

# REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

*Form Approved*  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE</b> (DD-MM-YYYY) (30 October 2015)		<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> FINAL		<b>3. DATES COVERED</b> (From - To)	
<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b>  The Alligator Farther From the Canoe				<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>	
<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b>  Lieutenant Colonel Josh Gelerter, U.S. Marine Corps				<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>	
				<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>	
<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>  Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207				<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>	
<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b>				<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>	
				<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>	
<b>12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT</b> Distribution Statement A					
<b>13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES</b> A paper submitted to the Naval War College faculty in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint Military Operations Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.					
<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  Over the last four years, the Syrian Civil War has created a horrific internal humanitarian disaster, displaced millions of refugees resulting in instability throughout the Levant region and beyond, and provided a safe haven that the Islamic State in the Levant has exploited to declare a Caliphate. The Syrian Army has served as one of Bashar al-Assad's principle tools in fighting the war, and its use by the regime since his father, Hafez, assumed power contributed significantly to creating the rifts that sparked the conflict. Any far-sighted solution to the Syrian Crisis must thus address the underlying causes that allowed Assad to employ the Army in this way. To promote long-term stability within the Levant region the United States should pursue the creation of a post-Civil War Syrian Army that is well educated in the importance of balanced civil-military relationships, is trained in Western counterinsurgency techniques and whose key leadership reflects the demographic make-up of Syria as a whole.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> Syria, Civil-Military Relations, Counterinsurgency, Syrian Army					
<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>  21	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b> Chairman, JMO Department
<b>a. REPORT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b> UNCLASSIFIED	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b> UNCLASSIFIED			<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER</b> (include area code) 401-841-3414

**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**THE ALLIGATOR FARTHER FROM THE CANOE:  
SHAPING THE POST-CIVIL WAR SYRIAN ARMY**

by

**Josh Gelerter**

**Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

**30 October 2015**

## Contents

Introduction	1
The Objective	2
Syria's Civil-Military Relations	3
The Syrian Army's Approach to Counterinsurgency	7
Demographics of Assad's Loyal Syrian Army Forces and its Impact	10
Conclusions	15
Recommendations	16
Bibliography	17

## **Abstract**

### *The Alligator Farther From the Canoe: Shaping the Post-Civil War Syrian Army*

Over the last four years, the Syrian Civil War has created a horrific internal humanitarian disaster, displaced millions of refugees resulting in instability throughout the Levant region and beyond, and provided a safe haven that the Islamic State in the Levant has exploited to declare a Caliphate. The Syrian Army has served as one of Bashar al-Assad's principle tools in fighting the war, and its use by the regime since his father, Hafez, assumed power contributed significantly to creating the rifts that sparked the conflict. Any far-sighted solution to the Syrian Crisis must thus address the underlying causes that allowed Assad to employ the Army in this way. To promote long-term stability within the Levant region the United States should pursue the creation of a post-Civil War Syrian Army that is well educated in the importance of balanced civil-military relationships, is trained in Western counterinsurgency techniques and whose key leadership reflects the demographic make-up of Syria as a whole.

## Introduction

For the last four years the Syrian Civil War has ravaged that country, killing more than 220,000 people, internally displaced 7.6 million more, created 4 million refugees and created a power vacuum that enabled the ascendance of the Islamic State of the Levant (ISIL).<sup>1</sup> Besides the humanitarian disaster within Syria's borders, the outflow of refugees has overwhelmed the surrounding region's ability to assimilate or even care for them. Additionally, ISIL's declaration of an Islamic Caliphate has provided an international beacon and breeding ground for violent extremists, some of who may find their way back to their countries of citizenship, effectively exporting ISIL's violent agenda. Given the amount of chaos this conflict has created, most discussion on the United States' way ahead has focused on the best means to end the war. Focusing solely on near-term challenges, however, no matter how serious, threatens to ignore long-term implications. Conversely, determining a far-sighted strategy means making decisions in the short-term that may be more difficult, but will ultimately lead to long term stability.

