



Discussion Paper (4)

## **Reforming the Syrian Arab Army: Russia's vision**

Yury Barmin, RIAC

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## **Yury Barmin**

Yury Barmin, is the Director for the Middle East and North Africa at MPG, a Moscow-based political consulting firm. He is a fellow at the Russian International Affairs Council covering the Middle East and North Africa, Moscow's policy towards the region as well as the conflict in Syria. Apart from Syria, Mr Barmin works on the Libya file. He has worked in the GCC advising government and private clients.

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## **Introduction**

Throughout its involvement in the Syrian conflict, Russia has been the main guarantor of the survival of the Syrian army as an active fighting force and as a state building block. While Moscow has been investing time and effort into making the Syrian Arab Army a powerful institution, a deep reform process would need to be launched once the war is over. Russia's role in the Syrian army reform is predicated not only on its active involvement in the Syrian war alongside the army, but also on the close links that have existed between the two countries during the Cold War. The USSR became a political and military patron for Syria in 1955, the country's military was essentially modelled after the Red Army. The Russian role in Syria extended not only to instructions on how to use Soviet-made weapons but also to training in planning, tactics and operations<sup>1</sup>.

The extent to which Russia is ready to spearhead the reform process is not yet clear. However, it has been making attempts to increase the institutional and fighting capacity of the Syrian army. Moscow realises that while Iran mostly relies on militias inside Syria, the government in Damascus will not be able to create a viable army on its own. The real extent of change that could be performed by Russia also depends on its willingness to enact political reform in Syria.

### **Overcoming structural imbalances in the army**

The structure of the Syrian army before the war was marked by asymmetries that came from decades of preparations for a large land-based confrontation, the most likely potential adversary being Israel. By the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the army had a largely out-dated fleet of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles unfit for urban warfare. Immobility and poor preparedness for the conflict that erupted in 2011 led to heavy material and human losses within the Syrian army. These imbalances were also evident in the fight against the Islamic State when the group used light truck-mounted units to recapture Palmyra in 2016, resulting in the collapse of the Syrian defences. Based on this experience, Russia has improved the Syrian army's light motorized infantry capabilities, which better addresses the challenges of fighting the enemy's mobile forces in the desert setting<sup>2</sup>.

Before the war, the overwhelming part of the armed forces were deployed in southern and central Syria, the remaining threats in the north and in the east of the country requiring the preservation of significant combat-ready forces there. The bottom line for Russia is that the future Syrian army should be more mobile and be able to fight on multiple fronts. To facilitate this, Russia would need to review the policy of entrenchment of divisions and their commanders in specific geographic areas and introduce rotation of the officer corps.

Identity asymmetries also became a destabilising factor that contributed to grievances of the officer corps. Before the war, the majority of servicemen in the Syrian army came from the rural Sunni communities (and even today 60 to 65 percent of the regular army are Sunnis<sup>3</sup>), which

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, *Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries*, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 549-578

<sup>2</sup> *Lessons Of Syria: Russia Creates Super Light Motorized Infantry*, South Front, August 9, 2017, <https://southfront.org/lessons-of-syria-russia-creates-super-light-motorized-infantry/>

<sup>3</sup> Chris Zambelis, *Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience*, *Combating Terrorism Center*, May 2015, Volume 8, Issue 5, <https://ctc.usma.edu/syrias-sunnis-and-the-regimes-resilience/>

gave the army an illusion of diversity. Yet 90 percent of generals were vetted Alawites who were often tied personally to the president<sup>4</sup>.

Solving the issue of Alawite dominance in key positions within the army would require revamping the system of promotion to higher ranks from the moment a Syrian is drafted or joins the military academy, eradicating corruption and nepotism from the army, as well as introducing a clear and transparent system of benefits. To reduce grievances of marginalized groups within the Syrian army, Russia would need to replace its sectarian identity with a strong corporate identity, a process that was initially introduced by the Soviet Union to Syria, but was later obfuscated by the sectarian and political realities of the Syrian context.

