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Assad Rex?

Assessing the autonomy of Syrian armed groups fighting for the regime

President Assad is close to winning the Syrian civil war by not losing it. His security apparatus has, however, fragmented in the course of seven years of fighting. Today, Syrian loyalist militias fulfill important policing and warfighting roles. But what is the nature of these organizations and how loyal are they to the Syrian regime? The answers to such questions matter for Syria's reconstruction – where issues including local authority, human rights violations and security sector development are concerned.

Introduction¹

This brief assesses the autonomy of Syrian armed groups loyal to the regime of President Assad. The issue is important for several reasons. First, if these groups individually or collectively gain sufficient autonomy they will constrain the regime's ability to rule and, potentially, even challenge it. Second, it is likely that many of these groups will continue to exist in some form post-civil war and will therefore play a role in the reconstruction of Syria, constructive

or otherwise. Finally, as other conflicts such as the Balkans and Guatemala² have demonstrated, it is probable that some of these groups will morph (back) into criminal outfits – potentially with transnational dimensions.

¹ The author would like to express his gratitude to Nour Samaha (freelance journalist), Aron Lund (freelance journalist and The Century Foundation Fellow), Sam Heller (Syria analyst and The Century Foundation Fellow), Floor El Kamouni-Janssen and Erwin van Veen (both Clingendael) for their review of this brief. Its contents remain the author's responsibility.

² United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, 'Information on the re-emergence of civil patrols in post-war Guatemala', 2003. January. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3f51f5eb4.html> (accessed 31 July 2017); Heinemann-Grüder, A., and Paes W. 2001. 'Wag the Dog: The Mobilization and Demobilization of the Kosovo Liberation Army', *Bonn International Center for Conversion*, 20, <https://www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/wag-the-dogthe-mobilization-and-demobilization-of-the-kosovo-liberation-army-124/> (accessed 31 July 2017).

Because the Assad family-led Ba'athist regime always functioned through a network of personal connections, corruption and competing security organs – rather than through institutions or political parties – the expectation is that contemporary Syria will continue to function as a ‘modern feudal polity’, with Assad as its supreme ruler (*Rex*) in negotiated alliance with a number of vassals. However, it may also be the case that the strains, cost and regression of authority from seven years of fighting have unraveled the Syrian ‘monarch’s’ ability to keep different parts of the country’s elite together and that Syria will become a more plural security space once the main conflict is over. This brief explores these possibilities to inform Western policies vis-à-vis the reconstruction of Syria.³

As the Syrian polity was riven by war and fracture, the operating assumption of many Western diplomats and analysts has been that the Assad regime would one day fall. As a result, most studies have focused on the Syrian opposition – estimated to be in the hundreds of groups and between 100,000 and 150,000 fighters.⁴ This is particularly true for its radical Islamist elements, who fit nicely into the war on terror narrative and therefore had substantial resources made available to study them. Moreover, the opacity of the

regime, compared with the broad and early social media presence of many rebel groups, also discouraged researchers, journalists and analysts from taking a hard look at the armed groups loyal to the regime. Notwithstanding a few excellent pieces,⁵ such groups have been understudied.

A short history of Syrian pro-regime armed groups

By 2013, the protests and demonstrations that began in March 2011 had morphed into armed opposition and the Assad regime was facing a full-blown insurrection. The Syrian *Mukhabarat* security services had been unable to quell the demonstrations and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), built on a Soviet army model, was unprepared for unconventional warfare.⁶ The regime filled this gap with paramilitary groups. At first, it turned to criminal and smuggling gangs from the coastal region it already had informal links with. These groups are broadly referred to as *shabiha*.⁷

A key turning point came on 5 August 2013 with Legislative Decree 55, which legalised and expanded the use of such groups. It authorised private companies to protect

3 This brief is based on a review of existing grey literature, primary sources such as social media (English and Arabic), and four virtual interviews with key informants. It examines only domestic loyalist armed groups, leaving the Assad regime’s Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranian support groups out of account. As Syria is a warzone and field research on this topic in regime held areas is all but impossible, the brief is exploratory in nature and its findings subject to future revision. It is part of Clingendael’s Levant research programme, which analyses hybrid security actors in Syria and Iraq.

4 For example: Balanche, F. 2016. ‘Status of the Syrian Rebellion: Numbers, Ideologies, and Prospects’, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 22 November. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/status-of-the-syrian-rebellion-numbers-ideologies-and-prospects> (accessed 31 July 2017); Lister, C., 2015. *The Syrian Jihad, Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and the evolution of an insurgency*, London, Hurst, 540.

5 For instance: Schaap, F. and Werner, C., 2017. ‘Gangster’s Paradise: Assad’s Control Erodes as Warlords Gain Upper Hand’, *Der Spiegel International Online* 8 March.; Lund, A., 2017. ‘Aleppo Militias Become Major Test for Assad.’ *IRIN*, 22 June. <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/06/22/aleppo-militias-become-major-test-assad> (accessed 31 July 2017).