The Syrian Army has served as one of Bashar al-Assad's principle tools in fighting the war, and its use by the regime since his father, Hafez, assumed power contributed significantly to creating the rifts that sparked the conflict. Any far-sighted solution to the Syrian Crisis must thus address the underlying causes that allowed Assad to employ the Army in this way. To promote long-term stability within the Levant region the United States should pursue the creation of a post-Civil War Syrian Army that is well educated in the importance of balanced civil-military relationships, is trained in Western counterinsurgency techniques and whose key leadership reflects the demographic make-up of Syria as a whole.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Quick Facts: What You Need to Know about the Syria Crisis," *Mercy Corps*, accessed September 29, 2015, <http://www.mercycorps.org/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>.

## The Objective

In his National Security Strategy (NSS), the President of the United States, while highlighting the requirement to “degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL”, directs that “we will focus on building the capacity of others to prevent the causes and consequences of conflict.”<sup>2</sup> He also acknowledges that “the only lasting solution to Syria’s civil war remains political—an inclusive political transition that responds to the legitimate aspirations of all Syrian citizens.”<sup>3</sup> In the National Military Strategy (NMS), the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff expounds on this requirement in stating that “. . .counter-VEO [Violent Extremist Organization] campaigns demand that our military, in close coordination with other U.S. agencies and international organizations, assist local governments in addressing the root causes of conflict.”<sup>4</sup>

From the NSS and NMS then, the U.S.’ strategic leadership has directed a long-term solution to the conflict in Syria. Additionally, while it highlights the dangers that ISIL poses to national security, that same leadership requires that the US address not just the symptoms of the conflict, but the disease itself, using a whole-of-government approach. The U.S.’ Theater Strategic Objective as it applies to Syria then is to address the underlying causes that led to the civil war. Bashar al Assad’s employment of the Syrian Army to quell internal dissent, and the methods the Army used to do so, pose one of the most significant threats to stability in that nation.

This paper assumes that, with secular opposition groups marginalized, the U.S. must end the Syrian Civil War by working with the standing Syrian government and the world

---

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington, DC, February 2015), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC, June 2015), 8.

community in order to counter ISIL. It assumes that the end-state of hostilities results in either the return of Syrian sovereignty throughout its borders or, more likely, the establishment of government authority in critical areas, leaving ISIL controlled areas as future objectives for the Syrian government.

### **Syria's Civil Military Relations**

A strong, stable nation requires not only a capable military to defend its borders, but one that likewise respects the rights of the citizens within those borders. A nation must strike a careful balance between its military's involvement as an extension of policy and the role that it plays in traditionally civilian responsibilities. Samuel Huntington describes these civil-military relations as:

basic to a nation's military security policy. The objective of this policy on the institutional level is to develop a system of civil-military relations which will maximize military security at the least sacrifice of other social values. The achievement of this objective involves a complex balancing of power and attitudes among civilian and military groups.<sup>5</sup>

A nation unable to strike this balance that consequently tilts towards a military empowered or directed to insert itself into a traditionally civilian area of responsibility threatens to undermine the social fabric of the very society it is meant to defend. An army, by necessity, specializes in the violent application of force. When a nation, rather than directing a political or social solution to internal dissent, employs that force to crush it, it achieves short-term stability at the cost of its legitimacy. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Max Weber states that:

Without legitimacy, a ruler, regime, or governmental system is hard-pressed to attain the conflict-management capability essential for long-run stability and good government. While the stability of an order may be maintained for a time through fear or expediency or custom, the optimal or most harmonious relationship is that in which the ruled accept the rightness of

---

<sup>5</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 2.

the ruler's superior power.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, if a nation pursues illegitimate means to consolidate power, it upsets the equilibrium of civil-military relations and trades short-term control for long-term instability. In this vein, both Bashar al Assad and his father, by perpetuating a tradition of employing the military to consolidate power, upset this balance in Syria.