### **Re-establishing institutional capacity of the army**

When the war broke out, the Syrian army was essentially a dysfunctional institution mired in corruption and nepotism, where officers' primary goal was personal financial gain. Throughout the conflict the institutional capacity of the Syrian army has been degraded by the reliance on auxiliary formations and foreign fighters. To make up for the manpower shortage from 325,000 in 2011 to around 150,000 in 2014<sup>5</sup>, the Syrian government had to allow a whole spectrum of militias and auxiliary forces supported by local businessmen and foreign powers, chiefly Iran, to emerge.

From the beginning of its military campaign in Syria, Russia has prioritised work with the Syrian army despite its operational weaknesses and tactical inaptitude. As opposed to Iran's modus operandi on the battlefield through militias that essentially established a parallel chain of command in Syria, the Russian military entrenched itself within the existing Syrian army institutions. According to the chief of the Russian General Staff, Army Gen. Valery Gerasimov, Russian advisors, intelligence and artillery specialists, as well as military engineers are attached to nearly all military units of the Syrian army<sup>6</sup>, significantly propping up its capacity and helping salvage the army as an institution. The final declaration of the Syrian Congress in Sochi states, "the use of force shall be the exclusive prerogative of competent state institutions<sup>7</sup>". This also reflects Russia's approach to re-institutionalising the Syrian military and reducing the role of parallel chains of command in maintaining state security.

Russia's attempts to increase the capacity of the Syrian army are also evidenced by its efforts to offset the influence of militias in Syria by creating the 4th and 5th Assault Corps whose fighters formally belong to the army. While fighters from the former were drawn from the National Defence Force (Russia's first attempt to integrate auxiliary forces in the army) and were to be stationed in Latakia, the latter recruited amnestied rebels, as well as defectors, who were to serve in different localities across Syria.

Another formation that truly benefitted from Russia's aerial as well as logistical support was the Tiger Forces led by Brigadier General Suheil Al Hassan, which originated in Air Force Intelligence<sup>8</sup>. Russian officers have been embedded within the Tiger Forces and have trained them to use advanced Russian weapons. In the offensive to retake Eastern Ghouta, Russia went

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<sup>4</sup> Florence Gaub, *The Syrian Military: The Day After*, ETH Zurich, Center for Security Studies, May 3, 2017, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/9fc28602-3d64-4a41-8568-dfc28d632dc3/pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Battered but Hardened, Syria Army Adapts to Guerrilla War, Naharnet, October 21, 2014, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/152046-battered-but-hardened-syria-army-adapts-to-guerrilla-war>

<sup>6</sup> Russian military advisors work with all Syrian army units — Russian General Staff, TASS, December 27, 2017, <http://tass.com/world/983232>

<sup>7</sup> Final statement of the Congress of the Syrian national dialogue, Sochi, January 30, 2018, [http://www.mid.ru/en\\_GB/maps/sy/-/asset\\_publisher/9fcjSOwMERcf/content/id/3046246](http://www.mid.ru/en_GB/maps/sy/-/asset_publisher/9fcjSOwMERcf/content/id/3046246)

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Waters, *The Tiger Forces, Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia*, Middle East Institute, October 2018, Policy Paper 2018-10, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2018-11/TigerForces.pdf>

as far as sidelining the Republican Guard and the 4th Armoured Division, prioritising the role of the Tiger Forces in this operation<sup>9</sup>. Personalities of Suheil Al Hassan's calibre are likely to emerge as the new elite of the Syrian army as a result of the war in Russian eyes. Some analysts suggest that he might be groomed by Russia to lead the army and its reformation in the post-war period<sup>10</sup>.

