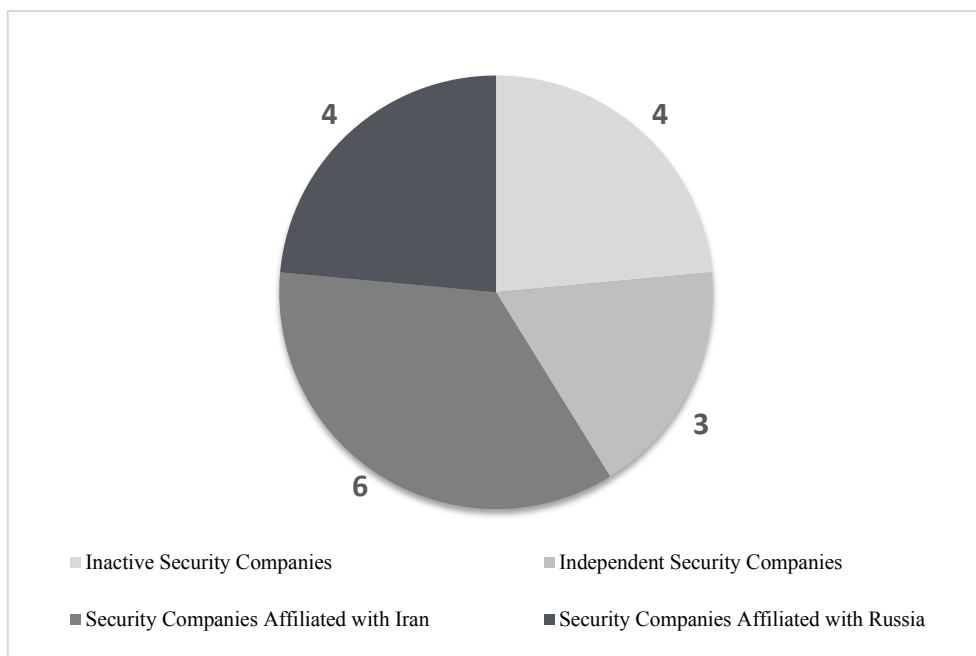
Breakdown by number of Syrian private security companies' affiliations
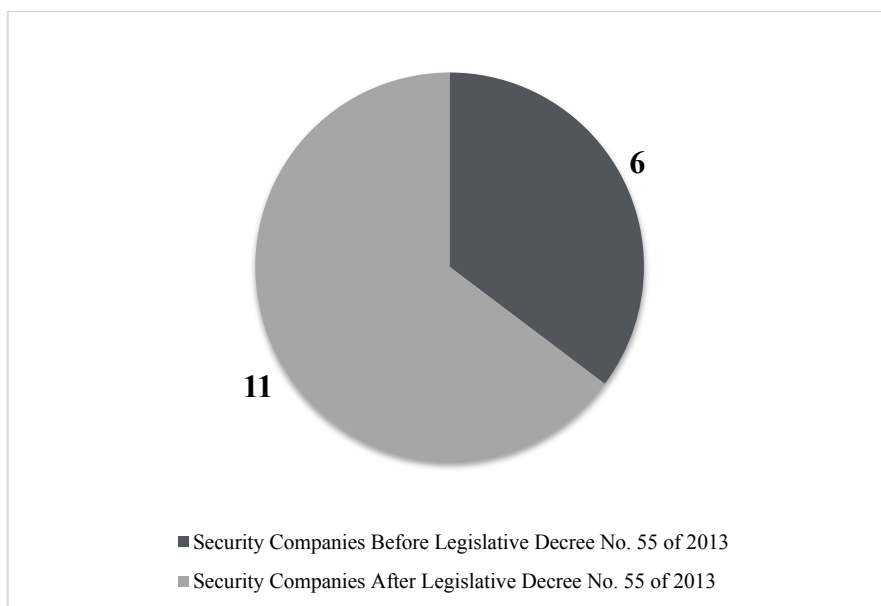
Number of Syrian private security companies established before and after Legislative Degree No.55 of 2013

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the Russian intervention and its success in tilting the balance of the conflict in favor of the regime, the process of controlling and restructuring the military has undergone important transformations.

Iran worked hard to gain horizontal control (i.e. personal loyalties, controlling regime military and security units and special units such as the Republican Guard) over the military establishment, re-engineer its presence within the structures of the regime, especially military and security institutions, and divide the combat fronts in Syria into five major sectors: the Damascus sector, which includes the Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates; the Southern Front sector, which includes Daraa, Quneitra, and Suweida governorates; the Central Front sector, which includes Homs, Hama, and Idlib governorates; the Coastal Front sector which includes the governorates of Latakia and Tartous; and the Northern Front sector, which includes Aleppo and Raqqa governorates. Iran also established fixed military bases in all of the abovementioned sectors that accommodate 6,000 fighters and it supplied them with heavy weapons, air force, and anti-aircraft missiles. Iran appears

determined to protect and defend its supply lines to the Syrian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah, making Moscow's task of reigning in Iran difficult, especially that some of the Iran-affiliated militias have become officially affiliated with the regular Syrian army, such as the LDF.

Regarding Russia, since mid-2017, its control over the regime has been evident, especially with regard to the continuing changes in the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff, and some security agencies, in addition to the inspection and controls imposed on some military units. While some Russian moves seem to be driven by what is described as combating 'corruption issues' to deal with the great waste in the allocations made to the Syrian armed forces, others are understandable only in the context of installing a network of Syrian officers loyal to Russia in the most sensitive military and security positions. Available information confirms this trend, including making the General Staff of the Syrian Army and Armed Forces in Damascus headquarters for Russian officers, and making numerous changes in the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense that have already reached the highest ranks including the Minister of Defense and his aides and advisers.

While the Iranian and Russian influence networks are crystallizing within army structures, the Syrian army continues on in its current structure, a hybrid form that has been penetrated by networks of different allegiances. This has contributed to its transformation into essentially a militia, full of contradicting ideologies and conflicting Iranian and Russian interests.

All of the above reinforces the premise of this paper, namely that the structural and functional dysfunction of the military, which has forced it to seek assistance from foreign and local forces and militias as well as the support of its Russian ally, will influence the process of reform and the army's ultimate fate. The army will remain captive to the hybrid network format, which will drain much of its independence and effectiveness, unless and until there is a new political moment that can redefine the roles of an army, which was heretofore preoccupied with killing Syrians. Strengthening the conditions of social support for the military reform process and ensuring that it takes national conditions and requirements into account is necessary, but today is still absent, because the army has been transformed into a field of manipulation for many influence networks.

Annex: The Most Prominent Combat Groups within the Local Defense Forces

1. **Al-Imam al-Baqir Brigade:** In 2016 the activities of al-Baqir Brigade were limited to the eastern and southern countryside of Aleppo, but in 2017 it expanded its operations into the Syrian desert and Deir Ezzor governorate. The brigade is primarily composed of men from al-Baggara tribe, many of whom converted to Shiism before and during the Syrian revolution due to the Iranian proselytizing activities there and the superficial relationship between al-Baggara tribe and Imam al-Baqir, based on their names. Fighters of this brigade received their weapons from the Iraqi militia of Hezbollah al-Nujaba in addition to receiving salaries of 25,000 SYP each. The brigade had training camps in the villages of Tal Shahib, Eissan, and Ein Issa in the southern countryside of Aleppo.

   Today, al-Baqir Brigade militia operates the transportation sector in Aleppo city using a large fleet of microbuses. Most of the drivers of those buses come from the tribes fighting within the brigade. With the help of the Traffic Administration and Military Security, the revenues of transportation services are given to al-Baqir militia.

   Currently, al-Baqir Brigade is active in the eastern fronts, especially in Deir Ezzor governorate near the border areas. The brigade is in charge of securing the Albu Kamal-Deir Ezzor road and supervises the Afghan militias that protect the T2 oil pump in the governorate. The current number of its fighters is estimated to be around 2,000.

2. **Jaysh al-Mahdi Forces:** Jaysh al-Mahdi is the Syrian branch of Iraqi militias affiliated with the Sadr movement, which was led by Muqtada al-Sadr in both Iraq and Syria until he recently appointed Aws al-Khafaji as commander of the Syrian forces. These forces include al-Muammal Brigade, which is stationed in Aleppo and estimated to include around 2,000 fighters.

3. **Al-Imam al-Hussein Brigade:** The al-Imam al-Hussein Brigade is a Syrian Shiite militia that was established in 2013 and contains some Shiite fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan. It currently has around 1,200

fighters and has close ties with the militia's Iraqi branch. It is stationed in Sayida Zainab in Damascus and in the city of Daraya since the displacement of its population. Kazem Jawad, an Iraqi who was the commander of the brigade, was killed on 15 March 2015. Jawad's successor, Amjad al-Bahadli died in Damascus of a stroke on 17 March 2017. On 29 March 2017, Asaad al-Bahadli, the brother of Amjad, was appointed as commander of the brigade.

4. **Assad Allah al-Ghaleb Brigade:** Assad Allah al-Ghaleb Brigade is a Shiite militia that began its activities in the countryside of Damascus. It is led by an Iraqi national named Aqil al-Moussawi, aka Abu Fatima al-Moussawi. The uniform of this brigade is similar to the Iraqi Rapid Intervention Forces. In early 2015, the brigade was redeployed to Baniyas city in Tartous and the countryside of Latakia. It is estimated to have around 800 fighters today.

5. **The militias of Nubl and al-Zahraa towns in the north of Aleppo,** which adopted the slogan of 'the Islamic resistance in Syria and al-Mahdi soldiers shall prevail.' They are estimated to have around 1,000 fighters.

The following are the most important combat groups that joined the LDF at the beginning of 2018:

Name	Deployment	Origin of fighters	Name	Deployment	Origin of fighters
Doshka Brigade	Aleppo	Syrian	Islamic Resistance in Syria	Aleppo – Raqqa	Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese
Al-Safira Brigade	Aleppo	Syrian	Al-Rida Forces	Homs	Syria
Al-Birri Brigade	Hama	Syrian	Al-Ridwan Forces	Homs	Syrian
Al-Hikma Battalion	Hama	Syrian	Sukur al-Daher Forces	Idlib	Syrian
Al-Nayrab Regiment	Aleppo	Syrian	Nusour Khan al-Assal	Aleppo	Syrian
Force 313	Deir Ezzor	Syrian, Iraqi	Imam Zein al-Abideen Brigade	Palmyra	Syrian
The Christian forces of al-Ghadab	Hama	Syrian	Al-Kursh Group	Latakia Countryside	Syrian

Analysis Paper

The Role and Fate of Palestinian Militias Loyal to the Syrian Regime

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The Role and Fate of Palestinian Militias Loyal to the Syrian Regime

First: Intimidation and Containment Policies in the Era of Hafez al-Assad

Before the outbreak of the revolution, from the early days of Hafez al-Assad's rule, the Syrian regime sought to seize the Palestinian cause using it as a card to serve the regime's domestic and foreign policy agendas. Hafez al-Assad sought to divide the Palestinian national movement by coopting a number of Palestinian factions, including the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA), placing them under political and security control, and even mobilizing them in certain military situations such as what took place in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s.

Many factors helped the elder Assad use and manipulate the Palestinian issue. The most important of these was the spread of Palestinian refugee camps in most Syrian governorates and the great sympathy that Syrians held for Palestine and the cause of its people. Hafez al-Assad recognized the importance of controlling the Palestinian issue early on. When he was minister of defense during the events of September 1970 between Jordan and the Palestinian resistance, he refused to send aerial cover to support the Palestinian resistance in violation of orders from al-Ba'ath party leadership at the time. Later that same year he led a coup against that same Baathist leadership, taking power and putting his former comrades in prison.[1]

Furthermore, Hafez al-Assad considered the Palestinian cause a strategic pillar in his propaganda campaign and exploited it in the worst ways possible. While claiming his deep concern and care for the cause, he worked to divide the Palestinian ranks, undermining Palestinian legitimacy and forming several Palestinian factions with more links to the regime's security services than to their national cause.[2] It was therefore no coincidence that most

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[1] Nashwan al-Atasi, Evolution of the Syrian Community (1831 – 2011) Beirut, Atlas Publishing house, fifth edition, p269.
[2] Rasheed Hourani, Assad Regime and the Pragmatic Investment in the Palestinian Cause, Kitabat, 10 Dec, 2017, https://bit.ly/2wnxDCr

defections from Palestinian organizations produced pro-Syrian regime groups.

A review of several historic milestones can help reveal the type of methods used by Hafez al-Assad to contain the Palestinian presence in Syria, in contrast to the weakening of the independent Palestinian national decision. The most accurate description of this equation came from Palestinian leader Salah Khalaf (Abu Eyad) when he said, "… In Syria, living conditions where less harsh, but in return, the authorities made demands of their guests, including full compliance and unconditional obedience to the existing regime, whether it is rightist or leftist, separatist or pan-Arab".[3]

Thus, the behavior of Hafez al-Assad towards the Palestinian factions and community is clear in many incidents, including the transformation of the Palestinian organization within al-Ba'ath party, 'al-Sa'iqa,' into a tool of the regime; encouraging certain groups to defect from their factions and granting them financial and logistic privileges; and committing massacres against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. These included the massacre of Tel al-Zaatar in Lebanon in the summer of 1976, and the massacres perpetrated by the regime-backed Amal Movement against the Palestinian camps in Beirut in the mid 1980s. These massacres committed in order to put pressure on the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and in retaliation for the refusal of PLO leaders to function under the umbrella of the regime.

Second: Mobilization during the Syrian Revolution

Bashar al-Assad followed in his father's footsteps. From the beginning of the Syrian revolution, he realized the risk of the Palestinian population siding with the demands of the Syrian people and was concerned that young Palestinians, who were already discontent with the Arab regimes, would participate broadly in the Syrian revolutionary movement. Accordingly, the regime used its political influence and security tools to support the Palestinian groups and factions that have been historically pro-regime, using them in battles and confrontations during the revolution and when necessary,

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[3] Salah Khalaf (Abu Eiyad), Palestinian without an Identity, Amman, al-Jaleel Publishing House, Second edition, 1996, P69-70.

deploying them on the hot fronts in different parts of the country to fight alongside the regime.[4] This helped guarantee the isolation of Palestinian camps – the largest of which is al-Yarmouk camp – from surrounding Syrian neighborhoods. The regime also used the pro-regime Palestinian factions to promote its narrative of the universal conspiracy that targets it as a regime of resistance, which is paying the price of defending Palestine and embracing its resistance. The Palestinian factions loyal to the regime repeated the lies of this narrative in their media and political discourse.

Formations and Factions Loyal to the Regime before and During the Revolution

This section will discuss pro-regime Palestinian factions in detail, by presenting an overview of the identity of the PLA and each of the other pro-regime factions, according to the size and role of each both before the revolution and during the Syrian war. After that, we will discuss the Palestinian factions created by the regime during the revolution and the roles that they played in supporting the regime's survival and defending its existence.

1. Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA)

In 1956, the Syrian Parliament passed Legislative Decree No. 260, which stipulated that Palestinians would be equal to Syrians in all rights and obligations, except for running for elected office and voting. Palestinians of age for military service were then called to serve in the Syrian Arab Army, and a battalion composed mostly of Palestinians was established under the name of Battalion 68.[5]

During the second Arab Summit, held in September 1964, the PLO was recognized as the representative of the Palestinian people and the summit endorsed a resolution to establish the PLA. PLO declared the creation of the PLA on 10 September 1964, and appointed Wajeeh al-Madani as its first

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[4] Ayman Abu Hashem, Repercussions of the Syrian Revolution on the Palestinians of Syria, Case Study: al-Yarmouk camp, Research paper, Palestinian Affairs Journal, Edition 251, July 2013, P3

[5] Battalion 68 was established under the Unity between Syria and Egypt in 1958, under the leadership of Colonel Akram Safadi, Lieutenant Colonel Haitham al-Ayoubi (two Syrian Nasserist officers) and Colonel Ahmad Hajjo (Palestinian officer in the Syrian army), Battalion 68, Assafir Newspaper, Palestine Annex, July edition, 2011, https://bit.ly/2I5JOcN

leader before Brigadier General Subhi al-Jabi was appointed as the chief of staff on 8 June 1965.[6] The PLA participated in the War of June 1967 on the Jordanian and Syrian fronts and played a significant role in the battles of Jerusalem and its surroundings. The PLA also participated on the Syrian front in the War of 1973, especially the Hittin and al-Qadisiyeh forces, which fought the battles of Tal al-Faras, Tal al-Shaar, Tal Mutaweq and Tal Shams.[7]

When Hafez al-Assad came to power, he worked to separate the PLA units operating in Syria from the PLO, which it was initially established under. Instead, he made the Syrian PLA contingent directly affiliated with the Syrian Army in terms of its organization, training, armament, and logistics, with the aim of utilizing the PLA in the regime's future policies and battles. In 1976, Hafez al-Assad sent several units of the PLA to Lebanon, to fight alongside Syria against the Lebanese National Movement and the Palestinian Resistance. This led to a split in the PLA, led by Mahmoud Abu Marzouk and Abdullah Siyam, under the leadership of Major General Mesbah al-Budeiri.[8]

In 1983, when Hafez al-Assad brought the PLA into battles against the Palestinian Revolution Forces in Lebanon and attacks on the Palestinian camps in Tripoli, Brigadier General Atiyeh Awad, the well-known commander of Ajnadeen Forces, rebelled and refused to obey orders. Syrian security forces arrested him and held him in an unknown place, until his death in regime prisons was declared in 2004.[9] Due to the repeated rebellions within the PLA, Hafez al-Assad worked to restrict the command of PLA, its chief of staff as well as all officers in charge of its administration to those known for their strong loyalty to the regime and who were trusted by the security agencies.

When the Syrian revolution started in 2011, the PLA was estimated to have around 4,500 volunteers and conscript (including officers, non-commissioned officers, conscripts, and civil servants). It consisted of three infantry and lightning brigades (shock troops) including the Hittin Forces stationed in

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[6] PLA, the Palestinian encyclopedia, 5 Nov 2013.
[7] Saqr Abu Fakhr, Popular Liberation Forces: The Lost Role and the Unknown History, al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, 11 August 2014, https://bit.ly/2KaVjSz
[8] Ibid
[9] Mustafa al-Wali, Atiya Awad, A Human General, Geroun, 8 Jan 2017, https://bit.ly/2VT2Qbc

Qatana near Damascus; the Ajnadeen forces stationed in Jebel al-Sheikh; and al-Qadisiyeh forces deployed near Suweida governorate; in addition to the training center in Masyaf, and a number of military, financial, logistics, and technical departments, independent units, and health and cultural centers affiliated with the PLA leadership. The number of PLA military personnel involved in battles during the Syrian war is estimated at only around 2,000, noting that the PLA leadership has exaggerated the number of its soldiers involved.[10]

In terms of organization, the PLA general command is headed by Major General Muhammad Tareq al-Khadra, who reports to the General Staff in the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Army. The Military Intelligence Directorate has general oversight of the units and departments of the PLA through the monitoring and observation branch, which was headed by Brigadier General Akram al-Salti before it was later assigned to Brigadier General Fayez al-Basha.