While Sunnis make-up three-quarters of the Syrian population, they no longer wield commensurate political clout.<sup>7</sup> Syria's Sunni population initially wrested control of the Syrian government from the Alawites when the French mandate ended in 1946, but they left the predominantly Alawite armed forces virtually intact, paving the way for a series of coups and counter-coups, ending in Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Ottoman Empire, Hafez al-Assad never adopted a universal approach to power sharing within Syria, instead turning to the Syrian Army to consolidate his rule. As an Alawite in a predominantly Sunni nation, he thus never attained legitimacy with the majority of Syrians. Instead, he upended the equilibrium of Syria's civil-military relations to maintain power, ruthlessly employing the military to quell dissent.

In his book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas Friedman describes Hafez al-Assad's brutal repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982 and coins some basic political traditions of the region, dubbed Hama Rules. In particular, Friedman identifies the Arab tradition of an individual's association with their tribe over their nation state. This association, in turn, requires an authoritarian state to employ either gentle - because it retains some legitimacy - or brutal - because it does not - coercive techniques to overcome this tribal

---

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber and A. M. Henderson, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2012), 124-126.

<sup>7</sup> Reva Bhalla, "Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis," *STRATFOR Global Intelligence*, May 5, 2011, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110504-making-sense-syrian-crisis>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

affiliation.<sup>9</sup> Given Assad's lack of legitimacy with much of Syria's Sunni population, he inevitably employed the latter against his more intractable opponents.

Bashar al-Assad's Desired Endstate is to remain in power. Throughout the decades of both his and Hafez al-Assad's reign that has meant using the Syrian Army to quell the inevitable internal dissent born from the friction between the secular Assad regime and the fundamentalist Sunni Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and the even more extreme Islamic Front.<sup>10</sup> Dr. Murhaf Jouejati, Professor of Middle East Studies at National Defense University, notes that Assad "...lost his legitimacy at the domestic level because of the violence he has inflicted on his people...most Syrians no longer accept the rightness of Bashar al-Assad's superior power."<sup>11</sup> Given the Assad regime's lack of legitimacy and reliance on Friedman's Hama rules to maintain power as described above, the Syrian Army serves as that nation's operational Center of Gravity (COG). Any solution to the Army's make-up post-Civil War, therefore, that leaves it as it stood in 2011, risks leaving an institution in place that will readily violate the principles of civil-military relations and thus trades long-term stability for a short-term solution.

With that said, the U.S. must avoid the pitfall of mirror imaging. The U.S. cannot expect a nation such as Syria with a history of power driven by tribal identity to immediately adhere to the principles of civil-military relationships in the same manner as a Western nation. The Syrian Army's (and indeed many of the armies in the region) history of employment for internal security and its role as Assad's operational COG means that, in the near term, it must maintain that role in some capacity to ensure stability in its homeland, but

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Expanded edition (New York, NY: Picador, 2012), 87-96.

<sup>10</sup> Aron Lund, "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1-4," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183>.

<sup>11</sup> Murhaf Jouejati, "Reforming Syria's Security Sector in the Post-Assad Era," *Arab Reform Initiative*, July 2014, <http://www.arab-reform.net/reforming-syria's-security-sector-post-assad-era>.

it must execute that role in a manner more conducive to establishing legitimacy for the government that results in long-term stability.

Whatever events end the Civil War in Syria, the nation will remain in turmoil and the government will require a means to establish security within its borders. Eventually, the world community must assist Syria to develop a civilian-led force better equipped and trained to maintain internal order but, as operations in Iraq and Afghanistan prove, that may take many years to accomplish. Until then, the Syrian Army must fill this internal stability vacuum, but it must do so in a manner that adheres to the rule of the law. To establish a more stable regime in Syria after the Civil War, therefore, the U.S. must pursue the creation of a Syrian Army whose leadership respects the importance of a balanced civil-military relationship and the maintenance of the rule of law.

Some would argue that focusing on developing a Syrian Army that understands and practices balanced civil-military relations would: 1) Take a very long time, when the world should focus on a solution that ends the chaos in Syria and 2) Be difficult, if not impossible, given the tribal nature of politics in Syria, particularly under the current regime. To answer the first challenge, the U.S. should absolutely seek to end the conflict as soon as practicable, but, as addressed above, to do so without resolving the roots of the conflict will lead to long-term instability.

