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The Syrian Desert Hawks: flying no more

The Desert Hawks were a pro-Assad paramilitary group of 5,000 - 12,000 fighters that fought in the Syrian civil war between 2014 - 2017. Its postmortem highlights how the politics of coercion and the economics of loyalty can link in a wartime autocracy. Having amassed their fortune and influence in Syria before 2011 as part of the patronage systems of the Assad family, the brothers Mohammad, Ayman and Ibrahim Jaber created the Desert Hawks when wartime manpower shortages threatened regime survival. The paramilitary group gradually took on front line roles and contributed to several regime victories. In return, its fighters received generous salaries and its leaders a stake in Syrian war economy – continuing peacetime patterns of patronage and loyalty. The group also (ab)used its coercive capabilities to enrich itself. Eventually, its greed and arrogance resulted in swift disbandment by the same regime it had faithfully served, as a warning to others that President Assad remained firmly in control.

Introduction

The Desert Hawks Brigade, known in Arabic as *Suqur al-Sahra*, was a pro-Assad militia formed in early 2013. It supported the regime’s warfighting effort for just over four years and was disbanded in August 2017. In this period, the Desert Hawks are estimated to have fielded between 5,000 and 12,000 troops.¹ It participated, for example, in the notorious regime offensives in Palmyra, Latakia, and Aleppo. Forces like the Desert Hawks were created in response

to the shortage of personnel that resulted from the significant number of defections and desertions from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) during the first few years of the civil war.² Regime survival came to depend, successively, on the rapid mobilisation of effective auxiliary forces, Iranian-sponsored militia and the Russian military.

While a number of Syrian militias, such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP),³ were ideologically and historically linked to the

1 *The Desert Hawks: Armed Fire Brigade in Action Across Syria*, South Front, 23 April 2017, [online](#), (Accessed September 2019); Makki, D., *Syria’s war economy exacerbates divide between rich and poor*, The Middle East Institute, 6 November 2018, [online](#), (Accessed November 2019). There is no official figure. This is why the brief uses the lowest and the highest estimate that could be found online to indicate a range.

2 Ohl, D., Albrecht, H., Koehler, K., *For Money or Liberty? The Political Economy of Military Desertion and Rebel Recruitment in the Syrian Civil War*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Regional Insights, 24 November 2015, [online](#), (Accessed October 2019).

3 See: Solomon, C., Grinstead, N., McDonald, J., *Eagles riding the storm of war: The role of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party*, The Hague, Clingendael, CRU policy brief, 2019.

Ba'ath party and its political dominance over the Syrian state, others sprung instead from the informal, patrimonial networks on which the Assad regime relied for economic and political support. The story of the Desert Hawks is an example of the latter, centred on the brothers-cum-strongmen Mohammad, Ayman and Ibrahim Jaber. The Jabers were prominent figures in Syria's private sector, both wealthy and well-connected to the Assad government and the military establishment. The opportunity to serve Assad allowed the Jabers to protect their assets from destruction and seizure, as well as to project an image of national service and patriotism.

This brief assesses the evolution of the Desert Hawks Brigade as a fighting force in the context of the Syrian civil war. It offers some key insights into how the politics of coercion are linked with the economics of loyalty.⁴

Syria's political economy: wealth, patronage and the Jaber family

Prior to 2000/01, Syria had a state-led economy with low productivity and a modest output. The country was also home to various black market and criminal networks.⁵

When the government liberalised the long-isolated Syrian economy to generate growth and attract foreign investment, the state's clientelist structure of rule enabled wealthy business figures, who often had ties with such networks, to obtain profitable licences, monopolies and economic privileges, provided their loyalty to the regime was undisputed and kickbacks offered. This pre-conflict trend of elite capture of the benefits of liberalisation and the associated corruption was turbocharged during the war and resulted in large-scale profiteering, looting and the rapid development of an extensive war economy.⁶