From the first months of the Syrian revolution, many voices within the PLA expressed the desire not to involve the PLA in what is happening in Syria and to instead maintain its focus on the core mission of liberating Palestine. In 2012, a number of officers who criticized the PLA's involvement in the Syrian conflict were assassinated by the regime. Among them were Hittin Forces leader Brigadier General Rida al-Khadra, Colonel Abdel Nasser Maqari, and Major Bassel Rafiq Ali.[11] The assassination operations continued against anyone who disobeyed orders to participate in battles against Syrian opposition forces. Many officers defected to express their clear support of the Syrian revolution, including Colonel Qahtan Tabasheh, commander of Lightning Battalion 421 of al-Qadisiyeh forces, who formed the 'Free Palestinian Liberation Army' along with other defectors in July 2012. In 2013, Colonel Khaled Ismail al-Hassan defected and established,

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[10] According to a testimonial interview with the author and an officer in the general staff, before being dismissed for medical reasons and leave Syria in 2017 and a testimony by a conscript sergeant who was serving in the financial department since 2011 and he deserted the service in 2014.

[11] Ali al-Saleh, Ambiguous Assassinations of Palestinian Military Leaders in Syria, Asharq al-Awsat, 2 March 2012, Edition No. 12148, available at: https://bit.ly/2LRFrqJ

along with other defected officers, the 'Free Brigade of the Liberation Army' in the area south of Damascus.[12]

The PLA's participation in the fighting alongside the regime increased gradually. In the beginning, the PLA was tasked with preventing opposition faction from expanding into the areas where its forces were deployed and where it's training and administrative compounds were located. Its tasks were later expanded by the Syrian leadership to include the protection of economic infrastructure and other vital facilities like the Tishreen thermal power plant near Harran al-Awameed in the Damascus countryside. Starting in 2015, the PLA's participation expanded to include many hot fronts inside of Syria. Statements by the PLA leader, General Tareq al-Khadra, in July 2017, revealed that PLA forces were fighting in 15 locations in Damascus, the Damascus countryside, Daraa and its countryside, Suweida, and al-Badiya desert region.[13]

As of early 2019, the PLA had participated in battles on the following fronts:

- **The Damascus Countryside:** Battalion 421 fought on the Adra industrial city front and in Tal Sawan and Tal Kurdi against opposition forces starting in 2015. Some sources reported that a number of PLA officers and soldiers were liquidated in Tal Kurdi because they refused to fight to the side of the regime.[14] Units of the Ajnadeen Forces also participated in the siege of Khan al-Sheikh refugee camp in November 2016.[15] They also participated in battles on the Jabal al-Sheikh front at both Beit Jinn and its farms and Mughr al-Meer in late 2017, as well as other battles in al-Rayhan farms area of Eastern Ghouta the same year. They later took part in the regime's battles to take control of besieged Ghouta in March 2018, fighting on the Harasta, Ein Tarma, and Jobar axes.

- **Suweida:** The battalions of al-Qadisiyeh Brigade and Lightning Brigade 421 are deployed in Suweida. In 2015, they fought alongside the regime against opposition factions in the vicinity of al-Thaleh Airport in the

[12] Defection statements by Palestinian officers, https://bit.ly/2HSBKM4
[13] Ghassan Nasser, PLA fights with the regime in 15 locations, Geroun, 14 July 2017.
[14] Zaman al-Wasal, 2 March 2015, available at: https://bit.ly/2JJWdGi
[15] Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, November 2016, available at: https://bit.ly/2I1jyjv

western part of the governorate. In 2017, PLA Engineering units participated in sweeping areas of the Badiya desert in Suweida, including Beer Qassab, al-Kraa, al-Hebbariyeh, and others. In 2018, the Lightning Battalion fought against ISIS in the surroundings of Tulul al-Safa in the eastern desert of Suweida and helped the regime regain control over the area.[16]

- **The Syrian Badiya desert:** In 2017, some PLA special missions units fought alongside the regime in combat against ISIS in Uqayribat in the eastern countryside of Hama, the surroundings of Tal al-Hawaiyat, and in Maskaneh countryside near Tal Sad Risheh, Jabal Makhoul, Tal Asfar, Tal al-Baqar, the strategic area of Jabal Sisi, as well as the battles of al-Tanf,[17] and the battles to lift the siege of Deir Ezzor.

- **Daraa:** In 2016, a number of PLA units, led by the 12th Battalion, engaged in fierce battles on the fronts of Sheikh Maskeen and al-Kateebeh al-Mahjora in Daraa's northern countryside.[18] In June 2018, the PLA participated in the battles of Bosra al-Harir and Mleiha.

- **Damascus:** In April 2018, the PLA participated in the battle to take the southern Damascus suburbs from ISIS, fighting on several combat axes, notably al-Hajar al-Aswad, al-Qadam, and Palestine and Yarmouk Streets.[19]

This significant support of PLA to the Syrian regime in all of these battles and confrontations in so many different areas resulted in the death of 276 PLA members, including a number of defectors who were killed fighting on the side of opposition factions.[20] Furthermore, hundreds of conscripts and volunteers escaped the compulsory service in the PLA and illegally fled out of Syria. Those that were arrested were transferred to security branches for

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[16] Ahmad al-Ibrahim, PLA soldiers killed in al-Suweida Desert battles, al-Arabi al-Jadeed, 18 Sep 2018, https://bit.ly/2KeQW94

[17] PLA's Moral and Political Department page on Facebook, June 2017: http://bit.do/eTywb, July 2017: http://bit.do/eTywG, Aug 2017: http://bit.do/eTyxh.

[18]) PLA's Moral and Political Department page on Facebook, June 2018: https://bit.ly/2XbUw7B, https://bit.ly/2QsvYF7, https://bit.ly/30Nocds, July 2018: https://bit.ly/2Wum9M8, July 2018: https://bit.ly/2ECnMNw.

[19] Eldorar al-Shamiya, 'the Tiger's' Militia get involved in al-Yarmouk camp after the failure of storming it, 13 May 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2HFXv2W

[20] Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, documenting 276 casualties from PLA, killed during the war in Syria, 25 Jan 2019, available at: https://bit.ly/2HHPo69

interrogation before being referred to the military judiciary. Dozens were tortured to death during the process. The number of Palestinian young men – of compulsory or reserve service age – who left Syria in different ways is estimated to be in the thousands. Military service was a key reason for the emigration of the Palestinian young men out of Syria during the revolution.

2. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC)

This group was first established in 1959 under the name the 'Palestine Liberation Front.' Then in 1967 it merged with other Palestinian groups to form the 'Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine' (PFLP). In April 1968, part of the PFLP split off and became known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC).[21]

Among the most prominent founders of the PFLP-GC were Ali Boshnaq, Ahmed Jibril, Talal Naji and Fadl Sharuru. Its Secretary-General, Ahmed Jibril, graduated as an officer from the Military Academy in Egypt in 1959. From its inception, the PFLP-GC focused on military action and throughout its history, it carried out a number of well-known guerrilla operations against the Israeli enemy, in addition to prisoner exchange operations: Operation al-Nawras in 1979 and Operation Galilee in 1985.[22]

The PFLP-GC started in the refugee camps in Syria and adopted a left-wing nationalist ideology, but its relationship with the Syrian regime did not really begin to strengthen until after 1970. The most prominent milestone that revealed the nature of that relationship was the entry of the Syrian army into Lebanon in the mid-1970s. The PFLP-GC supported the Syrian army's intervention in Lebanon and remained silent about the massacres committed by the Syrian regime in the Tal al-Zaatar camp in 1976. This led the leader Muhammad Abbas (Abu al-Abbas), along with Talaat Yaqoub and a number of other leaders and cares to split from the PFLP-GC to express their rejection of the position of the group's leadership, which they considered to be

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[21] Amjad Mahmoud Mansour Jallad, the Role of Palestinian Factions in Establishing National Unity, Master's thesis, al-Najah National University, 2016, P89
[22] PFLP-GC, Phases of Establishment and Founding, al-Fiker al-Mukawem Magazine, 2002, Edition 3.

collusion with the Syrian regime. They established the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) organization in April 1977.[23]

Ahmed Jibril's relationship with the regime grew over time, especially after the escalation of conflict between Hafez al-Assad and Yasser Arafat on the eve of the 1982 Lebanon War. In 1983, Hafez al-Assad supported a split within the Fatah movement, taking advantage of political discord between Fatah, dissidents thereof, and the PFLP-GC. The regime incited these factions to wage a war against Fatah forces in the camps in northern Lebanon, with the goal of expelling it out of the Lebanese arena.[24] That stage, when PFLP-GC fighters participated in the war of Tripoli 1983, clearly increased the organization's ties with the Syrian regime, such that it became the closest Palestinian organization to the regime. Throughout the period of Syrian forces' control over Lebanon until their departure in 2005, the PFLP-GC fought alongside the regime in many battles during the civil war. The PFLP-GC's military bases, which were present in several areas in the suburbs of Beirut and the Beqaa Valley, received political and security support and coverage from the regime, in addition to support for the PFLP-GC's political, organizational, and media activities inside of Syria.

From the early days of the Syrian revolution, the political and media discourse of the PFLP-GC was consistent with the regime's narrative of a universal conspiracy targeting Syria because of its resistance regime, which supports the Palestinian cause. This narrative fueled anger among Palestinian and Syrian communities, especially after the security forces' scheme to send young Palestinians to the borders of Golan was exposed on 15 May 2011. It was repeated on 5 June on the anniversary of 'the setback' (al-Naksa), in order to divert attention from the revolutionary movement inside Syria. That bloody day in 2011 resulted in dozens of martyrs and hundreds of wounded shot by the Israeli occupation to prevent demonstrators from crossing the borders. On the day after the massacre, after the funeral was held for martyrs in Yarmouk camp, angry mourners went out to the positions of the pro-regime PFLP-GC.

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[23] Samih Shbeeb, Palestinian Liberation Front: one Faction with two general secretaries, Palestine annex to Assafir Newspaper, February 2012, https://bit.ly/30NljJP.

[24] Several press and media statements by leaders of Fatah during the events of 1983, condemning the regime use of Palestinian factions loyal to it, including PFLP-GC in its war to fight Fatah and end its presence in Lebanon, (Abu Jihad al-Wazeer – Abu Eiyad – Nabil Shaath..)

At the PFLP-GC's 'al-Khalisa' building, building guards shot at protestors as Jibril and the rest of the PFLP-GC leadership were inside. This fueled the anger of the protester further, so they surrounded the building and set it on fire. This tragic incident resulted in casualties on both sides before the regime's security forces intervened and evacuated the PFLP-GC leadership from the building.[25]

A few months after this incident, the PFLP-GC began to form what became to be known as "Popular Committees," which were supervised by Khaled Jibril, head of the PFLP-GC's military and security department. The PFLP-GC claimed that the purpose of these committees was to protect al-Yarmouk camp and protect it from the nearby flashpoints in al-Hajar al-Aswad, al-Tadamun, al-Qadam, and al-Asali. It quickly became clear that the objective of the Popular Committees was bigger than that when the committees – which included unemployed young men and people with criminal records and bad reputations – started to track down and arrest Palestinian and Syrian activists inside the camp then hand them over to the Syrian security authorities. In addition to that, when some Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups emerged in neighborhoods surrounding al-Yarmouk camp, the PFLP-GC Popular Committees played a role in harassing and assaulting members of these groups as they passed near the camp.

In 2012, skirmishes between the PFLP-GC Popular Committees and FSA factions increased and the people on al-Yarmouk camp became hostages of the committees. The popular committee's had provocative practices and openly went about turning al-Yarmouk into a military barracks for the benefit of the regime, and to prevent the expansion of FSA groups into the area. These were the main reasons that led to the FSA invasion of the camp, which happened in conjunction with bombardment of the camp by the regime's air force. A large number of civilians were killed and wounding in Abdul Qadir al-Husseini Mosque and surrounding neighborhoods during these attacks.[26] The FSA factions were able to defeat the committees after the surrender and

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[25] Testimony of the Palestinian refugee Omar H. who was one of the people who went to the Golan borders on 5 June 2011 and participated on the next day in the funeral of those who were killed by the Israeli forces there. He was among the protestors in the confrontations that took place in the surroundings of al-Khalisa building on that day.

[26] The Future of the Palestinians of Syria, Strategic Assessment (78), al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations, July 2015, https://bit.ly/2ECmGBE

escape of large numbers of their members, and a number of their members subsequently joined the ranks of the FSA.

The defeat of the Popular Committees was a serious blow to the PFLP-GC, but this did not deter its leadership from continuing to support the regime. Moreover, its abuse of civilians who remained in the camp increased, after the majority of the camp's population was displaced in the wake of the airstrikes. The PFLP-GC participated along with the regime forces in the crime of tightening the suffocating siege on al-Yarmouk camp and the entire southern suburbs area starting in July 2013, until the regime restored control of the camp in May 2018.[27] Throughout the siege, the PFLP-GC committed serious violations amounting to war crimes against the besieged civilians. These crimes included the continuous bombardment of the houses of besieged people from the artillery barracks located north of the camp, the prevention of access to medical and relief items throughout the siege, the abuse of camp locals – hundreds of whom were detained and handed over to Syrian security agencies – and continuous cooperation with the notorious Palestine Branch of the intelligence services.[28]

Starting in 2012, the PFLP-GC also had groups of *shabiha* thugs in Hama camp. These groups arrested and handed over many young men from the camp to the regime's military security branch in the city, where more than 20 of them were reportedly killed under torture. These *shabiha* sometimes supported regime forces in their battles in the countryside of Hama, however their influence waned with the spread of al-Quds Brigade in the camp starting in 2015.[29]

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[27] The Regime Celebrates Restoring Control over al-Yarmouk camp, Report issued by the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, 7/8, https://bit.ly/2K9zK4W

[28] Dozens of reports issued by human rights and documentation groups about the crimes perpetrated by PFLP-GC Militia under the leadership of Ahmad Jibril during the siege of al-Yarmouk camp, (Action Group of Palestinians of Syria – Syrian Network for Human Rights – Violations Documentation Center – The Independent Commission for Human Rights – the Center of Documenting Palestinian Detainees – The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights)

[29] Information derived from Palestinian refugee M. S., who deserted one of the groups affiliated with the PFLP-GC and escaped to Turkey. Social media pages circulated names of the Palestinian victims of torture from Hama camp during July 2018.

Through its groups deployed in Daraa, the PFLP-GC fought alongside regime forces in the clashes that took place in the vicinity of Daraa camp, during the regime's June 2018 offensive to restore control over the area.[30]

Apart of the arming of some groups in other camps such as Khan Dunoun, al-Sayida Zainab camp, and Jaramana, and groups to protect its base in the Ain al-Saheb area south of Damascus, the PFLP-GC does not have forces deployed in other areas of Syria. In total, the group is estimated to have approximately 250 fighters in Syria and about 100 in their military positions in Lebanon. The leadership of PFLP-GC exaggerates the numbers of its members involved in the fighting for propaganda reasons and to obtain more financial support from Iran, from whom it has been receiving a monthly budget for several years. The PFLP-GC Assistant Secretary-General Talal Naji told Russian news agency Sputnik "the PFLP-GC had lost 420 fighters in addition to 800 others wounded in its participation alongside the Syrian state in the Syrian war."[31] These figures do not match the numbers of the killed members declared in PFLP-GC media outlets, which at most does not exceed 50 members.

3. Al-Sa'iqa Organization

Al-Sa'iqa Organization (Vanguards for the Popular Liberation War – Al-Sa'iqa Forces) was established during the June War of 1967 (the Six-Day War), as an armed guerrilla (*fedayeen*) faction affiliated with the Palestinian branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in Syria, as an embodiment of the strategy adopted by the Ninth National Party Congress held in September 1966. Al-Sa'iqa had branches in Syria, Lebanon, eastern Jordan, the occupied West Bank, the Gaza strip, and in a number of other Arab countries. With the increase of its military activities and its political action among the Palestinian and Arab public, al-Sai'qa became the second guerrilla organization after Fatah in late 1960s. Accordingly, it had significant representation in PLO institutions like the National Council, the Central Council, and the Executive Committee.[32]

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[30] A report issued by the Action Group of Palestinians of Syria, Review of 2018, 3 Jan 2019, https://bit.ly/2EBklqo
[31] Action Group of Palestinians of Syria, from a meeting with Talal Naji on Sputnik Arabic website, 30 Oct 2018, https://bit.ly/2I0YBW7
[32] Vanguards for the Liberation Popular War, The Palestinian Encyclopedia, 26 Aug 2014, https://bit.ly/2Bo6z9f

When Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, he put al-Sa'iqa under his control, and began to shift its activities from undertaking guerrilla operations on the Syria-Lebanon-Jordan borders, into becoming a military force used by the regime, especially after the regime's entry to Lebanon and during the civil war. Zuhair Mohsen, a confidant of Assad, led al-Sa'iqa from 1971 until he was assassinated by the Israeli Mossad in France in 1979.[33]

Al-Sa'iqa played different roles for the Syrian regime in Lebanon, specifically during the regime's support for the Lebanese secessionist forces in their war against the Palestinians in 1976. The regime not only imposed a siege on Palestinian camps, but also took part in bombarding it under the pretext of ceasefire violations by the Palestinian factions. Former soldiers in the Syrian army revealed that they were taken from their military units to fight in Lebanon under the banner of pro-Syria Palestinian factions, including al-Sa'iqa battalions, which participated in handing the camp over to the Lebanese forces, which then committed a horrific massacre.[34]

After the battles of Tripoli in 1983, during which al-Sa'iqa fighters fought alongside other pro-regime factions against the Fatah movement and the PLO forces in Lebanon, al-Sa'iqa's military presence began to shrink. Its importance to the regime declined as other pro-regime factions such as PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifada rose in importance. As a result, al-Sa'iqa's activities in Syria became linked to branches of al-Ba'ath party and to political parties within the Palestinian camps in Syria. In Lebanon it has maintained only a symbolic presence in the last three decades.

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, al-Sa'iqa's secretary was Farhan Abu al-Hija. The group played a limited role in the first year of the revolution, only putting out a handful of pro-regime statements. However, after the FSA took over al-Yarmouk camp, it started to create small groups – mostly composed of its old members – which were intermittently deployed to the municipality building and sometimes to the northern entrance of the camp.

