

## STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS: THE SYRIAN ARMY'S ACCIDENTAL RESILIENCE

KHEDER KHADDOUR | MARCH 16, 2016

The Syrian army was not combat ready when the country's current conflict erupted in spring 2011. Decades of corruption had stripped the Syrian Arab Army of its combat and operational professionalism. And yet five years on, it has withstood a mass public revolt, a multifront war, and tens of thousands of defections.<sup>1</sup>

The army's ability to hold territory vital to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is the result of an unexpected paradox: the factors that had eviscerated its fighting ability in peacetime have become its main strength during the war. In particular, the army's networks of patronage and nepotism, which predate the war, have morphed into a parallel chain of command that strengthens the regime. By withdrawing the army from select front lines, the regime has managed to bolster its social, political, and local community base after outsourcing its infantry needs to ad hoc militias. The parallel chain of command has enabled the regime to adapt its strategy to reflect the conflict's quickly changing dynamics, secure its authority over loyalist paramilitary forces, and entrench itself in key territories.

The army is not simply an instrument of the regime's strategy; the two operate as distinct but interdependent agencies that need each other to survive. The army divisions' entrenchment across wide swaths of Syrian territory has helped the regime maintain control over key population centers. The army also serves as the logistical backbone for regime-sponsored militias and as a crucial aid channel for the regime's backers,

Russia and Iran. While the militias have supplied much of the regime's infantry needs, the army has maintained control over the air force and the use of heavy weapons. As a result, the number of casualties and defections has dropped, with the Assad regime's image as a symbol of national unity bolstered. The Syrian army's evolution and resilience since 2011 has thus far allowed the regime to withstand the conflict and position itself as an integral part of any negotiated political settlement that may be reached.

### THE SYRIAN ARMY: WEAK BUT RESILIENT

#### Sustained by Corruption

Established in 1946, the army quickly emerged as a leading player in the political development of Syria. During the 1960s, deep political and ideological rifts in the army led to a series of military coups, the last of which saw then defense minister and air force commander Hafez al-Assad, a member of the Baath Party, take power in 1970. With the assistance of a small cadre of officers, Assad neutralized his opponents. The regime

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kheder Khaddour** is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. His research focuses on issues of identity and society in Syria.

thereafter maintained a tight grip on the army, rendering its rank and file dependent on regime patronage for promotions and material benefits. After the army's last confrontation with Israel in Lebanon in 1982, it abandoned its primary task of fighting foreign enemies. The army turned to a more symbolic role that helped propagate the regime's domestic narrative—that Israel and other foreign countries posed an imminent and persistent threat. General conscription became an effective tool to manage and mobilize Syrian society, and the youth specifically.<sup>2</sup>

No major changes to the army's formal organizational hierarchy occurred when Bashar al-Assad took office in 2000. Officers continued to reap power and resources in a way that increased corruption and reduced the army's fighting ability.

Social and financial benefits for army officers were commonplace. In particular, Assad's neoliberal economic programs empowered a new class of regime figures and private investors and encouraged linkages between them, which enriched some high-ranking officers.<sup>3</sup> For example, beginning in 2007, the Defense Ministry and a group of businessmen launched a joint plan to sell luxury cars to retired military officers at a discounted and tax-free rate, and the vehicles would be paid off over time via deductions from recurring pension payouts. This program conferred a new social status on these officers: luxury cars had long been available only to the elite due to high import tariffs in the range of 200 percent and the limited purchasing power of most Syrians. Officers could also sell their cars immediately, earning a huge profit off of the tax savings alone.<sup>4</sup>

Base salaries of individual officers were notoriously low and ranged from \$400 to \$800 per month. For this reason, officers have for decades regularly used their outsized authority for personal financial gain. They regularly allow affluent conscripts to evade their mandatory service for months on end in exchange for kickbacks. The practice became so common that it was colloquially named after the official file (*tafyeesh* or *feesh*) an officer opens regarding a specific person. Officers also frequently assign

conscripts to perform maintenance and construction work on their personal homes and properties, in addition to driving their children to school in military vehicles. They accept gifts or local food specialties from conscripts' hometowns—in some cases, honey from Hama or cheese from Deir Ezzor—in exchange for overlooking infractions.<sup>5</sup>