The wealth and influence of Mohammad, Ayman and Ibrahim Jaber derived from their links to the president's family and their influence over Syria's energy, iron and steel industries.⁷ Of the three brothers, Ayman Jaber was the best known. As well as being connected to President Assad's family through marriage,⁸ he was also a businessman and engineer prior to the conflict, founder of the Arab Company for Metal Rolling (ASCO) and co-founder of the Addounia TV Channel.⁹ Moreover, he was thought to be linked with Beirut-based, Emirati-owned Overseas Petroleum Trading (OPT) via Sytrol, Syria's state-owned oil company. Through OPT, Ayman Jaber paid Egypt's Tri-Ocean Energy to secure oil supplies for the Syrian government.¹⁰ In addition, he allegedly facilitated an oil smuggling network spanning the Syrian-Iraqi border on behalf of the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum.¹¹ His brother, Mohammad

4 This brief is the product of a literature review as well as two in-depth interviews with anonymised Syrian sources for reasons of safety and confidentiality. It was produced for Clingendael's Levant research programme that examines the influence of hybrid coercive organisations on state development during times of conflict. It has benefited from a review by Samar Batrawi and Erwin van Veen (both Clingendael).

5 Quite a few of these networks can be traced back to the country's 1976 intervention in the Lebanese Civil War when the Syrian military expanded into the narcotics and arms trade. See: Haddad, B. *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience*, Stanford University Press; 1st edition (15 August 2012); Steenkamp, C., 'The Crime-Conflict Nexus and the Civil War in Syria', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 6(1), 28 September 2017, [online](#), p. 6 (Accessed 6 October 2019).

6 Cornish, C., *The men making a fortune from Syria's war*, The Financial Times, 3 October 2019, [online](#). (Accessed 27 July 2019).

7 Winter, L., 'Syria's Desert Hawks and the Loyalist Response to ISIS', *Small Wars Journal*, 3 January 2019, [online](#) (Accessed 27 July 2019).

8 See: <http://www.souriyati.com/2015/04/23/5772.html> (Accessed 15 January 2020).

9 Aliqtisadi, *Who is Ayman Jaber? Profile: A Syrian businessman resides in the Latakia Governate*, [online](#) (Accessed 27 January 2020).

10 Payne (2013), *op. cit.*

11 Primavera, M., *Rami Makhoul and the Syrian war economy*, the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 25 April 2018, [online](#) (Accessed October 2019)

Jaber, was not as well-known in Syria prior to his involvement with the Desert Hawks militia.¹² But his past as general in the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) would prove crucial in developing the military prowess of the Desert Hawks. Little is known about a third brother, Ibrahim Jaber, except that he was involved in the incident that led to the group's disbandment. In other words, the Jabers were part of the clientelist circle of businessmen that rendered handy services to the regime and provided it with revenues while turning a tidy profit for themselves in the process. Such 'services' took a more macabre turn after the outbreak of the conflict, including the Jabers' support for the Shabiha in the Latakia region (triggering US sanctions against Ayman Jaber)¹³ and organising the supply of barrel bombs to the Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF).¹⁴ In such a context, the creation of the Desert Hawks is best seen as rendering the regime yet another service – albeit a large one – in the expectation that economic rewards would follow.

Purpose, relations and performance of the Desert Hawks

The Desert Hawks were initially created to help secure the supply of oil to the Syrian regime. As the conflict progressed, the regime rapidly lost territory across the country to a growing number of rebel groups. This included the Syrian desert region, home to the country's oil and gas fields, and thus regime access to crucial oil supplies. In fact, in May 2013, the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources noted a more than sevenfold drop in the production of oil from 380,000 barrels per day to 50,000.¹⁵

As part of a bid to recapture and secure access, the regime issued Legislative Decree Number 55 in August 2013. This allowed non-state entities to procure contracts to protect the country's energy production infrastructure from opposition forces.¹⁶ In other words, it enabled businesses to hire 'mercenaries' to protect strategic economic assets. While the name 'Desert Hawks' reflects the group's original task in the eastern desert – closely linked with the petroleum dealings of the Jabers from before the war – the militia took on a greater offensive role on the government's behalf as the conflict progressed.