6 Personal interview, Yüksel, E., independent security analyst, 2017. The Hague (via Skype), The Netherlands, 6 June.

7 The word literally means ‘ghost’ in Arabic and refers to the Mercedes cars coastal smugglers used. D, M. 2012. ‘The Original Shabiha’, *Syria Comment*. Posted 24 May 2012. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-original-shabiha-by-mohammad-d/> (accessed 31 July 2017); Personal interview, Syrian researcher living in Europe, 2017. The Hague (Whatsapp) 26 July.

capital assets if they possessed the relevant permit from the Ministry of Interior.⁸ This decree became the formal instrument to legitimise the formation of all manner of armed groups. It was significant because it represented an implicit admission that the Assad regime was unable to provide both internal security and fight a war. Following the decree, the Syrian government took steps to formalise and professionalise the hundreds of self-defence militias that already existed – the ‘Popular Committees’ – into a national paramilitary structure known as the National Defence Forces (NDF).⁹

Formed in 2013, the NDF has evolved into the administrative umbrella for Syrian armed groups loyal to Assad,¹⁰ with an estimated 50–60,000 members nationwide.¹¹ Serving in the NDF originally also provided a way for Syrian men who had avoided conscription into the SAA to avoid prosecution or forced conscription by defending their home areas, although this benefit is reportedly being steadily rescinded.¹² The NDF receives salaries and military equipment from the government, although units are still largely

engaged in defensive action and providing security in regime-held areas.¹³

While the original *shabiha*-type groups were only able to fill security gaps in areas already under the regime’s control, their legalisation, combined with training and support provided under the NDF framework, upgraded the ability of some groups to contribute meaningfully to the battlefield successes of the Assad regime. Indeed, regular posts about their battlefield prowess and support for the SAA rapidly became a standard feature of their social media profiles.¹⁴ However, while some groups acquired the firepower and training necessary to perform frontline roles, many continued to provide internal security.

Further expansion and professionalisation of armed groups loyal to the regime was brought about in October 2015 by the creation of the SAA’s 4th Corps following Russian intervention in the war. All loyalist armed groups were folded into this new Corps. Some groups, such as the Desert Hawks, were transferred to the remit of the NDF, which itself sat under the 4th Corps, while others, such as the Bustan group, which did not fall under the purview of the NDF, were still situated under the 4th Corps.¹⁵

8 AFP, 2013. ‘Syria’s Assad ‘legalizes’ Private Security Firms’, 6 August. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/08/06/syria-assad-legalises-private-security-firms.html> (accessed 6 August 2017).

Arabic original: <http://www.parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=201&nid=4253&RID=-1&Last=10240&First=0&CurrentPage=6&VId=-1&Mode=&Service=-1&Loc1=&Key1=&SDate=&EDate=&Year=&Country=&Num=&Dep=-1&> (accessed 31 July 2017).

9 Fulton, W., et al. 2013. ‘Iranian Strategy in Syria’, Washington, *Institute for the Study of War*, May. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria> (accessed 26 July 2017).

10 Personal interview, Samaha, N. 2017. Beirut, Lebanon. 27 June.

11 Middle East Eye, 2015. ‘Who are the pro-Assad militias in Syria?’, 25 September. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-are-pro-assad-militias-syria-2030619965> (accessed 2 August 2017).

12 Personal interview, Samaha, N. freelance journalist, 2017. The Hague (via Whatsapp), The Netherlands, 7 June.

13 Reuters, 2013. ‘Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement’, 21 April. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421> (accessed 28 July 2017).

14 For example, this is an NDF Twitter account announcing a joint operation with the SAA against a Daesh position near Deir ez-Zor in March 2017: الجيش السوري بموازة قوات الدفاع الوطني يتصدى لهجوم عنيف شنه تنظيم داعش على جبهات الأحياء الشرقية ومطار #بيروالزور العسكري @C_Military 1, 13 March 2017, https://twitter.com/C_Military1/status/841274473806458881 (accessed 31 July 2017).

15 Bustan is the name for a charitable group run by Rami Makhlof that serves as an organising body for several militias, some of which sit within the NDF while others sit outside it, although still administratively under the 4th Corps. The criteria for which groups fell under or were pushed into the remit of the NDF, as opposed to just the 4th Corps, is unclear.

The 4th Corps' purpose was to create an administrative umbrella for all loyalist armed groups. In reality, however, many groups have continued to operate relatively independently of this administrative structure. Practically, this has meant that their command and control structure has remained outside the normal SAA chains of command.¹⁶ They would not, however, undertake offensive action of their own accord.

While this amalgam of loyalist armed groups proved useful to Assad – and, one could argue, essential to the course of the war – ultimately it proved impossible for the regime to fully finance the fighting, maintain basic services in areas under its control, and oil the patronage networks that sustained it. One stopgap measure included permitting loyalist armed groups to loot and plunder recaptured areas as well as maintain extractive checkpoints both around besieged towns and in newly liberated territory.¹⁷ While this relieved the regime's finances, it also reduced its popular legitimacy. For example, it created a perverse incentive for armed groups to maintain checkpoints that, in practice, were sources of revenue and corruption.¹⁸

A provisional typology of pro-regime armed groups in Syria

Today there are dozens of armed groups fighting on the side of the Assad regime. These groups are diverse in terms of their beliefs, the areas in which they operate, and their fighting capabilities. They are more locally rooted than the SAA, which 'draws recruits indiscriminately from across the country... [whereas] militia recruitment centers are local bodies with recruits often having close personal connections to the officers in charge.'¹⁹ The proliferation of loyalist armed groups based on 'local origins' reflects the diverse fabric of regime-held Syria, which has often been framed in media and by policy makers as a homogenous and unitary polity. What follows is a brief analysis of the main Syrian loyalist armed groups in terms of their motivation, external links and fighting strength (summarised in Table 1).