Changing the culture of the Syrian Army will prove challenging, but no more so than changing that in any number of developing nations that the U.S. military engages with across the world. For example, during the 1980s, the U.S. sought to balance its objective of countering the communist insurgency in El Salvador with its reticence to support the Government of El Salvador because of its human rights abuses. The U.S. combined

economic assistance to the government with U.S. Special Operations Forces involvement to both train the El Salvadoran military in techniques to defeat the insurgency and to pressure them to adopt a more conscionable treatment of the population.<sup>12</sup> Not only did the U.S.’ efforts result in the defeat of the insurgency, a United Nations commission determined in 1993 that the acts of violence committed by the government “declined from 1196 per 1000 soldiers [in 1980] to 45 per 1000 soldiers [in 1990], a 2600% decrease.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as in El Salvador, the U.S. can achieve a change in the culture of the Syrian military, as long as it provides the right balance of incentives and pressure. Additionally, the change in military culture must be a supporting effort to a long-term, whole-of-government campaign to mold the Syrian government into one that better respects the rule of law, an effort that would require removing the worst oppressors, to include Bashar al Assad himself.

### **The Syrian Army’s Approach to Counterinsurgency**

Much of the world’s focus has been on the atrocities committed by ISIL and the destabilizing effects of its campaign of terror. The U.S. must not forget, however, that the Assad regime’s methods to crush political dissent in 2011 had a direct impact on stability in the nation and the surrounding region as well. Assad employed the Syrian Army in what might be termed a “slash-and-burn” methodology to quell popular dissent, not unlike the counterinsurgencies executed by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s and by Russia in Chechnya in the 1990s.

Joint Publication 3-24 *counterinsurgency* states that “[Counterinsurgency] is the blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes. The goal of [counterinsurgency] is to enable

---

<sup>12</sup> Waghelstein, John D. “Military-to-Military Contacts: Personal Observations - The El Salvador Case.” Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2005, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

the [host nation] government to exercise political control over its population [through] legitimate governance.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, to effectively defeat an insurgency, the government must apply all elements of national power. In addition, it must do so in a manner designed primarily to answer the legitimate grievances of its populace. If a government, like the Assad regime, lacks the legitimacy to employ those elements in such a manner it will seek to coerce its population with whatever means available. As discussed above, one of the Assad regime’s greatest strengths lies in its armed forces, making that instrument of national power the means to which it naturally turns to consolidate power.

Not surprisingly, given the Syrian government’s history of skewed civil-military relations, it has employed its army in a manner completely anathema to the rule of law. In describing the siege of Hama in 1982, Friedman states that “Hama was not just what happened when two tribe-like sects...decide to have it out; it is also what happens when a modern Middle Eastern autocrat who does not enjoy full legitimacy among his people puts down a challenge to his authority by employing twentieth century weapons without restraint.”<sup>15</sup> These tactics annihilated the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, imposing stability in the near term, but left the resentment and disenfranchisement of the Sunni population unresolved, laying the foundations for the uprising in 2011.

Bashar al Assad has continued his father’s legacy. In today’s Syrian Civil-War, the regime inflicts mass punishment against civilians in opposition areas to force large-scale displacement. Regime ground forces besiege rebel-held neighborhoods and cities, cutting off aid supplies and spurring thousands to flee to regime zones of control in the face of starvation, and subjecting those that remain to indiscriminate indirect and aviation delivered

---

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “*Counterinsurgency*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24” (Washington, D.C., November 22, 2013), III-1.

<sup>15</sup> Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, 99.

fires, including its use of now infamous ‘barrel bombs’.<sup>16</sup> This time, however, the regime’s iron-fisted tactics could not overcome the momentum generated by the social-media driven Arab Spring. Instead of revising his strategy, however, the regime continued to employ the army in the same repressive manner, resulting in chaos that has destabilized an already fragile region.

If, once the Syrian Civil War ends - or at least temporarily stabilizes - the U.S. allows the Syrian Army to conduct stability operations in the same repressive manner, it will continue to create long-term instability in Syria and the surrounding region. The Syrian Army’s scorched earth tactics, focused on erasing the symptoms of unrest, but not solving its root causes, will continue to exacerbate the marginalization of the Sunni majority in Syria.