In all likelihood, the militia's initial development relied heavily on Mohammad Jaber – a retired SAA general. Mohammad is said to have turned to the SAA's Special Forces for recruitment.¹⁷ To further enhance the military capabilities of the Desert Hawks, the Jabers also engaged Colonel Mohsen Said Hussein. He was the Deputy Commander of a Republican Guard unit based at the Desert Military Intelligence Branch in Palmyra.¹⁸ Parallel recruitment drives unfolded over the course of 2015 in Hama, Tartous and Latakia with the help of Ayman Jaber's local connections. It proved easy to find recruits as Desert Hawks' employment conditions, pay, and access to arms and supplies were superior to the corrupt SAA.¹⁹ Pro-government outlets described the salaries of rank-and-file fighters as 'generous', which further facilitated recruitment.²⁰

The Desert Hawks obtained weapons, including heavy and small arms, through unspecified Western sources. The group's desert camouflage uniforms and vehicles

12 Source: Personal interview, Solomon, C. with "Elijah" of the unofficial SSNP News Twitter account, September 2019, (email correspondence).

13 Payne, J. EXCLUSIVE - Assad's secret oil lifeline: Iraqi crude from Egypt, *Reuters*, 23 December 2013, [online](#) (Accessed 31 August 2019).

14 Winter, (2019), *op. cit.*

15 Dagher, S., *Assad's Not-So-Secret Weapon: Loyal Syrian Businessmen*, *The Wall Street Journal*,

24 May 2013, [online](#) (Accessed November 2019).

16 Winter, (2019), *op. cit.*

17 Aboufadel, L., *Who are the Syrian Desert Hawks?*, *Al Masdar News*, 4 June 2016 [online](#) (Accessed December 2019).

18 He was killed in November 2014 when the Desert Hawks launched a counterassault to recapture the Al-Sha'ar Gas Fields from IS. See: Tadmur (Palmyra) News Network Facebook page, 19 November 2014, [online](#) (Accessed 13 October 2019).

19 Winter, (2019), *op. cit.*

20 Aboufadel (2016), *op. cit.*

were allegedly US products.²¹ The Desert Hawks have also been photographed fielding Grads, MRLs, and Fagot anti-tank guided missiles.²² The *Small Wars Journal* described the group's tactics as follows: 'The Desert Hawks employed tactics similar to those of [IS]. They relied on speed and superior firepower to conduct rapid counterstrikes against advancing IS forces and occasionally received fire support from the SAAF and government artillery units. The Badia, the Syrian Desert, was favourable terrain for IS' 'small, disparate mobile desert units' which, when attacked, could easily 'dissolve away into the desert, leaving small and determined bands of fighters to deflect and bleed-out the invading force'. For both [IS] and the Desert Hawks, the difficulty lay not in striking targets but in holding terrain.'²³

The militia's strength varied, and its sectarian composition is unclear. The Russia outlet 'South Front', said it fielded an estimated 5,000 fighters in late 2016.²⁴ The Desert Hawks also included female fighters, although it is uncertain how many were engaged in frontline combat. A social media post from the pro-Assad *Al-Masdar News* website shows a female Desert Hawks militia fighter deployed with the SAA near Palmyra in March 2016.²⁵ It is also unclear how the Desert Hawks related to the other pro-regime forces, such as Hezbollah. As a non-religious, non-ideological militia, the Desert Hawks could have experienced cultural tensions with Hezbollah at the individual troop level, for example, on matters such as drinking alcohol and blasphemy.²⁶ However, there are no recorded public

differences at senior military or political levels. Furthermore, the Desert Hawks did work with clearly religious armed groups on the battlefield, suggesting that such differences were surmountable in practice. For example, Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi interviewed members of an Iraqi Shia group fighting under the name 'Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham' (Conquering Lion of God Forces of Iraq and the Levant) and reported that this group performed an advisory role for the Desert Hawks during operations in the Latakia region in 2015.²⁷ Its credible battlefield performance in Latakia in turn enabled the Desert Hawks to improve their standing among the loyalist segments of the Syrian populace.²⁸

During the long battle for Aleppo (2016), Syria's largest city held by opposition forces, the Desert Hawks participated both in the siege and the assaults that broke opposition defences. The group was featured in videos liaising with the Syrian Republican Guard and firing artillery pieces.²⁹ The Desert Hawks were also deployed extensively during the government's campaign to recover the Palmyra region from IS in 2017.³⁰ Ayman Jaber allegedly received a share of funds generated from oil production in the Badia region when pro-government forces advanced into the area, possibly as a reward for the Desert Hawks' contribution to the operation.

