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Russian Forces in Syria and the Building of a Sustainable Military Presence: What About Iranian-backed Syrian Militias?

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Iranian, Russian and Syrian Foreign Ministers at a press conference following negotiation on the Syrian crisis in Moscow, Russia - October 2016 © EPA



Introduction

There is constant talk of the “soft conflict” between Iran and Russia in Syria. Most research and media reports focus on the areas of influence and control of each party. Without going into the relationship between Iranian and Russian forces on Syrian soil, in which the Iranian of influence weakened following the entry of Russian troops, it is important to distinguish the nature of these two forces to help identify the characteristics of this conflict, which are not limited to areas of influence. In fact, there is a clear difference between Iranian and Russian interests as well as strategy on two major issues.

The first is the relationship with Israel. While Russia sees Israel as a strategic ally in the region, Iran gains its regional legitimacy by emphasizing the continuity of conflict with it.

The second is the way each party sees the future of Syria, and its own role in it. Iran is not capable of establishing a centralized state in Syria because of its ideological hostility to the Sunni majority there. Therefore, a state based on sectarian militias will be the cornerstone of Iran’s continued presence on Syrian soil as it has the capacity to manage militias with no national project. Russia, on the other hand, has a vision of a centralized state that is based on the fundamental pillar of a disciplined and dutiful army. Thus, the “soft conflict” involves not only the geographical divvying-up of Syria, but also fundamental matters related to the structure of Syria’s security and military system.

This paper is the second part of a broader study of Russia’s policy of establishing a military influence in Syria. It will look at the Syrian militias that Iran has fostered and supported, and Russia’s approach in dealing with them on the ground. However, it does not consider non-Syrian militias on Syrian soil brought by the Iranians, such as Hezbollah, the Fatemiyoun, the Zainabiyoun, and other Shia militias because of their close association with Iranian politics and their temporary posting in specific conflict areas, making them a foreign presence on Syrian soil.

I. Collapsing Sovereignty and the Proliferation of Militias

When Russia decided to interfere militarily in Syria in September 2015, militias put by in place by Iran to enhance its military power on the ground had the upper hand



in regime-controlled areas. Special militia groups that were affiliated with particular businessmen spread across the country. Religious militias linked to Iran had been deployed through Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers disguised as Iranian pilgrims. The regime overlooked sanctions for those who failed to turn up for their compulsory military service if they joined one of these groups and avoided any clashes with them, despite numerous kidnapping and looting reports. Moreover, Iran focused on the civilian sphere and supported the Shiatization effort on the Syrian coast and in Damascus and Sweida, and on linking economic, cultural and political activities in these areas to its expansionist project. The following sections will examine the nature of Russia's relationship with these militias.

1. Popular Committees:

The Popular Committees militia was first formed when the Baath Party instructed its local commands to install checkpoints around towns and villages in the coastal area, and particularly around Alawite communities. The aim was to instil fear of the revolution in the hearts of the Alawites. These checkpoints first intimidated people in these communities and suppressed dissent. Later, certain Popular Committees members were armed and joined the National Defence Militias in early 2013. Some, however, remained working in the Popular Committees even after 2013, and were directed by the Military Intelligence, one of the regime's many security agencies.

The Russians disbanded these militias after they arrived in Syria and kept a few lightly armed members for the protection of Baath Party offices in towns and cities.

2. National Defence Militias:

The National Defence Militias (NDM) were launched in early 2013. Most of their members took part in training programmes in Iran, including military and doctrinal courses. The Iranian Revolutionary Guide would give daily Shia religious lectures to the fighters, who were forced to pray in mosques in Iran behind a Shia Imam. One of the most important tasks entrusted to the militia is the sectarian massacres that resulted in implicating the Alawite communities, in addition to the



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systematic rape and robberies that became the hallmark of these militias as well as organized looting campaigns in all neighbourhoods that opposed Assad.

The NDM's campaigns varied from region to region. In Latakia, they were led by Hilal al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's cousin, assisted by Ali Al-Kayali, a Turkish Alawi who had led the militia in the infamous al-Bayda massacre in Baniyas in the summer of 2012. Hilal was killed in 2015 in mysterious circumstances. His son, Suleiman al-Assad, was notorious for assault, rape, and tyranny in the city of Latakia, and was arrested and imprisoned by the regime by the end of 2015.

