

Roots of fragmentation: The army and regime survival in Syria

The Syrian army did not turn on the regime in the face of popular protests, contrary to its Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts. Yet, the Syrian army lost its ability to keep the country together. This CMI Insight focuses on the Syrian army's co-optive political function. Drawing on interviews with defected military officers,¹ it provides a window to observe how the Assad regime has used the army to maintain stability in Syria. The interviews also help us understand the root causes of the nation's fragmentation.

Control over the repressive apparatus is the sine qua non of regime survival.² Yet the military's ability to maintain stability goes beyond the prevention of the occurrence of coups. This CMI Insight argues that the Syrian army has mattered for stability in ways that has gone beyond the enforcement of repression, serving as a balancing instrument and a privilege distribution tool.

The army in society



The Syrian army is a conscript army where all male members of society above the age of 18 are expected to serve. It also offers career opportunities for volunteers who enrol in military or air force academies. The military academy in Homs was founded in 1933 by the French and has formed generations of infantry officers. It became an important springboard for social mobility.

FROM THE PROVINCES

Officers in the Syrian army are predominantly from the countryside. After the Ba'thist revolution replaced the old military elite it is rare to find sons of the traditional urban quarters in Aleppo, Homs or Damascus in the officer ranks. Until the civil war broke out the military personnel was primarily deployed along the border with Israel. Provincial officers brought

their families with them and often settled in the outskirts of Damascus.³ Hafiz al-Assad allowed the construction of informal housing to assist the lower class families. Access to health care and hospitals was relatively better for officers and their families. They could also obtain subsidised goods and housing through organisations like the military social establishment⁴ and the military housing establishment.⁵

'ALAWIS AND SUNNIS

The army offered stable income and the prospect of a better life for young men in the provinces. It not least appealed to the members of the 'Alawi community that historically had been the country's poorest. Whereas the wealthy took advantage of the right to buy exemption from military service in force until 1964, the rural, mostly peasant,

'Alawis saw in the army an opportunity for social promotion.⁶ They were originally concentrated in the lower ranks of the army but rose to prominence in the shadow of the Ba'thist revolution (1963-1970).⁷

The military career was also attractive to members of the other communities. A defected Sunni colonel from the village of Khan Shaykhun, north of Hama, who joined the military academy in Homs in 1983, described his reason for enlisting as follows: "I used to admire officers. They were the elite. I saw they were living comfortable lives and that people had esteem for them. When an officer came walking down the street everyone would follow him with their eyes."⁸ The fact that Hafiz and his brother Rif'at al-Assad had crushed a Sunni Muslim brotherhood rebellion one year earlier in next-door Hama did not affect the officer's career choice. He explained that he used to consider the army a national institution and that he had believed the regime's account of the battle in Hama as a fight against terrorism.⁹ There was an effective state media monopoly in Syria in 1982.

Balancing instrument

Hafiz al-Assad gained control over Syria and the Ba'th party in a coup he called the "corrective movement" of 1970. He had climbed the military ranks to the post of air force commander and established a power base in the air force intelligence division. His take-over was the last in a series of coups in the 1950s and 1960s that empowered officers with a rural background. Hafiz succeeded in taming the military where others had failed before him.

COUP-PROOFING

In a frequently referred to article on the topic, James T. Quinnivan described the essence of Hafiz al-Assad's "coup-proofing" as: the exploitation of special loyalties; the creation of parallel militaries; and the establishment of multiple security services.¹⁰ The first implied that the president relied on members of his family, tribe and religious community to control the security apparatus. Hafiz entrusted the most central armed forces to persons who were tied to him by blood such as his brothers, Rif'at and Jamil al-Assad, and his cousin, 'Adnan al-Assad. Parallel military units were established to counterweight the regular armed forces. And the president created four parallel security agencies—the General Security, Political Security, Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence—

to "watch everyone, including other security agencies."¹¹

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SOCIAL COMMUNITY QUOTAS

According to former Brigadier-General Manaf Tlass, who defected from the elite Republic Guard in January 2012 and was personally close to the current president, there was another key component in the coup-proofing strategy: Hafiz al-Assad flanked every leader in the security forces with

