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Eagles riding the storm of war: The role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party

Among the myriad of loyalist militias that have augmented Assad's battlefield prowess, the Eagles of Whirlwind of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) stand out as an exemplary pro-regime hybrid coercive organization that filled an enormous manpower gap and helped turn the tide of war. The regime permitted the Eagles to defend and police Syrian territory and in some cases fight alongside the Syrian Arab Army on the frontlines. In its role as paramilitary auxiliary, the group proved to be a capable and effective force.

In parallel, the parent political party of the Eagles, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party has sought to leverage the battlefield successes and prestige of its fighters into political gains. Historically a political rival to the Syrian Ba'ath party, the SSNP has been able to translate the achievements of the Eagles into ministerial positions and open recruitment drives across regime-held territory. However, the success of the Eagles has not led to a larger or more permanent role for the armed group.

Demonstrating the complexity of hybrid security actors in the Levant, the SSNP offered the Assad regime a novel form of support that traded greater political autonomy in exchange for paramilitary mobilization in support of the regime. For the Assad regime, accepting the price of greater autonomy for the SSNP was a calculated decision outweighed by the add-on auxiliary fighting capacity of the Eagles of Whirlwind. Moreover, the Assad regime has demonstrated that this autonomy can be rescinded.

Introduction¹

In seven years of civil war, the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has gone from the brink of collapse to a series

of victories through a combination of forced co-optation and outright conquest. The regime's campaign has been aided proactively by external powers (Russia, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah) as well as reactively through halfhearted US interventions and limited EU policies. Disunity among rebel and Islamist forces has also played a significant role in weakening opposition – and by extension strengthening – the regime. Finally, the regime's ability to create,

¹ This policy brief has been commissioned as part of Clingendael's Levant research programme that examines relations between hybrid coercive organisations and state development in Syria and Iraq. Its research outline and publications to date can be found here: <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>.

arm and deploy non- and semi-state actors has been critical to its impending victory. While the proliferation of loyalist militias² has so far only marginally affected the Syrian state's monopolist *control* over the use of force, it has fragmented the actual use of force exercised on behalf of the state and transformed a number of regime-held areas into places with hybrid governance and security provision that sees militias simultaneously cooperating and competing with the state.

Among the myriad of loyalist militias that have operated in the Syrian conflict, the Eagles of the Whirlwind – the armed wing of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) – offers a useful case study to analyse the modalities and consequences of the creation and fostering of auxiliary forces by the Syrian regime as key components of its warfighting strategy. In this context, the Eagles/SSNP can be seen as a hybrid coercive organisation, i.e. as a coercive organisation that simultaneously competes and collaborates with the state. Ideologically, the SSNP is a political competitor of the Ba'ath party (it was banned in Syria for nearly five decades), while, as a militia, the Eagles have so far proven to be very loyal to President Assad's regime.³ Moreover, other than the Ba'ath Brigades, the Eagles of the Whirlwind are the only domestic loyalist militia connected to a political party.⁴

It is with these considerations in mind that the brief assesses the Eagles of the Whirlwind's performance as regime militia while also examining relations between the SSNP and Ba'ath regime. It focuses on the period of the Syrian civil war (2011–2018).

SSNP cooperation with the Ba'ath party

Newfound political fraternity despite differences and prohibition

As a political party, the SSNP is essentially based on the idea that Syria should be much larger than it currently is. This irredentist ideology of 'Natural Syria' (a.k.a. 'Greater Syria') is outlined in Box 1 below. However, despite this view, the SSNP has proved to be ideologically flexible during the Syrian civil war and demonstrated a malleable attitude towards its political differences with the Ba'ath party in the service of the wartime aim of preserving the core Syrian state. It seeks to safeguard the Syrian state in its current form and, like President Assad, intends to reclaim all territory currently in rebel or foreign hands.⁵ This may appear a modest ambition in light of the party's irredentist goals but, as a member of the Eagles of the Whirlwind stated, 'I think this war is part of an intellectual, political and civilised development in our country and this includes redefining Arabism from the standpoint of the Syrian nation first. It is what many Ba'athists believe today, which has been the mentality of Hafez al-Assad for a long time.'⁶ Another official remarked, 'There are no longer any major differences between us and the Ba'athists. The war and the course of events have played a major role in bridging our views.'⁷

The SSNP is currently divided into three factions (see Box 2), all of which support

2 See, for example: Grinstead, N., 2017. 'Assad Rex: Assessing the autonomy of Syrian armed groups fighting for the regime', The Hague: Clingendael; Lund, A., Aleppo militias become major test for Assad, IRIN, Stockholm, 22 June 2017, online, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/06/22/aleppo-militias-become-major-test-assad> (accessed 28 May 2018).