Although exemplary administrative work could in theory assist an officer's advancement, nepotism and clientelism have traditionally been the main factors in promotions, particularly among the middle and upper echelons.<sup>6</sup> Rising above the rank of colonel was simply impossible without the necessary connections. One former conscript, assigned to the mapping unit of his army division in 2002, recalled having to carry out the most basic professional tasks for his colonel supervisor who lacked even the most elementary cartography skills. This particular colonel, who had family connections in the security services, became a brigadier general in 2005 and was later tasked with commanding a brigade in Daraa in 2012.<sup>7</sup>

Over time, the Syrian army devolved and came to resemble any other state bureaucracy in which employees' primary ambition was to leverage their positions for personal gain. One long-time officer recalled that from the 1980s through the 2000s, yearly officer inspections (*mashru harby*) became evaluations in name only—inspectors would arrive at military bases, enjoy a leisurely meal with officers, and then sign the requisite certifications. Both the regime and the army knew about this widespread practice but did nothing to curtail it.

Following the 2011 uprising, the Syrian army's lack of professionalism actually facilitated the regime's ability to overrule and bypass segments of the officer corps that objected to the army's crackdown on the opposition. The defection of up to 3,000 mostly Sunni officers during 2011 had little adverse impact on the army's cohesion and operational capability,<sup>8</sup> since the formal structures they previously staffed were not critical to performance. Patronage networks thus emerged as the regime's de facto, informal chain of command once the

crisis became militarized in 2012. The regime could relay orders through an agile system of trusted figures linked closely by familial and sectarian ties, as well as shared business and financial interests. For instance, Bashar al-Assad's cousin and prominent investor Rami Makhlouf began funding the Tiger Forces (Qwaat al-Nimr) in 2013 under the leadership of General Suheil al-Hassan, an Alawite intelligence officer and celebrity among Alawites. The Tiger Forces are an elite unit, are better equipped than the regular army, and draw mostly Alawite officers from the Fourth and Eleventh Divisions. The regime's Air Force Intelligence Directorate (Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiya) has also recruited and trained civilian Alawites to join this special force.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, by circumventing the army's official bureaucracy, the regime could react swiftly to the rapidly unfolding conflict. The regime's response to demonstrations in the central city of Homs in May 2011, in the presence of international observers, illustrates how this worked. In order to deceive UN monitors, regime members provided officers and locally based soldiers with civilian IDs and police uniforms, deploying them alongside demonstrators. The regime was able to skirt accusations that the army violently put down the protests as a result.<sup>10</sup>

### **Entrenched in Syria's Land**

The army has held onto key swaths of territory in the face of opposition advances since 2012 due in part to its territorial organization of combat divisions (*furaq*, singular *firqa*). Each division is assigned to a specific base area and to a portion of the surrounding lands. Division headquarters (*quiada al-firqa*) are located in these regions, as are training facilities, fuel depots, ammunition and equipment warehouses, and military housing. These, along with any nearby population centers and civilian facilities that fall within the division's zone of operation, form a complex administrative unit known as a sector (*qutaa*).

By entrenching each *firqa* within a *qutaa*, an officer's career and life become intertwined with the specific army division and sector in which they reside. This has prevented officers from

defecting. In return, the military gives the division commander *carte blanche* with the territory over which he presides. This power was formalized in a section of the Syrian military code dedicated to officer responsibilities, which stipulates that "the commander can deal with any event within his *qutaa*, without asking the leadership [the Ministry of Defense in Damascus] if there is no communication or in an emergency situation."<sup>11</sup>

Then president Hafez al-Assad first instituted the *qutaa* system in 1984 to neutralize his brother Rifaat's political ambitions after a brief illness seemed to open a path toward succession. After reasserting control and resuming his regular duties, Hafez al-Assad assigned the heads of various army divisions and the forces under their command to particular *qutaas* in order to prevent any challenge to his rule. The shift to a *qutaa* system enabled commanders to create personal fiefdoms in key areas of the country in which the sectors were located. For example, during the 1990s, the leader of the First Division, Ibrahim al-Safi, controlled the town of Kiswa and its surrounding areas on the outskirts of Damascus in which the First Division's *qutaa* fell. To demonstrate his power, he illegally built a summer home outside the *qutaa* perimeters in proximity to Kiswa's civilian residents—and faced little to no resistance.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the president could use the sector system to limit the influence of division commanders by playing them against each other, thus preventing any collective action that could wrest power through a military coup.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Army's Resilience**

In March 2011, the Syrian army was made up of twelve divisions. Their distribution over their *qutaas* was heavily weighted to the south and southwest of the country nearer to Israel, reflecting the strategic considerations of the 1970s and the 1980s. The Fifth and Ninth Divisions were, and remain, stationed on the outskirts of the southern city of Daraa; the Fifteenth Division is located in Sweida, which is also in the south; six divisions are around Damascus; the Eleventh and Eighteenth Divisions are in Homs; and the Seventeenth Division is in Raqqa.