By this time, the militia had been largely integrated into the Syrian military's Fifth

21 Aboufadel (2016), *op. cit.*

22 Roche, C. and Beshara, V., *Assad Regime Militias and Shi'ite Jihadis in the Syrian Civil War*, Bellingcat, 30 November 2016, [online](#) (Accessed 12 October 2019).

23 Winter, (2019), *op. cit.*

24 *The Desert Hawks: Armed Fire Brigade in Action Across Syria*, South Front, 23 April 2017, [online](#) (Accessed September 2019).

25 Twitter post, Al-Masdar News, 24 March 2016, [online](#) (Accessed 24 August 2019).

26 International Crisis Group, *Hezbollah's Syria Conundrum*, Middle East Report N° 175, 14 March 2017, p. 24 (Accessed October 2019).

27 Al-Tamimi, A., *Liwa Usud al-Hussein: A New Pro-Assad Militia in Latakia*, Syria Comment, 19 February 2016 [online](#) (Accessed 5 October 2019).

28 October 2019 email correspondence with an anonymous Syrian-American who travels to Latakia a few times every year.

29 *Desert Hawks Brigade in Battle for Aleppo (Infographics)*, South Front, 2 November, 2016, [online](#) (Accessed October 2019).

30 Aboufadel, F., *Desert Hawks redeploy to west Palmyra to lead new offensive*, Al Masdar News, 7 February 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/desert-hawks-redeploy-west-palmyra-lead-new-offensice/>, [online](#) (Accessed 27, January 2020).

Corps,³¹ but retained an appreciable level of autonomy as well as benefiting from higher salaries.³² Service in the Desert Hawks could also open doors for career advancement and generate new economic opportunities when fighters left the brigade. For example, a young Syrian man from the city of Masyaf returned home from Lebanon in 2014 and joined the Desert Hawks. He served with the brigade for roughly a year and later formed his own group of approximately 70 fighters. His new militia then formed a relationship with the Tiger Forces³³ and he received 75,000 SYP a month, along with a vehicle, weapons, mate tea and tobacco. His unit was eventually merged with the Tiger Forces.³⁴

The Desert Hawks were allegedly close to Russian military forces operating in Syria. The research group Bellingcat suggested that 'Russian involvement with these Jaber groups is higher than with any others, including potentially the supply of some weapons' and pointed to video recordings of the group fighting in Aleppo. Bellingcat also indicated that the Desert Hawks operated its own training camps and suspected the group's logistical capacity to exceed that of other loyalist forces.³⁵ It is likely that

Russia saw the Desert Hawks as a capable local force, able to deliver on government objectives and thus decided to provide it with substantial military support.

Getting too big for its boots

Next to its fighting prowess, the Desert Hawks increasingly earned a negative reputation for looting and for excessively violent behaviour on the battlefield. Following the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, social media images showed the group's fighters looting furniture from civilian homes (an accusation that was denied by the pro-Russian outlet South Front due to the fact that the figures did not have any insignia on their uniforms).³⁶ Another item circulated on social media showed alleged members of the Desert Hawks holding the severed head of an enemy fighter.³⁷

Reporting on the timing of Desert Hawk battlefield successes and excesses loosely suggests that the Desert Hawks gradually transformed from a small but high-powered military unit with good ties to both the regime and Russia into a more abusive outfit that sought to defend its gains from looting and to protect its position in the war economy (smuggling, criminal activity) from other pro-regime elements.³⁸ This interpretation is lent credence by the fights the Desert Hawks picked with other loyalist units as it became more powerful. For instance, President Assad's paternal cousin, Munther al-Assad, is thought to have

31 See for example: Waters, G., *The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth*, MEI, 2019, [online](#); Omran Center for Strategic Studies, *The Syrian military establishment in 2019: Sectarianism, Militias and Foreign Investment*, Omran Center, 2019, [online](#) (especially page 95 and following).

32 Balanche, F., *An Opening for the Syrian Regime in Deir al-Zour*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 12 July 2017, [online](#) (Accessed 15 September 2019).