3 The conceptual underpinning for the notion of 'hybrid coercive organisation' is provided here: Van Veen, E. and F. Fliervoet, *Dealing with tools of political (dis)order: Coercive organisations in the Levant*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

4 Yonker, C., 2018. 'Wither the Syrian Ba'ath? Down, but Not Out', *Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 5, March 28, (online): <https://dayan.org/content/wither-syrian-bath-down-not-out> (Accessed 25 June 2018).

5 Black I. and Shaheen K., 2016. 'Syrian president Bashar al-Assad vows to retake whole country', *The Guardian*, 12 February.

6 Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official spokesperson (WhatsApp) 10 July.

7 *Ibid.*

Box 1: The SSNP's irredentist theory of 'Natural Syria'

The *raison d'état* of the SSNP is that the modern borders of Syria that exist today are a shell of what the country is truly meant to be. This irredentist theory, developed by the party's founder, Antoun Saadeh, rejects the post-World War I borders created by Great Britain and France.

In the party's view, this unrealised political entity extends to include modern-day Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Israel-Palestine and Kuwait, as well as parts of Turkey, Iran, the Sinai Peninsula, along with the island of Cyprus.

The region's current borders have been imposed by foreign powers, a political division that the region's indigenous people never agreed to. Furthermore, party members insist that these artificial borders are a primary driving factor of the violence, terrorism and conflicts occurring in the Middle East.

Source: Personal interview, Solomon, C., SSNP-I Political Adviser to Dr Ali Haidar, Ilya Samman, 2017 (email correspondence), Personal interview, Solomon, C., SSNP-I U.S. Director Nour Chammas, November 2017, (email correspondence)

Al-Assad as President although they are less tied to him personally than Ba'ath party members may be. Regardless, the SSNP's loyalty to the regime is seen as firm enough for Assad to give it a key role in managing the conflict's *nonmilitary* efforts. The party was called to head the Syrian State Ministry for Reconciliation in 2011, a responsibility that has put the party in the unique position of reaching out and negotiating with armed groups, and facilitating their reintegration into the regime's orbit. Ilya Samman, political adviser to SSNP member and Minister of Reconciliation Dr Ali Haidar explained:

'Our party members or supporters in areas controlled by rebels would help in establishing contact between their local community and the Ministry of Reconciliation. Once the contact has been established, the ministry teams (employees and volunteers) would take over and negotiations would start with the leaders of the armed groups in the area. When reconciliation is accomplished the fighters who agree to give up their weapons are granted amnesty and they can go back to their normal civilian lives if they were civilians. Defected soldiers, officers and

*policemen are allowed to go back to their jobs as well.'*⁸

The SSNP has been put forward by the regime as the face of reconciliation both domestically and internationally.⁹ Dr Haidar has frequently been quoted in major Western outlets¹⁰ as a firm supporter of the regime's insistence on regaining Syria's territory in its entirety as well as

8 Personal interview, Solomon, C., SSNP-I Political Adviser to Dr Ali Haidar, Ilya Samman, 2017 (email correspondence) 10 July; 'Syria – Six Years On: From Destruction to Reconstruction', 2017. London, The European Centre for the Study of Extremism, Cambridge, 5–6 April.

9 For example, see: 'Director-General of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Deng Li Meets with Minister of State for National Reconciliation Affairs Ali Haidar of Syria', 14 April 2018, online: <http://me.chineseembassy.org/mon/wjbxw/t1551685.htm> (accessed April 2018).

10 For example, see: Sengupta, S. 2017. 'Help Assad or Leave Cities in Ruins? The Politics of Rebuilding Syria', *The New York Times*, 7 December, online, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/world/middleeast/syria-war-rebuilding-homs.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0.

Box 2: Factions of the SSNP in Syria

All SSNP factions operate with the same party name, symbol and ideology but view each other with suspicion and maintain relatively separate administrative structures. The Markaz and Amana factions are the closest to the Syrian Ba’athist regime and while the Intifada faction is small it is allegedly gaining influence.

SSNP-M (Markaz) – Markaz, meaning ‘Centre’, is the party’s most prominent and largest faction, based in Lebanon and Syria. Its militia, the Eagles of the Whirlwind, has been fielded in various theatres of operations during the Syrian Civil War. Although it retains a close relationship with the Assad regime, it has not yet resolved a licensing issue (regarding legality of foreign militias) that would allow it to unite with the Amana faction of the party that is legal in Syria. SSNP-M is headquartered in Beirut and is headed by Assaad Hardan and Hanna al-Nashef.

SSNP-A (Amana) – Amana or ‘Trusteeship’, also referred to officially as the SSNP in the Syrian Arab Republic, is the party’s smallest faction and is based only in Syria. It is a legacy of the faction that endured a crackdown in 1955, when its leaders were imprisoned. The faction’s elder statesman, Issam al-Muhayri (now in his 90s) passed control over to Syrian Minister Joseph Sweid. Rami Makhoul, President Assad’s cousin and Syria’s richest businessman, is also a member. This faction is allegedly losing members to SSNP-M. In November 2018, Ilyas Mtanious Shaheen was elected president of SSNP-A by the faction’s Supreme Council.