Over the course of the conflict, the Syrian army has held onto territory with far more success in areas with an entrenched *qutaa*. Even though large swaths of the country have fallen to opposition forces, all the army divisions have remained intact and continue to command their sectors. The only exception is the Seventeenth Division in Raqqa, which fell to the self-proclaimed Islamic State in the summer of 2014. Critically, the division was less entrenched in its sector than the others, given that it had only been established after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

In Aleppo Province, by contrast, army brigades were deployed in areas without military *qutaas* only to subsequently retreat under opposition advances. Similarly, in 2012 in Idlib Province, the regime set up a large military complex to house brigades and units from multiple divisions operating in the Mastouma area. The military base located there was not part of a long-standing sector, and it fell within a month after coming under siege in April 2015—the army withdrew without making a serious effort to hold its position. However, in the long-established *qutaas* of Daraa, the army's Fifth and Ninth Divisions have been under a longer and more brutal siege than in Idlib, yet they have held on to the area.<sup>14</sup>

## SUBCONTRACTING COMBAT

### Giving Infantry Missions to Paramilitary Forces

Since the war's onset, the relationship between the Syrian army and the Assad regime has changed significantly. While army personnel had long relied on the regime for benefits from patronage networks, the uprising has reversed this dependent relationship. The regime needs the army to keep a handle on the militias fighting on its behalf—also imbuing these armed groups with the mantle of defending the state and acting in the national interest. This is why the army, more than any other state institution, is central to the regime's claim to be the legitimate steward of the country through the conflict.<sup>15</sup> Should the army collapse, the regime would certainly follow shortly thereafter.

Yet even before 2011, young Syrian men were finding numerous ways to avoid military service—something that later hindered the regime's ability to wage long-term combat operations. Young Syrians regularly pursued means to evade military duty, including attending university, working abroad for years on end in the Persian Gulf, paying a \$5,000 exemption,<sup>16</sup> or fleeing Syria entirely.

Understanding the army's importance, the regime had to address this manpower shortage. To entice more recruits, the government shortened the length of mandatory military service in 2005 from two and a half years to two years. But the government's neoliberal reforms made the private sector a more lucrative option—even for Alawites.

The regime also took the unprecedented step in the fall of 2011 of retaining its active service members until 2016, dubbed Class 102, and merely providing them a monthly salary between \$60 and \$100 as noncommissioned officers.<sup>17</sup> Yet even this measure was insufficient, and the regime increasingly resorted to setting up and using paramilitary groups.

The Military Service Law, the legal framework officially governing the army, made the use of paramilitary groups possible because it permits “auxiliary forces” (*quwwat fariyyah*) and “other forces that are necessitated by circumstances” to fight alongside the army.<sup>18</sup> Militias fall in the latter category because they are deemed autonomous armed groups working in the military's framework. The regime mobilized recruits to establish paramilitary groups that appeared autonomous but were actually operating under army supervision.

Overall, paramilitary recruitment has been far more successful than army conscription, as it tends to occur through local, informal networks and familial or community ties. These groups also offer better pay—30,000 Syrian pounds compared to the 18,000 Syrian pounds per month for a regular soldier (or \$136 compared to less than \$81). Paramilitary groups typically allow fighters to stay close to home—critical in a war where many fighters are far more interested in defending their

houses and communities than the regime. It's also easier to join a paramilitary group and then leave it, which is enticing for military-age men who might otherwise be conscripted for many years. The National Defense Force (NDF) in the city of Homs is a prime example of the regime's ability to mobilize Syrians via paramilitary groups. By mid-2013, the NDF of Homs and its surrounding areas had attracted as many as 30,000 fighters under the leadership of Saqir Rustum, an Alawite trained as a civil engineer who was the nephew of Bassam al-Hassan, the Republican Guard officer who established the NDF. Rustum had no previous military background.

