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'Second-Class': The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces

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ABSTRACT The defection of a significant number of Sunni officers amidst the ongoing turmoil in Syria created a unique opportunity to get access to original data on the Syrian armed forces. This study draws on extensive fieldwork to probe the sectarian question in the Syrian officer corps. On the basis of a series of interviews conducted throughout the summer of 2014, I investigate the politics and consequences of sectarian stacking in the Syrian military as well as the root causes of Sunni officers' grievances and alienation. My conclusions draw on an original database that compiles the sectarian affiliations of 81 prominent officers who occupied the most senior military positions under Bashar al-Asad.

KEY WORDS: Arab Spring, Syrian Military, Sunni Officers, Grievances, Sectarian Stacking, Defection

The Arab Spring rekindled scholarly interest in Arab militaries.[1] Studies published in recent years have shed new light on Arab

[1]See Risa Brooks, "Abandoned at the Palace: Why the Tunisian Military Defected from the Ben ʿAli Regime in January 2011", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36 (April 2013), 205–20; Hillel Frisch, 'The Egyptian Army and Egypt's ''Spring''", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36/2 (April 2013), 180–204"; Florence Gaub 'The Libyan Armed Forces between Coup-Proofing and Repression', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36/2 (2013), 221–44; Hicham Bou Nassif, 'Generals and Autocrats: How Coup-Proofing Pre-determined the Military Elite's Behavior in the Arab Spring', *Political Science Quarterly* 130/2 (2015), 245–75; Joshua Stacher, *Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford UP 2012); Hazem Kandil, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt* (London: Verso, 2012); Yezid Sayigh, 'Agencies of Coercion: Armies and Internal Security Forces', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011), 403–5; Zoltan Barany, 'Comparing Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military", *Journal of Democracy* 22 (2011), 28–39; Holger Albrecht, and Dina Bishara, 'Back on Horseback: The Military and Political Transformation in Egypt', *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3 (2011), 13–23.

armed forces, and fleshed out important dynamics pertaining to military politics in the Arab world. The new scholarship, however, suffers from a double limitation: First, so far, it is Egypt-centric. At least half of the recent studies on Arab armies pertain to the Egyptian armed forces, while most other militaries remain severely understudied – the Syrian armed forces being a case in point. Second, field-based research on Arab militaries continues to be scarce.[2] This lacuna is understandable in light of the difficulties scholars face when they seek to get access to sources within military institutions. Yet it remains true that much of the data that is most instructive is fieldwork-dependent. This article seeks to contribute to filling the informational gap with regard to the Syrian military which I study from the vantage point of Sunni officers' grievances.

That Alawi officers enjoy special treatment in the military is a time-honored orthodoxy in the literature on Syria. The work of Nicholas Van Dam provides a detailed account on the manipulation of sectarian loyalties in the Syrian armed forces. Polarization first pitted Sunni against non-Sunni officers immediately after the 1963 Baathi-dominated coup. Following the destruction of Sunni power base in the military, Alawi and Druze officers contended for supremacy. The purge of Druze officers in 1966 opened the door to Alawi domination despite the intra-Alawi struggle for power between the supporters of generals Hafez al-Asad and Salah Jadid. Van Dam's analysis probes how overlapping sectarian, regional and tribal loyalties reinforced one another and thus structured the political loyalties of officers hailing from Syria's compact minorities (i.e. the Alawis and the Druze).[3] Along similar lines, Hana Batatu's work on Syria shows that out of 31 officers appointed by Hafez al-Asad to lead the Syrian armed forces between 1970 and 1997 no less than 61.3 per cent were Alawi. Batatu argues that the heightening of sectarian friction in Syria in the 1970s, on the backdrop of the escalation of the conflict between the Muslim Brothers and the Asad regime, as well as the latter's unpopular intervention in Lebanon, increased Asad's dependency on his kinsmen for political survival, and thus heightened the Alawi nature of his regime.[4] Eyal Zisser, Michael Eisenstaedt and James T. Quinlivan have also published

[2]An exception is Yezid Sayigh, *Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Aug. 2012), 1–38.

[3]Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society Under Asad and The Ba'th Party* (New York: I.B.Tauris 1996).

[4]Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1999), 215–26.

informative studies shedding additional light on the politics of sectarian stacking in the Syrian military.[5]

This literature forms the backdrop of my own research on the Syrian officer corps. My fundamental thesis on the politics of sectarian bias in the military does not diverge from the aforementioned studies. The level of analysis is different, however. While the literature probes the macro-dynamics of Syrian politics – namely, coups, and the role of the military elite in the struggle for power in Syria – I focus on micro-dynamics within the officer corps. That sectarian stacking has long been central to the Asad regime coup-proofing strategies is by now firmly established. But how did five decades of instrumentalization of sectarian identities structure grievances and cross-sectarian relations within the Syrian officer corps? To the best of my knowledge, little empirical work has been done to probe this question.

I proceed as follows. First, I specify the study's goal and its contribution to the literature on officers' grievances. Second, I discuss my research design and methods. Third, I probe the root causes of Sunni officers' grievances in the military. I discuss my findings in the conclusion and reflect upon future venues for research on the Syrian military.

Literature Review and Theoretical Contribution

Students of identity politics have long observed that autocrats in heterogeneous societies tend to favor their own ethnic, sectarian or racial group in terms of military recruitment in order to enhance regime security – a practice which the literature refers to as ethnic or sectarian 'stacking'.[6]

[5]Eyal Zisser, 'The Syrian Army Between the Domestic and External Fronts', *The Middle East Review for International Affairs* 5/1 (March 2001), accessed on 7 June 2014 at: <www.gloria-center.org/2001/03/zisser-2001-03-01>; James T. Quinlivan, 'Coup Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East', *International Security* 24/2 (Autumn 1999), 131–65; Michael Eisenstaedt, 'Syria's defense companies: Profile of a Praetorian Unit', unpublished paper, 1989. See also N.E.Bou-Nacklie, "Les Troupes Speciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916–46", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25/4 (Nov. 1993), 645–60; Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkley: Univ.of California Press, 1988); Alasdair Drysdale, 'Ethnicity in the Syrian Officer Corps', *Civilizations* 29/. 3/4 (1979), 359–74; Itamar Rabinovitch, *Syria Under the Baʿath 1963–1966. The Army-Party Symbiosis* (Jerusalem: Israel UP. 1972); and Gordon Torrey, *Syrian Politics and the Military. 1945–1958* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1964).