SSNP-I (Intifada) – Intifada or ‘Uprising’ is the legacy faction of George Abd Messih, Antoun Saadeh’s controversial successor. This wing brands itself an ‘opposition’ faction and so does not carry the same authoritarian stigma as the other two factions. SSNP-I places a strong emphasis on ideological purity and indoctrination, while still participating in Syrian politics at the cabinet level. Its leader, Dr Ali Haidar, has become a prominent public figure as the head of the Syrian regime’s Ministry of Reconciliation during the civil war. SSNP-I also retains a minor foothold in Lebanon and efforts to negotiate a reunification with the party’s other factions are ongoing.

Source: Personal interview, Solomon, C., SSNP-I Political Adviser to Dr Ali Haidar, Ilya Samman, 2017 (email correspondence); Personal interview, Solomon, C., SSNP-I U.S. Director Nour Chammas, November 2017 (email correspondence); Personal interview, Solomon, C., Antoun Issa, who attended the Markaz faction youth camp in Australia, but was not a party member. February 2017 (in person)

projecting complete state sovereignty.¹¹ It would appear that the regime is keen to use Dr Haidar and the SSNP as a front with which to engage select Western actors. For example, the Ministry of Reconciliation

has hosted Germany’s right-wing populist Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) party in an effort to legitimise and showcase the government’s efforts at restoring order and stability to Syria, an attractive opportunity for the AfD to advocate for the return of Syrian refugees in Europe and advance its Islamophobic platform. Moreover, SSNP-I party representatives also met with a US peace delegation in 2016, hoping to

11 Nasr. J., 2018. ‘Syrian refugees, German govt. condemn far-right trip to ‘normal’ Syria’, *Reuters*, 7 March, online, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2018-03-07/syrian-refugees-german-govt-condemn-far-right-trip-to-normal-syria>.

ward off a Western-led military intervention in Syria.¹²

Military alliance: The Eagles of the Whirlwind in support of the Syrian Arab Army

As protests turned into civil strife, the weaknesses of the Ba’ath regime’s security forces were gradually laid bare. By mid-2013, the Syrian army had lost half its forces, shrinking from an estimated 220,000 strong at the beginning of the war to 110,000 in 2013.¹³ Active battle fronts throughout the country left the struggling Syrian armed forces unable to defend many towns and cities. To counter this downward trajectory, the regime sourced reinforcements by permitting the presence of non-state security actors. Into this void entered the Eagles of the Whirlwind (*Nusur al-Zawba’a*). In some instances, they were entrusted with securing recently recaptured areas based on the fighters’ familiarity with the area. For example, Eagles of the Whirlwind units were given a fairly high level of independence in Homs city, administering and providing security by setting up and manning checkpoints as rebels began to withdraw.¹⁴ The regime soon came to prefer the Eagles of the Whirlwind to the Ba’ath party’s ‘popular committees’,¹⁵ which were

prone to outsized violence that reflected badly on the ruling party.¹⁶

Currently, the Eagles of the Whirlwind has the capacity to field around 6,000–8,000 fighters in Syria.¹⁷ Since many SSNP members fought in the Syrian army prior to joining the Eagles of the Whirlwind, they have a base level of training and tactical understanding. Once they join the Eagles of the Whirlwind, the Syrian army provides all the equipment, logistics, weapons and additional training.¹⁸

The Eagles of the Whirlwind also began to appear in areas and towns that had not been held by rebels, particularly towns dominated by minorities. For example: Sadad, al-Qaryatayn and the Wadi al-Nasara area in Homs province; Marhdeh, as-Suqaylabiyah and Salamiyah in Hama province; towns throughout Sweida province; and Saidnaya and Maaloula near Damascus. The Eagles of the Whirlwind made a good fit for patrolling these areas since many of their fighters originated there. The regime recognised this and gave the group substantial autonomy in policing the areas. ‘We have a margin of action made available by the state military institutions in the areas where we have

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- 12 ‘Al-Mikdad to US Peace Council: The American People Need to Know What is Really Going on in Syria,’ *Syria Times*, 25 July 2016, (online), <http://syriatimes.sy/index.php/news/local/25334-al-mikdad-to-us-peace-council-the-american-people-need-to-know-what-is-really-going-on-in-syria> (accessed May 2018).
 - 13 Lister, C., and Nelson, D., 2017. ‘All the President’s Militias: Assad’s Militiafication of Syria,’ *Middle East Institute*, 14 December (online), <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/all-president-s-militias-assad-s-militiafication-syria> (accessed January 2018).
 - 14 Personal interview, McDonald, J. 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind military commander in Homs, 25 April. (Facebook correspondence). Plus Personal interview, McDonald, J. 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official, 19 June. (Twitter correspondence). In June 2017, the SSNP held a rally in Homs city asserting that the city had returned to normality.
 - 15 Not to be confused with the National Defence Forces loyalist militia network.