members of a different social identity segment. His main recruitment pools for officers were the four big 'Alawi tribes, al-Kalbiyya, al-Khayyatin, al-Haddadin, and al-Matawirah. Manaf Tlass estimates that, out of Syria's 40,000 officers, 30,000 would be 'Alawi, 8,000 Sunni and 2,000 from other religious minorities such as the Christian, Druze and Ismaili ones.¹² The president made sure to balance the distribution of posts among the 'Alawi tribes and other identity groups according to an informal

"quota" system. For example, in designating generals for the army's seven divisions he would prefer to have a Kalbiyya, a Khayyatin, a Haddadin, a Matawirah, a Sunni, a Christian, and a Druze. The same principle would apply for officers in the security services.

The balancing system was also enforced within the military units. If the head of a division was Sunni, his deputies would typically be an 'Alawi and a Christian, but never

other Sunnis. Their deputies again would be Sunni, Druze, Ismaili or 'Alawis from different tribes.¹³ The army structure was in other words based on internal contradictions to prevent concerted movement from below. Short of orders from the man on the top, any attempt to mobilise the army from within would provoke its falling apart.

GROWING IMBALANCE

According to Manaf al-Tlass, the internal balance was upset after Bashar al-Assad came to power. Bashar reduced the presence of Sunnis in the army's commanding positions which in the defected brigadier-general's view was a fatal mistake:

For 30 years Hafiz al-Asad was commander-in-chief of the army, surrounded by two Sunni deputies, Mustafa Tlass from Rastan and Hikmat Shihabi from al-Bab, in the Aleppo countryside. The two were rivals, competing with each other. He also maintained the Sunni Najib Jamil from

the outskirts of Deir-e Zour in a prominent position. In 2009, Bashar al-Asad was the army's supreme commander. His minister of defence, 'Ali Habib, was an 'Alawi and so was his deputy, again 'Ali 'Ayyub. The chief of staff of the armed forces, Dawud Rajiha, was a Christian while his deputies, 'Asif Shawkat and Munir Adnuf, were both 'Alawis. The first Sunni to appear in this hierarchy was Fahd Jasim al-Frej as the seventh or eighth most influential person.¹⁴

Privilege distribution tool

The informal quota system did more than preventing the occurrence of coups. It also provided a system for the distribution of "rewards." Hafiz al-Assad used the army in a clientelist political strategy that involved the generation and distribution of economic rents. The military build-up served to generate rents in the sense that it increased Syria's strategic importance to great powers like the former Soviet Union and regional powers like Iran. Syria gained the role of "frontline state" with Israel and the West and would request military and financial assistance from its allies to keep the enemies at bay.

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ARMY EXPANSION AND RENTS

Following the 1973 October War, the Syrian armed forces expanded remarkably to 430,000 forces in the early 1990s. Military personnel equalled 1.3 per cent of the population in 1970, rose to 3.5 in the late 1980s, and later stabilised at around 2 per cent.¹⁵ Syria became a player in the Cold War and later indispensable for the Iran-Hezbollah resistance. As a consequence it could build its repressive apparatus without exhausting domestic resources. Volker Perthes argues that Hafiz al-Assad used war threats and the militarisation of state and society to stabilise the political system.¹⁶

The army's role as a rent allocation institution was no less important for large parts of the population as it connected them to the privilege distribution of the regime. The formal benefits of military employment, such as access to health care and housing, were only part of this privilege distribution. For many officers unregulated patronage was in fact a far more important source of revenue. The army offered opportunities—and cover—for a range of unlawful activities. All the defectors interviewed for this insight concur that corruption in the army was indeed pervasive.