[6]See Philip Roessler, 'The Enemy Within. Personal Rule, Coups and Civil War in Africa'", *World Politics* 63/2 (April 2011), 300– 46; Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategy and Military Defection in Rebellion", *Comparative Politics* 42/3 (April 2010),333–50); Quinlivan, Ibid; Donald Horowitz. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict.* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press1985); Cynthia H Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers, State Security in Divided Societies* (Athens: the Univ. of Georgia Press. 1980).

When an autocrat in power becomes the symbol of a communal identity or a value system held dear by officers serving under him, they are less likely to threaten his rule, especially if the vacuum created by his downfall could potentially be filled by a loathed 'other'. Theodore McLauchlin notices correctly in that regard that autocrats' co-ethnics in the officer corps know that should the out-group come to power they are likely to be purged from the military; upholding the status-quo becomes a matter of self-interest.[7] That said, beyond egoistic and professional considerations, loyalist officers may well be convinced that their group's physical survival, or political role, could be at stake, should the regime crumble. Thus, if anti-regime demonstrators take to the streets, communal fears and shared aversions facilitate autocrats' efforts to frame protesters as the 'others', agents of foreign powers and enemies of the ruling elite's religious, ethnic or sectarian group *per se*. This accounts for the fact that ethnic or sectarian stacking has repeatedly proven particularly effective at wedding militaries to nondemocratic regimes.

The aim of this study is to investigate how sectarian stacking shapes officers' grievances in the military. The literature on grievances in the armed forces has traditionally been intertwined with the scholarship on coups. Officers' grievances pertaining to corporate and bureaucratic motives have been central in the work of several influential scholars including Eric Nordlinger, Roman Kolkowitz and Timothy Colton.[8] By contrast, grievances pertaining to officers' professional ambitions have figured less prominently in coup studies, possibly because they are less easily testable – Samuel Decalo's work on African coups is a notable exception in that regard.[9] Thompson's classic study on the grievances of coup-makers has shown that most putsches are triggered by a mixture of corporate complaints pertaining to militaries' organizational needs – e.g. budget, autonomy, cohesion – and professional grievances centered on personal ambitions of putschist officers.[10] The two approaches differ in their levels of analysis: corporate grievance theory studies coups from the vantage point of the military as an organization whereas the work on professional grievances pinpoints the egoistic motivations of coup-

[7]McLauchlin, Ibid., 339.

[8]Timothy Colton, *Commissars, Commanders, and Civilian Authority: The Structure of Soviet Military Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1979); Eric A. Nordlinger, *Soldiers In Politics. Military Coups And Governments* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall 1977); Roman Kolkowitz, *The Soviet Military and the Communist Party* (Princeton UP 1967).

[9]Samuel Decalo, *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP1976).

[10]William Thompson, *The Grievances of Military Coup-Makers* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications 1973).

makers. Yet, despite this divergence, both approaches belong to the rationalist-materialist school of civil-military relations studies and contribute to its persistent hegemony. Put differently, both corporatist and professional approach to putsches downplay the importance of factors such as ideology or culture and stress interest-centered rational behavior as the main source behind officers' grievances. I show in this study that while sectarian stacking does generate tension pertaining to corporatist and professional motivations, it also heightens ideational friction within the officer corps; consequently, non-material considerations also need to be probed for the picture on officers' grievances to be full.

Research Design

This study builds on a series of in-depth interviews conducted in May, June, and July 2014, with Syrian Sunni officers who had defected from the military in 2012 and 2013. Except for one retired brigadier-general, all my interviewees had been active-duty officers until they decided to break with the Syrian regime. I conducted my interviews in two Turkish towns situated on the borders with Syria, Antakya and Al Rihanle, both of which have become major asylum centers for Syrian refugees since the beginning of the uprising in 2011. Of the 24 officers I interviewed, three were Brigadiers, five Colonels, four Lieutenant-Colonels, four Majors, five Captains and three Second-Lieutenants. The preponderance of officers serving in the teaching staff of Syria's military academies, the Signal Corps, and Air Defense, reflects the fact that few Sunni officers are assigned to army positions within the military, and even less are allowed to join the military's elite troops such as the 4th Armored Division or the Special Forces Division.

The interviews I conducted in Turkey all followed a semi-structured, open-ended format and lasted between two to five hours each. There was little variation among my interviewees in terms of age and rank as most were middle and junior officers. The uniformity of my sample in that regard reflects the fact that few Sunni officers are promoted to the higher ranks in the Syrian armed forces; most retire prior to becoming brigadier (*Aamid*), and only a handful reaches the coveted rank of major-general (*Liwa*). In addition, of those Sunni officers who did reach the upper echelons in the armed forces few defected. Consequently, the sample of Sunni officers available to be interviewed was relatively homogenous in terms of age (late 20s; till late 30s/mid-40s) and position in the military hierarchy. The rural background, common among the overwhelming majority of my interviewees, added to the homogeneity of the sample. The urban/rural divide line, central to Syrian politics, is inconsequential within the officer corps, whose members hail

overwhelmingly from the countryside irrespective of sectarian affiliation. My interviewees maintained that they were aware of anti-Sunni discrimination in the armed forces prior to enlisting; they joined the officer corps nonetheless because it promised young rural men with limited access to lucrative alternatives in the private sector some degree of social mobility. These similar characteristics, combined with the shared alienation caused by anti-Sunni discrimination in the military, have contributed to the noticeable convergence in opinions among my interviewees.

Sunni Officers in the Syrian Military: The Roots of Grievances

The origin of Sunni officers' disaffection in the Syrian military is threefold: professional, corporatist, and ideational. First, Sunni officers complain about the preferential treatment received by their Alawi colleagues. All of my interviewees expressed deep resentment of what they perceived to be systematic anti-Sunni discrimination in the military institution. Second, Sunni officers were alienated by the neglect of the corporate interests of the military as an institution, which contrasted sharply with efforts deployed to provide all-Alawi units charged specifically with regime security, and counterbalancing the armed forces, with state-of-the-art weaponry. Third, the ethos of the Syrian officer corps is permeated with practices that Sunni officers perceive to be alien, indeed, offensive, to Islam, such as serving alcohol at social gatherings and frowning upon the observance of regular prayer. The regime's alliance with Iran, against the backdrop of heightened Sunni-Shiite friction in the Middle East, heightened the suspicions of Sunni officers, who became increasingly convinced in the decade preceding 2011 that the regime's ideological discourse was a veneer hiding its sectarian nature and motives.

