

# **SYRIA'S 'SHOGUN' IN THE MAKING: RUSSIAN-BACKED GENERAL SUHEIL AL-HASSAN AND FUTURE OF THE SYRIAN ARAB ARMED FORCES**

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## Key Judgements

➤ Current open-source intelligence pieces of evidence suggest that Syria could witness a serious intra-regime power struggle between General Suheil al-Hassan, the commander of the battle-hardened Tiger Forces (Qawat al-Nimr), and the incumbent Baathist military elite.

➤ The underlying geopolitical reason of a potential break within the Syrian military apparatus would be the ongoing Russian – Iranian competition in shaping the future design of Syria. While Moscow seeks to expand its influence through state capacity building, Tehran strives to institutionalize militancy in the post-war era and exploit the power vacuum. The Syrian Arab Armed Forces' unity of command and strategic orientation will remain at the epicenter of any political transition scenario in the future.

➤ In case Moscow opts for backing the 'Nimr', as it has been doing hitherto, a takeover (attempt) for the high military command would be likely. Quite possibly, the change would not take place in the form of a political putsch overthrowing Bashar al-Assad to replace him with a generalissimo, but a forcible reshuffle of the top military leadership. To materialize its political goals in Syria, Russia should rein in profiteer paramilitary formations, restrict Iran-orchestrated Shiite militancy's presence in the Syrian security sector, and ensure a unified chain of command to lay the foundations of the post-civil war doctrinal order of battle of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces.

➤ In any Damascene power struggle scenario involving General al-Hassan and the Tiger Forces, General Maher al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's brother known for his brutality) and his combat-proven 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division would play a

key role in determining the limits of an intra-regime clash. In fact, following a period of relief from his command position, Maher al-Assad's appointment as the commander of the praetorian 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division meaningfully coincides with General Suheil al-Hassan's assignment to lead the offensive in the outskirts of the capital Damascus in spring 2018, at Russia's behest.

➤ President Putin had to overcome Salafi jihadism and Sunni insurgency to 'win the war' in Syria. The Russian campaign has made a significant progress in this respect. Inevitably, for 'winning the peace' and rebuilding the civil war-torn country to serve Russia's strategic interests, the Kremlin will have to contain Iran-backed Shiite militancy from now on. General Suheil al-Hassan appears to be Moscow's 'great white hope' to re-unite the Syrian Arab Armed Forces to become the only military entity across Syria.



General Suheil al-Hassan (left, in dark green uniform) was personally addressed and praised by President Putin before Bashar al-Assad during the Russian President's visit to Hmeimim Air Base in late 2017<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.murason.com/2017/12/video-putin-praises-prominent-syrian-general-heroes-battlefield/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

## Introduction

This report is primarily based on a strategic assessment highlighting Moscow-backed General Suheil al-Hassan's rise and prospects of causing a reshuffle at the top echelons of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces (SAAF). This is not merely a military issue, but rather the reflection of a broader geopolitical topic.

The civil war has fundamentally changed the political-military control capacity of the Baath regime installed by Hafez al-Assad. The Syrian Arab Army's doctrinal order of battle largely mirrors the Soviet Red Army, especially in the elite units. This Cold War legacy, coupled with the sectarian character of the conflict, has been the underlying factor that prevented a total collapse of the Syrian military at the outset of the civil war when Bashar al-Assad's foreign patrons had limited engagement.

However, the Syrian Arab Army suffers from a severe manpower shortfall. In the meanwhile, the number of paramilitaries has skyrocketed in recent years. Shady business elites funding various irregulars and warlords are now playing important power-brokering roles. Furthermore, Iran's efforts to institutionalize militancy in the post-war era

based on the Lebanese Hezbollah model mark another trend that troubles Russia's political design for Syria. The fragmented structure of the military and security agencies hinders any viable state capacity building effort that Moscow should pursue to secure long-term influence.

Against the backdrop of this *tour d'horizon*, one can grasp the crucial role that a Russian-backed military leader could play in maintaining the unity of command among the SAAF ranks, and addressing the fragmentation of the defense establishment. Such an achievement would provide the Putin administration with an important pivot when pursuing its politico-economic reconstruction agenda for Syria.

This report will first explain the political-military context. Then, it will analyze the current state of the SAAF and the need for a reshuffle at the top echelons. The third section will focus on General Suheil al-Hassan and his elite Tiger Forces. The fourth section will present the evidence suggesting a firm Russian support for General al-Hassan to assume the high command position. Finally, the study will conclude its findings and telltale indicators of a possible Russian-backed takeover to replace Syria's incumbent military leadership.

## The Political-Military Context: Russia Needs to Broker a Politico-Economic Reconstruction Process in Syria

The Russian intervention in Syria was a successful one in terms of military-strategic, operational, and tactical advances in the battlefield. Depending on a mid-size contingent, not only did Moscow turn the tide in favor of its client, the Baath regime, but also tested more than 200 weapons<sup>2</sup>, and provided more than 63,000 personnel –including 434 generals and about 90% of combat pilots– with real battlefield experience<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation secured critical permanent forward basing nodes in Eastern Mediterranean. More importantly, Moscow has succeeded in avoiding “mission creep” so far. In brief, Russia, largely, won the war.

Now, the Kremlin needs to translate its military-strategic achievements into long-term, viable political gains. In other words, the Putin administration should ‘win the peace’ in Syria. In doing so, Russia engaged in various multilateral and bilateral political processes. At this point, two issues loom large. Firstly, and above all, the reconstruction of Syria remains a hot topic. The World Bank’s findings suggest that more than 400,000 Syrians died during the conflict, while half of the population was forcibly displaced. The cumulative losses in GDP from 2011 until the end of 2016 were \$226 billion, about four times the Syrian GDP before the civil war. Furthermore, housing and infrastructure suffered considerable damage<sup>4</sup>. The reconstruction cost is estimated to be between \$200 and \$350 billion.