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- 16 Leenders, R., and Giustozzi., 2017. ‘Outsourcing state violence: The National Defence Force, ‘stateness’ and regime resilience in the Syrian war’, *Journal of Mediterranean Politics*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13629395.2017.1385169> (accessed June 2018).
 - 17 Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018, Eagles of the Whirlwind official spokesperson, 10 July (WhatsApp correspondence). See also: Samaha, N., ‘The Eagles of the Whirlwind’, *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2016, (online), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/28/the-eagles-of-the-whirlwind/> (accessed May 2018).
 - 18 There are reports that some specialist training is done within the party. Nonetheless, any such training takes place in Syrian military camps instead of in SSNP facilities. See: Interview with Eagles Whirlwind official spokesperson, 10 July 2018, (WhatsApp correspondence). Regarding salaries, many Eagles of the Whirlwind fighters are volunteers, while interviews with fighters suggest their primary motivation is the defence of a united Syria. See: Personal interview, McDonald, J. 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official spokesperson, 9 August, (WhatsApp correspondence).

Box 3: Eagles of the Whirlwind (Nusur al-Zawba'a) – a chronology

For the SSNP, the symbolism of the eagle stems from its position as the king of birds with its native home in the Syrian highlands.

1947 – First known as the 'red whirlwind' and established under the leadership of Mustafa Suleiman (operations mostly concentrated in Palestine).

1958 – Took part in extensive number of battles on the side of the Lebanese government during the 1958 Civil War

1974 – Re-established as Eagles of the Whirlwind (Nusur al-Zawba'a) under the leadership of SSNP member Assaad Hardan.

1980s – Eagles of the Whirlwind active in the Lebanese civil war, particularly against Israeli forces and the South Lebanon Army. The region's first female suicide bomber in 1985 was an SSNP member.

1990s & 2000s – Largely idle with diminishing number of fighters.

2013 – The revival of the Eagles of the Whirlwind as the Syrian regime's need for manpower increases and the SSNP spots an opportunity for political rehabilitation.

a popular base,' a member of the Eagles of the Whirlwind stated.¹⁹ By pulling back from administration at the local level, the regime was able to reallocate resources and manpower elsewhere. By the same token, the fighting capacity and remit of the Eagles of the Whirlwind was still reliant on authorisation and material support from the regime, both of which could be withdrawn.²⁰

As the fighting spread and the Syrian army became further stretched across the country, the regime used the Eagles of the Whirlwind to boost its ranks on several battlefronts. Fighting side by side, the Eagles of the Whirlwind and the Syrian army mutually benefited (particularly between 2014 and 2016). This not only fostered a fraternal relationship with the regime, it also enhanced the SSNP's reputation with members of the public in pro-regime areas as a force that could be trusted. For example, in 2015

and 2016 the Eagles of the Whirlwind were deployed to areas in the Alawite stronghold of Latakia province (Jabal al-Turkman, Jabal al-Akrad, Salma, Ghamam and Deir Hanna) to defend it against an array of rebel and Islamist groups that were threatening regime supply lines.²¹

In other operations, Eagles of the Whirlwind fighters were stationed with the Syrian army closer to Damascus, to drive rebels further from the capital. In 2015, when fighting erupted in Zabadani, the Eagles of the Whirlwind were one of the auxiliary units fighting with the Syrian army and Hezbollah.²² In early 2018, there was a contingent of fighters present in Eastern Ghouta during the regime's push to clear the Damascus suburb. They were positioned in the western town of

19 Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official spokesperson, 10 July, (WhatsApp correspondence).

20 Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official spokesperson, 9 August, (WhatsApp correspondence).

21 'Syria: Thousands of Fresh Recruits Joining Army's Imminent Operation in Idlib,' *Fars News Agency*, 11 March 2016 (online), <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13941221000333> (accessed March 2018).

22 'Hezbollah, Syrian Army Regain Western Parts of Zabadani + Video', *Alalam News*, 13 September 2015 (online), <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1738385> (accessed February 2018).

Ayn Tarma, to act as a buffer while regime forces advanced from the east.²³ Although not always engaged in forward offensive action, the Eagles of the Whirlwind were often deployed in rear positions during major battlefield operations to block any potential escaping militants fleeing the front lines.

In summary, the Eagles have been primarily used by the Syrian regime to provide security in areas away from the front lines, but the group has also participated in direct action on the battlefield, mitigating the manpower shortages of the Syrian Arab Army. While not the largest of Syrian loyalist militias, the Eagles of the Whirlwind have nonetheless been a critical stop-gap measure for the regime's war effort.²⁴

SSNP competition with the regime

An ideological alternative to the Ba'ath party...