The Professional Grievance of Sunni Officers

Up to the early 1970s, Sunnis retained a significant presence in the Syrian officer corps. Retired Brigadier Muhammad Shahima, who joined the military academy in 1970, maintains that half of his cohort consisted of Sunnis.[11] Throughout the 1970s, Hafiz al-Asad progressively tilted the balance in favor of his Alawi coreligionists, continuing a practice that had begun in the preceding decade. The 'Alawi-tization' of the officer corps became more pronounced after the 1979 attack on Alawi-cadets in Aleppo's school of artillery by Islamic militants, and

[11]Interview with retired Brigadier Mohammad Shamel (army), 7 May, 2014. Antakya, Turkey.

even more so, in the wake of the Hama massacre.[12] Since the early 1980s, Alawis have made up 80–85 percent of every new cohort graduating from the military academy.[13] Syria has a Sunni majority, but the recruitment policies of the Asad regime have prevented the demographic order from reproducing itself in the officer corps. The fundamental complaint of Sunni officers is straightforward: Sectarian stacking largely keeps them outside the military academy and the few of them who are actually recruited into the officer corps see their careers evolve in an institution heavily dominated by Alawis. The consequences of the sectarian imbalance structure the officers' careers throughout the three years of study at the military academy, or the five years at the Asad Academy for Military Engineering, and after graduation.

The Syrian military academy is divided into 11 departments, the most important of which are the schools of infantry, artillery, and armor.[14] Admission to these schools is sought-after because they provide the Syrian armed forces with its upper elite: Officers who secure appointments as regimental commanders hail overwhelmingly from the infantry, artillery, and armor.[15] Not every graduate of these schools is guaranteed a prominent future position, but being assigned to any other department of the academy is a serious handicap for ambitious cadets. Students do not choose their specialization; nor is the system that structures their distribution among the different schools merit-based. The commandership of the academy determines who in each incoming cohort will study what and where. Every year, up to 90 per cent of the cadets who join the privileged schools are Alawis.[16] Non-Alawi cadets are then scattered among the other schools, irrespective of their educational accomplishments prior to enlisting in the military. This practice ensures Alawi domination of command positions and relegates non-Alawis to a status of permanent inferiority in the armed forces.

Discriminatory policies continue after graduation. Officers typically prefer to serve either in non-combat divisions such as the intelligence agencies (*mukhabarat*) and administrative departments; or in special combat units, such as the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored

[12]Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Ahmad Hakim (Asad Academy for Military Engineering), 8 May, 2014, Antakya, Turkey.

[13]This figure was given to me by all of my interviewees; I asked each of them about the sectarian distribution in his cohort.

[14]The other departments include the schools of administration; military technology; electronic warfare; mining engineering; air defense; military transportation; armament; and signal corps.

[15]Interview with Second-Lieutenant Mamoun Nassar (Signal Corps), 12 May 2014, Antakya, Turkey

[16]Ibid.

Division,[17] the Special Forces, and the Airborne Special Forces (*Firqat 14 Inzal Jawwi*).[18] These divisions are preferred destinations for three reasons: First, especially in the intelligence agencies, the financial advantages are great. Politicians and businessmen give generous rewards to the intelligence officers who grant them protection.[19] Officers assigned to the *mukhabarat* also get access to new cars and free housing. According to Lieutenant-Colonel Yasser Nasser, a former instructor at the Asad Academy for Military Engineering:

> The dream of every single officer is to be recruited in the intelligence community after graduation from the military academy. People who are unfamiliar with Syria may have difficulty understanding how important it is for us to get access to cars, let alone free housing. With the kind of salary officers make in the military, they can spend ten years of their lives saving money and still not be able to buy a car. The same is true, *a fortiori*, about apartments. So the privileges bestowed upon the *mukhabarat* officers in terms of cars and housing are very important. To be able to get married, and settle down, you need to own an apartment and a car. *Mukhabarat* officers don't have to worry about this; the rest of us do.[20]

Officers in military administrations can also enrich themselves because they handle the commercial affairs of the armed forces pertaining to procurement of arms, food, and other provisions. These officers have the leeway to make deals with suppliers and reap kickbacks and commissions on the side.[21] Officers in special combat units also have a myriad of privileges. They, too, get new cars and free housing. In addition, due to their aura as 'Bashar's men' (the Republican Guard) or 'Mahir's men' (the 4th Armored Division)[22], they enjoy easy access to bank loans and whatever services they may

[17]The 4th Armored Division has gained a fearsome reputation in the ongoing conflict in Syria as the spearhead of the regime's repressive machine. The Division was known as unit 562 in the 1970s. The name was later changed into the Defense Companies (*Saraya al-Difa'*) when Rif'at al-Asad, Hafiz al-Asad's brother, led it the 1980s. After Rifa'at fall from grace in 1984 the name was changed again during the 1990s into the 4th Armored Division. I owe these information to retired Brigadier Mohammad Shamel. Ibid.

[18]Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Yasser Nasser (Asad Academy for Military Engineering), 13 June, 2014, Antakya, Turkey.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Interview with Captain Hussam Sabbagh (Air Force), 11 May 2014, Antakya, Turkey.

[22]Mahir al-Asad is the younger brother of Bashar al-Asad.

require from public institutions.[23] At the same time, serving in the intelligence community, or administrative departments, keeps these officers away from the hardships of military life. Special combat units, the Republican Guard, and the 4th Armored Division do face some of these hardships, but nonetheless they serve in Damascus, Syria's capital, which officers prefer to being stationed in the provinces, on the frontiers, or in the desert.[24] Finally, it is simply more prestigious to be an officer in intelligence agencies, or in special combat units, than to be one of the ordinary troops. Officers in these privileged divisions are conscious that they belong to 'the club of the masters of the country'.[25]

The competition to join the abovementioned advantaged sectors of the Syrian military breaks down along identity lines, with Sunnis and other non-Alawi officers falling on the losing side. Sectarian stacking in Syria spans the different subdivisions of the armed forces; Alawi officers are in the majority everywhere. But intelligence agencies and special combat units, and to a lesser extent, administrative departments, are almost all-Alawi divisions. Sectarian stacking is particularly apparent in the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored Division, the Air Force Intelligence (*al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya*), and the Military Security (*al-Amn al-ʿAskari*). That these units are privileged is unsurprising considering how critical they are for regime survival. Inevitably, their sectarian character generates resentment among non-Alawis, however. In the respective words of Captain Hussam Sabbagh and Major Mahmoud ʿAbboud, two officers I interviewed in Turkey, Sunnis are only allowed in the armed forces to fill subaltern positions that do not interest Alawis:

> The only place in the air force I know of where Sunnis match, and maybe outnumber Alawis, is the Tayfour military airport, close to the borders with Iraq. This base is 90 kilometers away from Homs, deep in the desert. It is situated in one of the most desolate, godforsaken regions in Syria. This is where Sunnis in the air force are sent to serve. What is true about the air force is also true about the army, which is more dangerous from a regime-security perspective.[26]

> The least attractive service in the armed forces is the air defense brigades. Air defense bases are scattered all over the national territory, some in the desert, or in remote areas on the frontier. No one wants to be assigned there. Furthermore, officers and soldiers manning air defense are constantly on alert; they get fewer leaves

[23]Interview with Captain Hussam Sabbagh, ibid.
[24]Mahir al-Asad is the younger brother of Bashar al-Asad.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid.

> than everyone else. That the number of Sunnis serving in the Syrian military is highest in air defense says a lot about our situation in the armed forces. Sunnis form less than 15 per cent of the officer corps yet they handle all the hard work because they constantly need to prove themselves in order to keep their jobs and get promoted. Alawis, by contrast, are admitted to the academy for regime-security purposes. Alawis do not have to spend much effort in order to move up in the hierarchy; their sectarian identity suffices. [27]

Three additional points of friction pertain to study-abroad programs, promotions, and the sense of disempowerment pervasive among Sunni officers. The Syrian armed forces maintain cordial relations with the Russian, Iranian, and Egyptian militaries; scores of Syrian officers have studied and received advanced degrees in Moscow, Tehran and Cairo. Intra-corps competition for study abroad is fierce because graduate studies facilitate promotion. In addition, officers receive substantially better salaries for the duration of their missions abroad, which makes graduate studies financially appealing. The Bureau of Officers Affairs (*Maktab Shu'un al-Dubbat)*, and the Training Committee (*Hay'at al-Tadrib*), select candidates for training missions. The two bureaus are Alawi-dominated, and particularly resented by Sunni officers, who maintain that both bureaus privilege Alawis, irrespective of actual academic achievements.[28] On the other hand, while promotions at junior and mid-ranking positions are automatic, the same is not true with regard to progress beyond the rank of colonel. Alawi officers are privileged over non-Alawis; Alawis who have connections with the political or military elite are more likely to be promoted than their co-religionists who do not. This issue is particularly frustrating for Sunni mid-ranking officers, many of whom serve for a decade without being promoted, by which time they have reached retirement age.[29] Finally, Sunni officers complain that even the few of them who do reach mid-ranking or senior positions do not get the clout that normally accompanies such relatively high standing in the military hierarchy. Real influence with the military is in the hands of Alawi senior officers and Alawi-dominated intelligence agencies. Soldiers who need a leave of absence, or hope to be transferred from one brigade or company to another, ask Alawi officers for help, not Sunnis, because they know where true power lies.[30]

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[27]Interview with Major Mahmoud Abboud (Asad Academy for Military Engineering), 15 May 2014. Antakya, Turkey.
[28]Interview with Second-Lieutenant Mamoun Nassar, ibid.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid.

It is interesting to note that the consensus among my interviewees is that Sunni officers suffered from more discrimination in the military under Bashar al-Asad than under his father. The officers maintain that Hafiz al-Asad's grip over his generals was stronger than Bashar's. Whereas Hafiz al-Asad was able to rein in the military elite in order to keep at least a veneer of inclusiveness in the Syrian officer corps, Bashar was not able to do so. The regime became more decentralized under Bashar, with several powerful military barons jockeying for power and competing to place their Alawi followers throughout the different sectors of the armed forces. Consequently, Sunnis' share of prominent appointments in the military shrunk even more over the last decade.[31] Tables 1 to 8 in the annex show the extent to which Alawi officers are over-represented within the Syrian military elite under Bashar al-Asad.

The Corporate Grievance of Sunni Officers

Beyond frustrations pertaining to their careers, Sunni officers accuse the Syrian regime of ignoring the fundamental corporate interests of the military. Officers argue that the regime deliberately keeps the armed forces weak as a fighting force, and breaches the military's institutional autonomy by transforming what should have been a national institution par excellence into what several officers labeled 'family business.' Virtually all of my interviewees agree that the combat preparedness (*al-jahiziyya al-qitaliyya*) of the Syrian armed forces has been in steady decline at least since the early 1990s and that it reached abysmal lows on the eve of the 2011 uprisings. Officers complain about Russian weaponry that is both old and malfunctioning and yet kept in service. Air force officers maintain that their Russian MiG-21 and 23 jets lack proper maintenance and much-needed spare parts, harming their training.[32] Army officers describe their old T-55 and T-62 Russian

[31]The informal network of Alawi military barons surrounding Bashar al-Asad, whose members are blamed for the increased sectarian bias against Sunni officers in the Syrian armed forces, includes: Mahir al-Asad (4th[h] Armored Division); Asef Shawkat (Deputy Minister of Defense until his death in 2012); General ʿAdli Habib (Special Forces); Major-General ʿIzz al-Din Ismael (Air Force Intelligence); Major-General Jamil Hassan (Air Force Intelligence); Major-General Rafiq Shehade, (Military Security); Major-General Hisham Ikhtiyar, (National Security Bureau); Brigadier Zoul al-Himma Shalish (General Intelligence). Interview with a Colonel in the Special Forces who wished to remain anonymous. 26 May 2014, Antakya, Turkey.