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[33] Zuheir Mohsen (1936 – 1979), The Palestinian Encyclopedia, 3 Aug 2014, https://bit.ly/2JKKO9p
[34] Tal al-Zaater, secret of the battle, private investigation, Aljazeera website, without date, 18 Feb 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2MdmxLc

Al-Sa'iqa has not been active militarily in other Palestinian camps and it is estimated to have about 70 fighters at most.[35]

4. The Fatah al-Intifada Movement

Fatah al-Intifada is a Palestinian organization that defected from the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) in 1983, and in May of that year, its fighters took over the headquarters of the first and second battalions of the Yarmouk Forces in the Fatah movement. Among Fatah al-Intifada's most prominent leaders are Musa Mahmoud al-Amleh, known as Abu Khaled al-Amleh, and the Secretary-General of the organization Muhammad Musa Muragha, also known as Abu Musa. Hafez al-Assad supported the split from Fatah. Taking advantage of the insurgency within the movement, he sent his forces to attack Palestinian military training camps that refused to join the defectors. Assad gave leaders of the defected group 60 tons of weapons confiscated from Fatah's military training camps.[36]

Fatah al-Intifada is mostly present in Syria and in some Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan. In November 2006, the organization witnessed an internal split that ended with the dismissal of Abu Khaled al-Amleh from the organization because of his suspected role in the breakaway of the so-called 'Fatah al-Islam.' Fatah al-Islam was a group used by the Syrian intelligence that was involved in a fight against the Lebanese army in 2006 that ended in the destruction of Naher al-Bared camp.[37]

During the Syrian revolution, and specifically after 2012, Fatah al-Intifada armed Palestinian youths, exploiting unemployment and poverty in Palestinian camps in the outskirts of Damascus in places like Jaramana, al-Husseiniya, Khan Dunoun, and al-Sayida Zainab. Those groups, led by the movement's military official Abu Eyad Zahra, had only 100 members at most.[38] They took part in different military engagements, for example they participated in the siege of al-Yarmouk on the northern side of the camp, they

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[35] Testimony of Palestinian refugee Hussein S., one of the al-Sa'iqa staff members who deserted and sought refuge in Europe in 1971.
[36] Mueen al-Taher, Yasser Arafat, the Defection and Tripoli, Institute for Palestine Studies, Edition 100, November 2014, https://bit.ly/2VUv6u2
[37] Kheir Allah Kheir Allah, From Fatah al-Islam to ISIS, al-Arabiya net, 17 July 2017, https://bit.ly/2I1PxQQ.
[38] According to a testimony by one of the cadres of Fatah al-Intifada (M. A. E.) who left it in 2017 and sought refuge in Europe.

deployed some fighters to al-Husseiniya, after the regime restored control over it in October 2013, and they deployed fighters to the camps of Jaramana, al-Sayida Zainab, and Khan Dunoun under the pretext of protecting them. Additionally, Fatah al-Intifada sent some of its groups to Daraa during the regime offensive against the Daraa camp in June 2018. Fatah al-Intifada receives financial support from Iran in the form of a monthly budget to cover the salaries of its cadres, fighters, and its administrative expenses.

5. Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF)

The Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF) was founded in 1967 as a left-wing organization affiliated with the PLO, before it became affiliated with Fatah in 1971. After Bahjat Abu Ghariba – a member of the PPSF Executive Committee – joined the organization, he worked on separating it from Fatah and annexing it to the Rejectionist Front in 1974.[39]

In 1992, leaders of the PPSF had several internal disputes, which led to a split in its ranks and it divided into two groups. The first was under the leadership of Dr. Samir Ghosha, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee. After Ghosha's death, Ahmad Majdalani took over as the group's leader and he was also assigned by the PLO leadership to head a special committee addressing al-Yarmouk camp's issues. The statements that he made during the years that the camp was under siege were biased towards the regime, covering up the crimes it committed while besieging civilians inside al-Yarmouk.[40] The second group is led by Khaled Abdul Majeed, who is based in the capital city of Damascus and has been affiliated with the Syrian regime since the early 1990s. Despite the small size of his organization, Abdul Majeed was appointed as the secretary of Alliance of Palestinian Forces,[41] because of his

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[39] Kamal Hammash, The Popular Struggle Front, Attempted Critique, Palestine annex to Assafir Newspaper, February 2012, https://bit.ly/2I5XW5y

[40] Archives of the news bulletin of Palestine Today, al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Edition 3547, 14 April 2015, https://bit.ly/2EDlu0R

[41] The Alliance of Palestinian Forces, a front-based formation also known as the Alliance of the Ten Factions. The formation was declared in a press conference held by the Palestinian factions in al-Khalisa headquarters of PFLP-GC in al-Yarmouk camp, after a short time of signing the Oslo Accord in 13 Sep 1993, from an opposing position to the track of settlement that started from Madrid in 1991. This Alliance is composed mainly of PFLP, PFLP-GC, the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (Khaled Abdul Majeed wing), al-Sai'qa Organization (Vanguards of the Popular Liberation War), the Communist Palestinian Revolutionary Party, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Fatah al-Intifada Movement, the Palestinian Liberation Front (Abu Nidal al-Ashqar wing). In addition to the two Islamic resistance movements, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Palestine. Soon later, the Popular and Democratic Fronts withdrew from the Alliance in 1998. (Source: Hisham Munwar, Alliance of

favor with the regime and its security agencies. During the revolution, he armed members of his organization –which amounted to no more than 40 or 50 members[42] – and used them in the siege of al-Yarmouk camp.

In addition to the PLA and other Palestinian factions mentioned above, there were other factions that supported the regime through their positions and media statements, but did not engage in military operations with the regime forces. These factions include the PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Front led by Abu Nidal al-Ashqar, and the Islamic Jihad Movement, which is close to Iran.

Palestinian Formations Created by the Regime During the Revolution

This section will cover the Palestinian militias and movements created by the regime, under the direct support and direction of the Syrian security apparatuses, starting in the early days of the revolution. They will be discussed according to the importance of their size, role, and distribution within the Syrian arena.

1. Al-Quds Brigade

Al-Quds Brigade was established on 6 October 2013, but this was not announced at the time. It was formed by the Palestinian engineer Muhammad al-Saeed, from al-Neirab camp, who is well known for his direct link with Brigadier General Adeeb Salama, the head of the Air Force Intelligence branch in Aleppo. Al-Saeed attracted some young men of ill repute from al-Neirab and Handarat camps to join his group. Along with his deputy, Adnan al-Sayyed, Al-Saeed worked from the beginning of the revolution to crush daily student protests that were staged on at the University of Aleppo.[43]

When it was first established, the activity of al-Quds Brigade remained limited and its membership consisted of just a few dozen *shabiha* thugs. However, certain events that took place during that period incited large segments of the Palestinians in Aleppo against the revolutionary movement.

Palestinian Forces, the Margins of Representation and Role, 20 Dec 2012, the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front website, available at: https://bit.ly/2HEQQGi

[42] Testimony of refugee Ahmad Hussein Jomaa, member of the Popular Struggle Front. He left the organization in 2016 and left Syria.

[43] Al-Quds Brigade in Syria, the False Name and the Real Role, a report issued by the Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria, 11 March 2018, https://bit.ly/2C7oZLB

The security services took advantage of this to recruit large numbers of young Palestinians into al-Quds Brigade, leading to the re-emergence of the brigade with a new vision and objectives. The most notable of these events included:

- On 28 June 2012, security forces kidnapped 17 conscripts from al-Neirab and Handarat camps who were doing their compulsory service in a military training base affiliated with the PLA in Masyaf. The kidnapping was blamed on factions affiliated with the FSA. The conscripts were killed and 14 dead bodies were returned to their families bearing marks of torture, while the fate of the other three remained unknown. Their fate was later uncovered in March 2015 during the liberation of Idlib city. In a cell in the criminal security agency branch, rebels found pictures of two of the missing conscripts that had been kidnapped and killed in 2012 – Mahmoud Abu al-Layl and Anas Kareem – with marks of torture on their bodies.[44]

- Upon the liberation of Handarat camp by opposition factions on 27 April 2013 they expelled inhabitants from the area in order to avoid retaliatory actions from the *shabiha* thugs, who were prevalent in the area at the time.[45] This incident stoked feelings of anger among Palestinian refugees in Aleppo that were easily exploited, creating a polarized environment that helped al-Quds Brigade recruit new members.

In 2014, many unemployed young Palestinians and Syrians were to join the al-Quds Brigade due to the difficult living conditions, and the size of the group increased significantly as a result. It is estimated that al-Quds Brigade had between 3,000 and 3,500 members made up of people from al-Neirab, Handarat, al-Raml, and Hama camps, as well as people from Aleppo city, its western and northern countrysides, the villages of al-Neirab, Tel Shugheib, Nubul, and al-Zahra, and people from al-Bakkara clan and the Berri family. Although most of the group's leaders were Palestinians, the proportion of Syrians in the brigade units was as high as two thirds of the total.[46]

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[44] Sadiq al-Bash, the Security Plot in Creating al-Quds Brigade and Exploiting the Palestinian Cause, Maseer Website, 6 March 2018. Available at: https://bit.ly/2HERHXw
[45] Mustafa Khateeb, al-Quds Brigade is a gang rather than a Palestinian faction, Ain al-Madina Magazine, Edition 97, 1 July 2017, https://bit.ly/2NIFAtO
[46] Testimonies of former members of al-Quds Brigade who deserted it and left Syria (Abdullah Sh., Palestinian from al-Neirab camp. He served in al-Quds Brigade between 2014 and 2017. He participated in the battles for al-

The al-Quds Brigade, which is considered one of the main auxiliary forces for the Syrian army, consists of three battalions armed with all kinds of light, medium, and heavy weapons. The three battalions are: 'Katibat Osoud al-Quds' (Lions of Jerusalem Battalion), 'Katibat al-Ridaa' (the Deterrence Battalion), and 'Katibat Osoud al-Shahba' (al-Shahba Lions Battalion).[47] Al-Quds Brigade received orders from the Fourth Division led by Maher al-Assad, and received its financial support and weaponry from the Iranian Quds Force until late 2018, when the support stopped. However, after the battle for Aleppo, the brigade started to strengthen its relationship with the Russian forces, which in early 2019 began to support the group and train its members in a training camp created in Handarat camp.[48]

Since its establishment, al-Quds Brigade received a significant amount of attention by the regime. Because it had its headquarters were located in al-Neirab camp, the regime used it as a cover to protect the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and regime forces stationed at the military and civilian airfield adjacent to the camp. When its combat role expanded, it became the largest auxiliary force for the Syrian army in the city of Aleppo and its countryside. Among the most important fronts and battles, that al-Quds Brigade participated in since its creation until early 2019:

- **Aleppo and its countryside:** From the beginning of 2014 al-Quds Brigade participated in the fighting alongside the regime on the battlefronts of al-Rashideen, al-Zahra Association, the surroundings of the Air Force Intelligence building, Sheikh Lutfi, al-Aziza, al-Layramoun, al-Ramoush, Sheikh Najjar, Karm al-Tarab, al-Breij, and Hailan.[49] It also took part in the battle to lift the siege of the central prison of Aleppo, and in the battles of September 2016 that ended with the regime restoring control of Handarat camp, the northern gateway to

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Leiramon, Sheikh Najjar, the surroundings of al-Neirab Military airport, al-Ramousa, and Handarat camp. Fadel Abdul Hamid, Syrian from al-Shaar Neighborhood. He served in al-Quds Brigade between 2015 and 2018. He participated in several battles on the fronts of Handarat camp, Jamiyat al-Zahra, al-Rashideen, and the battles for the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo)

[47] Al-Quds Brigade in Syria, the False Name and the Real Role, a report issued by the Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria, 11 March 2018

[48] Al-Quds Brigade: from the Iranian to the Russian Support, al-Modon, Tuseday 5 Feb 2019, https://bit.ly/2IWWrdB

[49] Statements of commander of the Brigade, Muhammad al-Saeed, to Watan News Agency, 4 May 2015, available at: https://bit.ly/2X8s5aI

Aleppo city.[50] This battle played a major role in tightening the blockade of the Castillo road, which laid the groundwork for the battle that led to the fall of Aleppo. The battalions of al-Quds Brigade participated heavily in the final battle for Aleppo, entering the neighborhoods of al-Inzarat, Hanano, and Baideen. During this fighting, the military commander, General Muhammad Rafaa (aka the godfather), was killed on 27 November 2016.[51] Al-Quds Brigade also participated in the battles in the countryside to the south of Aleppo city, on the fronts of Khanaser, Athriya, and al-Salamiya-Aleppo highway.

- **Other areas of Syria**: After the regime took control of the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo city, al-Quds Brigade began to fight in other areas of Syria. In October 2017, it participated in thwarting ISIS' attacks on the fronts of al-Sukhna, Uqairabat, Rusafa, and Arak, losing dozens of fighters in this process. It also participated in the battles to control Abu al-Dhuhur military airport in the southern countryside of Idlib in January 2018,[52] before moving several units to fight in Deir Ezzor and al-Mayadeen, and in the areas of al-Jalaa and al-Ramadi north of Albu Kamal.[53] During preparations for the battle for Eastern Ghouta, the Russian leadership asked al-Quds Brigade to send its units to the Harasta axis, where they were deployed to isolate the town and tighten its siege, then to negotiate the displacement of locals, which was ultimately carried out.[54]

Al-Quds Brigade's coordination with the Tiger Forces was evident in the battles it fought on al-Ghouta front in March 2018. After the fall of Eastern Ghouta, the brigade's moved on to al-Yarmouk camp, which was under the control of ISIS after more than five years of siege by regime forces. The

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[50] Regular troops restore control over Handarat camp north of Aleppo, tightening the siege of al-Castello, Syria News Website, 24 Sep 2016, available at: https://bit.ly/2wn9zzP

[51] Al-Quds Brigade official page announces the death of its military officer Muhammad Rafea, available at: http://bit.do/eTyYS

[52] Al-Quds Brigade members are either killed, wounded or gone missing in the recent attack by ISIS, Syrian Reporter, 2 Oct 2017, available at: https://bit.ly/2wuR6B7

[53] Al-Alam Channel, for the first time, al-Quds Brigade participates in Deir Ezzor battles, 9 Sep 2017, available at: https://bit.ly/2YQPEVV

[54] Kamal Khalaf, I write to you from the outskirts of eastern Ghouta of Damascus about the secrets of the battles and targets, Rai al-Youm, 6 March 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2I7mmeT

brigade participated in storming al-Yarmouk camp from the northern side and from al-Hajar al-Aswad front in April and May 2018.[55]

After the destruction of al-Yarmouk camp and the displacement of its residents, the commander of al-Quds Brigade began to make statements about the participation of his brigade in the battles of al-Quneitra. At the end of May 2018, he toured the town of Hadar, al-Baath city, Khan Arnaba, and the border points along the occupied Golan, in preparation for a military operation that al-Quds Brigade was to participate in.[56] However, the agreement reached between Russia and FSA factions in July of that year prevented the start of a major military operation in the area.

According to unofficial estimates from the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, the number of al-Quds Brigade members killed in fighting since the unit was created exceeds 500 fighter, including 52 Palestinian refugees from al-Neirab and Handarat camps in Aleppo and al-Raml camp in Latakia.[57]

There are facts and evidence confirming the involvement of al-Quds Brigade and affiliated groups in committing several violations that amount to war crimes. Such crimes include: recruiting minors in the brigade battalions; kidnapping civilians for ransom; looting and robbing civilian houses, as they did in Tal Shughaib village near al-Neirab camp and in the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo after bringing them under control, and more recently in al-Yarmouk camp; and raping people and handing detainees over to security agencies where some were killed under torture. The regime arrested the military commander of al-Quds Brigade, Samer Rafea, and his bodyguards last year, due to numerous complaints about cases of looting, raping, counterfeiting, robbing, and arms sales by the brigade.[58] Other leaders of the brigade were also involved in selling weapons, such as Muhammad Saad Eddin, who fled to Germany after getting involved with

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[55] Al-Quds Brigade Militia loses 8 of its members in battles south of Damascus, el-Dorar al-Shamiya Network, 13 May 2018, available at: https://eldorar.com/node/12203

[56] The commander of the Palestinian al-Quds Brigade Militia threatens the south of Syria and checks the area, Baladi website, 28 May 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2IQ38hj.

[57] Al-Quds Brigade in Syria, the False Name and the Real Role, a report issued by the Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria, 11 March 2018

[58] From looting and arms trade with ISIS, to smuggling money to UAE.. the story of an officer recruited by the intelligence and detained by the Syrian regime, Arabic Post, 13 Aug 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2EE133R

others in selling anti-armor missiles to ISIS, according to sources from al-Quds Brigade.

2. Free Palestine Movement (FPM)

The Free Palestine Movement (FPM) is a Palestinian organization whose name has been associated with its founder Yasser Qashlaq since 2008. Qashlaq, who has a strong relationship with General Ali Mamluk, is a self-described businessman who was living in the Gulf before returning to Syria.[59] The FPM defines itself as a movement that "works to communicate the tragedy of the Palestinian people, both legally and politically."[60]

The FPM's relationship with the security agencies was clear from the beginning of the Syrian revolution. One example was its commemoration of the "the setback' (al-Naksa) on 5 June 2011, when it urged Palestinian and Syrian youths to go to the Golan boarders to distract attention from what was happening in Syria, enabling the regime exploit the spilling of Palestinian blood through the bloody incident. The Movement began its actual activity among Palestinians during the revolution in 2013 when it established its military wing 'al-Aqsa Shield Forces,' and appointed Saed Abd al-Aal as the military commander. Al-Aal was among those who were involved in tracking down activists and suppressing the protests in al-Yarmouk camp, and he has a criminal record of drug trafficking and fraud.[61]

Al-Aqsa Shield Forces militia had no more than 75 members. They were deployed mainly on al-Yarmouk camp front and were sometimes sent to support the Syrian army in the battles of Deir Ezzor, al-Ghouta, and Daraa. The deaths of its members in those battles were announced on the web pages of the Movement and its military wing.[62] The al-Aqsa Shield Forces received financial support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, but this support

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[59] Information derived by the researcher from a Palestinian lady who joined Free Palestine Movement for a short period at the beginning of 2011, then she left after she discovered the link of the founder of the movement with Syrian intelligence and Ali Mamluk in specific.

[60] The Movement's account on Twitter: https://twitter.com/fpmovement?lang=ar

[61] Captain Rasheed Hourani, research paper under the title: 'The Assad regime and the pragmatic investment in the Palestinian cause', previous citation.

[62] FPM, the military wing, al-Aqsa Shield Forces, available at: https://www.facebook.com/militaryfpm

stopped during the first three months of 2019, so some of its members were dismissed from service.[63]

3. Palestinian Democratic Liberation Movement (PDLM)

The Palestinian Democratic Liberation Movement (PDLM) was established in early 2012. The group's founding was commissioned by Syrian intelligence, and it is led by Mazen Shukair, formerly affiliated with the pro-regime 'Popular Liberation Movement.' In 2012, the PDLM created a military wing called the 'Liberation and Return Companies,' which is composed of no more than four small cadres and is led by Nabil Hawarneh, a former officer dismissed from the PLA. The PDLM receives support through Hassan Izz Eddin, an Arab relations officer in the Lebanese Hezbollah.[64]

From its foundation, the PDLM focused on recruiting many Palestinians to fight in regime militias and worked on settling the status of Palestinians stuck in al-Yarmouk camp in Damascus, or those fighting with opposition forces, by getting them to return to fight in the ranks of the PLA or one of the Palestinian militias fighting with the regime.[65] The PDLM carries out its security role by holding political activities and meetings with Arab parties and figures, under the topic of the Palestinian cause.[66]

4. Galilee Forces

The Galilee Forces were created in mid-May 2011. The Syrian intelligence tasked Fadi al-Mallah with leading it under the name the "Palestinian Youth Return Movement." Al-Mallah was a former member of the Youth of the PFLP-GC, under the leadership of Ahmad Jibril.[67] Like other Palestinian militias, the Galilee Forces exploited poverty and unemployment among the young men of the Palestinian refugee camps and attracted a number of them from the camps of Khan Dunoun, al-Sayida Zainab, and al-Husseiniya. The group received funding from Iran, and its size is estimated to be about 70

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[63] FPM refutes dismissing its fighters and affirms the deployment of its members at new fighting fronts, a report issued by the Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, 27 Aug 2018, https://bit.ly/30Or89U.