### **Reversing militiafication of the Syrian army**

Militancy in the Syrian security sector will not be easy to address as it had been part of the Syrian government's survival strategy and was woven into the fabric of the security sector. The National Defence Forces (NDF) compensated for the weaknesses of the Syrian army, and insulated the president from a potential military-led coup. While the issue of Iran's influence within the Syrian security sector is worrying to Russia, the disbanding and re-integration of militias that present a sizable fighting force will have to be a long-term process, which is unlikely to fully demobilize NDF.

Russia's intention to preserve the army structure, while gradually dissolving the NDF became clear as soon as the Russian military operation in Syria was launched. The formation of the 4th Corps, which by this time had lost its prominence in Syria, was clearly supported by the Syrian government<sup>11</sup>, in the hope that Russia's intervention would avert complete overtaking of conventional Syrian forces by militias. Some opposition sources indicate that the Syrian government was actively pushing for the integration of the NDF in the army upon the launch of the Russian military campaign in the country<sup>12</sup>.

However, the expectation that Russia would insist on immediate disbanding of the NDF in Syria is misplaced. Russia's own operations in the country greatly benefited from the existence of parallel military structures that filled the void left by the Syrian army. For as long as security threats to the Syrian government continue to exist, Russia is unlikely to challenge the role of local militias.

The process of the integration of the military will be gradual and selective. In Russia's view, the Syrian military's full integration of auxiliary forces, seen as proxy forces for Iran, might be necessary in the southwest of the country where the risk of confrontation between Iran and Israel remains high despite the fact that foreign Shia forces have been pulled out of the area.

Elsewhere in Syria, Russia might insist on gradual Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration (DDR) process for militias and their transition into a reserve force. The issue of the People's Protection Units (YPG) militias would also need to be addressed. However, the role of these Kurdish militias in the Syrian armed forces will be conditioned on the terms of the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Can Kasapoğlu, Syria's 'Shogun' In The Making: Russian-Backed General Suheil Al-Hassan And Future Of The Syrian Arab Armed Forces, EDAM, Foreign Policy & Security 2018/11, [http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/CAN\\_Tiger-Forces-Russia-Syria-report.pdf](http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/CAN_Tiger-Forces-Russia-Syria-report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> General Ayoub: Syrian armed forces launched a wide-scale offensive today to eliminate terrorist gatherings – video, SANA, October 8, 2015, <https://www.sana.sy/?p=280623>

<sup>12</sup> Russian intervention hastens the dismantling of the "Defense Forces" close to Iran ... and freezes the truce in Zabadani, Al Hayat, October 10, 2015,

<http://www.alhayat.com/article/698680/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AC%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%83-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%AF-%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A>

settlement of the Kurdish issue in Syria. Their involvement in the army, as well as in internal security forces in Kurdish regions, will be one of the ways to overcome the pre-war disenfranchisement of the Kurdish population.

To avoid a security relapse, demilitarisation of militias can only happen on the back of a strong regular army. Demilitarization of militias is not a new phenomenon for Syria, as it had been done previously by Hafez Al Assad who disarmed Baathist paramilitary groups (Jaysh Al Shaabi) following Muslim Brotherhood protests in the 1980s and kept them as a reserve force until Bashar Al Assad came to power and disbanded them<sup>13</sup>. Demilitarization of militias might be a strategy supported by President Assad, since new localised power centres that emerged in Syria during the war might in the long run threaten his presidency.

The failure of the Syrian army at the beginning of the war in part came from its inability to call up reservists, of whom there were hundreds of thousands when the call began in 2012, but who largely remained on the paper and had no intention of joining the army<sup>14</sup>. In creating a functioning military institution in Syria, Russia would need to become serious about training reservists to make them a strong fighting force that could potentially join the Syrian army, as well as to offset Iranian doctrinal influence that might remain among demobilised militia fighters.

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<sup>13</sup> Syria: Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces, The Carter Center, November 5, 2013, [https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/pro-governmentparamilitaryforces.pdf](https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/pro-governmentparamilitaryforces.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Lucas Winter, Manpower Gaps in the Syrian Army, The Foreign Military Studies Office, October 16, 2016