[32]Interview with Brigadier-General Yahiya Hajal (Air Force). 6 June 2014, Antakya, Turkey.

tanks as 'piles of junk.'[33] Air defense officers say that their equipment is greatly inferior to that of the Israelis, who have no trouble jamming Syrian radars, and the whole air defense system, each time Israeli jets fly over Syria.[34] The technological woes of the Syrian armed forces are blamed on the regime's insensitivity to the military's need. Sunni officers also pinpoint the corruption of Alawi senior officers, whom they accuse of reaping generous dividends from shadowy deals with providers of deficient weaponry, unhindered by the authorities.[35] My interviewees stated repeatedly that Alawi officers control the bureau of military inspection in the Syrian armed forces, and use their positions there to write false reports about military readiness, in exchange for bribes. According to Major Iyad Jabra:

> Combat preparedness is good when 80 per cent of a company's heavy weaponry (tanks, artillery, and military transport) is operational. Military inspectors on tours have often found that less than 40 per cent of the equipment is properly maintained. Yet they wrote reports stating otherwise, in exchange for bribes they get from military commanders who want their companies to look sharp on paper. The corruption of military inspectors is one of the worst-kept secrets in the armed forces. Alawi senior officers must know about the practice. But they don't do much to stop it because they benefit from it, and also, because they don't care.[36]

The venality of senior officers is also cited as the main reason for the notorious exploitation of the rank and file. Syria's is an army of conscripts; the performance of the Syrian armed forces in war is dependent on their morale and training. The draftees, however, suffer from difficult conditions during their military service. They live in overcrowded barracks lacking in basic hygiene, wear worn-out military fatigues and boots, and are provided with often defective Russian rifles. Conscripts sometimes go hungry because senior officers transfer sums

[33]Interview with Colonel in the army who did not wish to be named, 7 May 2014, Al Rihanle, Turkey.

[34]Interview with Major ʿIssam Kallas (Air Defense),. 14 May 2014, Antakya, Turkey.

[35]'Go visit the Alawi hinterland and you will find castles built all over the place in Kafroun, Beit Yashout, Kadmous, and other towns. In very Alawi village you will find fancy villas built on the best plots of land available. Ask about the owners and you will hear the names of officers from the Shalish, Makhlouf, Ismael, Douba and Haidar clans. How did these officers get the money to build these castles? Even a General in the Syrian armed forces does not make more than 800 dollars per month. They make the money, and we get the deficient equipment'. Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Ahmad Hakim, ibid.

[36]Interview with Major Iyad Jabra (Air Defense), 7 May 2014, Al Rihanle, Turkey.

allocated for food supplies to their own accounts.[37] In essence, senior officers divide conscripts into two categories. Those who hail from rich families become a source of additional income; they benefit from easy service conditions and can spend lengthy periods of time outside the barracks in exchange for bribes.[38] Conscripts who hail from poorer backgrounds are treated as personal servants and chauffeurs. The conditions for conscripts are a sensitive issue for Sunni officers because draftees are overwhelmingly Sunni, whereas most senior officers are Alawi. The matter thus takes on a sectarian undertone that increases the disaffection of Sunni officers.[39] In addition, the demoralization of Syrian soldiers compounds problems stemming from the technological inferiority of the Syrian armed forces in terms of combat readiness. In the words of Major Mahmoud Abboud and another officer who wished to remain anonymous:

> I have always been convinced that if there would ever be war with Israel, soldiers on the front would run away, rather than actually fight. Soldiers know that their tanks can barely move, that their armament is inadequate, and that generals steal sums allocated for food. You don't put a soldier in these conditions and then ask him to fight and win a battle against a military like the Israeli armed forces.[40]

> Some senior officers can be bought with a packet of cigarettes. Do you think soldiers would fight and die for such generals, if they are sent into battle? Had we went to war with the Israelis, they could have reached Homs within two hours. Then again, why would Israel fight the Asad regime?[41]

The neglect of the armed forces was made even more problematic in light of the preferential treatment lavished on the all-Alawi special combat units. Air defense officers have asked to be equipped with the portable surface-to-air 9K38 Igla missile ever since its latest version was fielded by the Russian armed forces in 2004. When Syria purchased these missiles from Russia in 2006, however, it was to the exclusive benefit of the Republican Guard.[42] Similarly, T-90 and T-80 Russian battle tanks, the most effective in Syria's arsenal, remain the sole

[37]Ibid.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Interview with Major ʿIssam Kallas, Ibid.
[40]Interview with Major Mahmoud Abboud,. ibid.
[41]Interview with a Brigadier from the Air Force who did not wish to reveal his name, 28 May 2014, Al Rihanle, Turkey.
[42]Interview with Major Iyad Jabra, ibid.

property of the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division.[43] As a general rule, the new weaponry Syria purchases is used first by the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Brigade, and sent to other units only when it has been outmoded by updates. Thus, armored division in the military at large only got T-62 Russian tanks when the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division were equipped with T-72 tanks; the same happened when T-72s were replaced with T-80s. Officers complain bitterly of being provided with only the 'leftovers' of the all-Alawi companies.[44] Some officers suspect the regime of weakening the armed forces on purpose, in order to reduce their ability to trigger coups, and keep the intra-military correlation of force tilted in favor of the all-Alawi special units.[45] Other officers stress that the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division are in charge of the regime's security, whereas national defense per se is incumbent on the armed forces at large. That the regime should privilege the special units over the regular armed forces reveals where its true priority lies; it also discredits the regime's cherished discourse of steadfastness in the struggle against Israel.[46]

That both Hafiz al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad have tended to appoint family members in commandership positions in the armed forces exacerbated the frustration of Sunni officers. Hafiz al-Asad began appointing relatives in senior military positions when he was still Defense Minister, before he seized power in 1970. He continued doing so after he became president. Asad's brother, Rifʿat, became commander of the powerful paramilitary Defense Units (*Saraya al-Difaʿ*) deployed in Damascus, and his other brother, Jamil, led a special section in the Defense Units in charge with securing the Alawi hinterland. In addition, 'Adnan al-Asad, a cousin of the president, led the Struggle Companies (*Saraya al-Siraʿ*), yet another paramilitary unit deployed in Damascus. Finally, 'Adnan Makhluf, Asad's brother-in-law, was in charge of the regime's Republican Guard.[47] In the early 1990s, Asad's eldest son, Bassel, who was being groomed to succeed his father, became a staff member of the Presidential Guard and a commander of an elite armored brigade, although he was only a Major in the armed forces. The 'All in the family' tactics did not change when Hafiz al-Asad passed away. The non-exhaustive list of family members appointed in senior positions under Bashar includes his brother Mahir, the defacto commander of the 4th Armored Division; his cousin, Zou al-Himma Shalish, in charge of units responsible for the safety of the

[43]Ibid.
[44]Interview with Brigadier Yahiya Hajal, ibid.
[45]Interview with Colonel Maher Nawwar (Air Force), 15 May 2014, Antakya, Turkey.
[46]Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Ahmad Abboud, ibid.
[47]See James Quinlivan, ibid.