Notably, rehabilitating the housing, infrastructure, and services is a critical politico-economic process that would provide internal and external actors with strong advantage

in shaping the future of Syria<sup>5</sup>. The reconstruction framework would also determine the characteristics of the Syrian regime. Hafez al-Assad, for example, had fundamentally altered the Sunni-dominant landscape of the capital Damascus, and turned the city into a military stronghold surrounded by a powerful Alawite habitation<sup>6</sup>. Another policy of his regime was to centralize military housing (*Dahiet al-Assad in Damascus*) to isolate the officer corps from the rest of society, to ensure their loyalty through home ownership, and to spy on them continuously<sup>7</sup>.

Given the exorbitant price of reconstruction, Russia needs to share the economic burden of rebuilding Syria with the West. In doing so, Moscow’s most important bargaining chip is the ‘repatriation card’, namely, returning the Syrian refugees back home. This is an attractive motivation for Europe, since the Syrian migration has caused various political problems for the EU including xenophobia and the rise of far-right movements<sup>8</sup>. In fact, at the time of writing, the quartet summit of the Turkish, Russian, French, and German leaders in Istanbul highlighted the aim of setting the conditions in Syria for a safe and voluntary return of the refugees and internally displaced persons<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, when reaching out to the West for cooperation, the Assad clan remains the elephant in the room for the Putin administration. Bashar al-Assad is a notorious war criminal in the eyes of the Western policy community. No politician in any democracy would be willing to support a reconstruction plan during Bashar’s tenure to avoid augmenting the legitimacy of his inhumane regime. Given the current circumstances, rehabilitating Assad on the world stage is beyond the Russian Foreign

<sup>2</sup> TASS, <http://tass.com/defense/962053>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/tens-of-thousands-of-russian-troops-have-fought-in-syria-since-2015-1.6409649>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The World Bank, *The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria*, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Benedetta, Berti. “Is Reconstruction Syria’s Next Battleground?”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/72998>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive study on Syria’s sectarian landscape, see: Fabrice, Balanche. *Sectarianism in Syria’s Civil War*, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Khedder, Khaddour. *Assad’s Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies / Policy Analysis Unit, *Can Russia Rehabilitate Assad on the World Stage?*, August 2018, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Can-Russia-Rehabilitate-Assad-World-Stage.pdf>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Daily Sabah, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/10/27/istanbul-summit-calls-for-syrian-constitutional-committee-by-year-end>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

Office's capabilities<sup>10</sup>. Some Russia analysts claim that Assad is not an indispensable card for Moscow; therefore, the Putin administration can sacrifice him. For the Kremlin,

Assad's removal remains the most lucrative bargain through which Russia should get something big in return<sup>11</sup>.

## Moscow's Critical Need for a Pivot: Reforming the Syrian Arab Armed Forces

The Russian endgame in Syria needs a pivot to safeguard a political transition and to enforce the Kremlin's political design on the ground. This pivot is (or ideally should be, from a Russian standpoint) the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, as Moscow seeks to expand its influence through state capacity building.

Yet, the current state of the Syrian military is highly problematic. The civil war has plagued the SAAF's unity of command with factionalism, fragmentation, and militancy. The chronic troubles of corruption and nepotism hollowed out the Syrian officer corps much worse than the pre-2011 period, while the reserve service and conscription mechanisms have completely lost legitimacy<sup>12</sup>. Some experts assess that the de-professionalization of the officer corps through the civil war has transformed them into "kleptocratic organizations"<sup>13</sup>. Manpower shortages rendered many conventional formations ineffective. Indeed, subcontracting a significant proportion of the ground operations to irregular groups protected the army from severe battlefield losses, and, to some extent, avoided desertions and defections. However, this preference has substantially degraded the SAAF as an institution<sup>14</sup>. In the meantime, Syria's shady businessmen are investing in the lucrative 'paramilitaries business', and forming their own 'pro-regime' militias<sup>15</sup>.

What is worse, the Iranians strive to institutionalize militancy

in the post-war era and exploit the power vacuum in the country to stay in Syria<sup>16</sup>. Iran is reported to occupy nearly every shrine that it considers to have a Shia link to build sectarian residences around them. The Lebanese Hezbollah is also deliberately placing its militants close to the Syria – Lebanon border areas<sup>17</sup>.

All in all, 'the state monopoly on violence', in a Weberian sense, is sinking without a trace in Syria. When pursuing its political goals in the international arena, Moscow needs somebody to shape the battleground with the help of military advisors. This 'Middle Eastern shogun in the making' should be pro-Russian and loyal to the Putin administration's agenda, someone highly decorated with Russian medals and personally known to the Russian President. He should be a 'war hero' in the eyes of the Alawite officer corps and *praetorian* units to re-unite the fragmented military apparatus during the reconstruction of the country. He should enjoy a dreadful battle record to rein in paramilitaries. While most of the SAAF's top command are subject to Western sanctions due to their conducts through the civil war, this commander, despite being sanctioned, should also have a good anti-ISIS history that Moscow could advertise. This study argues that Russia has firmly put its bet on General Suheil al-Hassan, the chief of the Tiger Forces, for commanding the Syrian military.

<sup>10</sup> The Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies / Policy Analysis Unit, "Can Russia Rehabilitate Assad on the World Stage?", August 2018, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/Lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/Can-Russia-Rehabilitate-Assad-World-Stage.pdf>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Nikolay, Surkov. "Will Russia Sacrifice Assad as part of Its Syrian Endgame?", Russia Direct, January 2016, <https://russia-direct.org/opinion/will-russia-sacrifice-assad-part-its-syrian-endgame>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Lina, Khatib and Lina Sinjab. Syria's Transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power, Chatham House, 2018, p.13.