33 The pro-regime Tiger Forces have been described as 'decentralised', but closely integrated with Russia's command and support, along with a 'higher-than-average competence' among the officer corps. See: Waters, G., *The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad fighters backed by Russia*, The Middle East Institute, 29 October 2018, [online](#) (Accessed December 2019).

34 Khaddour, K., *Syria's Troublesome Militias*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Diwan, 5 November 2018, [online](#) (Accessed 21 September 2019).

35 Woods, E., *Lost Boys – Child Combatants of the Syrian Civil War*, Bellingcat, 16 November 2016, [online](#) (Accessed 5 October 2019).

36 The photos were posted by Edward Dark, the anonymous Syrian civil war writer in Aleppo. *Do Syrian Soldiers Loot Towns Liberated from Terrorists?* (Photo), South Front, 20 November 2016, [online](#) (Accessed October 2019)

37 See tweet by @bm21_grad, 22 May 2016, [online](#) (Accessed October 2019).

38 Al-Hassan, O. Baladi News, Al-Mayadeen correspondent: Suhail Al-Hassan members killed civilians and stole their property in Aleppo, 18 November 2016, [online](#) (Accessed 27 January 2020); See also: Fadel, A. Al Arabiya, A thunderous scandal of Assad's militia and its closest officers, 18 November 2016, [online](#) (Accessed 27 January 2020).

engaged in armed clashes with the Desert Hawks in Latakia in July 2016.³⁹ Conflict with Suheil Hassan's Tiger Forces even seems to have forced the regime to separate rival militias by deploying them to different theatres of operation.⁴⁰

In late 2017, the Desert Hawks made the mistake of stopping President Assad's convoy at gunpoint on the way to Qardaha, the Assad family's hometown. In the aftermath of this incident, Aymen Jaber was put under house arrest,⁴¹ Ibrahim Jaber was jailed, and a pro-government news outlet reported that Mohammad Jaber had left Syria for Russia on private business.⁴² The Desert Hawks Brigade was subsequently ordered to disband⁴³ and its units integrated into the SAA's Fifth Corps, along with a number of other pro-government militias.⁴⁴

One might question why the regime would stand down one of its more effective loyalist units in times of war. The most likely explanation is that the Desert Hawks were turned into an example to discourage overly brazen and crass behaviour from other pro-regime militias. It signalled that even militias that performed well on the battlefield owed continued fealty and obedience to

the regime. Moreover, public perception had started to view the Desert Hawks as no longer answering to the Presidency or the Syrian armed forces and their disbandment was a highly symbolic act by which Assad unequivocally asserted his authority. In the event, the fighting capability of the group was not lost as it was simply transferred to other military formations. Finally, the move indicated that the regime had begun thinking about Syria's post-war order. In order to reconstruct the central state, sooner or later the regime would have to reign in the militias.

Conclusion

While the breakdown of Syrian government authority over pro-regime militias has been repeatedly highlighted by a number of commentators, this brief joins ranks with those analysts that have been more cautious on the matter. In 2017, Nick Grinstead assessed that 'the regime seemingly has adequate control over the larger loyalist armed groups [...]. Instead, persistent crime, low-level repression and extortion are more likely to prevail.'⁴⁵ In the same year, Sam Heller noted that 'the assembly of pro-government militias actually fit into existing regime networks of control: a set of official and unofficial strings that all run up to the single, pivotal locus point, Assad himself,' adding: 'when those strings pull taut, they can be puppeteered in sync.'⁴⁶ While the regime has had to tolerate a level of wartime autonomy on the part of its militias – from which the Syrian population has suffered most – its longer-term focus is to reassert regime dominance over the very militias that ensured its survival as the current conflict enters its final stages. The regime shares this interest with its Russian backers, as noted elsewhere.⁴⁷ It is Russia's

39 Roche, C. and Beshara, V. (2016), *op. cit.*

40 Schaap, F., *Assad's Control Erodes as Warlords Gain Upper Hand*, Der Spiegel, 8 March 2017, [online](#) (Accessed 27 January 2020).

41 Samaha, N., *Can Assad win the peace?* European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, 15 May 2019, [online](#) (Accessed 28 July 2019).