NDM were supported and overseen by the Al-Bustan Charity that was founded by Rami Makhlouf, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad and the owner of a vast group of businesses that had the monopoly over the telecommunication sector and private air transport. He also had a monopoly over the export and import of many goods. Militarily, the NDM were led by the Tartous Branch of the Military Intelligence.

Ultimately, the Russians disbanded the NDM and annexed the rest of its forces to the Suhail al-Hasan militia.

3. Suhail al-Hassan Militia:

Suhail al-Hassan Militia was named after Air Force Intelligence officer, Suhail al-Hassan, in order to build an image for him after his subordinates started to spread rumours that he was the alternative to Bashar al-Assad. This was clearly seen after the victories he achieved, including opening the roads to Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib. But he was particularly praised for the military operations to regain Palmyra and for leading the invasion of Eastern Ghouta. He was the commander of the military campaign against Northern Hama Countryside. Al-Hassan gained a considerable reputation among loyalists and enjoyed unlimited powers. Rumours have it that he will be chosen to take over Syria following the regime's victory and the end of the conflict.

Air Force Intelligence has increasing influence, although Military Intelligence is larger, with more than 100,000 members in its ranks. This is mainly due to Iranian support. Major-General Jamil Hassan, who heads the Air Intelligence Division, has strong ties to, and support from, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. Therefore, the Air Intelligence Division changed from a unit with few branches and small regiments



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not exceeding 10,000 members before the revolution (according to the highest estimates) to a pseudo-army with more than 100,000 troops at the end of 2013. It has recruited civilian and military personnel, and even army defectors. Members of the Suhail al-Hassan Militia and Air Force Intelligence enjoyed vast authority.

The al-Sahabat Brigades, led by Ali Muhanna, are affiliated with Suhail al-Hasan's army. Muhanna is the financial and economic façade of Suhail al-Hassan. Most of the members of the al-Sahabat Brigades come from the al-Khreibat area in Tartous. Until the arrival of Russian forces, the al-Sahabat Brigades were a militia that had been fully integrated into Suhail al-Hassan's army. Under his command, they participated in many battles in Aleppo and Homs. After the Russian military intervention, however, the role of these battalions changed, and they began to distinguish their role from that of Suhail al-Hasan's army.

At any rate, the Russians took full control of the Suhail al-Hassan militia, as the Iranian pilgrims, i.e., of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers, left and were replaced by Russian officers who now supervise every single matter, small and big. Russia is trying to formalize the militia to motivate its members and ensure that they work under Russia's command as a force in parallel to the regime's army. This creates a state of competition in terms of loyalty to the Russian forces, which gives the Russians a good room to manoeuvre and impose certain options on the ground.

4. The Desert Eagles (Suqour al-Sahra) Militia:

This group emerged at the end of 2013, under the leadership of businessmen Muhammad Jabir, a relative of Bashar al-Assad, with the help of his brother Amin Jabir, who supervised the logistics and tactics of the militia. The Suqour al-Sahra are trusted with the defence of oil facilities to support its financier Muhammad Jabir with contracts in this field, especially since the regime used it subsequently in several other fronts, like Idlib, and some fronts in Homs.

The Suqour al-Sahra are distinguished by their good salary of 50,000 Syrian pounds (around 100 USD), whereas the NDM made 25,000 Syrian pounds at that time. The Suqour al-Sahra appeared with the beginning of the disintegration of the NDM and most of its fighters integrating Suqour al-Sahra. However, its numbers



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did not exceed 5,000 because, at the time of its formation, there was a general reluctance on the part of the coastal youth to join the fighting. It possesses light to medium weapons, four-wheel-drive cars, and troop-transporting trucks given to it by the army of the regime.

This militia operates as gangs, in which each group is led by a person close to Amin Jabir. It combats under the supervision of the Suhail al-Hassan militia or the regime army. Its independence was recorded when it took up the defence of oil facilities and oil pipelines in the Palmyra area without the intervention of any other militias or the regime army.

The Russians have transferred the activities of this militia to the city of Latakia, where militia leaders meet regularly with Russian officers in the Hmeimim base and take orders for military manoeuvres, mostly related to guarding the oil infrastructure in Latakia and Baniyas.

1. An Iranian-Russian “Soft Conflict” to Fill the Vacuum on the Ground

Since the beginning of its involvement in the Syrian conflict, Iran has not depended on official institutions. Instead, it sought to destroy regime institutions and work outside them, eroding any form of the state and substituting it with loyal militias to ensure control and escape any form of accountability. The militias have proliferated, and with them has spread practices such as “tashbih” (“making into a Shabihah,” slang for loyalist paramilitaries) or “taafish” (the looting of furniture). They have imposed their authority and decisions upon all state institutions, until the situation reached a state where police officers are no longer able to confront with militia members.