[64] Majd al-Khateeb, Iran's hidden organizations in Syria, al-Modon, 1 April 2017, available at: https://bit.ly/2QtO35v

[65] Ibid

[66] Democratic Palestinian Liberation Movement's official page on facebook, available at: https://www.facebook.com/plestinforend/

[67] Information derived from sources close to Fadi al-Mallah, the researcher learned when he was in al-Yarmouk camp in 2011.

members. Its participation in fighting was limited to the hot fronts near Palestinian camps. The group's members fought in the battles of Palmyra, al-Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor, as confirmed through the death announcements of members posted on its official pages.[68]

Assessment of the Fate of Pro-Regime Palestinian Forces and Militias

In light of the overview provided in this paper regarding the extent of the connection and loyalty of Palestinian forces and formations to the Syrian regime as well as to the Iranian and Russian occupations in Syria, assessments of the fate of these militias will differ depending which future scenario plays out:

1. **In the event of the rehabilitation of the regime and its continuation without serious changes in its structure and institutions,** the PLA and other loyalist Palestinian factions will most likely be preserved, to remain as a bargaining chip used by the regime and Iran when needed. It should be noted that Iranian support for many Palestinian groups has stalled and sometimes completely suspended recently, late 2018, because of the tightened international sanctions on Iran. This could lead to the end of the role of some Iran-backed Palestinian forces, and the gradual diminishment of the role of others.

   The Palestinian militias that were created during the revolution will face a variety of different fates. Al-Quds Brigade, which is the strongest and most widely deployed recently switched its loyalty from Iran to Russia, a change that was particularly noticeable after the battle to regain control of Aleppo city. There is an expectation that after al-Quds Brigade establishes training camps in Aleppo city it will be annexed to the Fifth Corps, which is under Russian leadership. As for the other smaller formations like the FPM's al-Aqsa Shield Forces, the Galilee Forces, and the PDLM's Liberation and Return Companies, there are signs that their already-limited military roles are almost over.

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[68] The Youth of the Palestinian Return Movement's official page, available at: https://www.facebook.com/althwra/

2. **In the event that a political solution is reached that leads to a real political transition in Syria,** it is likely that the role of pro-regime factions, and the forces and militias created during the revolution will end. This is especially the case because the Palestinian communities have disavowed these factions and militias and expressed disapproval of them, and also the Syrian revolutionary forces and their constituencies will not accept the continued existence of these groups after the positions they took against the revolution of the Syrian people. As for the PLA, its fate will depend on how the Syrian army is restructured. It is likely that it will be dismantled and will not be allowed to remain as an administratively and organizationally independent formation within the Syrian armed forces. In this scenario, the fate of al-Quds Brigade will depend on the fate of the 'auxiliary forces' and whether Russia and Iran will continue to wield influence in the future. If the situation changes in favor of the revolutionary forces, and if the influence of one or both countries declines or disappears, then al-Quds Brigade will be on the list of the forces and militias that need to be dissolved and terminated, and its members who were involved in committing war crimes will be prosecuted if the path of justice is taken in Syria.

Report

New Military Corps in the Syrian Army

*Information Unit**

New Military Corps in the Syrian Army

When it became clear that the arms and consultative support provided by the regime's allies Russia and Iran was not enough to change the conflict equations across Syria, these allies were forced to change the quality of support provided. Tehran opted for an expansion of ground troops with a network of foreign and local militias overseen by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, whereas Moscow continued to provide the necessary political and diplomatic support. This level of support, however, was still not enough to stop the deterioration of the Syrian army's structure and field strength, leading to Russia's direct military intervention along with the necessary changes in army structure to accommodate this intervention. Once the military balance had finally shifted in favor of the regime and its allies, Moscow developed the idea of creating the 4th, 5th, and maybe even the 6th corps of the Syrian army. This report will provide a profile on each of these newly created corps that have been annexed to the army, the conditions, factors, and justification for the creation of each unit, and their current status.

Fourth Corps: A Failed First Step

Reports indicate that the idea for the 4th Corps was initially developed during preparations for Russia's intervention, while Moscow was conducting its status assessment of the Syrian army. The Russian assessment report recommended the "creation of a special Syrian force composed of all Syrian forces deployed in al-Ghab plains and part of the forces stationed along the Syrian coast."[1] This recommendation was acted upon quickly after the Russian intervention and on 8 October 2015, General Ali Ayoub, the Syrian army's Chief of Staff, announced the creation of the 4th Corps. The Corps is currently under the command of Major General Hassan Merhej and is headquartered in Masyaf in the western countryside of Hama. The 4th Corps is deployed in the northern and western countryside of Hama, the northern

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[1] Kirill Semenov, The Syrian Armed Forces Seven Years into the Conflict: From a Regualr Army to Volunteer Corps, Russian International Affairs Council, 27 April 2017, available at: https://bit.ly/2WpegYf

countryside of Latakia, and the southern countryside of Aleppo. **The rationale for the creation of the 4ᵗʰ Corps include:[2]**

- To compensate for the degraded Syrian field forces and facilitate integration with the Russian air force in the battles for northern Syria, from Idlib and its countryside to Aleppo and the Turkish-Syrian borders in its northern countryside. For these purposes, Russia controlled the process of organizing and arming the 4ᵗʰ Corps.

- To provide the organizational structure of the army with the greater degree of flexibility needed by the Russian air force, allowing for a quicker response to events and a more flexible military action strategy.

- To limit the role and influence of the militia of the National Defense Forces (NDF), which had been an important auxiliary force for the Syrian army. Immediately upon the announcement of the creation of the 4ᵗʰ Corps, the regime forces dissolved one of NDF groups, which can be viewed as Moscow's seizure of the military structure that Tehran had turned into a militia operation.

Moscow provided the 4ᵗʰ Corps with the following military support:[3]

1. Satellite-guided 152mm artillery;

2. Each battalion of the Corps was allocated two unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, aka drones), that were directly connected to Russian military satellites;

3. Modern rocket launchers which launch 200 shells at a time, with homing systems guided by UAVs and Russian military satellites;

4. Corps personnel were trained on advanced communication technology and modern weapons, including sniping helicopters;

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[2] Murad al-Kuwatli, The National Defense Militia is Threatened by Russian Efforts to Dissolved it and Replace it with the 4ᵗʰ Corps, Alsouriya.net, 1 December 2015, available at: https://bit.ly/2JYFaRO

[3] The 4ᵗʰ Corps: the Complete Story, Report on al-Ahd News website, 15 October 2015, available at: https://bit.ly/2uBpWb5

5. Battles fought by the 4th Corps were supported by Russian Sukhoi jets, Mi-28N attack helicopters which are night hunters of tanks and infantry vehicles, and KA-52 helicopters of the modern Alligator generation;

6. And a squadron of Mi-26 helicopters specially designed to transport tanks, each of which can transport as much as 20 ton of equipment onboard.

When it was first established, the 4th Corps included a number of main military units of the Syrian army that fought in many battles against opposition forces. The most prominent of which was the 87th Mechanized Brigade, affiliated with the 11th Tanks Division. It also included a number of local militias among its ranks, including groups from the NDF, in addition to some special forces regiments from the Syrian army which had been significantly impacted during the war. The 87th Mechanized Brigade was dissociated from the 4th Corps after a short period of time. The 4th Corps personnel was drawn from members of the Syrian army, its staff, and veterans, or those who left the army for one reason or another, without the need for recruitment campaigns, as the happened later with the 5th Corps.

The number of fighters in the 4th Corps at its peak did not exceed 10-12 thousand, which is the size of a military division. The most important battles that the 4th Corps has participated in include: the battles of the northern countryside of Latakia from the Corps' establishment until today; the battles to restore control over Aleppo city in late 2016; the battles that have taken place in the southern countryside of Aleppo from 2016 until today; and the battles of the northern and western countryside of Hama from the Corps' establishment until today.

Despite the support and attention that the 4th Corps received, it did not carry out its combat assignments effectively. Some reports say that decisions of the former commander of the Corps, Major General Shawki Youssef, led to a number of the group's battle losses to the opposition, which led to his replacement by Major General Hassan Merhej as Corps commander instead. As the 4th Corps lost its effectiveness and failed to meet the requirements for which it was established, the Russian leadership began to look for suitable

alternatives. For this reason, just 14 months after the creation of the 4th Corps, the Russians founded the 5th Corps.[4]

Fifth Corps: A Model for Containing Militias

On 22 November 2016, the General Command of the Army and Armed Forces issued a statement declaring the establishment of the 5th Assault Corps, which is composed of volunteers.[5] It soon became clear that this new formation, the 5th Corps, was created due to Russia's need to include local militias loyal to it in addition to other groups within a formation under the direct supervision of Russia. This was a model for a presumed success that could be replicated later on during restructuring of the Syrian army, which has been exhausted by years of war. The General Command designated specific centers to receive volunteers in different parts of the country: the Southern Area Command, Damascus Command, the 10th Division Command in Qatana, the Central Command in Homs, the Hama Location Command, the Administrative Affairs Academy in Masyaf, the Northern Region Command in Aleppo, the Tartous Location Command, the Coastal Region Command in Latakia, the 5th Division Command in Daraa, and the 15th Division Command in Suweida.[6]

Following the formation of the 5th Corps, instructions were issued to the Ministry of Endowments, as well as other government institutions, the army, cellphone companies, and media and marketing outlets to encourage people

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[4] Omran focus group meeting with defected military officers and current members of moderate armed groups, held in Reyhanli, Turkey.

[5] The statement establishing the 5th Corps said: "In response to the accelerating developments of events, in furtherance of the successes of the brave/ armed forces and in order to meet the desire of our steadfast/ proud people in putting a decisive end to all terrorist acts on the territories of the Syrian Arab Republic, the General Command of the Army announces the creation of the Fifth Corps Storming / composed of volunteers/ with the task to eliminate terrorism in addition to the other formations of our heroic armed forces, auxiliary and allied forces, to restore security and stability to all the territories of the Syrian Arab Republic"

As for the requirements for joining the 5th Corps as stipulated by the general command are: to be a male citizen who completed 18 years of age, not required to do the military service or deserter of the service, and to be fit for the service, and a state employee, after the approval of the party he works in. the general command also explained that "those who did their military service of all categories, including officers, non-commissioned officers and individuals, willing to join, as well as civil servants working in state institutions and willing to join can join by a one-year renewable contract, under the condition of receiving the approval of the party they work for". It also added that "state employees can preserve, in addition to the salaries they would receive from the Corps, all advantages and rights they have in their original working places, including salaries, bonuses, promotions and motivations."

[6] Syria: the 5th Corps for Volunteers to "Combat Terrorism", Alalam News Channel, 22 November 2016, available at: https://bit.ly/2WB8lMd

to join the new force. In a written memorandum, the Ministry of Endowments called on mosques imams to use their sermons to urge people to join the 5th Corps and to explain the benefits offered, including settling the status of those who dodged reserve force summons, to resolve the situation of deserters and civil servants who were absent from their work without leaves, and to inform people that members of the 5th Corps are given 100,000 SYP per month.[7]

The establishment of the 5th Corps, in Russia's view, was an important step towards reforming the security system in Syria. According to Russian military experts, who were interviewed during the work on this report, this has functional and symbolic importance in the medium term because it legitimizes some militias by incorporating them into the Corps. The Russians in Syria can take advantage of the lessons learned from the experience of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq and the formation of the Libyan national army. Those experts point out that the main beneficiary if the 5th Corps is successful will be Russia not Iran. This means that Russia could become the main engineer of the security system in Syria in the medium term.[8]

Some military experts believe that the creation of the 5th Corps is Russia's first step towards improving the Syrian army and establishing a unified command structure to include training, monitoring, and the unification of the scattered pro-government religious and ethnic groups. This in turn can help strengthen the relationships between the government and loyalist factions in order to integrate them within the Syrian army and the state security agency.[9] By creating the 5th Corps, Moscow also aimed to:

- Attract the remaining pro-Iran local militias and integrate them into the 5th Corps and to distance Iran from the military establishment in general.

- Integrate opposition factions that reconciled with the regime to the 5th Corps, providing them with guarantees that the Corps is under Russian sponsorship and it will ensure that individuals who settled their status and

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[7] Ibrahim Hmaidi: The 5th Corps... The Russian Army of the Orient to suppress comrades in arms and consolidate peace, al-Hayat Newspaper issued in London, 9 January 2017, available at: https://bit.ly/2BzERqa

[8] Ruslan Mamedov, The Special Role of the 5th Corps, Russian International Affairs Council, 13 April 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/cMTsWx

[9] Alexander Rostovtsev, 5th Corps Storming, Polit Navigator, 22 December 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/WdiV9K

became members of the 5th Corps would not be arrested by the regime's security agencies.

- Use the 5th Corps forces to separate regime-held areas and opposition-held areas to ensure the implementation of the international agreements reached between Russia and Turkey, or other agreements to be reached later. One example of the Russian use of the 5th Corps as an affiliated 'neutral' force tasked with disengagement between areas, the incident when the 5th Corps clashed with the Iranian-backed 4th Division after Russia's request for the 4th Division to withdraw from contact lines with opposition forces.

- In the long term, to draw lessons from the experience of the 5th Corps and apply these to the other four corps in the army.

Most of the 5th Corps' weapons were provided by the Russian army. The most important modern weapons provided are:[10]

- T-72B3 Tanks, equipped with dynamic protection system and thermal imaging equipment;

- Large numbers of T-62m tanks with enhanced armor protection against TOW missiles;

- Large numbers of BMP-1, BMP-2, and armored personnel carriers BTR – Gaz Tiger and equipped with 14.5mm machine guns. These are also used as armored medical transportation vehicles;

- A number of other vehicles equipped with 12.7mm machine guns and 30mm grenade launchers.

The most important units of the 5th Corps: The Tiger Forces form the core of the 5th Corps. The Tiger Forces consist of no more than one infantry battalion of 1,000 fighters and became famous for its crossing to the far bank

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[10] The 5th Corps: Formation, Combating Terrorism and the Russian Role, Military Review, 17 July 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/VLUdmG; The Russian Corps: the 5th Corps, size and equipment, Novosti Russian News Agency, 25 April 2017, available at: https://goo.gl/crk9i1.

of the Euphrates. A number of other army formations and units joined the 5th Corps, including:[11]

- **Members of Suqour al-Sahara (the Desert Hawks) and its affiliated Maghaweer al-Bahr (the Sea Commandos) regiment:** Military and economic developments related to this militia put it under the influence of the Russian forces that fought in 2016 in the battle for Palmyra against ISIS and against the armed opposition in Aleppo city. Following those battles Ayman Jaber, the commander of Suquor al-Sahara, became the largest partner of Russian generals in Syria by investing in all military operations, and civilian and regional status settlement processes, all of which fell under the umbrella of coordinated deals. This made Ayman Jaber and Suquor al-Sahara targets to leaders of militias close to the Assad family and distinguished regime army officers.

- **The Palestinian al-Quds Brigade:** Al-Quds Brigade is an armed Palestinian militia that was created in October 2013 in Aleppo governorate. Its member came from the Palestinian camps of Neirab and Handarat, and it was under the leadership of Engr. Muhammad Saeed. The brigade at first received Iranian support before turning to Russian support. Al-Quds Brigade bears the slogan 'the Syrian Arab Army Commandos' and it participates in combat on the side of the regime forces. The leaders of al-Quds Brigade have strong ties to Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and the Russian liaison officer in Aleppo city. The unit has around 2,000 fighters who are paid a monthly salary of around 100 USD. The Brigade has three main battalions: al-Quds Lions Battalion, al-Shahba Lions Battalion, and the Deterrence Battalion.

- **The Baath Battalions:** The Baath Battalions joined the 5th Corps when the Syrian government issued circulations to governors and directors of state institutions to encourage their employees to join the 5th Assaults Corps, in accordance with a regime decree issued in response to a Russian request to gather local militias in an institutional military framework. The

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[11] The information in this list comes from internal monitoring reports produced by the information unit in Omran, which relied on the approach of intensive monitoring of social media websites (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), analyzing data and information, and matching it with the military context.

same instructions were circulated to universities and educational institutes to inform students that they must join the 5th Corps.

- **The ISIS Hunters:** The ISIS Hunters is a group of special forces composed of volunteers whose relatives and friends were killed by ISIS, many of whom came from the suburbs of Homs and Palmyra. The ISIS Hunters are fully armed and trained by Russia and have conducted a number of offensives against ISIS locations in all areas surrounding Palmyra. It is believed that such operations led to the capture of the city in a very short time.

- **Al-Asha'ir Forces (Tribal Forces):** Al-Asha'ir Forces are led by Turki al-Buhamad. Turki al-Buhamad is part of the Buhamad clan in Raqqa, and is a member of the Arab Socialist Movement, which is part of the National Progressive Front political alliance. Al-Asha'ir Forces has around 1,700 fighters from the Buhamad clan and maintains an active presence in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. Before that they played a role in protecting Athraya-Khanaser Road.

- **Kimmat al-Nabi Yunus Battalion:** Kimmat al-Nabi Yunus is an Alawite militia stationed in the summit of al-Nabi Yunus Mountain in the Latakia countryside, at an altitude of 1,350 meters. The group is led by a man named Qusai Ibrahim, aka Abu Jaafar.

- **Shabab al-Sunnah (led by Ahmad al-Oda):** Shabab al-Sunnah was one of the largest free Syrian army (FSA) factions in Daraa and it played the key role in handing over areas to the Syrian regime and Russia in July 2018. Later, this faction joined the 5th Corps and its commander, Ahmad al-Oda, was appointed commander of the Corps in Daraa, where he carried out recruitment activities to bring more young men into the 5th Corps.

- **Al-Tawheed Army:** Al-Tawheed Army was a former opposition faction in northern countryside of Homs. It joined the 5th Corps after the settlement imposed by the regime and Russia on the northern countryside of Homs and the southern countryside of Hama in mid 2018.

- **Mahardah Forces:** Mahardah Forces is a Christian militia that is part of the NDF in Mahardah city in the northwestern countryside of Hama.

- **Darea al-Watan (Homeland Shield):** Darea al-Watan is led by Muhammad Jaafar, a Lebanese Shiite figure. It was created with the participation of Shiite Hezbollah people, including Lebanese citizens, living in the border areas between Syria and Lebanon,.

- **Al-Marada Forces:** Al-Marada Forces were created by Christians from Maaloula.

- The 5th Corps also include a large number of militias that were ordered by Russia to be dissolved, such as al-Qalamoun Sheild Brigade, which was led by Lieutenant Colonel Firas Jazaa.