<sup>13</sup> Kheder, Khaddour. Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Kheder, Khaddour. Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Chris, Zambelis. "Institutionalized Warlordism: Syria's National Defence Force", the Jamestown Foundation, March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/institutionalized-warlordism-syrias-national-defense-force/>, Accessed on: October 29, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Borzou, Daragahi. "Iran Wants to Stay in Syria Forever", Foreign Policy, June 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/01/iran-wants-to-stay-in-syria-forever/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Lina, Khatib and Lina Sinjab. Syria's Transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power, Chatham House, 2018, pp.16-22.



*General Suheil al-Hassan in a medal award ceremony in the Russian Hmeimim Base, Latakia<sup>18</sup>.*

## The Delusion of Winning the War: The SAAF's Need for Strong Leadership

In recent years, thanks to the efforts of Russia and Iran, control of the terrain in Syria has drastically tilted towards Bashar al-Assad. The regime captured major population centers. The armed opposition was defeated in many corners of the country. However, the current mapping of the conflict is delusive when assessing the real capabilities of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces.

Despite the advances in the battleground, the SAAF has eroded as a military entity. At the outset of the civil war, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) lost control of its infantry forces. The regime's conscription and reserves systems, which were already troubled with corruption well before the conflict broke out, simply collapsed. As a result, Assad lost half of his military through desertions and defections<sup>19</sup>. At present,

open-source intelligence estimates suggest that most of the formations remain under-strength with only 500 to 1,000 personnel in brigades and regiments<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, due to the polarized politico-sectarian makeup of the nation, the regime has adopted a 'selective deployment' strategy, referring to deploying Alawite-dominant formations in the area of operations<sup>21</sup>. Thus, although Syria's land forces are some 100,000-strong<sup>22</sup> –albeit on the paper–, currently, the available manpower that can operate away from their garrisons in high-risk offensive campaigns is limited to some 20,000 to 30,000 troops<sup>23</sup>. This crippled war machine is centered on traditional *praetorian* units, such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and the Republican Guard, as well as newly formed elite formations such as the Tiger Forces and the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/miladvisor/status/686649096879403009>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed study on the Syrian Arab Army's manpower shortages, see: Lucas, Winter. *Manpower Gaps in the Syrian Army*, the US Army Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> IISS, *Military Balance 2018*, London, Routledge, p.362.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph, Holliday. *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, ISW, 2013, pp.10-11.

<sup>22</sup> IISS, *Military Balance 2018*, London, Routledge, p.362.

<sup>23</sup> Michael, Eisenstadt. "Has the Assad Regime 'Won' Syria's Civil War?", *the American Interest*, May 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/05/15/has-the-assad-regime-won-syrias-civil-war/>, Accessed on: October 29, 2018; IHS Markit Jane's, *Syria – Army*, October 2018; IISS, *Military Balance 2018*, London, Routledge, pp.362-366.

<sup>24</sup> IHS Markit Jane's, *Syria – Army*, October 2018.

Moreover, heavy dependence on foreign involvement, coupled with the growing client status of the regime, has drastically deformed the military strategic culture at the SAAF officer ranks. Field studies reveal that *"Syrian officers have often changed their clothing and behavior depending on the foreign military with which they work. Those serving in divisions receiving Russian military aid use the Russian military lexicon, while it is common for those cooperating with Iranian advisers to button up their shirt collars, which is standard Iranian Revolutionary Guard attire"*<sup>25</sup>.

The burgeoning dichotomy in the Syrian military strategic cultural orientation, especially the IRGC signature among the officer corps, marks a problematic factor for Russia in the long term. Because, strong Russian strategic cultural influence over the SAAF reflects not only a civil war achievement, but also decades-long investment. During the Cold War, for example, of the Middle Eastern actors that developed alliances with Moscow through military advisory and defense aid missions (Iraq, Egypt, and Syria), the SAAF most closely resembled the Soviet Red Army in its tactics, organization, and doctrine<sup>26</sup>. Some studies conclude that since the SAAF's elite units mirrored the Soviet Red Army in its relations with the party, these formations have managed to avoid collapse<sup>27</sup>. The Putin administration has invested a lot in the regime's military capabilities (even transferred strategic weapon systems to the SAAF, as seen in the recent S-300 case). In return, Moscow would not want to witness a generation of pro-Iran Syrian generals deciding on defense matters in the 2020s and beyond.

Aside from the problems of the 'conventional' military, the rise of paramilitary units, warlords, and politically

empowered militancy are serious hindrances for state capacity building efforts in Syria. At the outset of the civil war, facing difficulties in securing sufficient numbers of soldiers, the regime turned to promoting irregulars. Paramilitary groups have mushroomed since then. Initially based on the thuggish *shabiha* and then the 'Popular Committees', the regime finally organized the National Defense Forces (*Qawat al-Difaa al-Watani*) in 2012. Over the years, the NDF—despite having local Sunni contingents in some places like Aleppo—has transformed into a notorious sectarian force dominated by the Alawites and other minorities. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Forces (IRGC – QF) and the Lebanese Hezbollah have strong influences over the Syrian paramilitaries which operate, at the same time, as organized crime syndicates with some 100,000 members<sup>28</sup>.