president and his family; another cousin, Hafiz Makhluf, who heads unit 251 in the General Intelligence and is widely considered to be the real commander of that service; yet another cousin, Hilal al-Asad, was commander of the Military Police in the 4th Armored Division; and Asad's brother-in-law, Asif Shawkat, the strong man in the intelligence apparatus until his death in 2012.[48] Sunni officers maintain that Hafiz and Bashar al-Asad have transformed the military into an appendix of the ruling elite, instead of being an institution on its own.[49]

The Ideational Grievance of Sunni Officers

In addition to material grievances, virtually all of my interviewees complained about what they perceive to be an aggressive anti-religious ethos within the armed forces. The overwhelming majority of Sunni officers I met during fieldwork were openly hostile to the Syrian Muslim Brothers, and other Islamist formations in their country, as well as in the Arab world at large. Yet the officers are deferential to Islam and tend to be socially conservative. Alawi officers frown upon any hint of religiosity among their Sunni colleagues, including daily prayer, which is a pillar of Islam. The ensuing friction between Sunni officers, and what they sense to be Alawi sectarianism hiding behind a veneer of secularism, stokes Sunni disaffection within the Syrian armed forces. According to Second-Lieutenant Mamoun Nassar and Lieutenant-Colonel Ahmed Abdel-Qader, respectively:

> I never dared to pray in my neighborhood's mosque during leave days, let alone praying during service. If an informer had seen me in the mosque, I would have been immediately summoned to Military Security to explain why I was present at a place that could harbor extremists and jihadis. In fact, I always avoided parking my car in the vicinity of mosques, just to be on the safe side. I cannot over-emphasize my frustration.[50]

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[48]See Hazem Saghieh, *Al-Baʿath al-Souri. Tarikh Moujaz* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi 2011); and Sobhi Hadidi, "Halakat al-Asad al-Amniya, Hatmyat al-Tafakouk… Baʿd Ikhtibar al-Nar", *Jadaliya*, 31 July 2011, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2280/%D8%B5%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%8A.

[49]In the words of one of my interviewees: 'Until 1963, the Syrian armed forces were a national institution. The Ba'athi coup that year transformed the military into a party militia. Asad's so-called "corrective movement" in 1970 then changed the militia into family business'. Interview with a Brigadier (army) who did not wish to be named, 28 June 2014,. Antakya, Turkey.

[50]Interview with Second-Lieutenant Mamoun Nassar.Ibid.

> In order to advance in the hierarchy, an officer has to be morally loose. In 1993, an intelligence officer summoned me to his office. He asked me: 'If I go visit you, will your wife be present?'. I explained that I am from the Syrian countryside and that it is not in our traditions that women be present when male guests who are not accompanied by their wives are visiting. I told him that if he visits me unaccompanied by his wife, mine would still greet him, but would not keep us company. He retorted that this is a backward ethos unbecoming of an officer.[51]

My interviewees complained that their Alawi superiors expect them to drink whiskey in social events and publicly mock those Sunni officers who abstain from doing so in order to conform to the teachings of Islam. Several of my interviews maintain that Sunni officers who occupy upper positions in the hierarchy brag openly about consuming alcohol and sometimes keep bottles of liquor in their offices within barracks as a public statement that they are only 'nominally Sunni'".[52] Another point of contention is the Hijab, the headscarf worn by Muslim women as a symbol of modesty and chastity. The preference of most officers I met goes to having their wives and daughters wear the veil. However, the Hijab signals attachment to religious doctrine which is precisely the wrong message to send if an officer is to climb the echelons in the armed forces. Thus, some officers chose to have their wives not wear the veil in order to remain on the safe side with the regime; others refused to do the same irrespective of the consequences on their career. My interviewees concur that the regime's policies and suspicions fostered an artificial contradiction between two goals they all hold dear, namely, being loyal to Syria and the military institution, on the one hand, and observing the rites of Islam, on the other.

This dimension of Sunni malaise is distinct from the competition over resources and advancement within the officer corps, although not completely unrelated to it. Despite sectarian stacking policies, the Asad regime did promote some non-Alawi officers to higher positions in the military, in order to mitigate the sectarian image of its special combat units and intelligence agencies. The regime thus signaled to Sunnis in the military that professional advancement remains possible for a handful of them, provided that they adopt an irreligious, and preferably, anti-religious, public persona. In order to preserve their chances of being promoted, but also to avoid raising the suspicion of the much-feared intelligence agencies, Sunni officers had to hide their

[51]Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Ahmed Abdel-Qader (Asad Academy for Military Engineering). 8 May, 2014. Antakya, Turkey.

[52]Interview with Major Iyad Shamsy (Air Defense). Al Rihanle, Turkey, 7 May 2014.

moral and religious preferences; they nurtured a deep sense of humiliation and resentment at being so obliged.

The discrediting of the regime's ideological message heightened ideational frictions within the officer corps. Hafiz al-Asad tried to legitimize his rule by taking a hardline stance vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict and stressing his dedication to the Palestinian cause. Bashar al-Asad also emphasized his regime's commitment to the regional 'axis of resistance' opposed to American and Israeli hegemony in the Middle East. Whether Sunni officers were ever convinced that Hafiz al-Asad was indeed a national Arab hero is questionable. My interviewees all maintain that they joined the military academy because it offered good prospects for young men hailing from the rural lower middle classes, not because they believed that the armed forces were being prepared to defend Syria or to liberate Palestine. A combination of factors made the regime's ideological claims appear even more dubious under Bashar al-Asad, however: First, as mentioned above, the combat preparedness of the armed forces deteriorated significantly in the last decade. Israeli jets flew repeatedly into Syrian airspace; the Syrian regime refrained from reacting, even in the wake of the Israeli attack on the Kubar base, where Syria was allegedly developing nuclear capacities, in 2007. Second, as Iran's profile grew in Middle East politics, Syria looked increasingly overshadowed by Tehran. Syria's apparent subordination to Tehran, just like its military weakness, corroded the credibility of the regime's rhetorical bravado.[53] The heightening of sectarian tension in the region in the wake of the breakdown of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, and the assassination of the (Sunni) Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, did little to endear the alliance with Iran to Sunni officers' hearts.[54]

The officers' alienation was compounded by the unease stemming from the need to remain constantly on their guard in interactions with Alawi colleagues. Although some cross-sectarian friendships did develop in the officer corps, they remained the exception rather than the rule. In general, sectarian relations in the armed forces are marred by mutual suspicion. Students in the military academy befriend members of their own sect. Rooms in dormitories are informally segregated by sect.[55] Sunni officers know that informers are to be found among Sunnis, too, but they tend to assume that all Alawi officers write intelligence reports about their non-Alawi colleagues. Not surprisingly, in an environment where mistrust is so high, the sense of military camaraderie is low. My interviewees bemoaned what they

[53]Interview with Colonel Maher Nawwar, ibid.
[54]Interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Yasser Nasser, ibid.
[55]Interview with Captain Issam Kallas, ibid.

described as the imperative of 'putting on a permanent mask' in presence of Alawis; they repeatedly described themselves as 'second-class' and maintained that their Alawi subordinates were more influential than they in the armed forces. There is a consensus among the officers I met that military socialization makes officers' sectarian consciousness more pronounced because it gives Alawis a sense of impunity and humiliates Sunnis.