Administratively, the 5th Corps is divided into a number of brigades:

1. **The 1st Brigade**: is deployed in the eastern countryside of Homs, especially in Palmyra and its surroundings;

2. **The 2nd Brigade**: is deployed in the northwestern countryside of Hama in the two Christian cities of Maharda and Suqaylabiya. It was led by Brigadier General Murad Kheir Beik before he was promoted to the rank of major general and appointed as chief of staff of the 5th Corps;

3. **The 3rd Brigade**: is deployed in the southern areas of Syria. It was previously deployed in the southern countryside of Aleppo and the eastern countryside of Hama on the Athraya-Khanaser axis;

4. **The 4th Brigade**: is believed to have been formed entirely from the Baath Brigade;

5. **The 5th Brigade**: is deployed in areas close to Idlib governorate and it is led by Brigadier General Khayrat Kahleh;

6. **The 6th Brigade**: is deployed in areas close to Idlib and Hama, and;

7. **The 7th Brigade**: which is deployed in Deir Ezzor near the Euphrates and it is led by Brigadier General Ghassan Bader.

The commander of the 5th Corps is Major General Zaid Saleh, one of the Syrian officers who is closely associated with the Russians. The number of Corps' fighters is around 15,000 and growing. This large of a number is usually the size of an entire military division, not that of a corps. The headquarters of the 5th Corps is in Latakia city and it is directly linked with the Russian forces command center in Hmeimim airbase. **The 5th Corps is fully funded by Russia**, with salaries of around 200 USD for individuals and about 250 or 300 USD for officers per month.

A 'Sunni' Formation in the Making

The 'success' of the 5th Corps by the end of 2018 provided an incentive for Moscow to prepare for the creation of the 6th Corps in **southern Syria**. Russia wants to embrace the opposition factions that signed truces with the regime. The goal of the 6th Corps is to prevent the expansion of Iranian influence in southern Syria and protect the Syrian-Jordanian borders. However, sources of Omran's information unit in the south have denied the creation of this corps and clarified that the rumors were based on the request issued by a number of opposition factions operating under the umbrella of 'the Revolutionary Army' to establish a brigade in the southern area that would become part of the 5th Corps. Russia agreed to that and called on those factions to join this brigade under the leadership of Ahmad al-Oda, the former commander of Shabab al-Sunnah opposition group who became commander of the new 8th Brigade affiliated with the 5th Corps in southern Syria, stationed in Bosra al-Sham, after striking a deal with the regime late June 2018 through which control of the area was transferred to the regime under the supervision of Russia. Russia is also seeking to establish a 9th Brigade within the formations of the 5th Corps, to be made up of former opposition factions that were not part of the 8th Brigade and refused to be evacuated to the north of Syria. All of those factions will fall under the leadership of al-Oda, who was the first to reach a deal with the regime and responded to the Russian calls to send his groups to northern Syria and al-Badiya desert. The same sources noted that Jordan plays an active role in the formation of these units and provides them with many privileges in return for not joining Iranian groups in the area, especially

Hezbollah. Russia will thus begin fulfilling its promise to limit the Iranian presence in the south.[12]

What is confirmed thus far is that the 6th Corps is still in the planning process and its features are not yet completely clear. Moscow has several goals in pushing for this formation, including:

- Halting the expansion of Iranian militias and Hezbollah in the southern Syria, as Iran and its militias continue to infiltrate the area despite earlier pledges to stay at least 40 kilometers away from the borders.

- Addressing the refusal of people in some areas of the governorate to enter military service in the regime's forces by convincing the refusers to join a local military formation affiliated with the regime rather than the army.

- Facing the 'popular resistance' in the Horan area, which emerged recently and has conducted several operations against regime forces throughout the governorate.

In this context, available information indicates that the 6th Corps will be deployed in the central and northern sectors of Daraa governorate, while the 5th Corps, led by Ahmad al-Oda, deployed in al-Lajat area and the eastern countryside of Daraa. Under these circumstances, former FSA commander Iyad Qaddour returned to Daraa from Jordan after signing a settlement of status agreement with the regime. He was received at the Syrian border with Jordan by Imad Abu Zureiq, who is a candidate to command the new military formation, which indicates that Qaddour will have a role in the anticipated new formation.[13]

In sum, the step of trying to create a new 6th Corps is a continuation of the Russian attempts to impose order on Syria's human infrastructure and reintegrate its components into a balance that it hopes to continue to control. These new corps– although they are established for security purposes, including work in the field and efforts linked to restructuring and reintegration–effectively turn the army into a large militia with

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[12] Russia Attracts the Youth and Opposition in the South of Syria, Eino Sami, Russia Today, 20 February 2019, available at: https://goo.gl/AyUpEb

[13] Adnan Muhammad, The 6th Corps: Russian Containment for the Locals of Daraa or for Iran and its Militias?, The New Arab, 1 March 2019, available at: https://bit.ly/2H5AzeC

hybrid military doctrines, and officially legitimizes the transformation of the army into networks controlled by several different domestic and international actors.

Analysis Paper

Testing the Regime's Capacity for Restructuring and Reintegration

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Testing the Regime's Capacity for Restructuring and Reintegration

Introduction

An increasing number of analyses seek to define and answer Syria's so-called 'post-war' questions. Central among these are the questions related to restructuring and rebuilding of the regime, especially its military and security units. These questions have become more frequent with the expansion of areas recaptured by the regime and the stabilization of conflict in those areas, whose dynamics are intertwined with complex and regional and international equations.

The framework used to answer these questions is often characterized by 'deliberate ambiguity,' by simply assuming that the results of current military dynamics will be reflected in political stability and "a neutral and safe environment" that encourage the implementation of the strategies for security sector reform (SSR) and Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR), while ignoring the lack of deep factors necessary for the success of such strategies. In some cases, these answers have been utopian, assuming that the regime is resilient enough to rise again, ignoring the political, military, and security context of the Syrian scene. The years of conflict confirm the fact that the military establishment has seen profound transformations that will have long-lasting impacts. This is especially true since the massive attrition of human capacity and quality, which necessitated Iranian and Russian interventions to correct the resulting depletion and shortcoming.

This paper explores the regime's ability to rise again and reestablish its military forces within the complex network of conflicting interests in its internal structure, be they local, Russian, or Iranian. The research is presented in four key themes whose conclusions can be used to create indicators that can in turn be used to test the regime's capability. The first of these themes is defining and clarifying the key question; the second is determining what policies the regime is pursing and identifying their drivers and objectives; the third theme is looking at the constraints to the regime's policies or strategies

and indicating whether they are chronic or temporary challenges; and the fourth theme explores the most likely scenario for how those strategies will play out, based on the regime's current capacity.

The Question of Capability as Perceived by the Regime

Based on observations of post-conflict periods in many other countries, DDR and SSR processes are decisive elements for maintaining security, social stability, economic growth, and reducing the local drivers of violence. The questions that need to be addressed first in post-conflict scenarios are political and security questions, such as agreement on a political solution and safe environmental conditions that promote stability. In this context, DDR processes are the first step through which we can understand the dynamics of restructuring in the post-conflict period.[1] In the case of Syria, which has not yet achieved stabilization, the process loses its drivers and imperatives. This is especially true for the regime which, having seen recent military developments turn in its favor, will not feel compelled to make major structural changes in the army.[2] Instead the regime will focus its efforts on two key processes: 1) restoration and repair, and, 2) re-structuring centers of power.

In light of the faltering political process–which should be pushing for a political solution that ends the root causes of the conflict in accordance with the relevant international terms of reference–it should be noted that the regime's renovation and repair efforts will not address the major defects in the military establishment which need to be reformed and changed as long as they are conducted without regard for the community's vision of its own army. Aspects of the military establishment that require reform include the military's doctrine, codification of the army's roles in the constitution and in law, reducing the military's intervention in political life, and promoting principles of national impartiality. Moreover, such a process will not address the regulation of civil-military relations.[3] Consequently, even

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[1] Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration, peacekeeping.un, https://bit.ly/2rnf8i2.
[2] Kheder Khaddour, Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience, Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 March 2016, available at: https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968
[3] Omran for Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military Establishment: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring, 31 December 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2YUyckt.

demobilization, reintegration, and rehabilitation processes will be designed to serve the regime's interests first and the interest of its allies second. These processes will be shaped to respond to the changes in the army's structure and the other challenges imposed on the army by the years of conflict, such as its ability to mobilize, and the need for military reconfiguration and improvement in the quality of its forces.

Accordingly, the question of capability will be explored in this paper not because it is derived from the requirements of DDR and SSR, but because it is related to the regime's planning and its mechanisms for reconfiguring and reestablishing control over the army. The elements of the regime's capacity are tied to many considerations, the most important of which are:

1. The centrality of the restructuring decision; i.e. the absence of any other conditions, pressures, or actors controlling the dynamics of that process;

2. The availability of appropriate alternatives and choices for 'irregular' personnel, which would facilitate the DDR for the regime;

3. The strength and cohesion of the regime's security and military networks, which requires centers of power within security and defense sectors to remain influenced by and in control of the functions of those networks;

4. Linking the dynamics of such reform to the international and regional rehabilitation of the regime;

5. The clarity of the scenario pursued by the regime, in terms of the structural and functional shape of the army and its ability to implement that scenario.

It must also be emphasized that international donor organizations will have no role in funding the restructuring process, especially since some organizations and donor countries still require the completion of a credible political settlement before they will provide funds, which makes the question of financing central among the considerations in the capability equation.

Cautious Decisions and Arrangements

In 2016 the regime started integrating irregular armed groups in the regular army, taking advantage of its military gains, and with the support and encouragement of Russia. This process has included tightening control over loyalist militias, and the integration of former opposition armed groups and fighters, distributing them to areas recaptured by the regime. It also includes preparation for the potential inclusion of forces that still control significant territories, namely the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the opposition forces in northern Syria.[4]

In order to understand the parameters and drivers of the 'restoration and repair' and 'reformation of power centers' processes, we will explore and analyze the key regime decisions and policies, which can be addressed on several levels, including:[5]

First: A level related to military service, through which the regime aspires to show indications that it has ended the depletion of its manpower as a result of the surplus of forces acquired through 'reconciliation' agreements with opposition areas, or amnesty decrees. On 9 October 2018, Decree No. 18 of 2018 was issued, granting a general amnesty for the full sentence of those who were military deserters inside and outside the country, and those who committed the crimes stipulated in the military penal code issued by Legislative Decree No. 61 of 1950 and its amendments, as long as they were committed before 9 October 2018. The amnesty decree does not apply to fugitives and deserters unless they turn themselves in within 4 months for those inside the country, and 6 months for those outside the country.[6]

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[4] Haid Haid, Reintegrating Syrian Militias: Mechanisms, Actors, and Shortfalls, Carnegie Middle East Center, 12 December 2018, available at: https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/12/12/reintegrating-syrian-militias-mechanisms-actors-and-shortfalls-pub-77932

[5] Unpublished report prepared by the Information Unit in Omran for Strategic Studies. The report records all resolutions issued by the regime in terms of demobilization, transfer, and appointment or the so-called "military bulletin." This is done through a monitoring approach focusing on changes related to commanders of units and divisions within the army, by following a number of accounts on social media, especially Facebook, that report on this matter. Analysis of the collected data has been cross-checked through a focus group discussion with defected officers held by the Omran Center in Gaziantep, Turkey on 17 January 2019.

[6] Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2018, Syrian Prime Ministry, 9 October 2019, available at: http://cutt.us/D5jhZ.

The General Command of the Army issued many orders in this regard, the most important of which was an order issued in November 2018 that ended the retention of conscripted non-commissioned officers from recruitment class no. 103, conscripted into the armed forces on 21 November 2010. The administrative order also includes conscripts who joined the military service in that same year and it stipulated "summoning conscripted non-commissioned officers, and reserve conscripts who joined the army before 1 July 2012." It also stipulated the demobilization of officers of recruitment class no. 247 and earlier, as well as reserve officers who joined in 2013 and completed more than 5 years of reserve service as of 1 July 2018. The order excluded those who deserted the army or who missed more than 30 days of service.[7]

At the beginning of 2019, the General Command issued two more important orders related to military service. The first stipulated the end of the retention and conscription of officers, non-commissioned officers, and conscripts, as well as the summoned civilian reserves (in service) who were 42 years of age and older, except for physicians. In sum, the order ended the retention of reserve officers from classes no. 250, 251, and 253, except for physicians, and excluding those who deserted the army or missed more than 30 days of service.[8]

The second relevant administrative order issued in 2019 excluded the summoned reserve conscripts, those who are not enrolled, and those born in 1981 and earlier, while it ended the retention and summons for non-commissioned officers and conscripts born in 1981 and earlier. The General Command of the Army clarified in a statement that "the administrative order terminates retention and summons for the reserve non-commissioned officers, conscripts, and summoned (in service) civilian reserves, born in 1981 and before. It also terminates retention and summons of reserve officers and other

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[7] General Command of the Army: ending retention of conscripted non-commissioned officers (recruitment class 103), SANA official website, 31 December 2018, available at: https://www.sana.sy/?p=871032

[8] Administrative order stipulating the end of retention and summons of officers, non-commissioned officers, conscripts and civilian reserves (in service) who are 42 years of age, The Prime Ministry Official Website, 31 January 2019, available at: http://cutt.us/Gg95Y

reserves who hold doctoral degrees."[9] The General Command stated that the administrative order would come into force as of 15 February 2019.[10]

Second: A level related to appointments and delegations. Several objectives are linked to this level, including a Russian desire to reorganize the army and improve its performance, and other objectives related to reconfiguring the map of power centers by replacing some figures with people more loyal to the regime. The Russian government sent a number of Syrian regime officers to Moscow to receive training in air defense, military vehicles, and infantry. Since the beginning of 2019, Russia also pushed for a series of appointments in the Syrian ministries of defense and interior, involving more than 100 officers in critical positions. Many officers were dismissed under the pretext of reaching statutory retirement age, while pro-Iran officers were marginalized under the pretext of the end of the need for their military roles, especially in the barracks surrounding Damascus.[11]

Russian-influenced appointments and dismissals included appointing the commander of the Republican Guards, Major General Talal Makhlouf, as a commander of the 2nd Corps, and replacing him with Brigadier General Malek Alia, a pro-Russian figure who was the head of Aleppo's security committee. Brigadier General Murad Kheir Beik was appointed as chief of staff of the 5th Corps and Brigadier General Ghassan Bilal, the director of Maher al-Assad's office in the 4th Division, was reassigned to the position of chief of staff of the Southern Command. Additionally, changes included the military operations room in the Army General Staff, the 1st Corps, the electronic warfare academy, and some air defense regiments, military courts, and medical services.[12]

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[9] The General Command of the Army dismisses the summoned reserves (who didn't enroll) who were born in 1981 and before from the summons for reserves, SANA website, available at: https://www.sana.sy/?p=890508

[10] Ibid

[11] For more read: Changes to commanders of military divisions in the Syrian army, Sham Times News, 29 December 2018, available at: https://shaamtimes.net/160592//ا-ليش-قي-ركري-عركرق-قفادلاطتارهيت; Moscow Strengthens its Control Over Military and Security Institutions in Syria, a report issued by the Strategy Watch, available at: https://strategy-watch.com/news/moscow-strengthens-control-military-security-institutions-syria/; Raed al-Salhani, Alexander Haddad, Russia Restructures Regime Forces: It's Time to Retire!, al-Modon Website, 12 January 2019, available at: https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2019/1/12/-قت-حان-ماظنلاتاوقةلكيف-دتعيروي-دعاقتلا

[12] Ibid.

<u>Third: A level related to restructuring, which can be seen as a process of recycling and redistributing the remaining forces.</u> The most significant example of this implemented since the beginning of 2018 has been the merging of the 'Division of Organization and Administration' with the 'Department of Officers' Affairs' into a new department called 'Human Resources Department,' which is currently headed by Major General Bassam Wardeh, the former head of the Department of Officers' Affairs. Major General Adnan Mehrez Abdo, former head of Organization and Administration Division, was appointed as the commander of the Southern Region. The regime also began restructuring the 1st Armored Division, which had clearly been depleted during the conflict. The division was provided with mechanized armored vehicles from Russia and renamed as the 1st Mechanized Division, which is now headed by Major General Zuhair al-Assad. This restructure also involved reorganizing the mechanized and armored forces within the 1st Division.[13] It worth noting that such restructuring will include the 3rd Division and the rest of armored divisions.[14]

It is not possible to find any indicators that the regime has adopted a restructuring and reintegration program. Furthermore, all decisions and directives issued in this regard show a cautious and limited desire for such a program since what has been issued thus far does not suggest a comprehensive strategy. Otherwise, we would have seen the problem of local militias resolved and the launch of a national process of restoring peace and stability. Instead, the regime has focused selectively on some groups and ignored others with no clear justification, leaving a big question mark about the fate of the remaining military factions,

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[13] The 1st Armored Division previously contained the following brigades: 57th Tank Brigade, 76th Tank Brigade, 91st Tank Brigade, 58th Mechanized Brigade, and the 141st Field Artillery Regiment. Each of the three tank brigades originally had the following: three tank battalions, each with 33 tanks, a mechanized infantry battalion with 31 BMP vehicles, a mobile artillery battalion with 18 mobile cannons, and a Shilka air defense battalion. The losses of armored weaponry in these brigades ranged from between 40 and 65%. It is noteworthy that one of the armored brigades, Brigade 91, will remain armored and the size of its armored vehicles (tanks) will be supplemented with tanks from the other two brigades which will be turned into mechanized brigades. Turning Brigades 57 and 76 tanks into mechanized brigades will require keeping one tank battalion that will be made up of the personnel of each new mechanized brigade, after completing the staffing of 41 tanks. After the tank needs of the 1st Division are met, the surplus number of tanks from other battalions will be transferred to other formations outside the Division that have the same type of tanks. It is important to note that each mechanized brigade includes: 1) a tank battalion with 41 tanks, 2) three mechanized infantry battalions, each with 31 BMPs, 3) a mobile artillery battalion with 18 mobile cannons, and 4) a Shilka air defense battalion.

[14] Leaks… Assad Starts Restructuring the Army under Russian Decisions, Zaman al-Wasl, 11 July 2018, available at: https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/88519/.

including those operating in areas out of regime control. Furthermore, these efforts were sometimes limited only to naming paramilitary groups as forces affiliated with the Syrian Arab Army.

Based on the descriptions above, an objective description of the process is a cautious attempt to reform the army's power centers in order to serve the ruling regime's philosophy by keeping this establishment as a tool of influence and power, controlled and directed by the regime itself. This is still a matter facing many difficult obstacles.

Contrasting Decision Drivers

According to the constitution, Bashar al-Assad is in charge of the state and its institutions, and therefore has the ability to forge decisions to serve his post-war rehabilitation and power consolidation objectives. However, the loss of actual central control (centralized decision making, structure, and function) is clear. That central functionality controlled jointly by the regime, Tehran, and Moscow, with discrepancies about restructuring the army starting to emerge between them. On the one hand, Moscow (according to several research papers issued by research centers close to Russian decision-making circles) recognizes that "**The Syrian Armed Forces lack discipline, centrality, technological and organizational modernization, and authority, and they cannot be called a real army.**" This conclusion requires Russia to start rehabilitating the Syrian armed forces, but Moscow will face several difficulties in doing so. The most prominent four challenges are as follows:[15]

1. The fact that the army does not control all of Syria's territory and the multiple sources of military decisions within its areas of control;

2. The inability of the army to be the sole party who possess weapons, a scenario that is not likely to be possible in the foreseeable future;

3. The presence of militias created by Iran, which would be difficult to integrate into the army's structures, and equally as difficult to disband or to remove from Syria;

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[15] Alexey Khlelbnikov, Development of the Syrian Armed Forces: Directions and Key Problems, Russian International Affairs Council, 6 December 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2I4oNPA

4. Building an army free of Iranian domination, in order to have a better chance of getting international financial support for the military's restructuring and reintegration processes.