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) shares a long and complicated history with Assad's ruling Ba'ath Party. Now considered the second largest legal party in the government-held areas, the SSNP is in a unique position. While it competes ideologically with the Ba'ath Party, some of its members are nevertheless also government ministers. Founded in Lebanon in 1932, the SSNP's political platform differs from the Pan-Arab vision espoused by the Ba'ath. The party embraces Pan-Syrianism, a theory that views Syria and its inhabitants as dis-

tinct from the larger Arab World (see Box 1). Unlike Arabism, the SSNP rejects ethnicity, religion, and language as the basis for its brand of nationalism, and instead emphasises the diversity of the Syrian people and their historical ties to the geography and land as its central tenet. These differing principles puts the SSNP in political competition with the Ba'ath party, especially given its ideological proximity and appeal to Syria's sectarian minorities who feel endangered by the predominantly Sunni Muslim rebels.

Since the start of the civil war and the SSNP's re-emergence in Syria, the party has worked quickly to solidify its independence and legitimacy as part of the 'patriotic opposition' in the country.²⁵ The SSNP-I faction operated as a member of the regime-sanctioned opposition coalition, the Popular Front for Change and Liberation (PFCL). One strategy the SSNP has employed is to publicly criticise the Ba'ath party for authoritarian excesses and call for democratic reforms. For example, in the wake of alleged irregularities in the 2012 parliamentary elections, senior SSNP-Intifada official Mohammad Zahweh told *al-Akhbar*, 'We have many problems with the election results.' Zahweh added, 'The [PFCL] is open to different scenarios, from suspending the candidates' membership in parliament to resigning completely.'²⁶ However, the SSNP-I withdrew from the PFCL to support the regime's National Progressive Front (NPF) during the 2016 parliamentary elections, but without formally joining the Front.

The SSNP as a whole has also sought to portray itself as having a 'clean slate' in contrast to the Ba'ath party. Operating from this more neutral ground allows it to conduct negotiations for surrender – deals euphemistically referred to as 'reconciliation agreements' – with rebel groups through the Ministry of Reconciliation, which is controlled by the SSNP-I. The fact that the Ministry has

23 For a video showing Eagles of the Whirlwind fighting in Ayn Tarma, see: SSNP al-Hosn Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/1096756370366237/videos/1826425247399342/>, 10 February 2018 (accessed August 2018). Eagles of the Whirlwind fighter who died in al-Hajar al-Aswad after fighting in Ayn Tarma: Eagles of the Whirlwind Facebook page, 20 May 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/SSNP.FieldMedia/photos/a.263579847165902/791092847747930/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018).

24 Here we mean to exclude foreign loyalist militias operating in Syria such as Hezbollah and the Fateymoun Brigade.

25 Personal interview, Solomon, C., SSNP-I Political Adviser to Dr. Ali Haidar, Ilya Samman, 2017 (email correspondence)

26 'Opposition disputes Syria election results', *Al-Akhbar English*, 15 May 2012 (online): <https://english.al-akhbar.com/node/7372> (accessed 15 May 2018; the page no longer functions today).

successfully brokered several deals offers some evidence that the party retains at least nominal impartiality, which helps it to engage with Syrian society on a different level than the Ba'ath party.²⁷ The SSNP will certainly seek to consolidate its political gains as the war winds down. Furthermore, it may seek to parlay its wartime assistance and burgeoning popularity into further political concessions from the regime. As of November 2018, the Ministry of Reconciliation, in a cabinet reshuffle, became a new entity called the National Reconciliation Authority, also headed by Dr Haidar.²⁸

The SSNP has utilised the small political space afforded it by opening offices and holding rallies across the country, especially in the capital, Homs and Hama provinces, and coastal areas.²⁹ Homs province in particular showcases the SSNP's strength and growing popularity. Present throughout almost every neighbourhood in Homs city, the SSNP holds lectures and rallies on topics ranging from solidarity with Palestinians to the party's ideology.³⁰ Additionally, the party openly campaigns at Damascus University, a remarkable activity considering that it

was banned until 2005.³¹ Party cadres hand out candy to soldiers and party literature to civilians. They donate blood and host camps for Syrian youth. As the war grinds down, the SSNP is looking to educate future generations of Syrians in its ideology.³²

The party may also use its clean slate image to recruit among the country's sectarian minorities – the regime's traditional support base. For example, the Alawites have suffered greatly in supporting the government throughout the course of the war.³³ The community might seek alternative but safe outlets to express their political discontent. Syria's Druze are another example.³⁴ The appeal for Syria's minorities is understandable and a political shift away from the Ba'ath towards the SSNP's branch in Syria is not unthinkable. The success of these efforts are likely to be limited, however, given the Ba'ath party's more established presence in Syria and greater resources.