Broadly speaking, these paramilitary forces can be categorized in one of two ways: those groups strongly linked to the regime's security apparatus and the Republican Guard through General al-Hassan, and those personally connected to the Assad family and private businesses. So, when al-Hassan was forming the NDF, Rami Makhoulf was using private funds to start Al-Bostan Committee for Charity Work. Although initially a charitable foundation, it later developed a security branch, mostly recruiting Alawites from the sect's coastal heartland in Latakia and Tartus. The Desert Falcons (Suqur al-Sahra), another force, was privately established by Mohammad Jabr, a businessman with close links to the regime. Centered around powerful personalities, these militias have a mafioso style. NDF members often refer to al-Hassan as the maternal uncle (el-Khal). Similarly, Mohamed Mansour, a retired noncommissioned officer who heads the 5,000-strong NDF force in Raqqa, is called the paternal uncle (el-Am).<sup>19</sup>

From 2012 onward, these paramilitary forces have proliferated across Syria, ranging in size from ten to 40,000 members. Some have only been deployed in restricted territory, from the size of a neighborhood to an entire region, and were quickly set up and dismissed according to the task at hand. Other paramilitary groups revealed a larger degree of internal organization and hierarchy, with a clear chain of command leading up to Damascus. While some are army battalions in all but name, others more closely resemble private contractors with narrow duties such as securing and manning checkpoints. In any case, paramilitary forces have protected the army from

exhaustion, and they display more internal coherence than the Syrian armed forces.

### **Army and Paramilitary Forces' Balancing Act**

The regime has put a great deal of effort into managing the division of labor between the army and paramilitary groups and into maintaining the right balance of power between them. It has had to ensure that the paramilitary forces remain dependent on the army, lest it risk being overruled in decisionmaking capacity or seen as losing credibility. First and foremost, this entails sustaining the army's qualitative edge in weapons funding and distribution. In particular, Damascus has ensured that the army maintains its monopoly of sophisticated heavy weaponry, with paramilitary groups receiving only light weaponry or the occasional armored vehicle.

Similarly, ex-army officers tasked with channeling weapons (intidab) to paramilitary groups often direct them and select their deployment based on ground developments and military strategy. For instance, Bassam al-Hassan established the NDF but tasked Hawash Mohammed, an army officer, to lead the force. In Shaar, an area close to Homs, the Bostan forces fall operationally and administratively under the local army's qutaa. Army officers also coordinate Bostan's logistics with the Eighteenth Division.

In cases when conflict between paramilitary groups and the Syrian army has arisen, the regime has been quick to step in. After tensions flared up between the local NDF branch and army units in Homs, the regime prohibited anyone over thirty-five years old from remaining an NDF member. Many lost their salaried positions or joined other pro-regime paramilitary forces located elsewhere. The local branch's fighting force subsequently dropped below 5,000 men, a decrease that neutralized the risk it could have posed to the army or to the regime's authority.<sup>20</sup>

Yet at the same time, territorial losses have pushed the regime to increasingly rely on paramilitary groups to stem the loss and regain credibility. Although the army had been on the front lines during the early stages of the conflict, this ended

after the battle of Baba Amr in Homs in 2012, where the army experienced heavy casualties. The 2013 battle of Khalidiya, another neighborhood in Homs, highlighted the regime's new approach: the militias were charged with dislodging the rebel forces while the army supported them from behind, ready to assert control once the fighting was over. As paramilitary groups were mostly managing the ground operation, the regime could focus more on its superior armaments and air power. The army has since repeatedly assisted paramilitary operations with heavy weapons across the country, from an army-backed siege of Daraa to the deployment of tanks in Baba Amr to the barrel bombing campaign against opposition-held areas in Aleppo.

For its part, the Syrian army's open support of the regime has polarized society's views of the military institution. While opposition factions began to call it the Army of Assad (Jaysh al-Assad), the regime has framed the war as a struggle against external interference and terrorism. The army's resilience through five years of warfare has bolstered this narrative. Indeed, for many Syrians living in regime-controlled areas—irrespective of their political views—the army has come to represent law and order. Ironically, corruption has never been worse in its ranks and the use of heavy weapons against civilian areas so widespread.

## FOREIGN INTERVENTION THROUGH THE SYRIAN ARMY

Foreign support from the regime's international backers, Russia and Iran, has been key to enabling the army to adapt throughout the conflict, particularly through financial aid and human resources. Both allies have provided logistical support to the army in addition to establishing a myriad of new paramilitary corps that strengthen but do not supplant the army.

