

The Syrian Army and the Coming Winter War

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, OCT 11 2012

The outcome of the ongoing Syrian civil war remains uncertain. What is certain is that the Army has not fragmented as in Libya and Yemen leading to the downfall of their leaders. The Army elite are closely associated with President Assad's regime, and perceive that their best option is to support the armed crackdown. The Syrian Army is committed to Assad's plan to wear out the rebels in a fierce summer battle and then blockade them in their villages through the winter. By next summer, the rebels will be weak, dead or defeated through exhaustion, battle or hunger.[1]

It is proffered that the domestic battle will not be determined by the Army. Despite reports of defections by soldiers and some junior officers, very few mid-level Army officers have turned against the regime and almost none of the heavily Alawi-dominated Special Forces have done so. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, a key turning point was the relationship between the President and his generals where the generals were not willing to support the continuance of the Presidential rule.[2] From June 2011 to August 2012, which was the last defection, the number of high level defections in Syria stands at 46, constituting 27 senior military and security officials, 3 cabinet members, 4 members of parliament and 12 diplomats. None of these defections were from key members of the inner decision-making elite and the outcome of the conflict has not been affected.[3] The main Army units are composed of around 200,000 soldiers, however they are not trusted to do most of the work because 175,000 of these soldiers are conscripts.[4]

There are several distinct arms of the Syrian military. Security forces compose the "first line of defense"; the intelligence services are another chief actor, and finally the regular army. The strategy of deployment of the military is to use regular army units establishing an outer cordon, while Special Forces and military intelligence raid houses, employ snipers, and arrest opposition leaders. These have been further assisted by the involvement of an armed militia group, the "Shabiha", who are Alawi and do most of the "dirty work". These tactics are not new; the same were used successfully against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s.[5]

Far from the most powerful institution, the Army is checked by four security directorates: Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, State Security, and Political Security – all under Assad's Alawite control.[6] Despite a growing death toll since the uprising began, and in the face of widespread castigation by the international community including the Arab League, the Army elites believe that in order to maintain a position of influence, their best option is to side with the regime. There is limited potential for the Army to act independently in order to influence Assad.[7]

In addition to the effective restraints imposed by the regime, the Army also has few interests in seeing a dramatic change to the status quo. The Army occupies a peculiar position in Syrian society that does not clearly indicate an overwhelming interest in overturning the current arrangement. It is accorded respect as an institution that has protected the state against Israel and fought bravely in Lebanon.[8] The Army still enjoys popular support in Syrian society, with the national anthem, sung by many protesters, celebrating the military as "defenders of our home ... [and] the lion-abode of Arabism."

Even though proximity to Assad trumps any other measure of influence, Army elites have also maintain a relatively high social standing in Syrian society. Officers see the Army as a social safety net. The salaries of junior and middle-ranking officers who come from lower- or middle-class families is supplemented by subsidized food, housing, and

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social clubs, coupled with “graft” on the side to guarantee a decent quality of life. Further, army elites have little reason to expect that supporting protesters would lead to any measurable improvement in their position in society.[9]

Even though the Army has little autonomy under Assad’s regime, it has not displayed a desire to gain more freedom of maneuver under a new regime. There is no evidence that they want to have more control over the economy, its decision-making abilities, or influence over promotions. There is no guarantee that supporting “the street” would result in any more autonomy or political influence. Further, soldiers have supported Assad’s regime “because they are scared to death of what might happen to them if Alawite control ends in Syria”.[10] For those units who have been involved in the eradication of protesters, there is little chance that they will be spared retribution from the populace if the regime falls. Reports of attacks on Army units in Banyas and Homs have substantiated this.[11]

President Assad has restricted his own freedom of maneuver by his continual use of armed force against civilian population and in recalcitrant rejection of international attempts to ameliorate the conflict. The Army elites and the rank and file who have obeyed his orders for many months can not claim innocence from the consequences of their actions. The President and the military are bound together in their fate. Assad may be calculating that forcing the Army into this dilemma will make it even more committed to his preservation. The Army remains on the outer lines while the security forces, the intelligence services and the “Shabiha” fight a hot summer and prepare the rebels for a cold winter. The Army elite hope this will keep Assad in power and themselves in safe employment. A new and democratic regime could scarcely offer the same lifestyle.

The exchange of fire with neighboring Turkey has provided both Assad and the Army elites with a new breath of life. The regular Army has welcomed it as a justifiable role to defend the nation’s borders, turning attention away from barracks gossip of civil war. Assad has found the external scapegoat he has desperately sought to unify the Army against the fragmentation that occurred in the domestic strife in Yemen and Libya leading to the demise of their leaders. Since the exchange of fire began, defections have been reduced to zero. This is a safe option because all-out war with Turkey is not probable, although low level skirmishes are likely to continue, despite the call for de-escalation by both sides.

The Middle East winter storm clouds have gathered on the horizon, the first rains of the season have fallen, the nights are becoming chilly, the Syrian rebels are moving back to their hill-top villages while the region is focused on Iranian nuclear developments and the world on American elections, and their own economic woes. No longer are the casualties of Homs and Damascus a daily focus of the world media, so President Assad and the Alawi look destined to a cozy winter in their Palaces, bar NATO intervention to support Turkey or a successful assassination attempt.

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[1] Mustafa El-Rashad, “A survey of Elite Opinions and Palace Information”, *Al Balad Newspaper* (In Arabic), Damascus, 30 September 2012, 2nd Edition, 2.

[2] Yezid Sayigh, “Armies and Civilians in the Arab Spring”, *The Daily Star, Lebanon*, 1 November 2011. 1st Edition, 5.

[3] “Syria Defections”, *Al Jazeera News*, last viewed 10 October 2012, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/syriadefections/2012730840348158.html>>

[4] Mohamed Ibn Fatih, “Our men in uniform”, *Al Baath Newspaper* (In Arabic), Damascus, 15

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[5] William Parsons and William Taylor, *Arbiters of Social Unrest: Military Responses to the Arab Spring*, United States Air Force Academy, Institute for National Security Studies, Research Paper, 2011.

[6] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2011*, London, Taylor and Francis, 2011, 474.

[7] Glen Segell, Interview with the Ambassador of Syria to Spain, Hussam Edin Aala, 4 July 2012 and Glen Segell, Interview with the Ambassador of Syria to Britain, Sami Khiyami, 13 July 2012.

[8] Lachlan Carmichael, "Syria's Army is Loyal, but not Fail Safe," *The Jordan Times*, 20 September 2011, 7.

[9] Heidi Huuhtanen, *Building an authoritarian state: the influence of external security and fiscal environment on Syrian authoritarianism*. Thesis. Durham : University of Durham, 2008

[10] Lachlan Carmichael, "Syria's Army is Loyal, but not Fail Safe," *The Jordan Times*, 20 September 2011, 7.

[11] Video of Syrian Army Unit Under Atatck, *Syrian Documents*, last viewed 10 October 2012, <<http://www.documents.sy/videos.php?id=522&lang=en>>

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