... enabled by fighting loyally for the regime

Unlike its parent party, the Eagles of the Whirlwind have made no discernable effort

27 Stone, K., 2016. 'Amid foreign imposed war, Syrian government works for reconciliation' *Crescent International*, online: <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/amid-foreign-imposed-warsyrian-government-works-for-reconciliation> (accessed September 2018)

28 Syria interior minister out in government reshuffle, *Agence France-Presse*, (accessed November 27, 2018): <https://www.france24.com/en/20181126-syria-interior-minister-out-government-reshuffle>.

29 SSNP Students at Damascus Facebook page, 6 May 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/ssnp.StudentsAtDamascus/photos/pcb.1538042376268841/1538041712935574/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018).
SSNP holding an event in Hama: SSNP Hamah Facebook page, 10 July 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/ssnp.hamah/photos/a.1644520515800933/1906210089631973/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018).

30 See: 'منفذية حمص في "القومي" تنظم وقفة تضامنية مع القدس وكل فلسطين': *Al-Bina'a News* <http://www.al-binaa.com/archives/article/180776> 23 December 2017 (accessed August 2018) and <https://www.sana.sy/?p=378353> 5 May 2016 (accessed August 2018).

31 SSNP students distributing literature: SSNP Students at Damascus Facebook page, 16 November 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/ssnp.StudentsAtDamascus/photos/a.600127383393683/1277228369016911/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018).

32 SSNP Latakia Facebook page, 4 August 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/LatakiaSSNP82/photos/pcb.1797131727037201/1797126853704355/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018); Another example of SSNP opening a youth camp, this one in Homs: Nouhad Semaan personal Facebook page, 3 April 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1308690595934465&set=pcb.1308690995934425&type=3&theater>, (accessed August 2018).

33 Al-Omar, S., 2018. 'The Fractured Relationship of the Alawite Community and Assad Regime', *The Atlantic Council*, 24 July (online), <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-fractured-relationship-of-the-alawite-community-and-assad-regime> (accessed July 2018).

34 Maksad, F., 2014. 'The Druze Dilemma,' *Foreign Affairs*, 8 October; See also: Al-Tamimi, A., 2013. 'The Druze Militias of Southern Syria,' *Syria Comment*, 13 November.

to contest the limits of their authority with the regime. The group appears to have been as loyal as any paramilitary organisation could be expected to be, acting much as an informal state security organisation.³⁵ As the number of fighting fronts in the war have decreased, many Eagles' fighters have returned to civilian life with little to no protest.³⁶ This is partly due to the ability of the group's leadership to maintain discipline among its fighters. The group's immediate focus is to reassert the territorial integrity of Syria. Longer term, the goal is for the SSNP as the Eagles' parent party to educate Syrian society on what the notion of 'Syria' really amounts to. The Eagles of the Whirlwind and SSNP realise that clashing militarily with the regime precludes any possibility of spreading this message. The groups' political and armed leadership therefore prefer to use their wartime goodwill to reap peacetime dividends.³⁷

Unlike many other militias financed by elite benefactors or influential military figures – such as the Lions of Hussein Brigade (Mohammad Tawfiq al-Assad), Desert Hawks (Mohammad Ja'aber), and Al-Bustan (Rami Makhoul) – the SSNP and the Eagles of the Whirlwind do not depend on a single elite member connected to the regime. They have a broader popular and leadership base in Syria as well as logistical roots and financial support from Lebanon.³⁸

While the SSNP and the Eagles of the Whirlwind are broadly independent of any single benefactor, the faction of the SSNP led by Joseph Sweid, designated SSNP-A in this paper, is supported and financed by Rami Makhoul, Syria's wealthiest individual and cousin to President Bashar al Assad. There is no direct evidence, however, that Rami Makhoul, who is formally a member of the SSNP, backs this particular political faction or the Eagles of the Whirlwind in a way that undermines the regime. Rather, the reverse may be the case, i.e. the regime is exercising influence on the entire party by having a member of Assad's inner elite who supports a particular faction of the SSNP.

Foreign relations

Unlike other proxy fighting forces in Syria, the SSNP and Eagles of the Whirlwind have received only modest foreign support. In the early stages of the Syrian war, assistance was provided by the SSNP's sister party in Lebanon and fighters from Lebanon participated in battles within the Eagles of the Whirlwind. In addition, several Lebanese nationals – including the head of the Eagles of the Whirlwind's media department, Adonis Nasr – perished in Syria.³⁹ Even the head of the SSNP in Lebanon at the time, Assaad Hardan, paid a visit to an Eagles of the Whirlwind camp in Syria.⁴⁰ Lebanese participation in fighting with the Eagles, appears to have tapered off after the early stages of the Syrian war. The SSNP and Eagles of the Whirlwind do, however, have

35 See van Veen & Flievoet, *op.cit.*

36 Personal interview, McDonald, J. 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind fighter in Homs, 25 April. (Facebook correspondence).