16 N. Samaha, *op. cit.*

17 In some provinces away from the front lines, loyalist armed groups are tasked with maintaining checkpoints as a matter of internal security, though in these instances the practice has been agreed upon with the local administration and is not extractive in nature. Personal interview, Samaha, N. 2017. Gothenburg (via Whatsapp), Sweden, 27 August.

18 There are reports that loyalist groups in Mazra'a (a city west of Homs) and al-Waer (Homs) undermined negotiations between the regime and rebel groups in order to maintain the profits they earned from checkpoints and smuggling operations. See: Araabi, S. and Hilal, L. 2016. 'Reconciliation, Reward and Revenge: Analyzing Syrian De-escalation Dynamics through Local Ceasefire Negotiations' *Conflict Dynamics International & Berghof Foundation*, August, 19 & 22. http://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/AraabiHilal_SyrianLocalCeasefireNegotiations.pdf (accessed 31 July 2017).

19 Khaddour, K., 2016. 'The Coast in Conflict: Migration, Sectarianism, and Decentralization in Syria's Latakia and Tartous Governorates', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, 14 July. <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/07/28/coast-in-conflict-migration-sectarianism-and-decentralization-in-syria-s-latakia-and-tartus-governorates-pub-64198> (accessed 25 July 2017).

Table 1 An overview of the main Syrian loyalist armed groups²⁰

Group Name	Motivation	External Links	Fighting Strength
National Defense Forces (قوات الدفاع الوطني)	Nationalist	Iran	Wide disparity across branches
Ba'ath Brigade (كتائب البعث)	Ba'athist	None known	7,000 fighters as of December 2013
Desert Hawks (لواء صفور الصحراء)	Ba'athist, profit seeking	None known	Medium weapons, armoured vehicles, Dushka artillery
Arab National Guards (الحرس القومي العربي)	Pan-Arab Nationalist (Nasserist)	Legionary force with volunteers from other Arab countries, though still predominantly Syrian	Unknown
Syrian Resistance (المقاومة السورية)	Marxist-Leninist	None known	Unknown
PFLP-GC (الجبهة الشعبية لتحرير فلسطين – القيادة العامة)	Marxist-Leninist	PLO	Unknown
Tornado Eagles (نصور الزوبعة)	Pan-Arab Nationalist (SSNP)	Sister party in Lebanon	Unknown
Anger Forces (قوات الغضب)	Religious minority defence	None known	Unknown
Syriac Protection Office (سوتورو)	Religious minority defence	None known	Unknown
Imam Mehdi Brigade (لواء الإمام المهدي)	Nationalist + Khomeinism	Iran, Hezbollah	Commander claims 25 martyrs as of July 2016
Imam al Baqer Brigade (لواء إمام الباقر)	Nationalist + Khomeinism	Iran, Hezbollah	Claimed 246 martyrs as of March 2016
National Ideological Resistance (المقاومة الأيديولوجية الوطنية)	Nationalist + Khomeinism	Iran, Hezbollah	Unknown
Harakat Nujaba (حركة نوجابا)	Nationalist + Khomeinism	Iran, Hezbollah	Unknown
Al Quds Brigade (لواء القدس ي)	Palestinian resistance	Russia	Beginning of 2015 had lost 200 fighters and 400 wounded
Coastal Shield Brigade (لواء درع ساحلي)	Local defence	None known	Unknown
Lions of Hussein Brigade (اللواء حسين الليون)	Ba'athist, profit seeking	None known	Unknown
Homeland Shield Brigade (لواء الوطن الدرغ)	Private security (Rami Makhlof)	None known	Unknown

Source: Author's additions to the excellent work of Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi (<http://www.aymennjawad.org/>)

20 Many groups were left off this list due to a shortage of available information on them. The most comprehensive list found gives 64 different loyalist armed groups as of November 2016, although there is some overlap between and rebranding of groups. See: Roche, C. and Beshara, V. 2016. 'Assad Regime Militias and Shi'ite Jihadis in the Syrian Civil War', *Bellingcat*. 14 December. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/30/assad-regime-militias-and-shiite-jihadis-in-the-syrian-civil-war/> (accessed 28 July 2017).

Motivations: From Ba'athist ideology to profit-seeking

Unlike their rebel counterparts, loyalist armed groups in Syria are much more unified in their broad objective in the war – namely, the preservation of the Syrian state under a Ba'athist regime headed by Bashar al-Assad. There is, however, a spectrum of motivations that these groups sit upon that is worth exploring. First, there are armed groups that are fully aligned with the regime's Ba'athist ideology.²¹ These include, for example, the Ba'ath Brigade²² and the NDF. These groups are formed from the same nationalist clay as the regime and pose no ideological challenge to it, though they may be problematic in other ways.