Fear of the omnipresent intelligence agencies deepened officers' malaise. It goes beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed study of how the much-feared Syrian *mukhabarat* penetrates the armed forces. Suffice it to say that of the myriad of security agencies keeping a tight grip on Syria, two organizations control the military, the Air Force Intelligence (*al-Mukhabarat al-Jawwiyya*), and the Military Security (*al-Amn al-ʿAskari*). The former is in charge of the air force and aerial defense brigades, while the latter handles the rest of the military.[56] Intelligence agencies keep a regional headquarters (*farʿ*) in each of Syria's 14 provinces. To each regiment, brigade, and company of the regular armed forces, they assign a security officer (*dabit amn*), who heads a network of secret informers planted in the unit for which he is responsible.[57] All Syrian officers live in the shadow of intelligence networks, but Sunnis in particular fear being denounced as religious or conservative. They serve under a sword of Damocles they sense permanently hanging over their heads.[58]

Conclusion

As suggested in the preceding analysis, the reasons for Sunni officers' disaffection with the Asad regime were threefold: professional, corporatist and ideational. Sectarian stacking was central to the Syrian regime's survival strategy; consequently, the Syrian officer corps remained skewed in favor of Alawis throughout the last decades. This meant that Sunnis were severely under-represented at all levels of the officer corps – namely, in operational and intelligence positions. Frustration over grim professional prospects was pervasive among Sunni officers. The latter's alienation from the regime was compounded by what they perceived to be an intentional neglect of

[56]The other two main intelligence agencies in Syria are the General Intelligence (*al-Moukhabarat al-ʿAmma*), and the Political Security (*al-Amn al-Siassi*). Both handle non-military intelligence; the latter also is in charge of the Syrian Police.

[57]Security Officers answer to regional intelligence headquarters, which report in turn to central directorates in Damascus.

[58]Interview with Captain Hussam Sabbagh, Ibid.

the military in favor of praetorian units. Their disaffection was exacerbated by the anti-religious ethos pervasive within the military, as well as the discredit of the regime's secular and Pan-Arab discourse which rang increasingly hollow in the decade preceding the 2011 uprising. The defection of Sunni officers in the wake of the 2011 popular mobilizations and ensuing repression reflects their alienation from the regime, combined with their refusal to slaughter civilians – mostly fellow Sunnis – in order to uphold the status-quo.

This study has focused on the grievances of Sunni officers, but more should be done to investigate the micro-dynamics of their defection from the military. The estimations I collected from my interviewees pertaining to the overall number of officers in the Syrian military range from 50,000 to 60,000. The highest assessment of the number of officers who defected from the Syrian armed forces in the wake of the 2011 mobilizations is 3,000. In effect, defection remained a Sunni phenomenon; very few non-Sunnis joined the uprising (i.e. Christians; Druze; Ismailis) and almost no Alawi officer did. Sectarian stacking originally aimed at stemming the tide of coups in the once-turbulent Syrian officer corps. But when the challenge to the Asad regime came from a popular mobilization that escalated into insurgency, the same coup-proofing tactic proved efficient at keeping the officer corps essentially cohesive, and overwhelmingly loyal.

My interviewees estimated that, roughly, half of Syria's Sunni officers had defected by the time I conducted fieldwork in summer 2014. Why did some Sunni officers defect whereas other Sunni officers remained in the loyalist camp? This is an important question that remains unanswered. One limitation of this study needs to be reiterated: It was logistically impossible for me to meet those Sunni officers who remained on the loyalist side of the Syrian civil war. That the Asad regime manipulates sectarian identities in the military has long been established by the literature and the evidence documenting anti-Sunni discrimination is overwhelming. It is highly unlikely that additional interviews with loyalist officers would have fundamentally altered this thesis upon which this study rests. However, while the data provided by my interviewees is trustworthy, the officers I met could only speculate about the motivations of their Sunni colleagues who stayed on the regime's side. The implication of being able to meet only those Sunni officers who successfully defected is obvious: The circumstances surrounding Sunni officers in the opposite camp are not covered by this paper.

Similarly, while bonds of sectarian solidarity and fear of Sunni retribution must have kept Alawi officers in the loyalist camp, the reasons why very few Christian, Druze and Ismaeli officers defected

need to be investigated. The data I collected does not suggest that Christian, Druze and Ismaeli officers were privileged by the regime as members of 'allied' communities – contrary to a pervasive but empirically unfounded perception which implies otherwise. It could be that Syria's officers hailing from a minority background prefer the Asad regime to potentially Islamist-dominated alternatives, but this too is mere conjecture. Additional fieldwork needs to be conducted in order to uncover the sectarian dynamics of the officer corps, prior to, and since, the 2011 turning point.

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Annex

Table 1. Ministers of Defense and Chiefs of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces under Bashar al-Asad by Sectarian Affiliation[59]

Ministers of Defense (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation	Chiefs of Staff (2000– 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation
General Mustafa Tlas	Sunni	General Hikmat Shihabi	Sunni
General Hassan Turkmani	Sunni	General Hasan Turkmani	Sunni
General ʿAli Habib	Alawi	General Dawoud Rajha	Christian
General Dawoud Rajha	Christian	General Fahd Jasim	Sunni
General Fahd al-Furayj	Sunni	General ʿAli Ayyoub	Alawi

[59]I asked every one of my interviewees to help me collect the data in tables 1 to 8. Particularly helpful in that regard was Colonel ʿAbdel ʿAziz Kanʿan to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. Lieutenant-Colonel Yasser Jaber, Brigadier-General Mohammad Shahima, Lieutenant-Colonel Nasha'at Haj Ahmad, and two other Brigadier-Generals who did not wish to be named also helped me collect data that appear in tables 1 to 8, and asked their colleagues to do the same. Note that the place of origin is the fundamental identity-related marker that officers' use to identify each other's sectarian affiliation. Officers hailing from, say, al-Rastan, are likely to be Sunnis; their colleagues from Latakia likely to be Alawis, whereas officers from Suweida, or the "Valley of the Christians" region, likely to be Druze and Christians respectively. Names also matter: An officer called "Georges" or "Elias" is clearly Christian, whereas "Omar" is Sunni, and "Ali" or "Hussein" likely to be Alawi. Family names are an additional indicator: A "Makhlouf" is Alawi whereas a "Qabbani" can only be Sunni. For officers to identity each other's' sectarian affiliation is a relatively easy task.