37 Personal interview, McDonald, J., Freelance Journalist, Nour Samaha, 2018, (email correspondence) 31 August.

38 Ahmed, Y., 2016. 'Syria's businessmen invest in post-war reconstruction', *The Arab Weekly*, 5 June (online), <https://theArabweekly.com/syrias-businessmen-invest-post-war-reconstruction> (accessed March 2018).

39 Adonis Nasr (known as 'Ado'), was born in Lebanon but died in Kinsaba, Latakia province in 2016. He ran the SSNP's daily newspaper *al-Bina'a* and led various media operations for the Eagles of the Whirlwind. For an additional example of a Lebanese national who perished while fighting with the Eagles of the Whirlwind in Syria, see: Raed al-Meslamaani, born in Northern Bekaa valley and perished in Latakia countryside, SSNP Homs Facebook page, 25 August 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/ssnphoms/photos/a.306679939493994/454144411414212/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018).

40 SSNP Homs Facebook page, 10 March 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/ssnphoms/videos/515594395269213/> (accessed August 2018).

an amicable relationship with Hezbollah.⁴¹ As well as reportedly fighting together in the Latakia countryside,⁴² the Eagles of the Whirlwind are also said to have received advanced tactical training from Hezbollah.⁴³

Russia and the SSNP and Eagles of the Whirlwind have sought to develop ties with one another as they see each other as defenders of a secular Syria.⁴⁴ High ranking SSNP officials have met with Russian diplomats, including the Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and North Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov.⁴⁵ At the Russian Coordination Center location on the Hmeimim military base south-east of Latakia city, Russian officials work directly with Minister of Reconciliation Ali Haider.⁴⁶ Moreover, as recently as November 2017, a

small unit within the Eagles of the Whirlwind specialising in demining received Russian medals for excellence.⁴⁷ More remarkably, in November 2015, Russian cargo planes transported about 200 Christian fighters from the Qamishli-based Sootoro militia, to assist Eagles of the Whirlwind fighters defending the Syriac town of Sadad, Homs province, from an Islamic State advance.⁴⁸

Despite the support they have received from external powers, the SSNP and Eagles of the Whirlwind have not behaved as a proxy force for Lebanon, Hezbollah or Russia. Support from the Lebanese branch of the SSNP dissipated shortly after the Eagles of the Whirlwind's entrance into the war, while neither Hezbollah tactical nor Russian material support has risen to significant levels. Crucially, there is no evidence that the SSNP or the Eagles of the Whirlwind have advanced the agenda of any foreign power in Syria. In other words, they are firmly situated in the regime camp.

In sum, the Eagles of the Whirlwind have demonstrated no intention to step outside the bounds of their limited military autonomy. There have been no instances of Eagles fighters clashing with regime forces or other loyalist militias. As such, the militia acts more like a paramilitary organisation than a hybrid coercive organisation.⁴⁹ In somewhat of a

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- 41 Additionally, fighters with the SSNP in Lebanon have participated in combat with Hezbollah when Israel invaded in 2006 and also during Beirut's street battles in 2008.
- 42 Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official, 23 August, (WhatsApp correspondence).
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 For Example, see: 'SSNP Politburo Member to ST: Sochi Congress Must be Based on Current Military Developments in Syria', *Syria Times*, 21 January 2018 (online), <http://www.syriatimes.sy/index.php/editorials/opinion/34516-ssnp-politburo-member-to-st-sochi-congress-must-be-based-on-current-military-developments-in-syria> (accessed January 2018). Also, in 2015, a Russian delegation, headed by an adviser to the Russian State Duma, met with the SSNP's leader in Homs. <https://www.ssnp.info/index.php?article=105228>, 15 September 2015 (accessed August 2018).
- 45 'Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's meeting with members of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party', *Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press Release*, 4 April 2017 (online), http://www.mid.ru/en/diverse/-/asset_publisher/zwl2FuDbhJx9/content/o-vstrece-specpredstaviteľa-prezidenta-rossijskoj-federacii-po-bliznemu-vostoku-i-stranam-afriki-zamestitela-ministra-inostrannyh-del-rossii-m-l-b-641 (accessed January 2018).
- 46 'Minister Haidar: 'We work with Russian coordination center in Hmeimim as one team to boost local reconciliations'', *SANA*, 18 December 2017 (online), <https://sana.sy/en/?p=121734> (accessed January 2018).