In addition to this Russian recognition, Iran emerges in its ability to manipulate the Assad regime, and to harness the contradictions within Syria's political, sectarian, and confessional components to serve its own agenda. Iran even contributes to undermining the Russian-backed Tiger Forces and limiting the missions of the Russian forces to within Hmeimim military base.[16]

Iran continues to be the dominant military force in regime-held areas. It controls critical positions in the capital city of Damascus and the military bases in the surroundings areas, as well as on the hills overlooking the occupied Syrian Golan. Iran has also managed to strengthen its influence through networks of mutual interests, dominated mainly by Shiites.

Russia has also gradually formed a large force in Syria, focused on the 5th Assault Corps. Russia also supported military characters like Suhail al-Hassan to reenergize the exhausted Alawites in 2015, the year of the Russian intervention. At that point in time, Iran was the main player dominating Assad's decisions. These dynamics impacted Russia's actions in a number of ways, including:

- The creation of forces to accomplish the objectives of Russia's intervention in Syria. The overall framework of this strategy was designed to weaken Iranian militias in regime-held areas;

- The displacement of Iranian influence in the central region, for example by taking control of the crossings linking opposition-held and regime-held areas;

- Taking control of the Syrian coastal area with all of its ports and airports, and the and establishment of two military bases in the area: the first is an airbase in Hmeimim airport, east of Latakia city, and the second is a naval base on the shores of Tartous;

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[16] Turki al-Mustafa, Assad: from Dancing on the heads of Snakes into the hole of the Iranian Snake, Baladi News, 28 February 2019, available at: https://bit.ly/2FXSTmJ.

- Training and building the capacities of the Military Security Agency and its branches in Syrian governorates to increase its efficiency;

- Curtailing the role of Iranian militias in the Hama countryside, where Moscow set up several military monitoring points in the villages of al-Tulissiya, the battalion stationed near Maardes, al-Tarabea farm south of Helfaya, Tal Salba southeast of Suqaylabiya, the Orontes basin building in al-Ghab plain, and in Tal Khanzir in Idlib's eastern countryside.

This does not mean that the Russian-Iranian strategic contradiction overshadows the importance of the circumstantial interests in the complicated Syrian scene; however, that contradiction is reflected on the nature of the 'official' decisions of the army, which is a subject of different and competing ambitions and interpretations between the Russians and the Iranians. This has turned the army into an arena of competing investments, where each side is seeking to accomplish its own desired conditions. Russia wants to build an army that can reduce the cost of Russian engagement and its deepening involvement in the Syrian crisis. Iran wants to ensure that the Syrian army remains under its influence, in light of a regional and international political atmosphere aimed at lessening its presence in the region. This has all been reflected in the military decisions and directives, wherein the rehabilitation decisions have been influenced by three contrasting driving forces, contributing to the creation of unclear and hybrid forms.

Returning to Original Structures or Forming a Large Gathering of Militias?

The 'limited capability' still imposes itself on the army restructuring approach, subjecting it to orders of transfer, appointment, and demobilization. This suggests that the competition for filling the army's power centers such as the armored divisions, air force and military intelligence, Republican Guards, and the general staff, is the most important indicator for understanding the consequences and outputs of the army's restructuring approach.[17]

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[17] This was the topic of discussion in the focus group discussion conducted by Omran for Strategic Studies with a group of defected officers in Reyhanli, Turkey, on 15 February 2019.

In theory, from the perspective of the regime's interests, addressing the exhaustion and attrition that hit the army requires programs and policies that are costly, both in terms of the necessary funds to be carried out and in terms of the cost of statistical and surveying efforts. Such efforts are still absent because the regime recognizes that the volume of its losses cannot be published, and also because it cannot control the reform approach on its own. In this sense, the most obvious objective for the regime is to increase its attention on the army bureaucracy, which is the key entry point for the regime's efficacy and control against the Russian or Iranian trends within the army. So the regime sometimes uses this bureaucracy in manipulating the situation to push its scope and mandate of operation; at other times, it uses the army as leverage against the Russians and the Iranians, and at times such bureaucracy allows the regime to strengthen the security and military networks that control the course of both the defense and security institutions.

However, due to the interactions of the Syrian landscape and the dynamics of internal frictions and competition within the military establishment, from the regime's point of view it needs to find a hybrid style that balances between Russian assertive policy and Iranian dynamics. The years of conflict paved the way for regime's allies to dedicate elements of power and control within the regime's military and security institutions to ensure harmony between battles and strategic objectives. **The following facts can be established in this regard:**

1. The difficulty of returning to the pre-2011 army, because the changes in the structure of the army and its human capital and social composition have been profound. Additionally, power centers within the army have experienced diminished influence, and the financial costs of such a rehabilitation are too high for the regime to afford;

2. Resistance to substantive nation-wide reform policies, because the regime would lose its control over the army and its ability to use it in local conflicts;

3. The growing adaptation with the concept of decentralization in managing and directing the defense and security institutions. On the one hand, there are institutions, that are different from those two, controlling a significant

and vital part of the Syrian geography. Furthermore, managing internal discrepancies and the multiplicity of militias dictate moving towards some kind of chaotic decentralization;

4. There has been a failure to complete an integrated DDR policy, which has been limited to some demobilization and some limited development facilitations thus contributing to the creation of 'gangs' within the community.

Based on this limited capability and through the analysis of dynamics of transfers, promotions, and demobilizations, it is possible to identify the following elements emerging within the formation approach:

First, there are changes in command centers, such as those discussed above. The most important of these changes took place in the 2nd Corps, which is one of the most important units in the army. The command of the 2nd Corps is always entrusted to the leaders of the most important Alawite clan, the Makhlouf family. It is noteworthy that Major General Awes Aslan, a prominent military figure, was relieved of his command post and appointed as deputy operations officer. He still has a high position in the chain of command, but without a fighting at his disposal.

Second is the deferral of the challenging issue of the fate of the militias. The problem currently is that the irregular formations controlled by Iranian or Russian networks far outnumber the units under the authority of the Ministry of Defense and security apparatuses in Damascus.

Third is the strengthening of power centers using the model of the Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria. This is something Tehran is seeking to achieve by integrating its militias such as the Local Defense Forces and Brigade 313 into the Syrian army.

Fourth, are changes made by Russia to the organizational structure of the military institution. Moscow seeks to ensure the unity and centrality of the army by turning the corps into regional commands similar to Russian military sectors, to include all regular and irregular armed groups in areas under their influence.

Fifth, there are 'cautious' arrangements in the Republican Guards, as a military-security network and a main pillar in consolidating the rule of the regime. For example, Major General Talal Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, was recently replaced by Major General Malek Alia. Makhlouf had commanded the Republican Guards starting in 2016 until he was appointed as commander of the 2nd Corps. Until recently, the trio leading the Republican Guards was Major General Talal Makhlouf, Major General Zaid Saleh, and Major General Malek Alia. At the same time, the Shiite militia Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, became a key part of the Guards.

Sixth, there has been postponement of the change of military commanders who are supported by Iran or Russia, such as Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan, aka The Tiger,[18] Russia's favorite military figure, and Major General Jamil al-Hassan, the head of Air Force Intelligence, who took office in 2009 and has served far beyond the statutory retirement age. Maher al-Assad's position as the commander of the 4th Division has also remained unchanged.

The question of managing the groups of formal and irregular forces remains unanswered. The regime has been using a number of short-term incentives for demobilizing or attracting larger numbers of rebel fighters. However, such a temporary tactic is imposed by the imperatives of restoring control through reconciliations. The coercive components of this tactic, such sieges and intensive indiscriminate attacks, put pressure on areas under the control of rebels to force them to surrender. The details of surrender agreements are then negotiated by committees largely composed of local mediators who have connections with the Syrian regime.

Compulsory conscription is also one of the most common means pursued by the regime to integrate former opposition fighters in the official armed forces. When the surrender arrangements are completed, former opposition fighters between the age of 18 and 42 who did not do their compulsory military service as required by law, must join the army. They are usually given a temporary six-month grace period to regularize their situation–a process known as status

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[18] Brig. Gen. Suhail al-Hassan belongs to the new generation and he received a number of Russian ribbons. The Russian chief of staff, Valery Gerasimov, conferred him a symbolic sword. Furthermore, when the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, visited Hmeimim airbase in December 2017, he met al-Hassan in person before meeting Bashar al-Assad. No one ever would fancy such a significant scene during the reign of Hafez al-Assad.

settlement–and they have to register in the local conscription branch in their respective area to arrange their military enrollment. Those who signed reconciliation agreements and did not join voluntarily within that deadline have been arrested and forcibly conscripted.

In a number of cases, fighters who dodged conscription have been arrested by the regime even before the six-month grace period was over. It should be noted that most opposition fighters were recruited on an individual basis after the dissolution of their respective groups. In a few rare cases, former revolutionary groups have been allowed to continue operating in the same area and under the command of the same leaders. The only changes that groups must accept in these cases is changing their name and shifting their loyalty.[19]

The aforementioned mechanisms have allowed the regime thus far to reintegrate or demobilize former opposition fighters who remained in areas under regime control. However, these efforts rely on short-term compulsory mechanisms to change the title of former opposition forces, rather than being concrete steps towards a comprehensive DDR strategy. Without a shift towards genuine political and institutional reform, these efforts will continue to undermine rather than strengthen Syria' stability.

Based on the analysis above, the likely scenario for the future shape of Syria's military is heading in a direction that will make it similar to the Soviet model -established by Hafez al-Assad- that is hard to change (i.e.

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[19] For example, following the surrender deal in Beit Jinn, southwest of Damascus, the former leader of a local revolutionary group called Omar Bin al-Khattab Brigade created a new group affiliated with the National Defense Forces with the name Beit Jinn Battalion, affiliated with al-Haramoun Regiment. In addition to the former fighters in Omar Bin al-Khattab Brigade, Beit Jinn Battalion included among its ranks civilians and other former rebels.

Unlike joining the auxiliary forces, which only allow their members to postpone conscription, some former revolutionary fighters are allowed to join the local police forces to meet the conscription requirements. In order to do that, those who dodged conscription usually call the police station in their area or talk to a local influential figure who is known to facilitate such accommodations. When those individuals are accepted in the local police force, the new conscripts must sign five-year contracts. Their ranks and salaries are usually defined in accordance with the police laws and regulations. The police stations in which they are stationed are responsible for following up with the authorities the matter of suspending their military service (settling their situation). Joining the local police forces allows ex-combatants to avoid conscription and stay in their communities. It also gives them the opportunity to avoid confrontation with other rebel fighters in battle. Nevertheless, this is considered the least attractive option because members of the police should serve for longer periods, with a minimum of five years. Their salaries are also lower than the average wages paid by other pro-regime forces. Among the hundreds of former armed opposition fighters who reportedly joined regime forces in Moaddamiyat al-Sham, there is public data available on only 80 individuals who preferred to join the local police. For more, see Haid Haid, Joining the Enemy: How the Syrian Regime Reintegrates Former Rebel Fighters, July 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2UKP6Cw.

intelligence supervision of the armed forces and closely linking the function of the special forces units to the interest of the regime), on one hand. On the other hand, it is also evolving towards networks of interests and proxies affiliated with Iran, especially seen in the creation of a Syrian Hezbollah model.

Conclusion

The degraded capability of the regime limits its ability to undertake military and security arrangements in pursuit of its own ambitions and interests. These interests are to rehabilitate and restore its control over a military force that will give it influence in all ongoing negotiations about the future of Syria. This makes the regime cautious in its approach as it seeks to manage the challenges that have been discussed.

With its limited capability, the regime is taking steps that are neither systematic nor strategic in the reintegration processes, in which it wants to take advantage of the surplus manpower and control the interactions of the local militias and security and military networks linked to Moscow and Tehran. In doing so, it is intentionally ignoring all of the national imperatives for change that would make such steps more serious and more conducive to sustainable stability. This makes the army more like a large militia formation cloaked in uniforms with a deeply-rooted Soviet structure that makes its military units as regional units whose roles grow eroding centralization levels, whether at the level of military decision or unit management. This leads us to conclude that the emerging dynamics reinforce the scenario where the military establishment will remain captive to the hybrid formation that has transformed it into a field of competition and investment for Assad's allies.

Analysis Paper

Non-Technical Challenges of Restructuring the Military in Syria

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Non-Technical Challenges of Restructuring Syria's Military

Introduction

In the context of post-conflict countries, 'restructuring' refers to a series of steps aimed at establishing a process to ensure the protection of human rights, equality, and promotion of the rule of law and democracy. This is accomplished through the implementation of programs such as: transitional justice programs; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes; rehabilitation, reintegration, and the rebuilding of state security institutions (the army, police, intelligence services, and border guards), and rebuilding of the judicial and penal systems.[1]

Restructuring faces many challenges that go beyond technical frameworks and accumulated military expertise. such challenges test the effectiveness and success of restructuring and they test a holistic Syria-centric vision that is tailored to the interests and contexts of Syrians and its position in the restructuring process. There are challenges specific to the Syrian context, such as the Baath party's roles in the army and its influence in formulating the army's political doctrine; the lack of a framework to regulate civil-military relations and the related need to redefine the roles of the Syrian military establishment; as well as the challenge of restructuring the army in a way that would be acceptable and legitimate to all Syrians. This paper will try to clarify the challenges, identify their most prominent elements, and their impact on the creation of a political and security environment that encourages all Syrians to engage in the national rebuilding process.

The Ideological Indoctrination of the Army

The twentieth century was characterized by highly politicized armies, particularly in non-democratic states. Those armies were not in ruling positions, but rather served the ruling party and adopted its ideology, as was the case in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Soviet bloc. The goal of having ideological armies is not only to govern, but to indoctrinate and

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[1] Omran for Strategic Studies, Changing the Security Sector in Syria, 23 October 2017, P22.

convince its members to best serve the single-party regime that adopts its doctrine. In this Soviet model, partisan commissioners were the tool used to consolidate the ideology from the lowest ranks up to the highest leadership positions, under the soviet commissars system. In military institutions this process took a top-down approach. Those commissioners were tasked with ensuring that the army was educated, and demonstrated ideological 'purity' and unconditional doctrinal commitment. There have been some attempts to replicate this model in Cuba and other underdeveloped countries.[2]

Syria is one of the cases in which the regime has succeeded in recent decades in indoctrinating the military. The political guidance officer–who reports to the political department of the army–plays a clear role in indoctrinating army personnel and promoting Baath narratives and slogans.[3] All divisions of the Syrian military, whether affiliated with corps or independent units, have been organized in party branches that are organizationally similar to the provincial branches. Additionally, the intelligence branches are considered party branches. Overall in the Syrian military there are 27 Baath party branches, 212 sections, and 1,656 cells.[4] The following table illustrates the party hierarchy in the Syrian armed forces:[5]

Military Hierarchy	Party Title	Notes
Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces	Regional Secretary	President of the Republic
Minister of Defense	Member of the Regional Command	Member of the Central Committee
Corps	Party branch	Corps Commander: Secretary-General of the party branch
Division	Party branch	The branch consists of three or more divisions

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[2] For more information see the lecture of Azmi Bshara, Chairman of the Arab Center for Policy Research and Studies, at the opening of "the Army and politics in the democratic transition period in the Arab world" conference, al-Modon, 2 October 2016, available at: https://bit.ly/2G6jaiP

[3] A phone interview conducted by the researcher with a defected political guidance officer on 13 March 2019. The defected officer affirmed that in each corps or division there is a political guidance branch linked with the political administration/department. In each brigade there is a political guidance section. The commander of the brigade is the secretary of the party branch, whereas the head of the political guidance branch or section is one of the members of the party branch or section.

[4] Eyal Zisser, In the Name of the Father, Bashar al-Asad's First Years in Power, Cairo: Madbuli Publishing House, 2005, p124.

[5] The contents of this table was determined during a focus group discussion conducted by Omran for Strategic Studies with a group of defected officers in Reyhanli, Turkey on: 7 March 2019.

Independent divisions	Party division	The military division's chief of staff assumes the position of the party division secretariat
Brigade	Party division	The division consists of three or more party sections
Military departments + regional military command	Party division	
Battalions	Party section	The section consists of three or more party cells
Platoons	Party cells	

There are several measures in place that ensure a role for the Baath party within the activities of the Syria's security and military institutions, including:

1. Baathists are given preference in admission to military academies. Baathists constitute about 98% of the total number of officers and non-commissioned officers.[6]

2. The ideological indoctrination branch is the organizational body of the Baath party within the armed forces.

3. The head of the party branch in each governorate is also appointed as that governorate's security committee head. After the eruption of the Syrian revolution, head of the party branch became the deputy head of the security committee, whereas the minister of defense became responsible for naming the head of the committee from among the military commanders.[7]

The important point here is not to prove that the Baath party has control over Syria's army, because this is related to use of the Baath party and other groups as tools to ensure loyalty of the army to the regime. What is important is showing the areas where the Baath party plays a significant role in the dynamics of the military and has the ability to impose its ideology and influence the political identity of soldiers, which is one contributing factor in

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[6] All officers who participated in all Omran focus groups have confirmed this fact. In a phone call with a defected security officer on 1 April 2019, he affirmed that throughout his entire time in service, he had met only two non-Baathist officers, and he noted that they were an unusual case because of their link to one of the strong Alawite tribes.

[7] A phone interview between the researcher and a defected security officer on 1 April 2019.

their political alignment and their wholesale adoption of the regime's narrative and definitions of ongoing events.

Article eight of the Syrian Constitution—which stipulated that the Baath party is the leading party in the state and society—was abolished in 2012, but its effects are still being felt. This is especially true in the army, which is under the political control of the Baath party. Military party cells still hold their weekly meetings without any disruption and security checks carried out by the intelligence about cadets nominated for officer roles still give priority to Baathists and Baath loyalty requirements, at the expense of other professional and national requirements.[8]

The ideological identity of the military consists of an ideological dimension that adopts the Baath doctrine and approach in the conduct of this institution, as well as a secondary sectarian/family dimension that is based on kinship and loyalty to the ruling individual as a criterion for joining the military and promotion, or otherwise for secret assassinations. Changing this identity formulation is a central challenge for the process of reforming the military establishment to tackle. As long as the political compass guiding the military's dynamics is ideological, the country will be unable to reach a national non-partisan consensus, and political exploitation by the regime will continue.