Table 2. Commanders of The Syrian Armed Forces on the Eve of the 2011 Uprising by Sectarian Affiliation[60]

Sectors	Officers	Sectarian Affiliation
Division 1	1)-Major-General Yusuf al-Asad (Commander)	Alawi
Division 3	1)-Major-General Naʿim Sulayman (Commander)	Alawi
	2)-Major-General Salim Rashid Barakat	Alawi
Division 4	1)- Major-General ʿAli ʿAmmar (Commander)	Alawi
	2)-Major-General Muhammad ʻAli Dargham (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Division 5	1)- Major-General Suhayl al-Hasan (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier ʿAli ʿAmmar (Deputy Commmander)	Alawi
Division 7	1)-Major-General Muhammad Khayrat (Commander)	Sunni
Division 9	1)- Major-General Mudar Yusuf (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier Ahmad Yunis al-ʿUqda	Alawi
Division 10	1)- Major-General ʿUmar Ribʿawi Commander)	Sunni
Division 11	1)- Major-General Jihad Sulaytin (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Major-General Nasib Abu Mahmud (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Division 14	1)- Major-General Husayn Husayn (Commander)	Alawi
	2)-Major-General Muhammad Suwaydan (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Division 15	1)- Major-General ʿAli Yusuf (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier Ramadan Ramadan (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Division 17	1)- Major-General Isbir ʿAbbud (Commander)	Alawi
	2- Major-General Badr ʻAqil (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Division 18	1)- Major-General Wajih Mahmud (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Major-General ʿAzzam al-Misri	Sunni
Navy	1)- Admiral Muhammad al-Ahmad	Alawi
Air Force	1)- Major-General Ahmad Ballul	Alawi

Table 3. Directors of Syrian Intelligence Agencies in Charge of Controlling the Armed Forces under Bashar al-Asad by Sectarian Affiliation[61]

Directors of the Air Force Intelligence (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation	Directors of the Military Security (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation
Major-General Ibrahim Huwayji	Alawi	Major-General Hasan Khalil	Alawi
Major-General ʿIzz al-Din Ismaʿil	Alawi	Major-General Asif Shawkat	Alawi
Major-General ʿAbd al-Fattah Qudsiyya	Alawi	Major-General ʿAbd al-Fattah Qudsiyya	Alawi
Major-General Jamil Hasan	Alawi	Major-General Rafiq Shihada	Alawi

[60]Ibid.
[61]Ibid.

Table 4. Commanders of the Republican Guard and the Fourth Armored Division under Bashar al-Asad, by Sectarian Affiliation[62]

Commanders of the Republican Guard (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation	Commanders of the Fourth Armored Brigade (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation
Major-General ʿAli Hasan	Alawi	Major-General Mahmud ʿAmmar	Alawi
Major-General Nur al-Din Naqqar	Alawi	Major-General ʿAli ʿAmmar	Alawi
Major-General Shuʿayb Sulayman	Alawi	Major-General Muhammad ʿAli Dargham	Alawi
Major-General Badiʿ ʿAli	Alawi		

Table 5. Commanders of the Special Forces and the Airborne Special Forces under Bashar al-Asad by Sectarian Affiliation[63]

Commanders of the Special Forces (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation	Commanders of the Airborne Special Forces (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation
General ʿAli Habib	Alawi	Major-General ʿAli Sulayman	Alawi
Major-General Subhi al-Tayyib	Sunni	Major-General Muhammad Husayn al-Husayn	Alawi
Major-General Ra'if Dallul	Alawi		
Major-General Juma ʿal-Ahmad	Alawi		
Major-General Fu'ad Hammuda	Alawi		

Table 6. Commanders of the Air Force and the Air Defense under Bashar al-Asad by Sectarian Affiliation[64]

Commanders of the Air Force (2000 – 2011)	Sectarian Affiliation
Major-General ʿAli Mahmud	Alawi
Hazim al-Khadra	Sunni
Major-General Ahmad al-Hattab	Alawi
Major-General ʿAbd al-Salam Lahham	Sunni
Major-General ʿIsam Hallaq	Sunni
Major-General Ahmad Ballul	Alawi

[62]Ibid.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Ibid.

Table 7. Subcommanders of the Special Forces on the Eve of the 2011 Uprising by Sectarian Affiliation[65]

Sector	Officer	Affiliation
Company 35	1)-Brigadier Muhsin al-Qabawi (Commander)	Alawi
Company 41	1)- Brigadier ʿAdnan Dib (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier Haytham Ibrahim (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 45	1)- Brigadier Ghassan ʿAfif (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier Muhammad Maʻruf (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 46	1)- Brigadier Halim ʿAllush (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier Akram Yusuf (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 47	1)- Brigadier Wahib Haydar (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier ʿAdnan al-Fayy (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 48	1)- Brigadier Muhammad Mayya (Commander)	Alawi
Company 53	1)- Brigadier Zuhayr Sulayman (Commander)	Alawi
	2)- Brigadier Hamza Nawfal (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 147	1)- Brigadier Ihsan Ahmad (Commander)	Alawi

Table 8. Subcommanders of the Airborne Special Forces on the Eve of the 2011 Uprising by Sectarian Affiliation[66]

Sectors	Officers	Affiliation
Company 554	1)- Brigadier Sulayman al-ʿAwaji (Commander)	Sunni
	2)- Brigadier Muhammad al-Hajal (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 556	1)- Brigadier Tamim ʿAli (Commander)	Alawi
	2- Brigadier Ahmad Sa'ouf deputy Commander)	Alawi
Company 636	1)- Brigadier Nayif Mashhadani (Commander)	Sunni
	2)- Brigadier Usama Saʿd (Deputy Commander)	Alawi
Artillery	1)- Brigadier Muhammad Habib (Commander)	Alawi

[65]Ibid.
[66]Ibid.