Russia in particular has insisted on providing military assistance through preexisting army channels. Historically, the Russian Federation and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, had

close and pragmatic ties with the Syrian Arab Republic; the Baathist regime in Damascus was preeminent among Moscow's few allies in the Middle East. The Syrian army has benefited from Russian technical and financial support since its creation in 1946 under Soviet supervision.<sup>21</sup> In 2005, Russia forgave \$10 billion in debt out of a total \$13 billion owed for the modernization of Syria's military with Russian equipment. Syria's budget for weapons procurement also quadrupled during the following four years, almost half of which was spent on Russian matériel.<sup>22</sup> Its support for the Syrian army has continued into the current conflict: in January 2012 alone, the regime received 60 tons of ammunition from Moscow.<sup>23</sup>

Most prominently, Russia entered the Syrian fray directly in the fall of 2015 to complement the army's existing structures. In part spurred by the needs of the Russian air campaign to have closer coordination with ground forces, Russia, in tandem with regime figures, established a new unit called the Fourth Corps that blends army and militia forces. Based in Latakia, this group brings together Syrian regime-affiliated paramilitary forces (such as the NDF and Tiger Forces) under the joint supervision of Syrian, Russian, and Iranian officers.

Iran has, by contrast, played a more active role in the proliferation of militias, all of which work in the Syrian army's military framework despite having a certain degree of independence. Thus, the various army divisions have retained their jurisdiction over their sectors, while foreign assistance has boosted the fighting ability of frontline militias. Whether these militias are newly established entities or were independent groups prior to the war, as in the case of Hezbollah, they operate in Syria only with the regime's blessing and under the command structure of the army. Louaih Mouhala, a powerful Alawite general, has been a critical conduit between the Iranian embassy in Damascus and the Syrian army in this regard. His role is exemplary of how the regime's informal command chains can bypass the army's formal hierarchy, reacting with speed and agility to developing events while also ensuring the army's structure remains intact.

One example came at the beginning of 2015, when a regime-affiliated division commander requested Iranian support to retrain the Sixty-Seventh Brigade from the army's Eleventh Division, with the division stationed in Homs and the brigade charged with defending the area north of the Qalamoun Mountains. Mouhala facilitated the Iran-based Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' rapid intervention. The Iranians paid each of their trainers almost double what an ordinary Syrian officer would receive and provided them with Revolutionary Guard uniforms, which helped foster the impression that the Sixty-Seventh Brigade had become an Iranian proxy unit. The brigade was later redeployed with the Eleventh Division under its command and logistic structure.<sup>24</sup> While the Iranians clearly left their mark on this brigade, it was also apparent that their intervention was at the behest of the Syrian army and that they deferred to the army's structural apparatus.

Another example includes the commandos (*maghawir*), a branch of the NDF that was established in 2012 by prominent regime figures and Iranian trainers as a mobile fighting force capable of quick interventions across a wide zone of operations. Although part of the NDF, its officers are trained in army facilities and are barred from carrying out autonomous operations. The *maghawir* may only be deployed at the request of army commanders, and even then only on short assignments exclusively in support of regular army units. Thus, this ostensibly independent, Iranian-backed fighting unit still operates in the framework of the Syrian army's overarching command structure.<sup>25</sup>

With these outside influences, opportunism has replaced professionalism and military doctrine. Syrian officers have often changed their clothing and behavior depending on the foreign military with which they work. Those serving in divisions receiving Russian military aid use the Russian military lexicon, while it is common for those cooperating with Iranian advisers to button up their shirt collars, which is standard Iranian Revolutionary Guard attire. An officer serving in a division advised by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, joking about his colleagues' tendency to mimic Iranian military advisers, said that

the "Syrian army has become a *husseiniyah*," or a congregational hall where Shia celebrate religious ceremonies. Similarly, officers refer to Iranian military advisers and Hezbollah militias as "the friends" (*al-asdiqa*).<sup>26</sup>

## AN ARMY OF OFFICERS

The Syrian army has suffered from a continuous loss of professional capacity since the start of the war. Its core is now made up of an officer class that is marked by corruption and is more Alawite than ever before. As significantly, the army's noncommissioned officers have watched their duties be outsourced to paramilitary groups and militias.