Second, there are armed groups whose ideology is close to that of the Syrian regime's interpretation of Ba'athism, which makes them competitors.²³ This category includes Leftist/Pan-Arab groups like the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party's (SSNP) Tornado Eagles²⁴ and the Nasserist Arab National Guards.²⁵ While these groups seek the same broad goals of resisting colonialism

and fostering a pan-Arab identity, they have historically competed over who would define this identity and consequently lead a pan-Arab state. What this means in practice is that, while these groups fight *against* the same 'takfiri' terrorists and, crucially, *for* Assad, their ideological proximity means that the Ba'athist regime remains vigilant to ensure that they do not gain too much local legitimacy.

Third, there is a mix of religious groups that the regime uses as allies and proxies. Although ostensibly a secular regime, Ba'athist Syria has had little issue allying itself with such groups throughout its history. This category includes smaller armed groups, such as the Anger Forces (Greek Orthodox)²⁶ and Sootoro (Assyrian and Armenian Christian),²⁷ as well as numerous groups modelled after Hezbollah, such as the Imam Mehdi Brigade²⁸ and the Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqqaya.²⁹ Although these last two groups are Shi'a – and specifically Khomeinist – they pose little ideological threat to the regime as they represent a deliberate strategy by Hezbollah – a key ally of the Assad regime – to create local allies in Syria.³⁰

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- 21 Briefly, Ba'athism is a secular ideology that promotes the development and creation of a unified Arab state under the vanguard party's solitary control. Within the realm of pan-Arabism, Ba'athism is based on Arab socialism as a means of modernisation in order to fully shake off Western colonial designs in the region. The liberation of Palestinian lands from the colonial project of Israel, as Ba'athism sees it, is also a key objective of the ideology.
- 22 Lund, A. 2014. 'The Baath Battalions Move Into Damascus', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 13 January. <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54167> (accessed 3 August 2017).
- 23 Seale, P., 2011. 'Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East', Berkeley, University of California, 2011 (1988). 552.
- 24 Samaha, N., 2016. 'The Eagles of the Whirlwind', *Foreign Policy*, 28 March. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/28/the-eagles-of-the-whirlwind/> (accessed 27 July 2017).
- 25 Al-Tamimi, A. 2013. 'The Arab Nationalist Guard: A Pro-Assad Militia', *Brown Moses Blog*, 31 December. <http://brown-moses.blogspot.nl/2013/12/the-arab-nationalist-guard-pro-assad.html> (accessed 3 August 2017).

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- 26 Al-Tammimi, A., 2017. 'Quwat Al-Ghadab: A Pro-Assad Christian Militia in Suqaylabiyah', *Syria Comment*, 9 May. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/quwat-al-ghadab-pro-assad-christian-militia-suqaylabiyah/> (accessed 3 August 2017).
- 27 AFP, 2015. 'Pro-regime Militias in Syria', 25 September. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/pro-regime-militias-syria-104205626.html> (accessed 27 July 2017).
- 28 Al-Tamimi, A., 2016. 'Liwa Al-Imam Al-Mahdi: A Syrian Hezbollah Formation', *Syria Comment*, 23 July. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-al-imam-al-mahdi-syrian-hezbollah-formation/> (accessed 27 July 2017).
- 29 Al-Tamimi, A. 2017. 'Liwa Al-Sayyida Ruqqaya: Recruiting the Shi'a of Damascus', *Syria Comment*, 31 March. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-al-sayyida-ruqqaya-recruiting-the-shia-of-damascus/> (accessed 3 August 2017).
- 30 Personal interview, Damascus Hezbollah representative (via Europe-based Syrian researcher). 2017. The Hague, The Netherlands. 28 May.

Finally, there is a category of loyalist armed groups that are less ideologically driven and more profit-oriented, such as the Lions of Hussein Brigade, the Coast Shield Brigade and the Homeland Shield Brigade. The first two operate largely in Syria's coastal regions and originate from smuggling networks.³¹ The last group is privately funded by Bashar Assad's wealthy cousin, Rami Makhlof.³² Free from restrictive ideological constraints, these groups still fight for their Syrian homeland but are driven by more material interests.

Fighting strength

The fighting strength of Syrian loyalist armed groups varies from armed neighbourhood watch groups capable only of defending their town or village to units with heavy weaponry and mechanised armour that are able to participate in regime offensives and augment the SAA. On the one hand, for example, Sootoro claims 500+ members, while the Khomeinist Imam Mehdi Brigade claims to have lost 25 'martyrs' in battles up to the end of July 2016, indicating a fighting strength of a few hundred troops.³³ On the other hand, groups like the Desert Hawks and the Tiger Brigade are used by the regime as 'rapid response units', and are rushed across the country to assist regime forces in need of frontline paramilitary support.³⁴ In the case of

the Desert Hawks, they were able to recruit fighters and procure heavy weapons from smuggling profits secured in the 1990s and 2000s by the Alawite Jaber family.³⁵ This latter group could also include the SSNP's Tornado Eagles, who have been engaged in battles in Homs, Latakia, Damascus, Suwayda, Hama, Quneitra and Daraa.³⁶