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- 47 Eagles of the Whirlwind Facebook page, 13 November 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/SSNP.FieldMedia/photos/a.263440027179884/705723616284854/?type=3&theater> (accessed August 2018).
- 48 Moore, J., 2015. 'Hundreds of Christian Fighters Scramble to Defend Syrian Town as ISIS Advance', *Newsweek*, 10 November (online), <https://www.newsweek.com/hundreds-christian-fighters-scramble-defend-syrian-town-isis-advance-392514> (accessed August 2018); Loveluck, L. and Oliphant, R., 2015. 'Russia transporting militia groups fighting Islamic State to frontlines in Syria', *The Telegraph*, 17 November (online), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11999694/Russia-transporting-militia-groups-fighting-Islamic-State-to-frontlines-in-Syria.html> (accessed August 2018).
- 49 For the typology of coercive organisations that both types are part of: Van Veen and Fliervoet (2018), *op.cit.*

contrast, the parent party of the Eagles of the Whirlwind has capitalised on the mobilisation of party cadres to fight on the battlefield to increase the political role and relevance of the SSNP in a fluid political landscape. Using its newfound political niche, the SSNP has placed itself firmly in the ‘patriotic opposition’ camp within Syria’s restricted political landscape. It does criticise the regime and seeks to maintain a ‘clean’ popular image. Arguably, the party has cleverly exploited its military role in the war for political benefit.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The SSNP has offered the Assad regime a novel form of support that traded greater political autonomy for paramilitary mobilisation in support of the regime. This was only acceptable to the regime due to the high attrition of the Syrian Arab Army and the risk of regime overthrow. Cleverly, the SSNP ensured it was seen as sufficiently patriotic to be potentially co-opted after the war by the regime, despite any criticisms it might voice. Given such fealty, the benefit of mobilising the Eagles of the Whirlwind in support of the regime’s warfighting strategy outweighed the price of greater political autonomy. Moreover, President Assad has made it clear that the SSNP’s newfound political autonomy may be temporary. For example, the regime effectively forced SSNP candidates out of the municipal elections in Sweida province while allowing other SSNP candidates to run in a number of other provinces.⁵⁰

The case of the SSNP/Eagles of the Whirlwind also demonstrates the complexity of hybrid coercive actors in the Levant. While the wartime sacrifices of the Eagles of the Whirlwind appear to have translated into tangible gains for the SSNP, this has

not led to a larger or more permanent role for the Eagles. For example, Eagles of the Whirlwind fighters seem to demonstrate little resistance to being absorbed into the Syrian Arab Army.⁵¹

Furthermore, it is notable that the SSNP is the only political party in Syria that has so far managed to leverage the mobilisation of a loyalist militia into tangible political gains. Even more remarkable is that no other loyalist militia in Syria has yet translated battlefield successes into a political platform of its own. This makes the SSNP and Eagles of the Whirlwind a noteworthy exception in the Syrian conflict which, broadly speaking, has not followed the pattern of the Popular Mobilization Units (*Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi*) in Iraq with militias that fought against Islamic State also running political parties (or vice versa).

On the basis of these insights, we conclude by offering three policy recommendations to Western policy makers engaged on the Syrian civil war:

- *Continue to monitor the SSNP’s political role and potency in Syria*, including the relative size and influence of its various factions. Watch for whether party members are given more prominent roles with the government in the form of ministerial positions or other politically important roles.
- *Track whether the Eagles of the Whirlwind are integrated into the Syrian Arab Army, transformed into a police force or disbanded after the conflict*. If it integrates into the army, the conferral of ranking positions upon former Eagles commanders may indicate tighter integration into regime ranks, whereas efforts at political proselytisation by SSNP members within the army may indicate the opposite.

50 Statement by SSNP on its withdrawal from municipal elections in Sweida province, 11 September 2018 <https://snacksyrian.com/في-سابقة-تاريخية-حزب-جيهوي-ينسحب-من-ال> (Accessed 25 September 2018).




51 Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018. SSNP member in Homs, 27 March (Facebook correspondence).

- *Potentially use the SSNP-I as a more palatable conduit into an Assad-led, post-war Syria.* For Western actors that seek ways to parlay with the regime but cannot do so directly due to EU, UN or unilateral policies and sanctions, the SSNP-I (Dr Ali Haider) may function as a palatable middleman. However, it should be borne in mind that while the SSNP is independent of the Ba'ath regime, it remains a firm ally of Assad and Hezbollah.

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www.clingendael.org/cru
cru@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg
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About the authors

Christopher Solomon is a Middle East analyst and works for a U.S. defense consultancy in the DC area. His writing has appeared on NATO's Atlantic Voices, Syria Comment, Global Risk Insights, Raddington Report, and the Small Wars Journal. Chris earned his MA from the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) at the University of Pittsburgh. He interned at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC.

Jesse McDonald is an independent research analyst, specializing in the Middle East. He has recently collaborated with Global Risk Insights, Syria Comment, and the Economist's Intelligence Unit. He has spent time in Cairo interviewing senior leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and currently resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Nick Grinstead is an independent conflict and fragility consultant who has written extensively on the political economies and conflict dynamics of the Levant for the Clingendael Institute, War on the Rocks, OpenDemocracy, and other publications. He has spent more than 5 years in the region and is currently based in Zambia where he continues his work on Syria and other fragile and conflict-affected countries.