UNREGULATED PATRONAGE

Officers could make money from trading. The security atmosphere combined with the protectionist nature

of the Syrian economy to privilege members of the security apparatus in business transactions. Officers were prevented from importing goods in their names but would enter into informal partnerships with traders who gained access and support (*wasta*) in the corridors of power. Together they were able to evade Syria's heavy trade regulations, as a defected major elucidated:

I imported women's cosmetics from Dubai in cooperation with a Hama trader. I did not only contribute the *wasta* but also 50 per cent of the capital. We imported the goods through a company controlled by Rami Makhluף and Maher al-Assad so that we did not have to pay the import tax. The goods were imported to the Syrian Free Zone where the company would take charge of bringing them in. We paid \$6,000 directly to Rami Makhluף instead of \$20,000 which was the regular import fee. In this way we acquired competitiveness in the market, and the quality of our products was sought after.¹⁷

The major explained that he would have to bribe the security services to make them look the other way. His trading nevertheless remained a lucrative activity:

I was more of a trader than officer. My military salary was \$450.00/month. But I had two houses and two cars. I made \$3,000-5,000/months from trading.¹⁸

For officers without such entrepreneurial disposition, ordinary work within the military institution gave opportunities for unregulated patronage as well. Spoils could be gained from the management of resources and from the power officers had over their subordinates. The handling of valuable goods such as food, fuel, money and material was liable to rent seeking. Officers charged with administering resource distribution were sometimes able to keep a portion for themselves. The evasion spanned from "petty theft" that army personnel would justify with reference to their low salaries and high living costs to large-scale corruption committed at the hand of higher officers. Such practices had become so engrained that when the armed uprising set off, there were cases where officers on patrol would sell parts of their ammunition to the Free Syrian Army for personal profit.¹⁹

PERMANENT LEAVE

Money streamed from the power officers who had to relieve their subordinates from duty or conversely to impose nuisance. An illustration of the first is the

practice of granting conscripts permanent leave (*tafyish* in Syrian colloquial Arabic), which had become an informal institution. According to a sergeant who began his military service in 2010 and was ordered to remain in uniform until he defected in the late 2012, it was common for conscripts to “buy relief” after the first month of training. Specifically, of the 50 soldiers who had been enrolled in his group 15 became *mufayyish*, as they were called in jargon, meaning that they had bought themselves out of the entire service and were able to stay at home. The total price was in the range of 8–12,000 Syrian lira (US\$1600–2400) and a monthly share was handed to the head of the unit. It was so institutionalised that when the brigadier-general was replaced the new officer would simply take over the monthly payment.²⁰

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PETTY EXTORTION

Lower-ranking officers would have to settle for smaller favours. The sergeant explained that the colonel in charge of “political direction” (*tawjih siasi*) of his unit would collect 4 to 5 mobile phones from the recruits every day in order to extort compensations. Mobile phones were not allowed in the barracks according to formal regulations so the soldiers would have to present small gifts to the officer to be able to get them back.²¹ Another former soldier recalled that officers would trade with the conscripts’ rights to leave. In principle the recruits were allowed to see their families periodically. In reality the right to leave was contingent on the ability and willingness to bribe the officer who handled their request.²²

TACIT ACCEPTANCE

It may seem curious that the regime did not strike down on such unlawful practices. After all, the Syrian regime was known for its all-pervading surveillance and omnipotent intelligence apparatus. Clearly the banality of corruption in the army was not a secret to anyone. But the regime could not afford to alienate the corporate interests of a pivotal political pillar. All the more so because the purchasing power of Syrian officer salaries had fallen over the years. Discontent within the officer corps was latent, and allowing some rent seeking was a way for the regime to compensate. Several of the interviewees expressed that they had felt encouraged to engage in small-scale corruption. A former colonel in the Republican Guard saw this as a strategy to assure that he would stay quiet in the face of large-scale corruption. Everyone was to become an accomplice along with the men at the pyramid’s apex.²³

In the wider context the tacit acceptance of unregulated

patronage was part of the regime’s clientelist strategy. It gave 40,000 officers and their families a stake in the perpetuation of privilege networks. Conforming to the clientelist logic, the benefit distribution was made dependant on political loyalty. Those who overstepped “red lines” and provoked the ire of the intelligence services were blocked from patronage and could be held accountable for previous misbehaviour. A major who explained that he had long made requests for promotion—in vain—gave a vivid illustration of how this disciplining mechanism functioned:

In 2000 I was accused of internal opposition in the army. The reason? During Hafiz al-Assad’s funeral ceremony in the military barracks I exclaimed: “Is it only him who is dead? Turn off the TV! There will be someone better after him.” They held me for one and a half months in jail. My father helped me out. He had very good relations with the ‘Alawi elders due to his Ba’th party membership and high position in the public administration.