In the period that followed the first fall of the dream of Assad’s victory over the Syrian revolution, at the beginning of 2012, militias practices began to take roots. Within two years, the manifestations of the destruction of security and chaos began to spread to the cities of the Syrian coast. Many incidents of theft and looting took place at the hands of armed members of the militia acting as fighters protecting the inhabitants of the cities. These thefts were like royalties that the Assad regime was not able to avert. The manifestations of the state began to progressively collapse.



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Incidents like those of Sulayman al-Assad, son of Hilal al-Assad, who killed a regime army officer, spread in all coastal cities, leading to widespread protests against him in loyalist circles, which forced Bashar al-Assad to order his detention. Outlaws spread and abused the security of the people and their livelihoods without punishment. This situation continued until the arrival of the Russians at the end of 2015 when a new phase started to emerge and develop on the Syrian coast, characterized by a new kind of discipline and order.

Two and a half years after Russian forces entered Syrian territory, most of the armed brigades that once filled the Syrian coast have disappeared. The Russians also disbanded all the small militias that were difficult to control, like the Jama'iyat Bustan militia, and other militias loyal to businessmen. Their members were wanted by the state apparatuses with the Russians using the Military Intelligence to track and arrest them, and strengthening its powers of arresting and processing deserters

This is due primarily to the interest of the Russians in exploiting these militias. They have lured their leadership to assimilate gradually and work under Russian command. The Russian forces needed organized militias able to take up the tasks of defence and are interested in preserving entities parallel to the army to participate in sowing fear and compete to gain the favour of the great powers. What is noteworthy is that most of its members work at checkpoints near the front lines.

The Russian way of dealing with the issue of the Iranian influence of the coast through militias could stem from the strategic importance of the coast for Russia. An example of this is the emergence of the Sahabat militia in the city of Tartous after the explosions of May 2015, which halted the acts of aggression against refugees, after Russia came to fear the spread of chaos in this sensitive region.

1. Small but Telling Changes to the Security Services and Military Intelligence

It is important to point out the need to pay attention to any small change that occurs in the conduct of the security services, given that they are the core of the Assad regime. It is important, too, to highlight that these services have not yet



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seen any significant changes. They continue to detain tens of thousands of Syrians, alongside their previous role in the suppression of demonstrations, and the arrest and killing of protesters, which will likely to recur in areas under regime control should protests break out or opposition groups appear again.

Before the outbreak of protests, the security services did not have the importance that they have now, in connection with the roles given to each branch. Thus, the presidential regime relied on Military Security bodies, which constitute an extremely repressive force made up of 100,000 members and distributed among branches that cover all the country and whose work involves terrorizing people, imposing the hegemony of the state, and bullying citizens. Military Intelligence also intervened in all facets of citizens' daily life.

After Military Security comes Political Security, in terms of its numbers and the regime's reliance on it. Its branches are under the Interior Ministry, and all its members come from the police, but they behave as a security branch – that is they wear civilian clothes, carry out arbitrary detention, and intervene in all details of life.

In third place come the branches of State Security, that is the First Intelligence Department, which the military leadership and governments have used since independence. It is an intelligence service that covered civilian issues, whereas the Second Department – Military Intelligence or Military Security – dealt with matters of the army and the control of officers' movement. When Assad the father came to power, he widened the work of the branches – especially Military Security – and gave unlimited authorities to all its branches. This led to an overlap in the mandate and authority of the various intelligence departments and created competition between them as a means to prevent any from monopolizing any specific file.

Finally, before the outbreak of protests, the Air Force Intelligence was constituted of one main branch in Damascus and a few critical points in various provinces all over the country, until the Iranians began to expand them greatly through Suhail al-Hassan's militia.

Except for the conversion of Air Force Intelligence into an entity resembling a



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military command that works under the orders of Suhail al-Hassan, the Russians have not altered the way the security branches work. Nor have they not intervened in the administration of their affairs, apart from halting political detentions, a move that altered the role of the security services and the form of the current system.