Noncommissioned officers are often the backbone of an army, but in Syria their professional capacity and military status was already low prior to 2011 and has since deteriorated further. They have mostly been consigned to administrative tasks, without access to the benefits and opportunities enjoyed by both officers and paramilitary personnel. Young men serving the regime see the paramilitary groups and militias as more attractive options that offer a sense of belonging to a defined group, better pay, and the opportunity to extort money from citizens and traders who must pass through their manned checkpoints.

Additionally, the war has sparked a sharp decrease in the real value of officer salaries (which fell from the \$400–\$800 range to \$100–\$200) even as it has generated new opportunities for enrichment through corruption. The Syrian pound has lost about 80 percent of its pre-war value.<sup>27</sup> As a result, officers are increasingly resorting to collecting bribes from conscripts in exchange for allowing them to avoid military service. Mid- to high-ranking officers with ties to the regime have also expanded their patronage networks by overseeing militias and channeling foreign support. For instance, the officer tasked with coordinating between the army and the Bostan charitable foundation in Homs receives an additional \$100 from the Makhlof-led militia on top of his regular pay.<sup>28</sup>

Officers can also extract benefits by managing militia-held checkpoints. Indeed, the proliferation of checkpoints has generated revenue for both officers and militiamen. Syrians have nicknamed some of these lucrative checkpoints at the entrance of Damascus or Raqqa “the 1 million checkpoint” (*hajiz al-milion*), referring to the extraordinary amount of money that is collected in bribes from civilians wanting to travel through it. Traders willing to transport merchandise—especially food products—across the country have to pay taxes to the customs offices (*makatib al-tarfiq*) located in Damascus, as well as in the provinces they are transiting for NDF members to accompany them and to facilitate their passage through checkpoints. Army officers in charge of NDF units get direct benefits from the customs fees, keeping some of them for themselves and redistributing the rest among the militia fighters.

Recruits selected for officer training have taken on a pronounced sectarian and localized identity: they are exclusively Alawite and largely hail from the coastal regions of Latakia and Tartus.<sup>29</sup> Since 2011, 10,000 new students have enrolled in Syria’s military education system, which has been shortened from three to two years. When the uprising began, three classes of recruits (from 2008 to 2010) were already enrolled in the Military College in Homs. From 2011 to 2015, the Military College continued to select recruits for officer training, adding one class each year, from class 67 to class 71.<sup>30</sup>

While the officer corps has long favored Alawites, it was by no means an exclusively Alawite institution. After all, the army remains officially secular and bars overt displays of sectarian affiliation. Before the 2011 uprising, for example, the Military Academy in Aleppo and the Military College in Homs accepted several hundred applicants per year from diverse backgrounds.

Although an entry quota system for the Military College favored recruits from Alawite-populated provinces (Hama, Homs, Latakia, and Tartus), entry was open to all groups. The army’s shift to security-vetted Alawite applicants has not

been acknowledged publicly but is now the army’s de facto recruitment policy. Notably, the Military College draws most of its recruits from the Alawite coastal region rather than from Homs, a city that was ravaged early on by urban warfare where Alawites had opted to join the NDF rather than the army. This evolution will steer the future of the Syrian army so that its top tiers are populated by coastal Alawites, regardless of whether the regime survives.

In any case, the dominance by Alawites in the officer corps is the result of both practical requirements and a shifting regime strategy. First, the Military Academy was relocated in 2014 from the overwhelmingly Sunni city of Aleppo to Jableh near Latakia, in which a large percentage of the pre-war population was Alawite. The inability of most Syrians to move freely around the country makes it more difficult for people living outside Latakia to take the requisite military entrance exams. Also, the process of obtaining the necessary security clearance makes it very difficult to recruit non-Alawites. Not only are newcomers subject to greater political and security scrutiny but so are their immediate and extended families. This heavily disadvantages potential Sunni recruits, who are far more likely to have a relative who is a member of an opposition group or is suspected of belonging to one. Security vetting includes verifying information from local officials (*mukhtars*) who provide bureaucratic services for villages and urban neighborhoods.

## CONCLUSION

The army has become vastly more corrupt, less professional, and more isolated from wider society in the five years since the start of the Syrian conflict. The military networks of nepotism and patronage, already deeply entrenched before the 2011 uprising, have transformed the army and especially the officer corps into kleptocratic organizations. The deprofessionalization of the army and the unfolding war have further hollowed out the army institutionally, leaving the officers little option but to collude with regime networks and cash in on the corruption to



compensate for their low salaries. And as the army becomes less professional, the more it has to rely on Alawite recruits to help offset the army's organizational deficiencies.

