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Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?

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SYRIA IN CRISIS
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SUMMARY Assad seems to be giving up on the reintegration of rebel-held Syria into the state apparatus. Thus, entrenching himself among the militias and what remains of his army, he has precious little left to offer anyone else—no carrot, only stick.

In a recent report for Open Democracy, Dutch journalists Robert Dulmers and Teun Voeten tell of a recent trip through the parts of Syria still held by President Bashar al-Assad's forces. Embedded with the Syrian military, they traveled by car from the capital Damascus via the reconquered city of Homs to Aleppo in the north, and back.

These cities, the country's three largest, are at the core of Syria in every way: politically, culturally, economically, and, of course, demographically. Assad's dominance over the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo axis, in addition to the coastal areas, Hama City, large parts of the south, and even a few small pockets in the northeast (Qamishli, Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor), underscores that he remains the central actor of this war. He is the ruler of not exactly Syria, but of "useful Syria," a potentially economically viable region encompassing at least two-thirds of the country's population.

But what about the state of the regime itself? The most interesting part of Dulmers and Voeten's account is their brief insider view of the pro-Assad forces. "In 12 days travelling some 1,200 km, except for special forces in Aleppo we hardly saw anything of the regular army," they write, noting that most of the many checkpoints and bases along the road were manned by locally recruited militias.

The "Shabiha" Phenomenon

The slow "militiafication" of Assad's Syrian state has been going on since the start of the conflict in 2011, when so-called Popular Committees spawned spontaneously or were recruited by intelligence services and pro-Assad businessmen all over Syria, mirroring the mobilization of anti-government demonstrators. The opposition (and much of the international media, which at the time listened to no one else) called these militias "shabiha," a vague term meaning approximately pro-Assad thugs, and dismissed them as a few thousand paid gangsters or members of the Alawite sect, the minority group to which Assad also belongs. But this was an underestimation of the Assad regime's social roots. The "shabiha" phenomenon was no mere Alawite militia, but representative of a genuine popular mobilization of a significant minority of Syria's population in favor of the regime, partly—but by no means exclusively—on a sectarian basis.

Very early in 2011, the government began to use money and services to buy the allegiance of unemployed youth, and to distribute guns, cars, and security clearances to trusted loyalists and their

families, essentially weaponizing the vast web of client networks constructed over four decades of Assad family rule.

Recruits included army families, Baathist true believers, intelligence-backed goon squads, religious minority communities, certain Sunni Arab tribes, and other local interests that either depended on the Assad regime or feared a takeover by the Sunni Arab–dominated rebellion. Initially tasked with putting down demonstrations and patrolling their own neighborhoods for signs of dissent, the Popular Committees—sometimes armed only with bats and knives—gradually took on local authority and developed into armed militias, as the state shrank from view and the opposition became militarized.

To this was added, especially after 2013, an influx of highly effective Shia Islamist foreign fighters trained and supported by Iran and its regional proxies. Lebanon's Hezbollah militia is the best known and probably the most important of these groups, but it is far from the only one. Iraqi factions have also sent fighters to Syria, including the Badr Organization, which currently controls the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and holds sway over much of Iraq's internal security apparatus, as well as the Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, a splinter group from the Shia movement led by Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and many others.

Syrian Pro-Assad Militias

For the most part, however, the militias are made up of locally recruited Syrians organized into a perplexing variety of groups:

The National Defense Forces (NDF): By far the largest militia network in Syria, the NDF was created through the rebranding, restructuring, and merging of local Popular Committees and other pro-Assad armed groups starting in 2012. Numerous reports point to Iranian funding and training of NDF factions, including Alawite- and Christian-dominated groups in the Homs region, and even some Sunni Arab tribal groups in the far east of the country. The NDF network is organized under provincial commanders like Fadi Saqr, who runs the NDF in the Damascus region, but seem to be loosely overseen by a national coordinator—reportedly Brigadier-General Ghassan Nassour, a powerful officer based in Damascus. Reflecting the bottom-up organization of the movement, local branches seem to act with considerable autonomy and to be less than cohesive on the provincal level, though the state of NDF forces varies considerably across the country. While some NDF units are heavily armed with tanks and rocket launchers, and appear to function like military formations, others are poorly disciplined semi-criminal or sectarian gangs in civilian attire.

The Baath Battalions: The only militia apart from the NDF that seems to have any real national level organization, the Baath Battalions is organized as an armed wing of Syria's ruling party. The Baath Battalions was created by former Aleppo party chief Hilal Hilal, the Baath Party's current deputy head, when he was co-organizing the defense of the city against the rebels in summer and autumn of 2012. The group remains strongest in Aleppo, but branches have since been created in Damascus, Latakia, Tartous, Hasakah, and probably other governorates too.

The Jerusalem Brigade: Now one of the main pro-government militias in the Aleppo region alongside the Baath Battalions, the Jerusalem Brigade was formed through the reorganization of Palestinian auxiliaries from the Neirab refugee camp in northwest Syria. No longer an exclusively Palestinian militia, it has grown into a powerful frontline force in Aleppo.