The regime permits these loyalist armed groups to boast of their battlefield successes. A myriad of official and semi-official Twitter accounts trumpet the achievements of the NDF, Tiger Forces, SSNP and others.³⁷ From the type of operations mentioned, it appears that the armed groups capable of carrying out offensives, such as the SSNP and Tiger Forces, are mostly involved in mopping up operations, such as capturing small villages surrounding a major urban centre as opposed to major battlefield pushes.³⁸ Much like their rebel adversaries, these loyalists also post pictures of their readiness for the battlefield and eulogise fighters who fall in battle.³⁹

All loyalist armed groups in Syria receive at least some portion of their salary from the regime,⁴⁰ although some groups such as the

31 AFP, 2015. 'Assad relative shot in Syria', *Al-Arabiya*, 14 March <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/14/Assad-relative-assassinated-in-Syria?bn=1> (accessed 28 July 2017).

32 K, Mikhail. 2017. 'Rami Makhlof: Magnate of the Syrian State, Part Two', *The Fulda Gap*, 22 January. <https://www.thefuldagap.com/2017/01/23/rami-makhlof-magnate-of-the-syrian-state-part-two/> (accessed 26 July 2017).

33 Al-Tamimi, A., 2016. 'Liwa Al-Imam Al-Mahdi: A Syrian Hezbollah Formation', *Syria Comment*, 23 July. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/liwa-al-imam-al-mahdi-syrian-hezbollah-formation/> (accessed 27 July 2017).

34 Schneider, T., 2016. 'The Decay of the Syrian Regime Is Much Worse Than You Think', *War on the Rocks* 02 September. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/the-decay-of-the-syrian-regime-is-much-worse-than-you-think/> (accessed 31 July 2017).

35 Personal interview, D, Mohammad, Syrian documentary filmmaker. 2017. The Hague, The Netherlands (via whatsapp), 16 June.

36 Samaha, N., *op. cit.*

37 For example, see @C_Military1, @Syria__alassad, @NationalDefens, & LylaGhan

38 الجيش العربي السوري / قوات النمر / تسقط دير حافر بريف حلب الشرقي و قريبا تعلن محررة .. نصر جديد يضاف الى انتصارات حلب

[Announcement on the cooperation between the SAA and the Tiger Forces in an operation near Aleppo], @news_syriaalyom, 22 Mar 2017.

https://twitter.com/news_syriaalyom/status/844597596987559937

39 شاهد رجال #الجيش و #تنسور الزويعه يظهرن عددا من مزارع عقارب_الصافية شرق مدينة #سلمية من الدواعش

[Announcement of the death of SAA and Tornado Eagle [SSNP] fighters in battle against Daesh near the town of Salmiya], @tishreen_news, 13 Jun 2017.

https://twitter.com/tishreen_news/status/874513495877963782

40 Personal interview, Samaha, N., freelance journalist, 2017. The Hague (via Whatsapp), The Netherlands, 7 June.

Desert Hawks and Tiger Brigades provide salaries higher than other NDF units by augmenting their finances through looting and plundering.⁴¹ Private financing from wealthy Syrians such as Rami Makhoul and smuggling operations also help to boost the salaries of fighters. Many armed groups operate checkpoints throughout regime-held territory and charge tolls for ‘protection’.⁴² By providing a base salary to all its allied forces, the regime is endeavouring to keep them on a leash, though some groups have enough leeway to enhance their financial standing from sources independent of the regime.

External links

While foreign armed groups allied to the Assad regime are beyond the scope of this brief, several Syrian armed groups also have strong links with external actors. This is in large part because Hezbollah and Iran have sought to foster local allies in Syria, with the permission and aid of the Assad regime. These local groups include the Imam Mehdi Brigade, Liwa al-Sayyida Ruaqqaya, Quwat al-Ridha⁴³ and others.⁴⁴ According to local sources, Hezbollah firmly controls these groups, although the Assad regime has the final say when it comes to battlefield engagements.⁴⁵ For the time being, this is a win-win situation, with the regime augmenting its fighting capability with groups trained by Hezbollah – which is more skilled in unconventional combat – and Hezbollah gaining local allies who know

the terrain better and are not perceived as ‘foreigners’.

Foreign influence with Syrian loyalist armed groups does not end with these mini-Hezbollahs. The NDF was explicitly modelled after the Iranian *Basij* militia and has received assistance and training from Hezbollah and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard.⁴⁶ The goal was to create an effective, locally based and highly motivated force out of the Popular Committees, which themselves were outgrowths of older Ba’athist militias known as *al-Jaish al-Sha’abi* (the Popular Army).⁴⁷ Concurrently, the NDF provided a modality to formalise and organise *shabiha* forces that the regime had tapped at the beginning of the conflict.

Armed groups’ autonomy versus the resilience of regime authority

Two indicators are employed to analyse the level of autonomy that the various loyalist Syrian armed groups have vis-à-vis the regime of President Assad. First is the extent of violence by loyalist armed groups towards one another or against the regime. If many such clashes occur, it would indicate a loss of central control. Second is the extent to which loyalist armed groups can engage in extractive practices. If extractive practices are common and not restrained, this similarly indicates a loss of central control.