During the years of Baathist rule, the idea that the military was not a national institution became deeply embedded in Syrian society. Since the 1970s, the Baath party's sectarian identity—which was hidden by the party's ideological veneer—completely supplanted the sense of a still-developing national identity, in terms of the army's behavior and practice. After the 1980s, following the period of armed conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and the conflict between Hafez and Rifaat al-Assad, this identity had yet another evolution based on the slogan "the Syria of Assad." Both the state and the military adopted the path of "our leader forever: comrade Hafez al-Assad".[9]

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[8] Michel Chammas, Syria is Still Governed by Article 8 of the 1973 Constitution, Geroun, 20 April 2017, available at: https://bit.ly/2S78bKp

[9] Kholoud al-Zagheer, The Syrian Army Institution: the Path of Liquidations and the Question of Identity, al-Jumhouria, 14 December 2012, available at: https://bit.ly/2IsdGSi

In light of these accumulated positions and distortions of the national identity, it is difficult to envision any restructuring process that does not take into account the national condition and its centrality in the process of a new identity formation. In order to achieve this national requirement, it is necessary to push for the end of partisan structures within the army and armed forces through the formation of legal committees that will work to end the effects of Article 8 that still linger in 2012 Constitution and which continue to influence the entire legal system related to the work of state institutions, especially the army and its personnel. There should also be a reassessment of the admission process for officers and of the education system in military academies, especially in terms of the social norms, which the regime subjected to sectarian-tribal dynamics.

Toward the Regulation of Civil-Military Relations

It goes without saying that addressing the problem of civil-military relations is a long process that may last for years. However, establishing this track is in and of itself is an important societal objective. In Spain for example, this process took around seven years, from the late 1970s until the election of the Spanish Socialist Party in 1982.[10] There are other cases where this process took more than a decade, as was the case in Portugal, where democratic process initiated by the 1974 Carnation Revolution was not consolidated until the late 1990s, when military influence was completely removed from political life.[11]

In the case of Syria, where the conditions conducive to reaching a political agreement that will lead to democratic change are absent, which is usually a condition precedes restructuring, this process will face many difficult challenges. In the context of a preliminary understanding of those challenges, the following points are worth mentioning:

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[10] Alaa Eddin Arafat, Models and Lessons: Civil-Military Relations, a contribution to set an Egyptian Model (4)", Arab Center for Research and Studies, 6 April 2016, available at: http://www.acrseg.org/40083

[11] Muhammad Salah Qassem, Carnation Revolution: the Story of Democratic Transition in Portugal, Idaat, 25 April 2018, available at: https://bit.ly/2JrPTiL

1. **Reducing the role of the military during the transition phase and asserting control over it,** which will be especially difficult because the military is one of the country's most important actors. The challenges here are in redefining the relationship between the presidency and the military on the one hand, and the persistence of political forces demanding change for controls on the civil-military relationship prior to a political agreement, on the other hand.

2. **The organic link that exists between the legitimacy and strength of the elected civilian government and the path towards a healthy of civil-military relations.** This link can contribute to establishing the conditions for optimum movement along this path. For example, different political forces can form a political partnership to address this issue and negotiate with the military on the future of the civil-military relations. All of this is related to the presence of civilian experts and specialists in military and security affairs.

3. **Instilling a democratic culture within the military structures, effectuating an internal democratic transition,** and undertaking a process of comprehensive institutional reform within them. This would help the military resist policies aimed at consolidating corruption and exploitation, or the interest-based networks currently emerging within the structure of the military. This can be achieved by opening channels for dialogue and negotiations between civilians and military personnel and building bridges of trust between the, bridges that are completely absent under the current regime.

4. **Understanding the issues of civil-military relations within the Syrian context.** Issues related to civil-military relations, which differ from one country to another based on their respective circumstances, include: who has the final say in defining the national interest and priorities; setting the army's budget; defining the jurisdiction of military courts over military personnel; transparency in access to information, with arrangements to secure sensitive military secrets; putting other non-military activities of the military establishment under civilian control; preventing the politicization of military commanders; civilian oversight of the military establishment through the parliament; maintaining a balance between

internal and external security and establishing controls over the army's intervention of in internal security matters; the decision to declare war; parliamentary confirmation of senior military leader appointments and the issues of promotions, appointments, and foreign relations of the military in terms of training and arming forces.[12]

5. **The difficulty of initiating the track of reaching a healthy civil-military relation unless a political agreement is reached that allows legitimate and credible institutions to start their work in accordance with the well-known rules of change and democratic transition.** The greater legitimacy an elected government possesses, the less need it has to call upon the army to maintain its legitimacy. Therefore, the strengthening of democratic institutions and cultures has always been and continues to be critical. In general, armies have not been given prominent positions in the constitutions of countries that underwent successful transitions to democracy.[13]

Addressing these issues requires a constitutional and legal approach. Constitutional change has an important role to play in establishing civilian control on the military establishment by imposing constitutional constraints on the military and its role, and detailing the scope of its involvement in public affairs, leaving no room for political discretion or the manipulation of the legislature. However, just because it is written in a text does not necessarily mean it will become reality. Constitutional reform must be followed by other policies and measures, such as enacting laws and passing regulations, to regulate the civil-military relationship. For instance, the Syrian state is governed by a system of extraordinary laws and other laws that interpret constitutional rights according to the view of the central authorities. This has been enabled by the broad language of the constitution and its lack of details, binding force, and constitutional oversight.

Such an approach must push towards redefining the main function and professional ethics of the military establishment, and developing an institutional culture that emphasizes internal discipline and oversight

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[12] Omran For Strategic Studies, Transformations of the Syrian Military: The Challenge of Change and Restructuring", January 2018, https://bit.ly/2TfOzb0

[13] Abdul Fattah Madi, Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Transformation, Abdul Fattah Madi Website, 24 April 2014, available at: https://bit.ly/2iVL9rT

mechanisms, the rule of law and a healthy reporting to the civil authority. Furthermore, legal and constitutional parameters should be developed for parliamentary authority and roles towards the military institution, such as clarity of the governing, constitutional and legal framework and informing the public of the mandate, legal powers, organization, and functionality of the military sector, as well as its accountability under a system of democratic civilian control within a framework that protects confidentiality of military secrets, yet transparent on all other aspects of budgets, internal policies, and war declarations.[14]

An Army Not for All Syrians?

The current DDR processes in the army are indicative of a network that is transforming into a large militia, where the interests of the allies (the regime, Iran, and Russia) intertwine and conflict. This process undermines any opportunity to build a national army for all Syrians. Social divisions about the roles and tools of the military establishment have grown deeper in response to the army's conduct over the years of the conflict and the accompanying changes that reinforced its transformation into a militia. Today, Syrian society has developed a deeply embedded conviction that the military is just a safety net for the ruling regime and the establishment, where sectarianism is practiced under several names. The members of this establishment, whether those who joined voluntarily or conscripts, are not of a single class and instead make up several categories: a group in control, an opportunistic group, and a third group that is crushed under constant blackmail.[15]

Although it was the most violent, the Syrian revolution was not the only situation where the Baathist military was involved in direct conflict with civilians during open confrontations on the streets. The Baath party clashed

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[14] The powers of parliament differ from one system to another: There are unlimited powers, such as in Sweden, whose parliament is entitled to amend budget items including items related to the security and defense sectors. Those parliaments can amend budget items, even if such amendments result in an increase in expenses or the addition of new items to the budget. There are parliaments with restricted powers, as the case is in Switzerland and Spain, whose parliaments can make amendments to the budget but cannot affect the total amount allocated for expenses. There are also limited powers such as those in the UK and Canada, whose parliaments can only reduce expenses allocated in the budget. For more, please see: Changing the Security Sector in Syria, Omran for Strategic Studies, 2017, P 48-54.

[15] Yasser Nadim al-Saeed, What Remained of the Image of the Syrian Arab Army in the Minds of Syrian People?, al-Jumhouria, 12 May 2012, available at: https://bit.ly/2Z5Iyhb

with civilians in the unrest of Hama in 1964; and the Assad regime did the same in Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib in the 1980s; in the year 2000 the regime used the army to crush sporadic protests in al-Suweida city; and in 2004 against the Kurdish uprising. However, the most important lesson in the formation of the military's identity was its reaction to the Syrian revolution, when it manifested ideological positions that cannot be the building block for a modern state, such as: 1) Militia positioning based on ideological agreement; 2) Illegal graft through networks of corruption that were reinforced by the dynamics of violence economy; 3) Ideological contradiction, wherein the military became a platform for the interests of several partisan and religious forces. The military became the director of those interest networks, coordinating between the Baathist interests and the Iranian Shiites, the Alawite tribal ambitions and the economic opportunism.[16]

Societal acceptance is the key pillar for rebuilding the identity of the military establishment and the formation of a positive social impression which would constitute a leverage and motive to protect, preserve and support the military. However, after the violent practices and policies carried out by the army against a large portion of the Syrian people, led many Syrian experts and activists to question the raison d'être of an army which, they believe, has been used as a tool that targets their very existence. because the army completely adopted the regime's narrative about those who revolted against it, considering them to be 'terrorist' groups.

Creating an army to which all Syrians feel a sense of belonging is made more difficult by a number of facts and impressions that pose a key obstacle to its acceptance, including:

1. A lack of the will by the regime to make any national reform. Instead the regime's efforts are limited to rebuilding and reinforcing its control over the army;

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[16] Focus group discussion conducted by Omran for Strategic Studies with defected officers in Karkahan city in Turkey on 2 March 2019.

2. The intentional absence of justice that should impact all those involved in killing Syrians. This absence serves well the approach of hijacking the military as an institution, including its doctrine and human resources.

3. Discriminatory policies, which have become a trademark of the military leadership in dealing with members of the institution. This multi-faceted discrimination is based on sectarian, ethnic, and class-based identities.

4. Interest linkages that military actors have with areas outside regime control, which feeds into the continued fragmentation of the Syrian identity.

5. The legacy of the military and air force intelligence agencies, which has resulted in the public impression that they are mere tools to crush Syrians and repress their political, developmental, and economic roles, in favor of deeply rooted corruption networks.

6. Recognition that the problem in the social composition of the military is chronic and the governing political doctrine is designed in the presidential palace.

7. The slogan "The Assad army is forever" became an established dynamic within the culture of the military institution and leadership. The military's internalization of this slogan was accompanied on the other side, with a growing sense of the army as an "army of death and destruction."

8. The military uniform has become a disguise under which the Iran-backed militias have hidden themselves. Thus, non-Syrian cross-national ideology grew bigger and the military became a reflection of the Iranian or Soviet models, or even a combination of the two.

9. The military values of 'honor, sacrifice, and faithfulness,' which were selected by the military establishment as its motto, became empty words that are unable to hide the army's dysfunction.

Once again, we are confronted with the importance of reaching this political moment in Syria. It is a moment of momentum towards national construction. A moment that attracts Syrians and ensures their

engagement in supporting stability and all of the national policies required to achieve it, that are not based on zero-sum approach. It is a moment to reset the compass of the security and defense institutions, while recognizing the difficulty of changing the established stereotypical image of the military. The absence of such a moment will further radicalize the military establishment and increase its alienation from society.

Conclusion

The question of the role of the military and its impact on local interactions and transformations, as well as on the dynamics of democratic transition, will remain central to the process of restructuring the Syrian military establishment. The structural and functional imbalances and the identity distortion of the military establishment have always pushed it to intervene in social and political life based on a logic that serves and feeds into the philosophy of the ruling class. The ideological, organizational, and functional manipulating of the security and defense institutions alienated them from Syrian society and transformed them into institutions lacking the concept of political neutrality and made them politically aligned with the regime.

The major challenges in the process of reforming the Syrian military are not only those that are related to the technical aspects of the security sector reform and DDR programs, but also particular aspects of the Syrian context such as the partisan nature of the military and its ideology, the lack of legal frameworks regulating civil-military relations, and the need to redefine the roles of the Syrian military establishment in order to create an army that is accepted and perceived as legitimate by all Syrians. All those challenges are naturally connected to a new political stage that embraces change and democratic transition. Otherwise, those technical processes should be a result of a political agreement not the domain of the current governmental duties and challenges thus legitimizing a political party seen by so many Syrians as a source of instability and chaos at the domestic, regional, and international levels.

Report

Military Judicial System in Syria (1950-2019)

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Military Judicial System in Syria (1950-2019)

Introduction

In the past seventy years, Syria suffered under a totalitarian regime that turned state authorities and institutions into tools to strengthen the rule of a single party and one individual. An independent judiciary cannot exist under a totalitarian regime, and accordingly there were a number of measures that impacted the judiciary in terms of its independence, the appointment of judges, or other means of interference in its work. Despite the subjugation of the regular judicial system under the dominance of the executive authority, represented by its security agencies, the judiciary branch managed to retain some independent judges and some traditional values. The authority wanted to have a direct and harsh tool at its disposal to contribute to strengthening the totalitarian regime, which led to the establishment of special courts and the expansion of the role of the military judicial system.

At the beginning of the era of military coups in Syria and with the rise of military figures to power, Legislative Decree No. 61 of 1950, known as the Penal Code and Military Trial Procedures, was issued. This decree established the military judicial system in its current form.[1]

The military judicial system has jurisdiction over crimes committed by or against military personnel, or within or against military locations. Article 47 of Legislative Decree No. 61 of 1950 defined this jurisdiction and added to it "crimes that military courts have been granted the right to adjudicate by virtue of special laws and regulations." This paragraph was one of the key steps towards the expansion of the jurisdiction of the military judiciary. However, the biggest expansion of the jurisdiction of the military judicial system was a result of the declaration of a state of emergency on 8 March 1963, whereby its jurisdiction became everything that was referred to it by the decisions of the martial ruler.

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[1] Penal Code and Military Trial Procedures, issued by Legislative Decree 61 of 1950, Syrian People's Assembly, available at: https://bit.ly/2HzJOkJ

The military judicial system has rules of procedures that regulate it, so in order to get rid of any legal constraints, Military Field Courts were established, which are not subject to the procedures and which were later turned into tools to silence opponents, outside of the rule of law. Similarly, military courts were established for the same purpose.

Along with the military judicial system a number of special courts have been established, on top of which was the State Security Court, which was replaced by the Counterterrorism Court after the eruption of the conflict. This court was used as a tool to consolidate totalitarian rule and to terrorize civilians, and as a rubber stamp for the regime's violations of the rule of law and human rights. In order to understand the nature, roles, and evolutions of the military judicial system, it is necessary to review the laws that regulate the military judicial system and how it has been influenced by them.

First: Military Judicial System Regulations and Jurisdiction

In contrast to civil judicial system, there is no specific law that regulates the military judicial system but its provisions are contained in the Penal Code and the Military Trial Procedures of Legislative Decree No. 61 of 1950. These are broad, concise provisions that contain little detail, leaving the regulation of military justice to the Ministry of Defense. Article 35 of the law stipulates that "judges of the military judicial system shall be selected from among: a) law graduate officers who joined the army through a public admission test; b) officers who graduated from the military academy and are holders of law degrees." Accordingly, military judges are military officers, such that those who pass the military judiciary admissions test would first be appointed as officers in the army by virtue of a decree and would then be appointed as military judges by virtue of a second decree.

The regulation of the military judicial system as an institution was tasked to the Military Justice Department, which is one of the departments affiliated with the General Command of the Army and the Armed Forces. It is of a military nature in terms of organization, but it has a judicial function. The department consists of a number of branches, which are the financial, technical, computer, and judicial inspections branches. **Based on this organizational structure and the manner of appointing judges, it is clear**

that the military judicial system is not an independent entity, but rather one of the departments of the Ministry of Defense instructed by the Ministry and within its orbit.

The jurisdiction of the military judicial system is laid out in Article 47 of the Penal Code and Military Trial Procedures, which defines the jurisdiction of the military judicial system in crimes stipulated in said law as crimes committed in military camps and institutions, crimes committed against the interests of the army, crimes committed by allied armies stationed on Syrian territories, crimes of publishing and disseminating military news, as well as any defamation of the flag or the army or causing harm to its dignity or reputation. The military judicial system also has jurisdiction over crimes that military courts have been granted the authority to hear by special laws and regulations.

An example of this jurisdiction is Law No. 26 of 2011 on criminalizing arms smuggling,[2] the penalties for which include death. The enforcement of this law is tasked to the regular judiciary, because it is not part of the jurisdiction of the military judiciary. However, four months after the promulgation of this law, Legislative Decree No. 31 of 2012 was issued stipulating the addition of a paragraph to Article 47 of the Military Penal Code.[3] This paragraph deals with the jurisdiction of the military judicial system in trying crimes set out in Law No. 26 of 2011, and says that cases related to the said crimes that are brought before regular judicial system should be referred to the military judicial system.

It is noteworthy that the military judicial system is the party that defines its own terms of reference in terms of its jurisdiction. Article 51 of the Penal Code and Military Trial Procedures stipulates that: "military judicial authorities alone have the discretion whether a case falls under their jurisdiction or not. Any dispute over jurisdiction arising with another judicial entity shall be referred to it [the military judiciary] to settle, before reviewing the substance of the claim. In the event this authority finds that this case doesn't fall under its jurisdiction, the case shall be returned; otherwise it shall

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[2] The Law of criminalizing weapons smuggling, issued by Law 26 of 2011, Syrian People's Assembly website, available at: https://bit.ly/2w6zqfg
[3] Legislative Decree 31 of 2012, Syrian People's Assembly website, available at: https://bit.ly/2HunnNY

be tried by the said authority, given that it shall inform its decision to the court that referred the case to it in the first place". **Hence, the military judicial system determines whether a case falls under its jurisdiction or under the jurisdiction of regular judicial system. The regular justice system may not try a case if the military judicial system determines that the case falls under its jurisdiction.**

Second: The Military Judicial System and Emergency Provisions

The jurisdiction of the military judicial system discussed in the previous section applies only in normal times. This jurisdiction expands significantly during states of emergency. The application of emergency provisions is not occasional in contemporary Syrian history, but it is rather a permanent state, and any other state would be an exception. The Emergency Law was promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 51 of 1962, and a state of emergency was declared during the al-Ba'ath party coup when it seized power on 6 March 1963. This state of emergency remained in place for decades until it was lifted after the start of the revolution by Legislative Decree No. 161, dated 21 April 2011.[4]

The provisions of the Emergency Law stipulate the powers and jurisdictions of the martial ruler. Article 4 stipulates, "The martial ruler or deputy thereof is entitled to issue written orders to undertake all or some of the following restrains or measures, and to refer violators to military courts." Therefore, any violation of the orders of the martial ruler will be referred to the military judiciary. Article 6 of the Emergency Law stipulates that "in areas where the emergency state is declared, the following crimes, regardless of the status of the perpetrators, inciters or accomplices, shall be referred to the military judicial system: a) breaching orders issued by the martial ruler; b) crimes against state security and public safety (from Article 260 to Article 339 of the penal code); c) crimes against the public authority (from Article 369 to Article 387); d) crimes undermining the public trust (from Article 427 to Article 459); e) crimes which constitute a comprehensive threat (from Article 573 to

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[4] Emergency Law issued by Legislative Decree 51 of 1962, Aljazeera, available at: https://bit.ly/2WcjrL9; Legislative Decree 161 of 2011, Syrian People's Assembly website, available at: https://bit.ly/2JoN6Lh.

Article 586).” Finally, Article 8 of this law stipulates, “the martial ruler has the final decision in jurisdiction disputes between the civil and military judiciary.”

By virtue of these provisions, the jurisdiction of the military judicial system has been greatly expanded and, in addition to military cases, it has come to include a large number of crimes that are referred to it by virtue of the emergency provisions, regardless whether the perpetrators are civilians or military personnel. Emergency provisions thus became a tool for the executive authority to decide who is referred to the military judicial system and who is left for the jurisdiction of the regular justice system.