The U.S. must instead seek to mold a post-Civil War Syrian Army that employs counterinsurgency techniques that alleviate the root causes of dissent. Such an army would place itself in a supporting role to an interagency process. Armies that respect the rule of law and appreciate the importance of appropriate civil-military relations can better grasp the preeminence of the civilian interagency in a counterinsurgency. Similarly, they realize their criticality in establishing a secure environment to allow the interagency to do its work. Lastly, indigenous militaries supporting their own government enjoy more legitimacy in counterinsurgency operations than foreign armies, a factor the U.S. must consider when determining how to restore order in Syria.

To achieve these objectives, the U.S. must determine what factors within the Syrian Army enabled its misuse as a repressive internal security force. An examination of the demographics of the Syrian Army provides an enlightening look at the impact that its

---

<sup>16</sup> Aron Lund, “The Failure to Stop Starvation Tactics in Syria,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, accessed September 24, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55172>; Christopher Kozak, “‘An Army in All Corners’: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria” (Institute for the Study of War, April 2015), 11.

imbalance in ethnic make-up had in both allowing its misuse as an internal security force that implements ‘scorched earth’ tactics, and the ability of the current regime to control its own territory.

### **Demographics of Assad’s Loyal Syrian Army Forces and its Impact**

Composed of 220,000 soldiers, mostly conscripts, the Syrian Army maintains three conventional Corps and a group of units that have effectively served as the Assad regime’s Praetorian Guard. The conventional Corps support missions that include securing the Israeli Border along the Golan Heights, conducting occupation duties in Lebanon, and defense of the interior (not to be confused with internal defense). The Praetorian Units, on the other hand, consisting of the 4th Armored Division, the Republican Guard, and the Special Forces Regiments, have the unique mission of protecting the regime.<sup>17</sup> The demographic make-up of these units directly impacts the role the regime expects each of them to play.

Any Syrian, regardless of ethnicity, would loyally defend his nation against an incursion by the Israeli Defense Force. The Assad regime has another, closer adversary that threatens its sovereignty, however – the Sunni majority within its own country. Sunnis comprise the majority of the conventional Corps within Syria, while the Praetorian Units are predominantly Alawite.<sup>18</sup> Assad, therefore, does not trust the conventional Corps to carry out the internal defense mission, and has had to rely on the Praetorian Units to do so. The RAND Corporation notes that:

Because of fear of defections, Assad can deploy only about one- third of his forces. These are primarily the elite units, including the 4th Armor Division, which has played a key role in suppressing the rebellion; the Republican Guard; and the Special Forces regiments that are manned mainly by Alawite career soldiers rather than Sunni conscripts and led almost

---

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Holliday, “The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle” (Institute for the Study of War, February 2013), <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syrian-army-doctrinal-order-battle>, 6-9. The reference to Praetorian Units is Mr. Holliday’s.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

exclusively by Alawite officers closely linked to the president.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, the three conventional Corps have remained deployed “to their assigned home stations, largely concentrated in Dera’a and Damascus Provinces as an artifact of a pre-2011 military doctrine designed to provide defense in depth against an Israeli offensive towards Damascus.”<sup>20</sup> This lack of combat power has limited Assad’s ability to maintain sovereignty over Syria, despite seeking non-state support to do so.

Lacking the ability to control his nation with his standing Army, Assad has begun to rely more and more on non-state actors, such as Hezbollah and the National Defense Force

(NDF), an Iranian trained paramilitary, to control key Alawite areas of Syria.<sup>21</sup> Even with this augmentation, which has come with its own problems, to include the inability of the regime to command these Iranian backed paramilitaries, the Assad regime forces have continued to lose territory, as