Unauthorised violence within the regime

A key indicator of ‘armed group autonomy’, despite their professed loyalty to the regime, would be incidents of armed-group-on-

41 Schneider, T., *op. cit.*

42 Lund, A., 2017. ‘Aleppo Militias Become Major Test for Assad.’ *IRIN*, 22 June. <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/06/22/aleppo-militias-become-major-test-assad> (accessed 31 July 2017).

43 Al-Tamimi, A., 2015. ‘Quwat Al-Ridha: Syrian Hezbollah’, *Syria Comment*, 4 August. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/quwat-al-ridha-syrian-hezbollah/> (accessed 4 August 2017).

44 Other Syrian Hezbollah-modelled groups include: Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja, Al-Ghaliboun, Junud al-Mahdi, Liwa Imam al-Baqir, and Quwat al Ridha. Roche, C. and Beshara, V., *op. cit.*

45 Personal interview, Damascus based Hezbollah representative (via Europe based Syrian researcher). 2017. The Hague, The Netherlands. 28 May.

46 Kozak, C., 2015. ‘The Regime’s Military Capabilities: Part 1’, *Institute for the Study of War* 26 May. <http://iswresearch.blogspot.se/2015/05/the-regime-military-capabilities-part-1.html> (accessed 25 July 2017); Bastani, H., 2015. ‘Iran Quietly Deepens Involvement in Syria’s War’, *BBC News*, 20 October. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34572756> (accessed 25 August 2017).

47 D, Mohammad, *op. cit.*

armed-group violence or successful shows of force by an armed group against government forces. Anecdotal cases of the former have occurred. For example, the Desert Hawks drew their guns on another loyalist armed group, the Tiger Forces, during the 2016 Palmyra offensive after Mohammad Jaber (leader of the Desert Hawks) accused the latter of deliberately firing onto one of his positions, killing nine and wounding two dozen more. In the end, Assad sent a delegation to make peace between the two armed group leaders.⁴⁸ The brief arrest and quick release of Philip Suleiman, accused by the regime of smuggling diesel and petrol, illustrates a case of an armed group successfully pressuring the government through force. Suleiman, head of the Christian armed group Anger Forces, was swiftly released after his detention triggered the arrival of dozens of armed men at the police station where he was being held.⁴⁹

Other anecdotes, however, demonstrate an enduring capacity on the part of the regime to set and enforce red lines for loyalist armed groups. For example, the military-type ID cards that members of loyalist armed groups held – and which allowed them to speed through checkpoints throughout regime-held territory – were recently rescinded by presidential decree. In part, this was because the practice created significant resentment

among members of the civilian population who waited in longer queues.⁵⁰

Another incident in the regime’s heartland demonstrates that the regime can enforce its will even against the most capable loyalist armed groups. Early in 2017, when Bashar Assad drove with a small motorcade to his ancestral home of Qardaha to visit his mother’s grave, he was met by a group of armed men led by Ibrahim Jaber, the younger brother of Mohammad Jaber who led the Desert Hawks. Ibrahim’s bodyguards trained their guns on Assad and his motorcade, not knowing who was inside. Assad’s reaction was to throw Ibrahim in jail *and* to cut down his brother Mohammad’s Desert Hawks by limiting their movements and favouring other armed groups at their expense.⁵¹ Ultimately, the group was disbanded in early August 2017.⁵²

Generally, analysis of conflict data that still exist suggests that no loyalist armed group has carried out a sustained campaign of aggression against other loyalist armed groups or against the government. In combination with the limited number of anecdotal examples of armed clashes between forces loyal to the regime, this suggests that Assad retains adequate command and control. In consequence, care should be taken in suggesting that chaos reigns in regime-held areas on the basis of lone incidents of violence by armed groups against other armed groups, or against the Syrian government.

48 Reuters, 2016. ‘Islamic State Forces Kill 26 Syrian Soldiers near Palmyra: Monitor’, 21 March. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-palmyra-idUSKCN0WN1R1L> (accessed 28 July 2017).

49 Shaam Network, 2016. ‘Fury and shots fired in al-Salibiyeh over the arrest of Anger Forces leader by Assad’ (author’s translation), 20 March. <http://www.shaam.org/news/syria-news/%D8%BA%D8%B6%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A5%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B6%D8%A8.html> (accessed 2 August 2017).

50 Personal interview, Samaha, N. freelance journalist, 2017. The Hague (via Whatsapp), The Netherlands, 7 June.

51 D, Mohammed, *op. cit.*

52 Qasion News Service, 2017, ‘النظام يحل ميليشيا «صقور الصحراء»’ ‘The [Syrian] regime disbands the Desert Hawks militia’ (author’s translation), وكالة قاسيون للانباء, 2 August www.qasion.net/ar/news/show/87372/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85_%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%84_%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%A7_%D8%B5%D9%82%D9%88%D8%B1_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1 (accessed 8 August 2017).