After this event they imposed surveillance on me for seven years. I could not proceed with any plan or request because I was under surveillance. In the end I performed a *dabke* [traditional dance] for Bashar in the 2007 presidential “yes campaign.” I cut the skin of all my fingers and voted for him with blood. Only then did they take the surveillance off my back.²⁴

Defections

Until the Arab uprisings, the carrot and stick approach kept officers (like the above “loose cannon”) in line and the military united. But from the April 2011 turning point, when the army was sent in to quell the uprising in Dara’a, defections started to take place. In late July, Colonel Riad As’ad declared the creation of the Free Syrian Army (*al-jaysh al-suri al-hurr*) in an online video, inspiring a wave of similar acts of defiance by other army personnel. Most of the deserters were soldiers and junior officers although some high-ranking defections occurred.²⁵ Those who raised their arms against the regime also had another trait in common: the vast majority was Sunni.²⁶

BREAKAWAY SUNNIS

The army’s bleeding of Sunnis is the consequence of brute regime repression in Sunni neighbourhoods and villages. The security forces used live ammunition from the early stage of protests and quickly escalated to artillery fire.

Sensing inaction from the international community they proceeded to deploy the air force and later even Scud missiles. The attacks targeted Sunni areas, hitting the home communities, friends and relatives of army officers. Even those who suffered no personal losses were affected as the public mood turned sharply against the military institution. In the words of a colonel who deserted his Aleppo post in late 2011, “being part of an army that killed randomly was becoming a source of shame (*eib*).”²⁷

RELATIVE DEPRIVATION

Beyond the trigger of acute and heavy-handed repression the defections fed on long-standing internal tensions. The Syrian Ba’th regime was founded on a non-sectarian discourse, but its practice was different altogether. Sunni officers developed feelings of relative deprivation. All interviewees denounced the systematic favouring of ‘Alawis within the armed forces. “The ‘Alawis have the networks it takes to get promotion and advantages of all kinds,” exclaimed a former fighter pilot, “the injustice has bothered me for 29 years!”²⁸ “How do you explain that, in a country where 80 per cent of the population is Sunni, only 20 per cent of army recruits hailed from this denomination?” a former member of the Special Forces asked rhetorically.²⁹

Most officers explained that they had nurtured different expectations and ideas when they became enrolled in the army. They had been influenced by the national discourse that emphasised patriotism and resistance to Israel. Many were astonished by the extent of sectarian differentiation within the military institution. A major who had wanted to become an officer since he was a child described his disillusionment when it dawned on him how decisions of military promotion were made:

When I came into the army I was disappointed. I discovered that we, as Sunnis, were considered to be third rank. The first rank was comprised of ‘Alawis with proximity to al-Assad. The second rank was other ‘Alawi officers and some of the minorities. The third consisted of us and the rest of the minorities. Then there was also a

fourth rank of Sunni officers with an Islamic inclination.³⁰

SECURITY SERVICES

Others confirmed that officers who professed their religious faith would attract the suspicion of the security agencies. As prayers were strictly prohibited in the barracks, a colonel explained that he would hide under the blanket in his bed to pray.³¹ In the defectors’ judgment the intelligence apparatus was ‘Alawi domination in its purest form. Its power over the military added to the officers’ sense of relative deprivation. The major introduced above experienced the security services’ grip and humiliation:

I had imagined that an army officer would have authority and prestige in society but Hafiz al-Assad had a strategy of lowering our morals. Security officers were always superior to army officers. They could convoke them at any time. In 2010, military officers were the weakest chain in the state apparatus. Any complaint from a citizen could lead to their dismissal. Officers were living with a constant feeling of insecurity [...] The Security Services could beat and humiliate an officer in front of his military unit. This became common after 2011. Officers like Naqib Hakam al-‘Eid, Musanna al-Muhammad and Firas al-Serafi were hand-tied and beaten in public.³²

BUILT-IN CONTRADICTION

There was in fact a built-in contradiction in Hafiz al-Assad’s political use of the army. On the one hand, he sought to prevent the occurrence of coups and placed members of his family, tribe and religious community in pivotal positions. On the other hand, he wanted to tie Sunnis to the system through patronage relations. The army was theoretically well placed to fill the latter stabilising function due to its national profile and reach. It epitomised the regime’s symbolic mission—resistance—and brought every subgroup of the nation together. However the imperative of coup-proofing worked against national integration and the appeasement of Sunnis. The army’s position was

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weakened vis-à-vis the security services and the Sunnis discriminated against within the military institution. The regime may have betted on the satisfaction of a “critical mass” of Sunni officers. But relative deprivation remained a source of dissatisfaction.³³ In the end, the strategy ran aground in the Arab uprisings.

Conclusion

Because no military unit per se turned against the regime and the higher officer corps remained predominantly loyal, the defections and creation of the Free Syrian Army did not result in the fall of Bashar al-Assad. However, the outcome was territorial fragmentation as lower-class neighbourhoods and the Sunni Muslim periphery slipped out of state control. I have argued that the Syrian army mattered for stability in ways that went beyond the enforcement of repression. It also served as a balancing instrument and privilege distribution tool. After 2011 the inter-confessional balance broke down and the army lost reach in co-opting the Sunnis. The regime has based its survival on repression and divide and rule.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Typical officer quarters were Sa'sa', Qatana, Qadam, Mazze 86, and Harasta.
- 2 Al-mu'assasa al-ijtima'iya al-'askariya.
- 3 Mu'assasat iskan al-'askariya.
- 4 Hanna Batatu, "Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria's Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance," *Middle East Journal*, 35: 3 (1981), 331-344.
- 5 Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996).
- 6 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East." *International Security*, 24:2 (1999), 131-165.
- 9 Ibid., 135.
- 10 Author's interview with Brigadier-General Manaf Tlass, January 10, 2014.
- 11 Manaf al-Tlass explained that in his case, as a Sunni brigadier-general in the Republican Guard, his second-in-command were Alawi and Druze, there were six Battalion chiefs, one Sunni, one Christian, and four Alawis from different tribes. Below them again, at the company level, he had 18 officers of different groups.
- 12 Interview with Brigadier-General Manaf Tlass, op. cit.
- 13 This included the gendarmerie and the Syrian contingent of the Palestine Liberation Army. See Volker Perthes, "Si Vis Stabilitatem, Para Bellum: State Building, National Security, and War Preparations in Syria," in *War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East*, Steven Heydemann, ed. (University of California Press, 2000), 98.
- 14 Volker Perthes, op. cit.
- 15 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Interview with Ra'id al-Naqshbandi, January, 10, 2014.
- 18 Author's interview, January 2014.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Author's interview, January 2014.
- 21 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 22 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 23 High-ranking defectors include Major General Muhammad al-Haj Ali, General Mustafa al-Shaykh, General Fayes Amro, Abdel Aziz Jasem al-Shallal, General Muhammad Nur 'Izz ad-Din Khalluf, and General 'Ali Habib.
- 24 According to a coordinating officer in the Free Syrian Army, merely one Christian, three 'Alawi, four Ismailis, and ten Druze officers, had as of March 2014 defected from the regime. Moreover, Christian Officer Marwan al-Qayd later rejoined the regime. Author's Skype interview, March 2014.
- 25 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 26 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 27 Author's Skype interview, March 2014.
- 28 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 29 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 30 Author's interview, February 2014.
- 31 Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

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