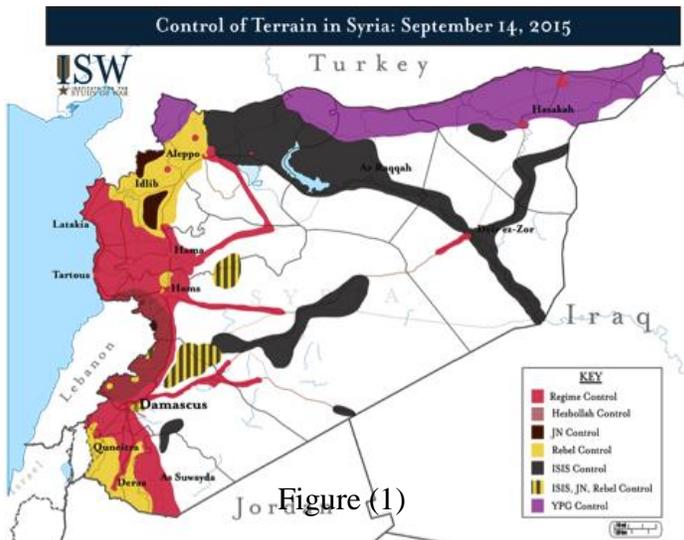


Figure (1)

depicted in Figure (1).<sup>22</sup>

These facts point to two conditions that the U.S. must consider: 1) The Syrian Army as currently organized cannot provide security across the entirety of Syria, and 2) There is a

<sup>19</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, “The Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War” (RAND Corporation, 2014), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Holliday, “The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle”, 8-10.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Barnard Hwaida Saad and Eric Schmitt, “An Eroding Syrian Army Points to Strain,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/middleeast/an-eroding-syrian-army-points-to-strain.html>; Christopher Kozak, “‘An Army in All Corners’: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria” (Institute for the Study of War, April 2015). 15.

<sup>22</sup> Institute For The Study Of War, “ISW Blog: Control of Terrain in Syria: September 14, 2015,” *ISW Blog*, September 14, 2015, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2015/09/control-of-terrain-in-syria-september.html>.

large portion of the Army, upwards of 150,000 soldiers, who have not been involved in the regime's brutal repression and thus could form the core a new Syrian Army, untainted by the atrocities committed by the Praetorian Units.

The U.S. must avoid the strategic error of seeking to disband the Syrian Army all together. In fact, we should take a lesson learned from the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as we look ahead to the best means to stabilize the Syrian nation. As Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor noted in their book *Cobra II*, “[t]he decision to abolish the Iraqi army not only risked alienating some 300,000 Iraqi troops, but upended CENTCOM’s postwar plan. . . Only 8,000 of the 140,000 officers and NCOs were committed enough Baathists to be disqualified. . . Even the supposedly loyal Republican Guard had not been allowed to take up positions inside the capital.”<sup>23</sup> As noted above, stabilizing the chaos in Syria will require some elements of the Syrian Army.

Abolishing the Syrian Army altogether would result in having to create not only new soldiers but also key leaders and experienced specialists in everything from logistics to communications, a process best measured in years. Additionally, tens of thousands of disenfranchised fighting-age Syrian males will only further destabilize the nation. The U.S. should avoid building the Army from the ground up, particularly when there exists a large pool of soldiers, some career and some conscript, not beholden to the Assad regime and untainted by the excesses of the current conflict.

Some would argue that not enough key Sunni leadership exists within the Army to create a viable, effective force. The reality is that, just from a sheer lack of Alawite numbers, Assad has to rely on Sunnis in some key positions. The Counter Terrorism Center of West

---

<sup>23</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 484-485.

Point noted “Sunnis continue to be well represented in Syria’s security institutions in various capacities, including leadership and other specialized roles.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan have noted that “Sunnis remain active in all branches of the Syrian military and political leadership” and that that “there are also officers in the Syrian armed forces who believe that Bashar al-Assad will survive this uprising, and that defection is therefore ill advised.”<sup>25</sup> Enough Sunnis exist in the current bureaucracy, therefore, to keep the government and the military running.

While Sunnis hold positions in both the military and the government, some would point out that any Sunnis subjected to the regime’s brutal counterinsurgency techniques would have difficulty in accepting any members of the current Syrian Army, regardless of religion, as part of the solution. The U.S. will find determining which members of the Army moderate opposition Sunnis would find acceptable a challenge, but parallels to the Iraq War lessons discussed above exist. The U.S. would need to determine the ‘cut-line’ for whom in the current government could stay, particularly for key leadership. Leadership of the three conventional Corps would be the best start.