The Syrian Resistance: In northern Latakia, a Turkish exile known as Ali Kayali (his real name is Mihrac Ural) organized a small militia called the Syrian Resistance, which—even if overshadowed on the ground by the local NDF—runs a very active media campaign. While it publicly espouses the far-left ideology and the Syrian nationalist demands of its founder, it seems to function as an Alawite sectarian group.

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP): In the Homs region and elsewhere, a branch of the small, pseudo-Fascist Syrian Social Nationalist Party, which operates in both Lebanon and Syria, has come to the aid of the regime, implanting itself particularly among the region's Christians.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC): In the refugee camps of Damascus, Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, a 1968 splinter from the Palestinian Marxist group known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, has kept up its long-standing alliance with the Syrian Baathist regime. PFLP-GC members started out by quietly policing dissent in the refugee camps in 2011 alongside smaller, pro-Assad Palestinian groups like al-Saiqa (the Palestinian branch of the Baath Party) and Fatah al-Intifada (a 1980s splinter from Yasser Arafat's Fatah), but they now operate as an armed formation alongside the army, the NDF, and the pro-Assad Shia militias.

This is far from an exhaustive list. Other militias include the Desert Falcons, reportedly led by Colonel Mohammed Jaber; the Commandos, a Sunni Arab tribal militia in the Qamishli-Hasakah region; various Druze non-NDF groups in the Sweida Province; the secular pan-Arabists of the Arab Nationalist Guards; and many others. There are also haphazardly organized clan-based or semi-criminal groups and units of hired fighters with no name or fixed structure, and auxiliary forces organized by individual commanders from the regular army or by one of the regime's many intelligence services. All in all, the various pro-Assad armed groups probably number in the hundreds, although many formally operate under the NDF or another umbrella.

Can Assad Control the Militias?

In 2015, it seems rare for a government offensive to be based on military units alone. Rather, on the major battlefronts, pro-Assad forces typically seem to operate in clusters of units involving local militias, foreign fighters, and more or less mobile elite units led by individually powerful "star commanders" like Colonel Soheil al-Hassan in Aleppo or Brigadier-General Issam Zahreddine in Deir ez-Zor.

Exact numbers are nowhere to be found, but the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated in mid-2013 that the regular army had lost half of its forces, shrinking from 220,000 before the war to approximately 110,000 in 2013, not including militias. In fact, the situation may well be similar to that in Iraq after June 2014. The Washington Post recently cited U.S. and Iraqi estimates that only some 48,000 men remain in the hollowed-out Iraqi army, which is overshadowed by pro-Iranian Shia militias with some 100,000-120,000 fighters who are funded but not controlled by the government.

"After this crisis, there will be a 1,000 more crises—the militia leaders," a Syrian government official told Time magazine in 2013. "Two years ago, they went from nobody to somebody with guns and power. How can we tell these shabiha to go back to being a nobody again?"

So far, there have been no major instances of infighting among pro-Assad forces in Syria, though there is a constant trickle of reports—often difficult to verify—about minor clashes and insubordination. In a regime as fundamentally corrupt as the Syrian one, it is no surprise that local commanders play a major role in the war economy, just like their counterparts on the rebel side, often self-financing through protection rackets, looting, and organized crime. Additionally, some of the most efficient militia groups enjoy sponsorship from abroad, particularly from Iran, and may ultimately prove more loyal to Tehran than to Damascus, in so far as there is any daylight between them.

In the long run, Assad will be forced to adapt his policies to suit these newly empowered militia commanders if he is to retain their support. Measures have already been taken to prevent splits and dissent. The creation of the NDF was one such step, as it sought to reinstitutionalize a chaotic militia movement and connect it more firmly to the central government. And while the NDF may be Iranian-backed and perhaps under partial Iranian influence, the regime has made sure to keep some sort of central command node in Damascus and to keep key militia groups under close control (Bashar's cousin Hilal al-Assad led the Latakia branch of the NDF until his death in March 2014). Additionally, as described by Carnegie's Kheder Kheddour, the government has set up a number of economic and social institutions to enmesh civilian militia fighters and their families in the state.

But concessions will cut closer to the bone as Assad's economy crumbles. When there is no more money to share, he will have to share power. And the more the militias are integrated within the state, the more the state itself comes under the sway of the communities and interests represented by them—violent, parochial, often sectarian or tribal, and sometimes criminal.

Never was this problem more clearly illustrated than in December 2014, when Assad decreed that 50 percent of all state jobs must henceforth be reserved for the families of "martyrs" from the security forces and militias. As a way of ensuring the loyalty of the regime's most important constituency, it makes perfect sense. But it also shows that Assad is giving up on the reintegration of rebel-held Syria into the state apparatus. Thus entrenching himself among the militias and what remains of his army, he has precious little left to offer anyone else—no carrot, only stick.

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