The NDF also became a more attractive option for recruitment. Firstly, it simply pays better than the regular army. While a regular personnel's wage at the SAA is around \$81 per month, a fighter in the NDF makes \$136. Secondly, the regular military service means executing combat duties away from the hometown. Yet, paramilitary forces are generally expected to defend their communities and provinces<sup>29</sup>. Thirdly, these groups exploit 'other' opportunities, like setting checkpoints for extorting money and looting in the captured provinces, as lucrative sources of making profit. Finally, pro-regime businessmen, such as Rami Makhoul and his al-Bustan association, fund many of the Syrian paramilitaries<sup>30</sup>. Recent field studies report that the NDF ringleaders have appeared as a new, privileged socio-economic class in Syria<sup>31</sup>. Some experts consider the current reality to be 'institutionalized warlordism'<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> Kheder, Khaddour. *Strenght in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> For a military strategic, operational, and tactical level study comparing the Cold War Iraqi, Egyptian, and the Syrian militaries with respect to the Soviet model, see: Michael, Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack. "Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries", *Middle East Journal*, Vol.55 No.4, Autumn 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Tim, Ripley. *Syrian Army Prepares for Post-Conflict Challenges*, IHS Markit Jane's, November 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Chris, Zambelis. "Institutionalized Warlordism: Syria's National Defence Force", the Jamestown Foundation, March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/institutionalized-warlordism-syrias-national-defense-force/>, Accessed on: October 29, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Kheder, Khaddour. *Strenght in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed assessment, see: Lina, Khatib and Lina Sinjab. *Syria's Transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power*, Chatham House, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Chris, Zambelis. "Institutionalized Warlordism: Syria's National Defence Force", the Jamestown Foundation, March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/institutionalized-warlordism-syrias-national-defense-force/>, Accessed on: October 29, 2018.

## The Shiite Jihad Factor in the SAAF's Weaknesses

At this point, one should grasp the intertwined characteristics of militancy in the Syrian civil war, the NDF's makeup, and Tehran's influence model. The trend that most Western analysts overlook in Syria is the emergence of the Shiite jihad against the backdrop of Salafi-jihadism and Sunni insurgency<sup>33</sup>. In fact, thousands of Shiite jihadists have poured into Syria under Iranian orchestration.

Tehran's geopolitical expansionist concepts capitalize on power vacuums, as showcased in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. Similar to the Syrian Civil War, while none of these conflicts was Iran's own making, they offered a bridgehead to the IRGC to build on<sup>34</sup>. Accordingly, Tehran aims to establish advanced militia organizations following the Lebanese Hezbollah model in the post-war *status quo*. In doing so, the IRGC Quds Forces first capitalized on the motivational boost of 'defending the Sayyeda Zainab shrine'. The holy site's geostrategic value, because of its proximity to Damascus and the capital's international airport, of course, provided additional advantages<sup>35</sup>. At the time when the regime's Popular Committees were morphing into the more organized and potent NDF back in 2012, advisors from the IRGC and the Lebanese Hezbollah were attached to the Syrian paramilitary formations<sup>36</sup>. Consequently, Iran has acquired considerable influence over the NDF's activities. Apart from the Syrian paramilitary groups, Tehran also mobilized Shiite foreign fighters. At present, 30,000 to 40,000 Shiite foreign fighters are estimated to operate in Syria<sup>37</sup>, including the Iran-harvested Fatemiyoun Brigade from Afghanistan, the Zeinabiyoun Brigade from Pakistan (together account for some 15,000 militants), as well as the Lebanese Hezbollah (that dispatched up to 9,000 fighters)<sup>38</sup>.

Overall, on the one hand, the Iranian involvement threw a lifeline to the Baath regime in compensating for the manpower shortages and holding the captured territories – in doctrine, 20 troops per 1,000 inhabitants is the minimum requirement for counterinsurgencies<sup>39</sup>–. On the other hand, it also caused severe breakdowns in the SAAF's command&control structures<sup>40</sup>.

Besides, the capacity to exercise control over the paramilitary entities tilts towards Iran. In this regard, while the core Abbas Brigade (*Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas, or LAFA*, the initial, relatively more indigenous Shiite militia of Syria), along with some others, is still commanded by the regime (particularly by the Syrian Republican Guard), the IRGC now orchestrates most of the paramilitaries, including the splinter factions from the LAFA<sup>41</sup>. The Iranian footprint can be observed especially in the Shiite militancy around the Golan Heights, adding complexity to Russia's post-war political plans<sup>42</sup>.

Unlike Iran, which essentially benefits from the erosion in the Syrian state capacity and fragmentation of the military, the Russian Federation's future posture in Syria depends on promoting institutions and restoring state capacity. Tellingly, while Iran has heavily invested in sectarian paramilitary organizations in Syria, Russia preferred to assign military advisors to each major unit (battalions, brigades, regiments, and divisions) of the SAAF<sup>43</sup>. Thus, in its ongoing efforts of forming political alliances to rebuild Syria, Moscow needs to ensure the unity of command through a strong and pro-Russian military leadership. This is where General Suheil al-Hassan, the 'Nimr', comes into play.

<sup>33</sup> For a detailed study on the Shiite jihad in Syria, see: Phillip, Smyth. *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Payam, Mohseni and Hassan Ahmadian. "What Iran Really Wants in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, May 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/10/what-iran-really-wants-in-syria/>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Phillip, Smyth. *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015, pp.1-2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p.21.

<sup>37</sup> Michael, Eisenstadt. "Has the Assad Regime 'Won' Syria's Civil War?", *the American Interest*, May 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/05/15/has-the-assad-regime-won-syrias-civil-war/>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Orit, Perlov and Udi Dekel. "The Model of Iranian Influence in Syria", *INSS*, July 2018, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/model-iranian-influence-syria/>, Accessed on: October 30, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of force ratio in stability operations, see: R. Royce, Kneeece, et.al. *Force Sizing for Stability Operations*, Institute for Defense Analyses, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher, Kozak. *Iran's Assad Regime*, ISW, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Phillip, Smyth. *Iran is Outpacing Assad for Control of Syria's Shia Militias*, Policy Watch 2955, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2018.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> TASS, <http://tass.com/world/983232>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

## The Rise of the 'Nimr': From Air Force Intelligence to the Tiger Forces

General Suheil al-Hassan, nicknamed 'the Tiger' (al-Nimr), was born in 1970 in the Alawite stronghold of Latakia. In compliance with the SAAF's elite units' sectarian makeup, al-Hassan made the right debut at his military career. Having graduated from the military academy as an air defense officer, he was assigned to the Air Force Intelligence Directorate (*Idarat al-Mukhabarat al-Jawiyya*)<sup>44</sup>.