The scope for loyalist armed groups to engage in extractive practices

Plundering by loyalist armed groups has been permitted by Assad as compensation for their sacrifices. But it needs to be moderate in scope to prevent the regime losing too much credibility with the Syrian people. War, however, is not about moderation and looting and warlordism have come to manifest themselves in regime-held territories to different degrees. Warlordism seems to be worse in areas recaptured after particularly long and vicious battles, the current state of the unruliness of armed groups in Aleppo being a prime example of this phenomenon. As well as looting homes and shops in recaptured eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods such as Masaken Hanano, Sakhour, Saliheen and parts of the Old City on a grand scale, armed groups have also set up a system of checkpoints throughout the city, ostensibly to provide security.⁵³

A particular subset of looting cases is that loyalist armed groups have at times undermined negotiations for the surrender of villages under siege (euphemistically named ‘reconciliation deals’) from their position as auxiliary siege forces. The reasons are self-serving: these armed groups profited from the siege by running smuggling operations into and out of these very towns.⁵⁴

Militias have also sought to extract revenue from basic services in recently liberated territories. The Liwaa al-Baqir group allegedly runs Aleppo’s transport sector using its own fleet of minibuses. The group splits the revenue earned with the Traffic Police Department and Military Security.⁵⁵

Such practices of looting, checkpoints and lasting sieges have become so despised and onerous that Syrian government politicians have spoken out publicly against the loyalist armed groups involved.⁵⁶ Assad, for example, referred to the issue in a speech to his cabinet on 20 June 2017 when he spoke about ‘abusive manifestations that emerged in recent years, which directly harm the rights of citizens... including manifestations by some officials...’ (author’s translations).⁵⁷ He is wise to do so in the sense that not being able to control such excesses could critically undermine regime legitimacy among key constituencies. In addition to the President’s public speech to the cabinet, the government launched a crackdown in Aleppo, rounding up loyalist armed group fighters in the Aleppo neighbourhoods of Adhamiya, Akramiya, and Seif al-Dawla.⁵⁸ Similarly, on 21 June 2017 the Ministry of Interior’s Traffic Department in Damascus began conducting patrols aimed at suppressing the unauthorised use of weapons inside the city.⁵⁹

While it remains to be seen how effective the government can be in winding up the extractive processes of loyalist armed groups, recent campaigns demonstrate that the government understands the risk to its authority and at the very least has the capacity to act on excesses committed by its domestic allies.

53 Lund, A., 2017. ‘Aleppo Militias Become Major Test for Assad’ *IRIN*, 22 June. <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/06/22/aleppo-militias-become-major-test-assad> (accessed 31 July 2017).

54 Araabi, S. and Hilal, L., *op. cit.*

55 Ezzi, M. 2017. ‘The Regime and Loyal Militias Will Struggle to Disentangle Their Relationship’, *Chatham House*, July. <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-regime-and-loyal-militias-will-struggle-to-disentangle-their-relationship> (accessed 25 August 2017)

56 Lund, A., *op. cit.*

57 Relevant portion of the President’s speech: حديثه خلال جلسة مجلس الوزراء التي ترأسها في مقر الحكومة بمنطقة كفرسوسة بـ #دمشق اليوم.. الرئيس #الأسد تطرق إلى بعض المظاهر المسيئة التي ظهرت خلال السنوات الأخيرة والتي تسيء بشكل مباشر لحقوق المواطن، ولا تليق بالوطن، منها مظاهر المواقب الضخمة لبعض المسؤولين أو غيرهم، وقطع الطرق، موضحاً أن هذا الكلام غير مقبول، ووجه الوزارات المعنية باتخاذ الإجراءات الرادعة والضرورية لوقف هذه المظاهر.

Video of the 20 June 2017 speech to the Syrian cabinet can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhxW6R4GnQI>

58 Lund, A., *op. cit.*

59 Ezzi, M., *op. cit.*

Policy considerations

Although conflict may persist, it seems that the civil war in Syria is reaching a conclusion. The Assad regime has won by not losing, but in doing so it has sacrificed much of its authority and relied heavily on help from external and internal allies. The regime has also needed to militarise all its component parts. This has strengthened its pre-existing 'feudal' characteristics of local autonomy and dispersed authority on condition of strong loyalty to the centre on essential matters.⁶⁰ While Assad has had to allow domestic armed groups loyal to him to collect their own 'taxes' and manage local security on his behalf, he appears to have retained the ability to keep them in check on essential matters. In part, this is probably the result of the massive amounts of resources and political capital Iran and Russia have poured into Syria to ensure his survival.⁶¹ It has enabled Assad to avoid overreliance on domestic loyalist groups and to retain the ability to respond to complaints from aggrieved citizens in the face of the proliferation of arms and armed groups.