Third: Military Field Courts, Times of War, and Internal Unrest

In addition to the military courts discussed above, extraordinary courts were established in Syria called Military Field Courts. These courts were established following the defeat of Syria in June 1967, under the pretext of trying military deserters. They were created by virtue of Legislative Decree No. 109 of 1968, which stipulated that the Military Field Courts would take cases committed during times of war or during military operations that fall under the jurisdiction of military courts, which the minister of defense decides to refer to them.[5] The jurisdiction of Military Field Courts was further expanded during the events that took place in Syria in 1980. Legislative Decree No. 32 of 1 July 1980 added to Decree No. 109 the phrase “or when internal disturbances occur” to the situations in which the Military Field Courts could try crimes that fall within the jurisdiction of the military judicial system.[6]

The jurisdiction of Military Field Courts remained active since no peace agreement with Israel was reached, so Syria has technically been in a time of war from the issuance of Decree No. 109 (1968) until today. Furthermore, a decree is supposed to be issued declaring the occurrence of internal

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[5] The Law of Establishing Military Field Courts, issued by Legislative Decree 109 of 1968.
[6] Amending the Law of Establishing Military Field Courts, by virtue of Legislative Decree 32 of 1980, Syrian People’s Assembly website, available at: https://bit.ly/2Vyk5hA

disturbances and another decree to declare the end of such disturbances. However, no such decrees have ever been issued, leaving the jurisdiction of the military field courts to hear cases related to uprising in effect until this very day.

Even given the broad mandate given to Military Field Courts under the law, the actual use of such courts has still exceeded their jurisdiction so that they have operated without any legal basis. They are supposed to have jurisdiction only in cases that fall under the jurisdiction of the military judicial system, which means that they cannot try civilians, especially after the end of the state of emergency, at which time the jurisdiction of the military judicial system is more limited by law. Yet Military Field Courts have continued to try civilians and have been an effective tool for the liquidation of political opponents and peaceful protestors during the years of the current conflict.

The following is an overview of the key parameters of Military Field Courts according to their founding decree, in order to help better comprehend their nature:

The court, by virtue of a decision by the minister of defense, consists of a chairman and two members. The chairman shall be no less than the rank of lieutenant colonel, with all members thereof being military personnel; they are not required to be holders of a degree in law.

- The court shall have the right not to abide by due process and procedures provided for in legislations;

- Decisions of this court may not be challenged by any means of appeal;

- The president of the state or the minister of defense may mitigate or replace a sentence or abolish it altogether, or suspend its implementation.

These parameters provide a better understanding of the nature of military field courts as extraordinary courts where there are no standards of fair trials, no right to appeal, nor the independence of the court and the judge, and no right of defense or to public judgments. These courts are not required to apply due process and procedures, according to their founding decree. Furthermore, the decree that created Military Field Courts do not differentiate between

juveniles and adults, which has allowed the courts to be exploitative and even try juveniles.

Finally, the decree creating Military Field Courts provides for the right of the president or the minister of defense to order a retrial before another military field court, a stark violation of the validity of judicial rulings and the principle of double jeopardy. That made these courts an effective tool to get rid of opponents. Thousands of death sentences have been issued by these courts, as has been documented in numerous reports.[7]

It is worth mentioning that there is another kind of military court, known as 'war courts,' and these are affiliated with the army. War courts were created by Legislative Decree No. 87 of 1972. The decree stipulates that the deputy commander in chief of the army and the armed forces, commanders of the forces, divisions, and brigades, and commanders of regiments and besieged battalions that have lost communication with their leadership, are authorized to establish war courts that have jurisdiction over some crimes committed by military personnel during combat with the enemy.

These war courts are composed of only three officers. There is no public prosecutor, an investigation, or a defense. They can be created by the command of the armed unit, and referral of military personnel is made by the same command entities that created them. These courts do not abide by the penalties provided for in the military penal code or the general penal code, nor with the due process and procedures stipulated by laws. They issue final rulings and after being ratified these rulings are implemented by the bodies that created them.

It is not known whether such war courts have been set up and have issued any rulings, because their rulings are not published there is no information available. However, these courts have a legal framework based on the legislative decree that created them. **Although those courts only try military personnel and only at specific times, they constitute a stark violation of the right to litigation, in terms of their formation, the appointment of**

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[7] Military Field Courts: Courts or Crimes?, report published by the Syrian Legal Forum, February 12, 2018, available at: http://www.syrianlegalforum.net/publications/view/32

judges, and their lack of compliance with due process and procedures or the penal code.

Fourth: Analysis of the Structure of the Military Judicial System

Apart from the Military Field Courts that, as discussed above, are extraordinary courts that lack all standards and requirements of fair trials, we will return to the broader military judicial system to analyze its nature, whether it is regular or extraordinary judiciary, and how closely it conforms to the standards of an independent judiciary.

In terms of independence of the judiciary, it is general rule that its independence is accepted and that other authorities shall not interfere in its work. But in Syria, the military judiciary is one of the institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Defense, which means that the executive branch does not only interfere in the military justice system's work, but even considers it as part of the executive's own functions. This means that the military judicial system is entirely subject to the executive authority, represented by the Ministry of Defense, and any talk of the military judiciary as part of the judicial branch contradicts the law and reality.

With regard to the appointment of military judges, one of the standards used to measure how independent the judiciary is and how impartial the trials are, and how isolated it is from the pressures and influences of other authorities, is the manner in which judges are appointed and the immunity they enjoy. By reviewing the provisions of the military judicial system, it is clear that the military judge is an officer in the armed forces and is administratively, professionally, and financially affiliated thereof. There are two paths to becoming a judge in the military judiciary: the first is direct appointment from among the army officers who hold a law degree in law, and the second is through the announcement of an admissions test for the appointment of officers in the army to judgeships. After the test is administered by the Department of the Military Judiciary – one of the departments of the Ministry of Defense – a decree for the appointment of those who passed the test is issued to admit them as officers in the army. A

second decree is then issued to appoint them as military judges with the rank of first lieutenants. **From the method of appointment and the entity in charge of the process, is it clear that military judges are officers who are tasked to work in one of the departments of the Ministry of Defense, namely the Department of the Military Judiciary.**

Concerning immunity, Article 39 of the Military Penal Code issued by virtue of Legislative Decree No. 61 (1950) states that: "the permanent military judges, while assuming the judicial function shall be affiliated directly with the Ministry of Defense, and remain, in such capacity, subject to the general military regulations. However, while assuming the judicial functions, they shall not be referred to a military court, an investigating commission or be subject to disciplinary punishment, unless by virtue of an order by the commander in chief of the army and the armed forces, or by virtue of a presidential decree, based on the level of their rank." This means that they enjoy immunity in principle, but it can be removed at any time, for any reason, by an order from the commander in chief of the army. In practice, military judges, like other officers, are subject to the biannual officers' relocations, and it is normal for a military judge to be transferred to any unit of the army, therefore ending his role in the judiciary.

On the question of the 'independence of the military judiciary,' it can be said that all countries consider their judiciary to be independent and created in accordance with law. However, this does not mean in reality that a judiciary is independent. The Basic Principles on the Independence of the Judiciary was adopted by the United Nations' General Assembly (UNGA) in 1985. These principles include general parameters for the independence of the judiciary, including that: the state shall guarantee the independence of the judiciary; the judiciary shall adjudicate matters brought before it impartially and free from direct or indirect influences, pressures, or interferences; there shall be no inappropriate interference in the judicial procedures; everyone shall have the right to be tried before the regular judiciary or tribunals that apply established legal procedures; and no judicial bodies that do not use

established due process and procedures may be created to assuming the judicial mandate of the regular courts or tribunals.[8]

These principles laid out by the UNGA have been all breached by Syria's military judicial system, which, as previously discussed, is not only subject to influence but is completely subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. This is especially true when it comes to trying civilians before the military judicial system, where they are deprived of their right to be tried by regular courts.

The UNGA principles also include the following points related to judges. They stipulate that the law shall appropriately guarantee independence of the judges and that they shall serve for the legally defined term in office. Judges shall enjoy the guarantee to remain in their position until they reach the compulsory retirement age or the expiration of their term in office if such term limits exist. Of course, these guarantees are absent in the military judiciary system. Therefore, **it is clear that Syria's military judiciary, in terms of its composition, affiliation, and the procedures for appointing or dismissing judges or holding them accountable, as well as everything related to the work of the military judicial system, is a far cry from the concept of an independent judiciary.**

Is the military judiciary extraordinary judiciary? In principle, we cannot consider the specialized judiciary to be extraordinary. All countries and their laws have specialized courts that focus on certain kinds of crimes or a specific group of people. Such specialized courts are considered part of the regular judiciary as long as they work within the framework of the judicial authority, apply the same legal procedures, grant litigants full legal rights and guarantees, and their judges are qualified and appointed independently from the influence of the executive authority. Any judicial system that does not pay heed to such standards, such as one that is subordinate to the executive authority instead of the judicial authority, or that suffers from defects in the procedures for the appointment of judges, or one that has special procedures that do not guarantee justice, can be considered an extraordinary judiciary.

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[8] Basic Principles of the Independence of the Judiciary, adopted by United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 32/40 and 40/146 of 1985, available at:
https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/IndependenceJudiciary.aspx

A number of countries have defined the military judicial system within their systems as a specialized judiciary that is subordinate to the judicial authority, in which judges have immunity and there are clear procedures followed for their appointments. This type of judiciary cannot be called extraordinary. Some countries also have separate mechanisms for accountability within the military, but these do not constitute a judicial system, and those abused by such mechanisms can resort to the judiciary for redress. **Therefore, in order to determine whether the military judicial system in Syria is extraordinary or not, we must look at its affiliation, the mechanisms for creating its courts and appointing its judges, as well as its guarantees for litigation and the right to defense.**

This analysis of Syria's Military Field Courts and war courts makes it clear that they have all of the criteria to be considered extraordinary courts, since their judges are not judges and are not required to be holders of law degrees, they are created by the executive branch, they are not required to apply the rules of procedure, and they lack guarantees of litigation and the right to defense, as well as the use of appeal.

As far as the military judicial system is concerned, we must first determine whether an individual tried before it is civilian or military personnel. In the case of a civilian, it is considered an extraordinary court, because it deprives that individual of his inherent right to be tried in the regular judicial system before a civilian judge. In the case of trying military personnel, in principle, when a member of the military is tried before the military judicial system it cannot be considered an extraordinary court, unless there is an irregularity in the composition of the court, its procedures, the appointment of its judges, or its affiliation. Only then can we say that this kind of judiciary is extraordinary judiciary. However, if the military court is trying military personnel and it provides the guarantees of litigation and independence, it is considered specialized rather than extraordinary judiciary.

Concerning the nature of the military judicial system in Syria, it has no relationship at all with the judicial branch, it is not subject to the judicial authority, and it is not affiliated to the Supreme Judicial Council. Instead, it is entirely affiliated with the Ministry of Defense. Therefore, the military judiciary is a body that operates outside of the judicial authority and is part of

and managed by the executive authority. Furthermore, its judges are not from or affiliated with the judicial authority; instead, they are army officers who are affiliated with and receive orders from the Ministry of Defense. They are subject to be transferred to active army units whenever the army command sees fit. **These two main factors - the affiliation of the judiciary and the appointment of its judges – lead us to conclude that the military judicial system in its current shape is an extraordinary judiciary.**

Fifith: The Military Judicial System and its Impact on Syrian Community

Since its establishment, the Syrian military judicial system has gone through several stages and its role has expanded as the military and security grip on the lives of Syrians increased. The creation of the military judicial system was linked with the period of military coups. The purpose of its creation was to give consideration to the special nature of the army, to regulate the work of the army in terms of the obedience of subordinates to their commanders, and the necessity of having speedy procedures. The military judiciary tried cases of a military nature or when one of the parties was a member of the military, without extending its jurisdiction to other types of non-military offenses.

However, after al-Ba'ath party rose to power and took control of all state institutions and authorities, the nature and work of many state institutions and organs changed, including the military judicial system. Since al-Ba'ath party's rise to power was accompanied with the declaration of a state of emergency, the role of the military judicial system expanded, as it became possible to refer any case to the military justice system, regardless of whether the parties are civilians or military personnel and regardless of the type of the crime. It was used as a tool to terrorize Syrians, or to address certain issues. For example, many Syrians recall how cases related to internal food trade used to be referred to the military judiciary by virtue of the declared state of emergency in order to put an end to breaches in that field. It was as if the authority was implying that the regular judiciary was ineffective and when the need arose to control a certain phenomenon, they needed to resort to the military judicial system.

Additionally, under the provisions of the Emergency Law, crimes committed against the state security shall be tried before the military judicial system. For many decades, many political opponents have been tried before military courts. The claims against them were heard either by military courts or by the state security court. This role played by the military judicial system as a tool in the hand of the authority to punish whoever it wants, in addition to the harsh nature of its procedures, the detention of civilians in military jails etc., made Syrians view the military judicial system as one of the security agencies rather than a judicial entity.

The function of trying crimes against state security was undertaken by the military judicial system from the time that al-Ba'ath party came to power in 1963 until the beginning of the revolution in 2011, during which time the country under emergency rule. After the outbreak of the revolution and lifting the state of emergency in April 2011, the Military Field Courts continued and even expanded their roles. At the same time the role of the military judicial system declined, since many of the cases that it used to adjudicate fell under the jurisdiction of the regular judiciary, and crimes of interest to the authorities – namely those linked to the opposition – became the jurisdiction of the counterterrorism court, established in 2012.

The military judicial system, in its current shape, does not adhere to international treaties and conventions and constitutes a violation to human rights. International treaties and conventions have set forth clear and specific standards to protect human rights, including the right to litigation, the right to have the case seen before an independent and impartial court, and the right to be granted all the rights and guarantees of litigation. Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him".[9]

Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates, "All persons shall be equal before the courts and tribunals. In the determination of any criminal charge against him, or of his rights and

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[9] Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1945, UN website, available at: https://bit.ly/2PuoNf0

obligations in a suit at law, everyone shall be entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law".[10]

Sixth: Concluding Recommendations

One cannot expect to find an independent judiciary under a totalitarian regime. This applies to the judiciary in general and to the extraordinary judiciary in particular, which already functions outside of the judicial system. Syria has suffered over the past decades from widespread violations of human rights and the absence of the principles of justice and human rights, and any vision for the future should study the problems of the past in depth and draw lessons from them.

The report of the United Nations Secretary-General submitted to the Security Council on 26 January 2004, 'The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies,' said that:

Our experience in the past decade has demonstrated clearly that the consolidation of peace in the immediate post-conflict period, as well as the maintenance of peace in the long term, cannot be achieved unless the population is confident that redress for grievances can be obtained through legitimate structures for the peaceful settlement of disputes and the fair administration of justice. At the same time, the heightened vulnerability of minorities, women, children, prisoners and detainees, displaced persons, refugees and others, which is evident in all conflict and post-conflict situations, brings an element of urgency to the imperative of restoration of the rule of law.[11]

After the above overview of the reality of military judiciary in Syria, its structure, affiliation, and function, and in order to address Syria's legacy of violations of the rule of law and human rights, the following recommendations are made:

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[10] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, OHCHR website, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx

[11] United Nations Secretary General report on the rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, S/2004/616, 2004, available at: https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/the-rule-of-law-and-transitional-justice-in-conflict-and-post-conflict-societies-report-of-the-secretary-general/

1. **Enshrine a ban on establishing extraordinary courts in the Constitution:** This text was contained in Article 10 of the 1950 Constitution, which stated that it was not permissible to establish extraordinary criminal courts. This text was absent from subsequent constitutions, under which several extraordinary courts were established.[12]

2. **Enshrine the independence of the judiciary and the formation of the Supreme Judicial Council in the Constitution.** Although Syrian constitutions in general provide for the independence of the judiciary, this provision was broad without factors and institutions to protect it. That is because the Syrian Constitution referred the establishment of the judicial authority to a law to be issued – the law of judicial authority. By doing so, the Constitution left the establishment of the third branch of authority to the other authorities, which contradicts the principle of the separation of powers. Thus, the constitution must not only include the phrase of independence of the judiciary, but also to put forward the manner of its establishment, its jurisdiction, functions, the appointment of judges and their immunity.

3. **Enshrine the affiliation of all judicial bodies with the Supreme Judicial Council in the Constitution.** It cannot be permissible to have courts that are not affiliated to the Supreme Judicial Council, and all judges should be appointed through it. Even with the preservation of military courts, they should be part of the judicial authority, and the Supreme Judicial Council should inspect their activities, appoint their judges, and manage their work. Ministries should have no influence on the work of courts and their role should be limited to supporting the work of courts and protecting them in accordance with law.

4. **Enshrine in the Constitution controls on the state of emergency, in terms of the body that is authorized to declare it, its duration, scope, and judicial oversight.** The state of emergency in Syria lasted for decades, during which it was an effective tool to violate human rights and the rule of law, without any role for the judiciary to limit its powers. A

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[12] Constitution of Syria, 1950, available at:
http://dustour.org/medialibrary/publications_syria/syrian_constitution_-1950-arabic.pdf

new constitution should include restrictions and prerequisites for declaring a state of emergency in terms of both, time and place. The state of emergency should be terminated when the causes for it have ended, and most importantly, it should not be arbitrarily imposed. The judiciary should therefore have the power to prevent the executive authority from abusing the state of emergency.

5. **Adhere to international treaties and conventions,** especially those signed by the Syrian government. The new constitution should include provisions for preventing contradictions between laws and these conventions, and such conventions should take precedence in the event of any conflict between them.

6. **Repeal and amend all laws that contradict the independence of the judiciary.** The new Constitution should provide for the repeal and amendment of all laws that contradict it, because a constitution alone cannot guarantee the rule of law unless factors are built to protect it, including powers and institutions, most importantly the judiciary. This requires enacting a new law for the judicial authority and the abolition of all laws that speak of the establishment of extraordinary courts, whose cases should be returned to the normal judiciary. Other laws that infringe the rule of law and independence of the judiciary should also be repealed, such as the laws and decrees that give immunity from challenge before the courts, or laws that give immunity to institutions or individuals so as to prevent the judiciary from initiating public proceedings against them without the approval of those same entities.

7. **Reform the judiciary and rebuild the trust between it and the Syrian people.** The judiciary has lost its independence along with much of it is of prestige and public trust. Despite the differences between the regular an extraordinary judiciary, addressing the reality of the judiciary requires radical reform, after its independence is guaranteed. This reform should include the reexamination of judges, some of whom were involved in human rights violations, especially during the recent period of conflict. It also requires structural reform, as well as providing the judiciary with staff, facilities, and equipment so that it can undertake its role in the post-conflict period.

8. **Implement the procedures of transitional justice.** Reform alone cannot be enough for the future. It is necessary to identify grievances of the prior period, process them, and restore rights to owners. Part of this process should be the empowerment of those who were prosecuted before extraordinary courts, or who were sentenced because of their political positions, who should be retried and be restituted. Individuals responsible for human rights violations should be held accountable, which will help restore trust in the state authorities and institutions.