Thanks to Hafez al-Assad's design, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate has always been one of the most powerful and dreadful agencies of the regime. De-classified intelligence reports from the Cold War era reveal that while the formal cabinet and the Baath Party leadership had limited political influence, Hafez al-Assad's close circle of Alawite military and intelligence chiefs, primarily the Air Force Intelligence elites, occupied the real power positions<sup>45</sup>. At the outset of the revolt, in 2011, this intelligence service (including Suheil al-Hassan who was a colonel then) was reported to take the toughest measures against the protesters<sup>46</sup>. In fact, General Jamil al-Hassan (no kinship is reported to Suheil), the Air Force Intelligence Director since 2009 (a very long tenure in Bashar's Syria), even tacitly criticized Bashar al-Assad's approach in a 2016 interview with Sputnik Arabic. He told that the president should have quelled the uprising more strongly from the beginning as the regime did back in the 1980s, in Hama<sup>47</sup>. Experts interpreted the interview to be 'very unusual', since a Syrian general cannot, under any circumstances, even imply any criticism about the president. More importantly, General Jamil al-Hassan is 65 years old. While the retirement age for his rank is 58, the strong general of the Air Force Intelligence exceptionally still keeps his post<sup>48</sup>. This very incident shows the central power

position of the agency, which became even more visible during the civil war. On another note, thanks to the Air Force Intelligence's 'fraternity of arms', General Jamil al-Hassan and General Suheil al-Hassan have been working closely since the first years of the civil war. Just recently, the two strongmen were spotted in the Abu Duhur Air Base, close to Idlib, in late October 2018<sup>49</sup>.

There is only a limited number of open-source writings available about the 'Nimr'. We know that he was based in the regime's key Mazzeh Air Base in the outskirts of Damascus when the unrest broke out. From the beginning, Colonel al-Hassan has adopted a very heavy-handed approach to the conflict. Back in 2011, his personnel was attached to the Syrian Arab Army units to make sure regular troops use 'enough' lethal force. In April 2011, Colonel al-Hassan himself commanded a civilian massacre in Dar'a. Then, he was transferred to the Hama Military Airport, showing the regime's trust in his brutal tactics given the geostrategic significance of the city. Starting from 2012, Suheil al-Hassan actively commanded the regime's barrel bombings. By the end of that year, he assumed control of critical campaigns in wider Hama<sup>50</sup>. Military experts assess that Colonel Suheil al-Hassan's most important trait was his ability to bring together various units and services. Not only did he terrorize the protesters, but he also had a tight grip on the Syrian Arab Army personnel. Thus, he was able to discipline and 'motivate' a broad array of soldiers from different formations and branches to fight the battles with 'unity of effort'. In most fronts, especially in Aleppo and Hama, he followed scorch-earth methods<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> Lucas, Winter. "Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces", Small Wars Journal, July 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Central Intelligence Agency Foreign Assessment Center, Politics in Syria, 1979, Approved for Release: August 05, 2003, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T00942A001000030001-0.pdf>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Human Rights Watch, By all Means Necessary: Individual and Command Responsibility for Crimes against Humanity in Syria, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Sputnik, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/interview/201611031020677981-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Aron, Lund. "A Voice from the Shadows: The Head of Syria's Air Force Intelligence Directorate Says Bashar al-Assad was Too Soft", Carnegie Middle East Center, November 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66240>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sdamdl-6pw>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Lucas, Winter. "Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces", Small Wars Journal, July 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Even very early records from the Syrian turmoil refer to Suheil al-Hassan, and highlights his open orders to target civilians<sup>52</sup>. However, these reports do not mention the Tiger Forces. In fact, amidst a severe infantry crisis in late 2013, the regime ordered this 'bright' colonel to establish a special operations unit centered on elite commandos. Al-Hassan handpicked his first soldiers and established the Tiger Forces<sup>53</sup>. Some sources claim that it was Bashar's cousin and the country's wealthiest businessman Rami Makhlouf who initially funded this new unit<sup>54</sup>. In the beginning, al-Hassan was a battlefield

commander that the regime wanted to promote as an inspiration to the desperate SAAF.

Yet, his first image had not reflected the present cult of military-persona. Below, two pictures of Suheil al-Hassan taken three years from one another can give an idea. On the left, there is a 2015 image released by a pro-regime news outlet. On the right, a 2018 picture with al-Hassan's Russian security detail visible in the back.



*Suheil al-Hassan's transformation from an Alawite Air Force Intelligence colonel and 'war hero' into 'the general and cult military persona' protected by extraordinary measures<sup>55</sup>.*

In 2014, Journalist Robert Fisk did an interview with al-Hassan. The story was entitled "the 'Tiger' – Bashar al-Assad's favorite soldier". Probably, a renewed version of the same interview would use President Putin instead of Bashar al-Assad to highlight the main political support behind the general. The piece portrayed al-Hassan as a ruthless soldier who loves poetry. The story noted that, strangely, al-Hassan broadcast his own poems to the armed opposition during the conflicts. Fisk depicted the colonel as

"one of the most frightening men" he has ever met<sup>56</sup>.

The first half of 2015 was not a good time for the 'Tiger'. He lost many subordinate commanders, and himself was lightly injured. In fact, the turning point for al-Hassan was the Russian intervention. After months of disappearance, he came back as a completely different figure, who was pretty suitable for propaganda and information operations in social media.

<sup>52</sup> Human Rights Watch, *By all Means Necessary: Individual and Command Responsibility for Crimes against Humanity in Syria*, 2011. p.50.