On the basis of the analysis set out in this brief, it is to be expected that any international support for the reconstruction of Syria will become enmeshed in negotiations between the regime and its

domestic loyalist armed groups about the terms of their role and function in post-war Syria. For example, a regime built on selective privilege, personalised rule, corruption and overlapping security institutions faces high transactional costs in its political economy. This means that the regime is likely to seek international financial contributions to oil the wheels of a negotiated drawdown of loyalist armed groups, sustain a bloated security apparatus for a while, or create privileges for those with power and guns.⁶² To complicate matters, Western actors have limited leverage to extract meaningful concessions from the regime and its domestic allies, and will therefore have less say in these negotiations.⁶³ Furthermore, Western actors will also have to contend with the *foreign* militias that may stay on after the conclusion of major hostilities, the dimensions of which are beyond this policy brief.

One silver lining for policy makers may be that, as the regime seemingly has adequate control over the larger loyalist armed groups, there is less risk of widespread warlordisation or militiafication in the Afghan or Somali sense of making Syria ungovernable.⁶⁴ Instead, persistent crime, low-level repression and extortion are more likely to prevail. Understanding the landscape of loyalist armed groups in Syria is a starting point for effective international support for

60 The current fragmentation of loyalist armed groups resembles in a way the longstanding regime strategy of having multiple security services compete with one another so that none could become powerful enough to challenge the central authority of the Assad family. Seale, P., *op. cit.*

61 Informal upper estimates put Iranian annual military spending in Syria at US\$35 billion. Publicly, Iran has extended several lines of credit to Assad that totalled \$5.6 billion as of June 2015. See: Al-Saadi, S., 2015. 'Iran's Stakes in Syria's Economy', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 June. <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/60280> (accessed 4 August 2017).

Russia has sent its own military forces to Syria and ran diplomatic interference for Syria at the United Nations Security Council. Nichols, M., 2016. 'Russia Vetoes U.N. demand for end to bombing of Syria's Aleppo', *Reuters*, 8 October. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un-idUSKCN1280VJ?il=0> (accessed 4 August 2017).

62 Khaddor, K., 2017. 'I, the Supreme', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 22 March. <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/68348?lang=en> (accessed 29 August 2017).

63 The fact that the Syrian regime still has good relations with states like Russia, China, India, Iran and South Africa, as well as Lebanon and Iraq, means that Western actors have less leverage than their superior financial resources may suggest. Cambinis, T., et al. 2017. 'Four Perspectives on Syria, Round II', *The Century Foundation*, 30 March. <https://tcf.org/content/report/four-perspectives-syria-round-ii/> (accessed 29 August 2017).

64 Grinstead, N., 2017. 'The Syrian Humpty-Dumpty', *The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 'Clingendael'*, 16 January. <https://www.clingendael.nl/publication/syrian-humpty-dumpty> (accessed 31 July 2017); Lund, A., 2013. 'Gangs of Latakia: The Militiafication of the Assad Regime', *Syria Comment*, 26 July. <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-militiafication-of-the-assad-regime/> (accessed 31 July 2017).

the country's reconstruction. Although still exploratory at this point, analysis suggests that domestic loyalist armed groups in Syria are likely to fall into one of two broad categories:

Less problematic groups: Groups under the NDF are part of a structured administration and their fighters are relatively well disciplined. Given the pre-existing structure, it is more likely that units of the NDF could be transformed into Syrian army units. Activists with knowledge of the groups claim that, 'After the war, these guys [NDF fighters] will go wherever Assad tells them.'⁶⁵ Units or groups from this category *may* have enough popular legitimacy and/or discipline to play a constructive role in post-war Syria by upholding ceasefires or providing security for reconstruction projects. Paradoxically, international support may be provided to reduce the existing regime fragmentation and firm up Assad's command and control to avoid persistent insecurity.⁶⁶

More problematic groups: While fewer in number, groups such as the Desert Hawks and Lions of Hussein Brigades – which fall under the 4th Corps but not under the control of the NDF – are likely to present more of a problem in post-war Syria. With smuggling origins, they may use their newfound wealth and arsenals to transform into criminal enterprises by building on the monopolies won from fighting in the war. The recent disbanding of the Desert Hawks, however, suggests that these types

of criminally-minded groups can be reined in by the regime under the right conditions. Nevertheless, international dealings with smaller groups like the Homeland Shield Brigade might be necessary to ensure protection of convoys of humanitarian aid or reconstruction materials.⁶⁷

To anticipate having to deal with these two categories of loyalist armed groups, international researchers, diplomats and intelligence agencies should commit more resources towards understanding their capabilities, aims and relations in greater depth. Such a deeper understanding can be achieved through the following:

- Develop contacts with pro-regime armed groups. This is perhaps best done through third party regional actors such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey or Iraq.
- Devote more thought to scenario planning exercises based on Assad remaining in power that examine security organisation and provision in regime-held areas.
- Build tailored research dossiers on loyalist armed groups in Syria, especially those in the more problematic category.
- Identify loyalist armed groups that are not connected to sanctioned individuals and not accused of significant human rights abuses that could – should they exist – play a constructive role in post-civil war Syria.

65 Mohammad D., *op. cit.*

66 Significant obstacles for substantial Western engagement in Syria remain, however. Not least the lack of a diplomatic presence in Damascus, human rights violations committed by the regime and allied forces, and potential prosecutions stemming therefrom.

67 This is not unlikely given that the Homeland Shield Brigade is part of the Bustan Group, owned by the President's cousin, Rami Makhlof.

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