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-option 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,
arm and deploy non- and semi-state actors has been critical to its impending victory. While the proliferation of loyalist militias 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. Moreover, other than the Ba’ath Brigades, the Eagles of the Whirlwind are the only domestic loyalist militia connected to a political party.

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. 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.’ 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.’

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

---


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.


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

7 Ibid.
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.”

The SSNP has been put forward by the regime as the face of reconciliation both domestically and internationally.  

Dr Haidar has frequently been quoted in major Western outlets as a firm supporter of the regime’s insistence on regaining Syria’s territory in its entirety as well as

---

**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)
projecting complete state sovereignty.\textsuperscript{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

\textbf{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 Makhlouf, 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.

\textit{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)

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
ward off a Western-led military intervention in Syria.  

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. 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. The regime soon came to prefer the Eagles of the Whirlwind to the Ba’ath party’s ‘popular committees’, which were prone to outsized violence that reflected badly on the ruling party. 

Currently, the Eagles of the Whirlwind has the capacity to field around 6,000–8,000 fighters in Syria. 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.

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 Saadnaya 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

---

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.
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).
a popular base,’ a member of the Eagles of the Whirlwind stated. 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.

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.

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. 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

---


---

Ayn Tarma, to act as a buffer while regime forces advanced from the east.\textsuperscript{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.

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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.’\textsuperscript{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


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

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

\textsuperscript{26} ‘Opposition disputes Syria election results’, \textit{Al-Akhbar English}, 15 May 2012 (online): \url{https://english.al-akhbar.com/node/7372} (accessed 15 May 2018; the page no longer functions today).
CRU Policy Brief

成功地撮合了几笔交易，提供了一些证据表明该党至少在某种程度上保持了中立性，这有助于它与叙利亚社会以不同的方式打交道，而不是与武装力量党进行交易。《SSNP将必然寻求巩固其在战争中的政治成果。此外，它可能寻求在时间上和规模上进一步政治让步。作为2018年11月的拜特解体，在重新安排内阁时，成为了一个名为解体方重置机构的新机构，该机构由Haidar博士领导。28

SSNP利用其有限的政治空间，在全国各地开设办事处和集会，尤其是在首都、霍姆斯和哈马省，以及沿海地区。29

霍姆斯省特别展示了SSNP的实力和日益增长的知名度。该党遍布霍姆斯城的几乎每一个社区，进行关于支持巴勒斯坦人民团结为主题的演讲和集会。30

此外，该党公开在大马士革大学进行竞选活动，这是一个值得注意的活动，因为这是它在2016年5月23日的巴尼亚新闻报道中进行的。（访问2018年8月）和https://www.sana.sy/?p=3783535

31

党干部向士兵和民众发放宣传品。他们献血并举办青年夏令营。随着战争的消弱，该党正努力教育未来的叙利亚人在其意识形态。32

该党可能还利用其清白的形象来招募该国的教派少数民族——政府的传统支持基础。例如，阿勒万德在支持政府的过程中遭受了巨大的苦难。33

这一社区可能会寻求其他更安全的出路来表达其政治不满。叙利亚的达鲁兹是另一个例子。34

对叙利亚的少数民族的吸引力是可以理解的，从拜特向SSNP在叙利亚的分支的政治理论转变是不可思议的。然而，由于拜特党在叙利亚更稳固的存在和更多的资源，这些努力的成功可能受到限制。
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 Makhlouf) – 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 Makhlouf, Syria’s wealthiest individual and cousin to President Bashar al Assad. There is no direct evidence, however, that Rami Makhlouf, 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 & Fliervoet, *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.
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.306679939493994/45414441414212/?type=3&theater](https://www.facebook.com/ssnphoms/photos/a.306679939493994/45414441414212/?type=3&theater) (accessed August 2018).
an amicable relationship with Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{41} As well as reportedly fighting together in the Latakia countryside,\textsuperscript{42} the Eagles of the Whirlwind are also said to have received advanced tactical training from Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{46} Moreover, as recently as November 2017, a small unit within the Eagles of the Whirlwind specialising in demining received Russian medals for excellence.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{49} In somewhat of a

\begin{enumerate}
\item[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.
\item[42] Personal interview, McDonald, J., 2018. Eagles of the Whirlwind official, 23 August, (WhatsApp correspondence).
\item[43] Ibid.
\item[46] ‘Minister Haidar: ‘We work with Russian coordination center in Hmeimim as one team to boost local reconciliations’, \textit{SANA}, 18 December 2017 (online), \url{https://sana.sy/en/?p=121734} (accessed January 2018).
\item[49] For the typology of coercive organisations that both types are part of: Van Veen and Fliervoet (2018), \textit{op.cit.}
\end{enumerate}
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.\(^5\)

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.\(^5\)

Furthermore, it is notable that the SSNP is the only political party in Syria that 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.

---


\(^5\) 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.
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.