<sup>53</sup> Al Masdar News, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/colonel-suheil-al-hassan-tiger-forces/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Keheder, Khaddour. *Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army's Accidental Resilience*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Al Masdar News, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-captures-2-villages-east-homs/>; <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/prominent-syrian-army-commander-observes-rebels-surrendering-in-northern-homs-video/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Robert, Fisk. "An Audience with 'the Tiger' – Bashar al-Assad's Favourite Soldier", *the Independent*, June 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/an-audience-with-the-tiger-bashar-al-assad-s-favourite-soldier-9508736.html>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.



*Suheil al-Hassan before (on the left, 2014) and after (right, 2016) the Russian intervention<sup>57</sup>.*

The Tiger Forces are very well-equipped shock troops and combined arms unit that go beyond a battle-hardened paramilitary. Russia deliberately transferred very advanced weaponry, including Tochka tactical ballistic missiles, T-90 main battle tanks, and BM-30 Smerch heavy multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to General Suheil al-Hassan's offensive unit. Besides, al-Hassan is getting intensive close air-support from the Russian Aerospace Forces contingent in Syria<sup>58</sup>. While there are conflicting reports about the number of soldiers fighting for al-Hassan, it is estimated that he commands a core group of 4,000-strong elite fighters along with additional artillery and armored units, as well as on-call militia to support operations when needed<sup>59</sup>.

Armed Forces of the Russian Federation also on the job trains the Tiger Forces with advanced operational concepts. In August 2017, TASS reported that the Syrian regime's troops, for the first time, executed a combat airborne mission. Paratroopers under the command of General Suheil al-Hassan landed behind the ISIS lines in Khirbet Mikman and Al-Kadir in the Raqqa province. This official

explanation revealed that the Tiger Forces had a paratrooper detachment. Russia also assigned Ka-52 attack helicopters for the operation<sup>60</sup>.

The Tiger Forces have fought and succeeded –due to their scorch-earth operational concepts and intensive Russian support– nearly in all fronts of Syria. However, their lead role in the 2018 east Ghouta offensive highlighted a sharp political dimension in General Suheil al-Hassan's role within the Syrian military apparatus. At Moscow's behest, the Republican Guard and the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division were deliberately sidelined in a very critical effort at Damascus' doorstep. The Russian military contingent's headquarters officially announced General al-Hassan's assignment to the east Ghouta offensive. Alexander Ivanov, the spokesperson of the Russian operations in Syria, even responded to a comment on the social media that suggested that it should have been Colonel Ghayath Dallah of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division leading the campaign. Ivanov told that General Suheil al-Hassan's assignment was "necessary given his abilities to lead battles that many others have been unable to"<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> Lucas, Winter. "Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces", Small Wars Journal, July 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Sam, Dagher. "Russia's Favorite Syrian Warlord", the Atlantic, March 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/who-is-russias-favorite-syrian-warlord/554774/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> For a comprehensive open-source study on the Tiger Forces' subordinates, see: Gregory, Waters. The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia, the Middle East Institute, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> TASS, <http://tass.com/defense/960294>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> OE Watch Commentary, "The Tiger Forces in Damascus", the US Army Foreign Military Studies Office, April 2018.

Interestingly, at a time when the 'Tiger' was assigned to such a critical command role close to the capital, Maher al-Assad, Bashar's brother who was previously appointed to a secondary role in the General Staff, resumed his post as

the Commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division<sup>62</sup>. Some sources interpreted Maher al-Assad's appointment as the regime's countermove to balance the Russian-backed rise of General al-Hassan<sup>63</sup>.



*General Suheil al-Hassan overlooking Damascus from Mount Qasioun, March 2018. His security detail appears to be elite Russian troops<sup>64</sup>.*



*General Suheil al-Hassan during the Victory Parade at Hmeimim Base, May 2018, with his medal reported to be the 1<sup>st</sup> Class Order of Suvorov<sup>65</sup>.*

<sup>62</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1250976/maher-al-assad-named-commander-syrian-army%E2%80%99s-elite-4th-mechanized-division>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Orient News, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQDQ\\_mIGZ8c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQDQ_mIGZ8c), Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> <https://mobile.twitter.com/ArabianaINTEL/status/974278042477645825>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> <https://mobile.twitter.com/ArabianaINTEL/status/974278042477645825>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

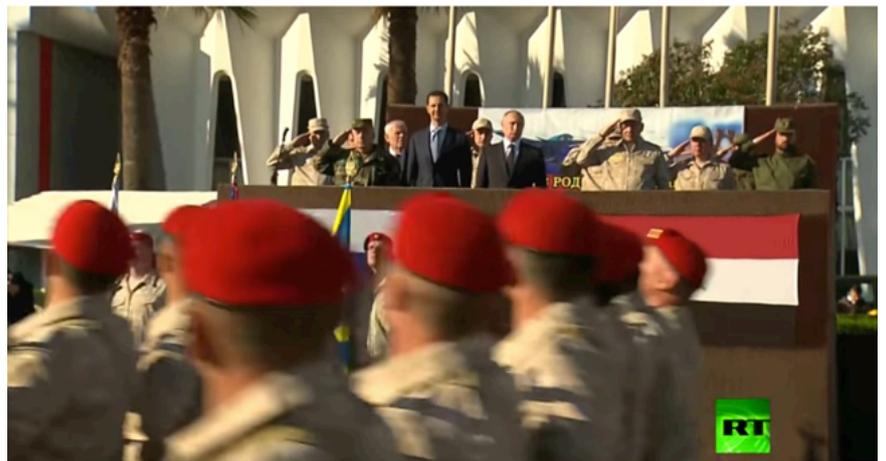
## Russia Put Its Chips on General al-Hassan

General Suheil al-Hassan enjoys a 'special' importance in the eyes of Moscow. In 2017, he was awarded with an iconic sword presented by the Russian Chief of Staff General Valery Gerasimov in Hmeimim Air Base for his valor in combat. When thanking General Gerasimov, General al-Hassan hailed "the great Russian military power"<sup>66</sup>. One year earlier, the Syrian commander was awarded with one of the top medals of the Russian military order<sup>67</sup>. There has been no other Syrian that Russia decorated so highly throughout the civil war.