Yet, the army's paradoxical resilience has been essential for the Assad regime's survival. Subcontracting the ground operations to paramilitary forces has allowed the army to avoid many battlefield losses. It has also helped to prevent mass defections and to bolster the army's image as a stalwart pillar of national unity among regime supporters.

Should substantive negotiations to end the Syrian conflict finally take place, neither the regime nor the opposition has any interest in dismantling the army, as this would likely bring about the total collapse of the Syrian state and renew the war. The regime has used this fact to its advantage: by ensuring the army remains deprofessionalized, it has secured officers' dependence and prolonged its influence via parallel command chains.

And yet the army's symbiotic relationship with the regime has been entirely detrimental to its capability and cohesion and must be addressed. Simply purging Alawite officers or reversing their dominance with de facto sectarian or ethnic quotas would likely fail. A more effective approach for any new government in Syria would be to invest in systematically reprofessionalizing the officer corps. This would help reduce the officers' dependence on regime networks, thereby weakening the regime's grip on the army. Admittance to the Military College and the Military Academy should also certainly be taken out of the control of the security agencies and not be based on their preferences. This would ensure equal opportunity for applicants from all communities and regions in Syria, and it should be accompanied by tightening entrance requirements. In parallel, the role and status of noncommissioned officers should be strengthened, with better training and increased avenues for promotion.

In the end, incentivizing the corporate identity of and loyalty to a united national military institution would promote acceptance of the political transition process.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, this regional insight is based on interviews conducted by the author and data compiled between June 2015 and January 2016 in Syria.
2. Volker Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: State Building, National Security, and War Preparation in Syria," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 149–73.
3. Kheder Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 4, 2015.
4. Author interview with a retired officer, Beirut, April 2015.
5. Author observation, Damascus, May 2011.
6. Author interview with a retired officer, Beirut, April 2015.
7. Author interview with a former army conscript, Beirut, March 2014.
8. Hicham Bou Nassif, "'Second-Class': The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 626–49.
9. Based on data compiled for this regional insight in Syria, August 2015.
10. Author observation, Homs, May 2011. See also: "Qawaim bi aktar min 63 alf bitaqa shurta al-nidham wazaa ala mukhabarateh" [Lists of more than 63,000 police ID the regime distributed to its intelligence], *Zaman al-Wasal*, August 4, 2015, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/63064.html>.
11. See the pamphlet "Al-mahaam al-qaed fi-l maarika al-haditha" [The commander mission in the modern battle], part of the military school's education program.
12. Author observation, Damascus, 2011.
13. Bashir Zein al-Abydin, *Al-Jaysh wa al-Siasa* [Army and politics] (London: Dar al-Jabya, 2008), 460.
14. Author interview through a consultant with an army officer in the Fifth Division, Damascus, February 2015.
15. On the regime's hold over the state, see: Kheder Khaddour, "The Assad Regime's Hold on the Syrian State," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 8, 2015.
16. See "Qanun rakm 30, al-mutalaq bi-khidma al-alam" [Law number 30, relating to general conscription], *Syria Today*, May 31, 2007, <http://www.syriatoday.ca/law-30-army.htm>.
17. See "Al-Daura 102: maalaha wa ma aleya: ismaw sawtahum" [The Class 102: what they have and what they have to give, listen to their voice], *Sham Times*, March 26, 2015, <http://www.shaatimes.net/news-detailz.php?id=26706>.
18. See Syrian Bar Association, "Qanun al-khidma al-askaryia" [Military service law], April 21, 2003, last updated July 2010, <http://www.syrianbar.org/index.php?news=150>.

19. Author interview with an Al-Bostan Committee for Charity Work member (via Skype), September 2015.
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28. Data compiled inside Syria, June 2015.
29. See the official Facebook page for the Military College in Homs, last accessed February 18, 2016: <https://www.facebook.com/-656863594348540-الكلية-الحربية-السورية-الدورة-71-طلاب-ضباط-/?fref=ts>.
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*This regional insight was prepared as part of the 2014–2015 Renegotiating Civil-Military Relations in Arab States: Political and Economic Governance in Transition Project run by the Carnegie Middle East Center. The project sought to promote research on armed forces in Arab states and on the challenges of democratic transition.*

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*The Carnegie Middle East Center is grateful to International Development Research Center (IDRC) for their support of the Civil-Military Relations in Arab States project. The opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author.*

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