- **The Halting Political Detentions:**

There have been no recorded cases of political arrest and detention in the regime-controlled areas following the intervention of Russian forces. As a number of Facebook pages show open opposition activists who support the line of the external opposition (the High Negotiation Committee) and use expressions like “the Russian occupation”, “the oppressive Assad regime”, and “the Syrian revolution”. Likewise, public Facebook pages have begun to publish articles by individuals from regime-controlled areas and from opposition pages that support the arrival of other forces to power.

In this context, two observations are necessary to measure this change:

First: There is no political opposition organization that works on the ground with total freedom, just as there is no clear curtailment of such activities. Political forces are alert, and surveillance has become internal, but political organizations have not yet tested the Russians’ margin of acceptance of such activities in areas under its strategic control.

Second: The phenomenon of the open opposition is very small and limited to a few political figures and opinion writers in each city. The distinction between angry loyalists and opposition politicians is very difficult to establish especially after the fall of several “red lines”, such as talking about Bashar al-Assad or the regime or defending opposition activists and the rights of the people in combat zones and the forcibly displaced.

The language of opposition used remain, alongside the orientation of the site or page on which it is published, the only criterion to distinguish opposition voices on social media. We could see harsher words from an angry loyalist than from a member of the political opposition, and here we are not talking about the



“opposition” that is loyal to Russia, who call themselves “the opposition of the interior;” but those members of the opposition who are not inclined toward any occupation, who oppose the Assad regime first and foremost, who support the revolution and are attempting to change the regime.

Finally, we must point out the big changes that have occurred among the officers of the Military Intelligence (Military Security), but which at the time of writing we are unable to specify the relationship of its new leaders with Russian forces.

1. A Special Militia for the Protection of Russian Officers and their Families

Russian forces have established a militia in the coastal regions, the “Reserve Forces for the Russian Friends”, tasked with the protection of Russian officers and their families in the cities of Latakia, Tartous, and Damascus, where Russian forces are based to a large extent. Some of the Russian soldiers brought their families to live with them and used hotels and fancy buildings belonging to the regime as residential bases.

Aside from this, Russians do not interact with Syrian civilians, except on rare occasions during tourist trips, when groups of Russian soldiers have been seen in the markets of Latakia and Tartous.

With the entry of Russian forces into Syria, the manifestations of the state have returned into the public space, such as the return of traffic police. The police – with the co-operation of military security – have arrested armed groups responsible for the random kidnapping and robbery of the wealthy in the coastal areas; some erected barricades in some villages for more than two years, at the time of Iranian influence.

After the entry of Russian forces, the behaviour of the police changed. Oversight by criminal police stations became possible. For instance, they started to abide by constitutional provisions when carrying out arrest and detention in criminal matters. Yet despite the emergence of some new practices in regime-controlled areas, these changes remain so far superficial, because of the lack of independence of the judiciary and its control by security men. This has made all



the civil changes in the structure of the Assad regime cosmetic. There have been no fundamental changes in the Assad regime, such as the halting of political detentions in the areas under regime control or the decrease of collective fear of the presence of the state, and fear of criticizing it.

Finally, one must note the security meetings that are headed by Russian officers in every province with the leaders of the security branches, police, and governor each month to study the security situation in the province and give directions to Syrian officers.

Conclusion

The security services are considered a brutal guard of society. They are primarily responsible for the outbreak of protests, people's resentment of the regime, the corruption of the economy and the spoiling of social and cultural life. The continuation of these services means the reproduction of the regime as it was and, in a way, the recycling of events in Syria.

It is clear Russia's aim is to remain permanently in Syria. This is obvious in policies applied on the ground. However, the security structure of the regime remains one of the dilemmas the Russians have not yet dared to deal with, considering the regime's rejection of any changes, despite the Russian intention toward a desire to change it.

The changes that we have seen in the daily practices of Russians on the ground point to a strategy that aims to build a more stable regime, based on various mechanisms to control society, and the creation of an environment that would allow the exploitation of the riches of the country ad infinitum.

Given the above, political forces must focus primarily on political organization in order to create a political movement that is able to put pressure on the upcoming regime – regardless of its shape – to impose itself as a reality on the ground. Likewise, it seems necessary to work to encourage collective effort of the Syrian elite toward the framework of the political powers on the ground, in parallel with the ongoing negotiations in international forums. In the absence of organized popular forces capable of applying pressure, it becomes easy to produce a new regime that is harsher and more oppressive than the Assad regime, or perhaps the



reproduction of the Assad regime as it was, a persuasive occupying force that controls all aspects of life.



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