Furthermore, during President Vladimir Putin's visit to Hmeimim Air Base in December 2017, Suheil al-Hassan appeared as the only Syrian military figure sitting at the table aside from Bashar al-Assad. There, Putin personally praised al-Hassan before his president<sup>68</sup>. In fact, this was something that can endanger a promising officer in a Baathist dictatorship. Moreover, inviting a brigadier-general of a combat unit to a presidential top-table itself is unusual in the military-diplomatic custom, especially considering the Syrian strategic cultural factors. All these signs are quite telling about General al-Hassan's future trajectory and the Kremlin's plans for him.



*General Suheil al-Hassan was personally rewarded with an iconic sword by the Russian Chief of Staff, General Valery Gerasimov<sup>69</sup>.*



*Russia Today broadcasting a parade at Hmeimim Base. General Suheil al-Hassan (right) saluting the Russian troops<sup>70</sup>.*

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCWYNFGtDCI>, Accessed on: October 28, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> <https://syria.liveuamap.com/en/2016/12-january-russia-awarded-syrian-colonel-suheil-al-hassan>, Accessed on: October 28, 2018.

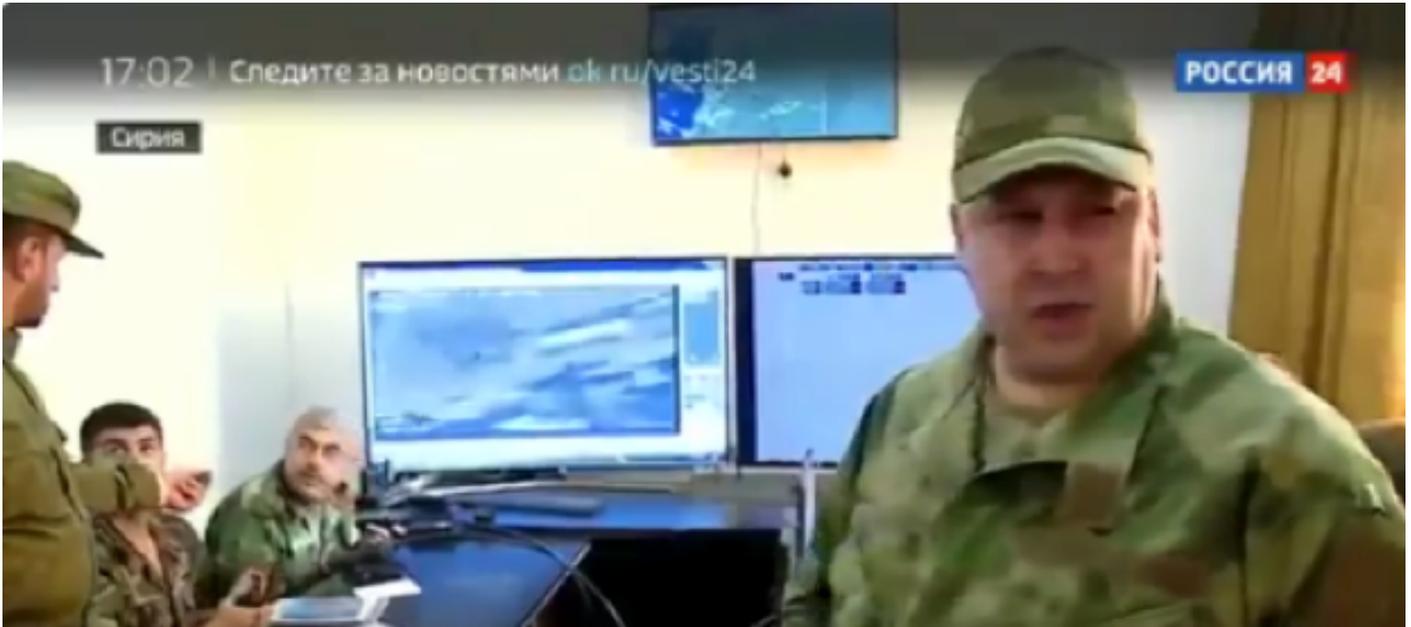
<sup>68</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LjAmzuxD5I>, Accessed on: October 28, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Al Masdar News, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/video-russian-commanders-present-suheil-al-hassan-sword/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Russia Today, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QN0iGnF9o8I>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

At the operational and tactical levels, General Suheil al-Hassan has been Russia's primary partner since 2015. As explained earlier, his unit was systematically provided with advanced weapons, tactics, and close air-support. General al-Hassan even worked with the then commander

of the Russian contingent in Syria, General Sergey Surovikin (currently the Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces, marking the first example since he comes from the Russian Ground Forces) in critical command & control centers.



*General Sergey Surovikin and General Suheil al-Hassan (standing in the back) in a command & control center in Syria<sup>71</sup>.*

General Suheil al-Hassan's personal history makes him a suitable candidate for carrying out Russia's future design for the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. He is an Alawite officer coming from the Air Force Intelligence, one of the main pillars of Hafez al-Assad's legacy in controlling the state apparatus. General al-Hassan has successfully commanded one of the most combat-capable formations in the Syrian battleground, and built himself a 'war hero' name in the eyes of the SAAF, especially among the Alawite officer corps and

the regime's popular base. He enjoys a significant combat experience in hybrid battlegrounds and combined arms operations. He has become very familiar with advanced weaponry and the Russian military advisory mission. More importantly, the 'Tiger' has also become well known among the Russian defense elites. Finally, although General Suheil al-Hassan is subject to various Western sanctions lists<sup>72</sup>, the the Kremlin can still introduce the general with his anti-ISIS combat record.