Additionally, the moderate Sunni middle class, caught between ISIL on one side and the regime on the other would likely accept a cooperative resolution to the conflict and the make-up of the Army. A recent RAND study notes “Most middle-class, urbanized Syrian Sunnis do not support the Salafi-jihadist ideology and do not want to live in a Salafi-jihadist state. The fact that defections of Sunni officers from the Syrian army have largely stopped within the past year is one indication that the Sunni middle class may be willing to accept

---

<sup>24</sup> Chris Zambelis, “Syria’s Sunnis and the Regime’s Resilience,” *Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel*, May 28, 2015, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/syrias-sunnis-and-the-regimes-resilience>.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan, “Sunni vs. Sunni: Pro-Revolution Sunnis Lament Assad Backers,” *Syria Direct*, June 21, 2013, <http://syriadirect.org/news/sunni-vs-sunni-pro-revolution-sunnis-lament-assad-backers/>.

regime victory.”<sup>26</sup> After four years of civil war, many moderate Sunnis, seeking to establish peace, would welcome a Syrian Army that is able to establish post-conflict security in a manner that seeks to resolve the roots of the conflict, even if some of its members once took orders from Bashar al Assad. The U.S. must therefore not only usher in a restructured Army, but one that embraces the civil-military relations and counterinsurgency techniques noted above.

Conversely, the U.S. must avoid creating a Sunni dominated Army or risk the pendulum of marginalization swinging the other way. Some Alawites, including ones involved in fighting the opposition, will need to remain in the Army. This will undoubtedly be a significant friction point with the Syrian Sunni majority. To counter alienating the Sunnis in determining the make-up of the Army, the U.S. must consider incorporating members of the secular Sunni opposition groups into the Syrian Army. Additionally, the U.S. will need to remove and potentially request the International Justice Court (IJC) try the most egregious offenders of international law for War Crimes. Paralleling the way ahead to establish an army more respectful of appropriate civil-military relations, this includes the key leadership of the Praetorian Units and Assad himself. Additionally, the US should also disband the Praetorian Units and reassign those least involved in the regime’s atrocities to other units.

With Russia’s recent major commitment to the war in Syria and Iran’s deep involvement, some might argue that the U.S. may not have a role in shaping the structure of either the future Syrian government or the Army. However, with its impact on the region and the European Union, the objectives for the termination of hostilities in Syria have worldwide

---

<sup>26</sup> Andrew M. Liepman, Brian Nichiporuk, and Jason Killmeyer, “Alternative Futures for Syria: Regional Implications and Challenges for the United States” (RAND Corporation, 2014), 11.

interest, and neither Russia nor Iran will have exclusive decision-making power in that regard. Additionally, the U.S. has made a significant commitment to the Syrian conflict already, which gives it diplomatic leverage in the terms on which the conflict terminates. This leverage increases significantly if the U.S. engages the world community to ensure a long-term focus on conflict resolution vice just termination.

### **Conclusion**

The instability created by the civil war in Syria has impacted millions of people and spread as far as Europe. While the vast suffering caused by the conflict requires a solution as soon as possible, the U.S. must ensure that any resolution implemented addresses the root causes of the war. This includes preventing the Syrian Army from repeating its past depredations on the civilian populace by inculcating its members with a strong sense of civil-military relations and ensuring it pursues the inevitable counterinsurgency following conflict termination as a supporting effort in a whole of government approach.

The Syrian Army in its current organization cannot possibly accomplish these objectives. Too many members of its Praetorian Units have close ties to the Assad regime. Two-thirds of the Army, however, has not participated in the atrocities of these predominantly Alawite units. That two-thirds can form the core of a post-Assad Syrian Army.

The U.S. must strike a careful balance between removing those officers most responsible for the Army's 'scorched earth' policy of counterinsurgency and gutting it of the key leadership it needs to remain a functioning force. Some moderate Sunnis may take umbrage with leaving Alawites in place that participated in some of the worst offenses of the regime. Removing all Alawites from positions of authority, however, may lead to a Sunni-

dominated Army that seeks revenge against its former masters. The U.S. will need to determine the right balance that prevents either ethnicity from controlling the army at the expense of the other with determining a solution on which all parties, to include the international community, can agree.