42 Aboufadel, L., *Pro-government "Desert Hawks" disbanded after three years of service*, Al-Masdar News, 8 February 2017, [online](#) (Accessed September 2019).

43 Grinstead, N., *The (Last) King of Syria: The Feudalization of Assad's Rule*, War on the Rocks, 22 November 2017, [online](#), (Accessed September 2019); This account was also later partially replayed by a Russian think tank, although it did not specifically say President Assad was in the government convoy. See: Semenov, K., *Who Controls Syria? The Al-Assad family, the Inner Circle, and the Tycoons*, Russian International Affairs Council, 12 February 2018, [online](#) (Accessed September 2019).

44 Samaha, N., *Survival Is Syria's Strategy*, The Century Foundation, 8 February 2017, [online](#) (Accessed September 2019).

45 Grinstead, N., *Assad Rex? Assessing the autonomy of Syrian armed groups fighting for the regime*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2017.

46 Heller, S. *The Signal in Syria's Noise*, War on the Rocks, 30 June 2017, [online](#) (Accessed 24 November 2019).

47 Batrawi, S. and N. Grinstead, *Six scenarios for pro-regime militias in 'post-war' Syria*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2019, [online](#), (Accessed 24 November 2019).

intention to rebuild and reequip the conventional armed forces of the Syrian state as a way to recentralise the legitimacy and the power of the regime. It is largely Russia that is behind the creation of the SAA's Fifth Corps as an instrument to facilitate the transition of loyalist militias, as well as rebel factions that have surrendered, into the regime's formal military apparatus.⁴⁸ The travails and fate of the Desert Hawks is a good case study that illustrates this narrative rather well.

Other pro-regime militias have also recently come under scrutiny. For example, the Bustan group, the charitable organisation headed by Rami Makhlof, funds and supplies an array of loyalist militia.⁴⁹ Some of these groups are also feeling the regime re-asserting its authority, amid alleged tensions between Assad and Makhlof as part of a selective crackdown on financial corruption.⁵⁰ Opposition sources allege that the SSNP's militia faction – the Eagles of the Whirlwind – has been disbanded. However, it is unclear whether the regime's focus extends to the party's entire militia or just the fighters associated with the Amana faction, which was the closest to Makhlof.⁵¹

It remains an open question to what extent the current financial and economic pressure on the regime – resulting from the Lebanese financial crisis, European/ US sanctions, wartime destruction and economic mismanagement – will increase tensions between the different networks and factions that appear to constitute the regime of President Assad. Growing tensions over reduced resources may result in coercive capabilities, such as militias, being increasingly used to assert dominance, setting elements of the regime against others in a struggle for control. While this does not reflect the current situation, it is an indicator to watch. Further points of attention for policy makers include the need for ongoing analysis of whether/how remaining loyalist militias will be integrated into Syria's reconstituted conventional forces and how this affects the interests of both Russia and Iran. Should it ever come to western re-engagement with the Syrian regime – or support for reconstruction efforts, including security sector reform – such knowledge will be essential to shape effective intervention.

48 Lund, A., *From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russia-Syrian Relations*, The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, UI.SE, July 2019, p. 40-41.

49 Others include the Tiger Forces, the Leopards of Homs, and the Druze-dominated Homeland Shield. See: Al-Tamimi, A., *Liwa Dir' al-Watan: A New Pro-Assad Militia in Damascus*, 24 February 2016, personal website, [online](#) (Accessed November 2019); Al-Tamimi, A., *The Leopards of Homs: A Pro-Assad Militia*, personal website, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/18833/the-leopards-of-homs-a-pro-assad-militia>.





50 Foy, H. and Cornish, C., *Syria: Assad, his cousins and a Moscow skyscraper*, The Financial Times, 11 November 2019, [online](#) (Accessed November 2019); *Assad Disbands Makhlof Militias, Renames 'Tiger Forces'*, Asharq Al-Awsat, 30 August 2019, [online](#) (Accessed November 2019).

51 Why did the "Eagles of the Whirlwind" militia evacuate their camps in Homs? Orient News, 13 November 2019, [online](#) (Accessed November 2019); For background on the SSNP's three factions, see: Solomon et al. (2019), *op. cit.*

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