<sup>71</sup> <https://twitter.com/miladvisor/status/922168724282642433>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>72</sup> The US Department of Treasury, <https://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnnew17.pdf>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018; the Council of the European Union, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/124083/list-persons-entities-EU-restrictive-measures-Syria-30052017.pdf>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

## Early Signs of a Challenge?

Before his superiors, including the Minister of Defense General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, the 'Nimr' acts like the commander-in-charge, rather than a subordinate<sup>73</sup>.



*General Suheil al-Hassan with the Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayyoub during a visit to east Qalamoun. General al-Hassan, in fact a brigadier before his defense minister, shakes hand of the cheering soldiers, walks in line with General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub (something that a subordinate should never do). General al-Hassan's Russian security detail visible in the back (left, in mask)<sup>74</sup>.*

Because of his shiny and swift rise, some experts think that al-Hassan became 'so powerful' that the regime might want to get rid of him. Such political eliminations took place in Syria before<sup>75</sup>. Notably, these speculations were voiced following the death of Major General Issam Zahreddine, a famous Druze figure at the ranks of the Republican Guard<sup>76</sup>. Tellingly, General Suheil al-Hassan was recently seen guarded by a Russian Special Forces security detail even when he was with the top generals of the regime<sup>77</sup>.



*General Suheil al-Hassan in east Ghouta with his Russian security detail<sup>78</sup>.*

Even more tellingly, a recent leaked radio communication between General Suheil al-Hassan and the regime military officers reveal that the strong brigadier openly threatened them not to 'even look at his troops', let alone stopping them<sup>79</sup>.

Although the leak needs technical authentication including voice biometrics, it is highly likely that the underlying reason of General al-Hassan's harsh rhetoric was his reaction to the regime's intentions to demobilize the Tiger Forces<sup>80</sup>.

<sup>73</sup> Orient News, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQDQ\\_mIGZ8c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQDQ_mIGZ8c), Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Orient News, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQDQ\\_mIGZ8c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQDQ_mIGZ8c), Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Sam, Dagher. "Russia's Favorite Syrian Warlord", the Atlantic, March 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/who-is-russias-favorite-syrian-warlord/554774/>, Accessed on: October 31, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Needa Suriya, <http://www.nedaa-sy.com/en/news/2280>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

<sup>77</sup> <https://twitter.com/WithinSyriaBlog/status/965222864004755456>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> <https://twitter.com/WithinSyriaBlog/status/965222864004755456>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSJuQsGESHY>, Accessed on: October 28, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=103034>, Accessed on: November 01, 2018.

## Conclusion and Strategic Forecast

Russia's political design for Syria needs to promote the SAAF as a strong pivot to rely on during the forthcoming political process. In case the current paramilitary landscape of the civil war-torn country becomes more prevalent and permanent, it would be Tehran, not Moscow, that will be the dominant force in Syria in the long-term. Such a development would trigger more intensive Israeli and American responses, making things harder for the Putin administration.

Russia would not openly confront Iran in Syria. Instead, the Putin administration will try to transform the SAAF into a magnet to rein in paramilitary formations. This ambitious goal requires leadership, charisma in the eyes of the Alawite-dominant officer corps, and pro-Russian attitude. Defense Minister General Ali Abdullah Ayoub, one of the embodied figures of the Baath regime and a veteran in his late 60s, is not suitable for this role. Russia would probably encourage and support General Suheil al-Hassan for executing a forcible reshuffle at the right time. This change should not necessarily seem like a takeover at first glance. The world could read pro-regime outlets congratulating General Suheil al-Hassan for his new role as the chief of the Syrian Arab Army, or even defense minister.

The SAAF, especially its *praetorian* units, have always had a symbiotic relation with the regime. Although Bashar al-Assad seems to be winning the war, his grip on Syria's military is nowhere close to Hafez al-Assad's iron-fist reign. Moreover, current manpower shortages make it impossible for the Syrian Arab Army to exert full control over the entire territory of the country.

As the war gradually comes to an end, the Assad clan would prefer capitalizing on General al-Hassan's legacy as an inspiration to consolidate the Alawite popular base, rather than the 'Nimr' himself assuming top command posts

with Russian medals on his uniform in the post-war era. Thus, a false flag assassination could be a way-out for the Baath regime. Yet, evidence suggests that the Russians are guarding their investment well. Besides, Moscow can harshly punish any 'false flag' attempts, and Assad knows it. The regime's intentions to demobilize the Tiger Forces would also be blocked by Russia.

At present (late October – early November 2018), General al-Hassan's units are mostly stationed around Abu Duhur Air Base, close to Idlib. The Tigers are away from the capital Damascus, and in the short term, a takeover does not seem possible. However, as the situation in Idlib unfolds, any changes in the Tiger Forces' deployment patterns should be carefully monitored.

In any reshuffle attempt at the Syrian military's top brass, there are several actors that can play determining roles. The Air Force Intelligence's (and its chief General Jamil al-Hassan's) stance would be important. Another key actor to watch is Maher al-Assad and his 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. As mentioned earlier, Maher's return to his combat position coincides with General Suheil al-Hassan's assignment to lead the east Ghouta offensive at Damascus' doorstep. Finally, the Republican Guard's stance would be crucial too.

General Suheil al-Hassan is, by all means, a hardliner. He is not the ideal commander to build a true national army by integrating the Sunnis into key units. However, he is under strict Russian influence, and could be dictated any policy by Moscow. Nevertheless, while some sources speculated that 'al-Nimr' is considered to be an alternative to Bashar by the Putin administration, this study concludes that the Russian plan about Suheil al-Hassan is mainly focusing on top military roles, at least in the foreseeable future.



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**SYRIA'S 'SHOGUN' IN THE MAKING:  
RUSSIAN-BACKED GENERAL SUHEIL AL-HASSAN  
AND FUTURE OF THE SYRIAN  
ARAB ARMED FORCES**

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