### **Recommendations**

To accomplish these objectives, the U.S. should undertake a number of initiatives:

- Leverage its influence with the global community to lead a re-organization of the Syrian Army to more closely mirror Syrian demographics. This re-organization must take advantage of the institutional knowledge of standing members of the Army who have not been involved in the worst of the regime's atrocities and should incorporate key leaders of the moderate opposition.
- Disband the Praetorian Units completely and disperse appropriate members to other units.
- Remove from positions of authority and request the IJC hold accountable those who directed or led the most egregious of the regime's atrocities.
- Engage this post-regime Syrian Army to educate and encourage its leaders to maintain balanced civil-military relations and to train the army in whole-of-government counterinsurgency techniques, with the goal of providing stability in their war-torn nation.

Enacting these initiatives will undoubtedly prove challenging for the U.S., particularly given the numerous parties with competing agendas involved in the conflict. By pursuing these objectives, however, the nation can help to secure long-term stability in Syria that will benefit its national interests in the region.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhalla, Reva. "Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis." *STRATFOR Global Intelligence*, May 5, 2011. <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110504-making-sense-syrian-crisis>.
- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "National Military Strategy of the United States of America." Washington, D.C., June 2015.
- Friedman, Thomas L. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. Expanded edition. New York, NY: Picador, 2012.
- Gordon, Michael R., and Bernard E. Trainor. *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. New York: Vintage, 2007.
- Holliday, Joseph. "The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle." Institute for the Study of War, February 2013. <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syrian-army-doctrinal-order-battle>.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957.
- Jenkins, Brian Michael. "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War." RAND Corporation, 2014.
- Jouejati, Murhaf. "Reforming Syria's Security Sector in the Post-Assad Era." *Arab Reform Initiative*, July 2014. <http://www.arab-reform.net/reforming-syria's-security-sector-post-assad-era>.
- Kozak, Christopher. "'An Army in All Corners': Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria." Institute for the Study of War, April 2015.
- Liepman, Andrew M., Brian Nichiporuk, and Jason Killmeyer. "Alternative Futures for Syria: Regional Implications and Challenges for the United States." RAND Corporation, 2014.
- Lund, Aron. "The Failure to Stop Starvation Tactics in Syria." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Accessed September 24, 2015. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55172>.
- . "The Politics of the Islamic Front, Part 1-4." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2014. <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183>.
- Mercy Corps. "Quick Facts: What You Need to Know about the Syria Crisis." Accessed September 29, 2015. <http://www.mercycorps.org/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>.
- Pizzi, Michael, and Nuha Shabaan. "Sunni vs. Sunni: Pro-Revolution Sunnis Lament Assad Backers." *Syria Direct*, June 21, 2013. <http://syriadirect.org/news/sunni-vs-sunni-pro-revolution-sunnis-lament-assad-backers/>.
- President of the United States. "National Security Strategy." Washington, D.C., February 2015.
- Saad, Anne Barnard Hwaida, and Eric Schmitt. "An Eroding Syrian Army Points to Strain." *The New York Times*, April 28, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/middleeast/an-eroding-syrian-army-points-to-strain.html>.
- U.S. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Counterinsurgency, Joint Publication (JP) 3-24." Washington, D.C., November 22, 2013.
- Waghelstein, John D. "Military-to-Military Contacts: Personal Observations - The El Salvador Case." U.S. Naval War College, n.d.

War, Institute For The Study Of. "ISW Blog: Control of Terrain in Syria: September 14, 2015." *ISW Blog*, September 14, 2015.  
<http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2015/09/control-of-terrain-in-syria-september.html>.

Weber, Max, and A. M. Henderson. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Edited by Talcott Parsons. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2012.

Zambelis, Chris. "Syria's Sunnis and the Regime's Resilience." *Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel*, May 28, 2015. <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/syrias-sunnis-and-the-regimes-resilience>.