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# **THE BAATH REGIME AND THE SYRIAN GAME OF THRONES: HAFEZ AL-ASSAD'S STRATEGIC LEGACY AT ITS BEST**

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## What Happened?

- Late August witnessed potentially significant reshuffles in Syria.
- The Baath regime has re-organized General Suheil al-Hassan's elite Tiger Forces and announced the launch of a new Syrian Arab Army unit, the 25th Special Tasks Counterterrorism Division.

- The regime has confiscated Syria's wealthiest figure Rami Makhlof's key assets including the critical al-Bustan Association that funds several militia organizations. Some sources voice rumors about the house-arrest of Rami Makhlof.

## Significance:

Suheil al-Hassan and his elite Tiger Forces (Qawat al-Nimr) have long been at the epicenter of the Russian Federation's plans to re-build the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. Rami Makhlof, a prominent member of the second most important family of Syria, is considered to be the richest person in the country. Makhlof is the sponsor of various

elite military and paramilitary formations including some Tiger Forces sub-units. With the drastic reshuffle, it seems that Bashar al-Assad and the top military elite of the regime have opted for eliminating possible challengers, marking yet another example of a decades-long Baathist practice in the Middle East.

## Background Information

Suheil al-Hassan has loomed large as a privileged military figure in the last years of the civil war. General al-Hassan, hailing from the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, was personally honored by top Russian officials. Several occasions showcased his significance in the eyes of the Kremlin. For example, General Suheil al-Hassan was present in the table along with Bashar al-Assad during President Putin's visit to the Hmeimim Air Base in December 2017. He was even personally addressed and praised by Putin there. The Russian Chief of Staff General Valery Gerasimov rewarded General al-Hassan with an iconic sword in 2017. One year earlier, he was awarded one of the top medals of the Russian military order. General al-Hassan's elite unit has been strongly backed

by Russian military advisors, operational concepts, and weaponry. Notably, in August 2017, TASS reported that for the first time in Syrian military history, the regime units commanded by General Suheil al-Hassan executed a combat airborne mission. Back in 2018, amidst the fiercely fought Ghouta campaign, General al-Hassan's Tiger Forces were the principal offensive unit of Russia's choice, sidelining the Hafez al-Assad legacy, praetorian units such as the Syrian Republican Guard and Maher al-Assad's 4th Armored Division. Even more importantly, during the operations, which took place very close to the capital Damascus, General al-Hassan had been accompanied by a Russian security detail.

All in all, considering the abovementioned facts and the Russian-backed, swift rise of an Alawite general who could gain the loyalty of the new generation of the Syrian

Arab Army, the regime's old guard (such as the incumbent defense minister, General Ali Abdullah Ayoub), and even Bashar himself, had all the reasons to be concerned.



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



*General Suheil al-Hassan with the Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub during a visit to east Qalamoun. General al-Hassan, in fact a brigadier before his defense minister, shakes hands with cheering soldiers, walks in line with General Ali Abdullah Ayoub (something that a subordinate commander should never do).*

Rami Makhoulf hails from Bashar's late mother Aniseh's family. Rami is considered to be the richest person in Syria – at least, before the recent reshuffle. He controls an estimated fortune of \$6 billion and owns giant assets such as Syriatel (the largest mobile network operator in the country), Cham Holding, and al-Watan news outlet. Some experts estimate that Rami Makhoulf has been in control of up to 60 per cent of Syria's economy. Notably, despite some joint businesses, Rami is known to be at odds with Maher al-Assad who is Bashar's brother, commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division with a substantial influence on the Republican Guard, and reportedly, Iran's critical conduit and best ally in Syria<sup>1</sup>.

Al-Bustan Association was a key instrument for the Makhoulf clan. The foundation has been the prime sponsor of paramilitaries and some private military companies throughout the civil war<sup>2</sup>. The association has also supported some 'regiments' of the Tiger Forces<sup>3</sup>, although General Suheil al-Hassan's battle-hardened unit is chiefly the product of Russian military assistance.

In the meanwhile, another important development that needs attention was the 'retirement' of General Jamil Hassan (no

kinship to Suheil), the head of Syria's powerful Air Force Intelligence, in mid-Summer 2019. General Hassan's favorable stance with respect to Iran-harvested Shiite militias in Syria has already leaked to international press<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, back in 2016, General Hassan gave a sensational interview to Sputnik Arabic, and criticized President Bashar al-Assad's initial response to the unrest, reminding Hafez al-Assad's heavy-handed measures to quell the 1982 Hama uprising<sup>5</sup>.

Some analysts reported that General Jamil Hassan's intransigent reaction hampered a Russian-mediated, high-level intelligence dialogue between Israel and Syria in late June 2019 in Quneitra that was assembled to discuss Iran-backed militias along the Israeli-Syrian border areas<sup>6</sup>. Besides, apart from the retirement of General Jamil Hassan, the regime has also replaced several key operational-level commanders at the Air Force Intelligence ranks.

It is important to note that General Suheil al-Hassan stems from the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, and this powerful directorate has provided the Tiger Forces with capable warfighting manpower.

<sup>1</sup> Kirill, Semenov. "Who Controls Syria? The al-Assad Family the Inner Circle and the Tycoons", Russian International Affairs Council, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/who-controls-syria-the-al-assad-family-the-inner-circle-and-the-tycoons/>, Accessed on: September 04, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study, see: Gregory, Waters. *The Tiger Forces: Pro Assad Fighters Backed by Russia*, Middle East Institute, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Anton, Masradov. "Is Russia Behind Syria's Security Apparatus Reform" Al-Monitor, July 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/russia-syria-iran-security-apparatus-reform.html>, Accessed on: September 04, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Aron, Lund. "A Voice from the Shadows", Carnegie Middle East Center, November 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/66240>, Accessed on: September 04, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Anton, Masradov. "Is Russia Behind Syria's Security Apparatus Reform" Al-Monitor, July 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/russia-syria-iran-security-apparatus-reform.html>, Accessed on: September 04, 2019.

## Assessments

➤ Although the Tiger Forces were transformed into the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Counterterrorism Division, we do not have adequate input concerning the emerging doctrinal order of battle following the change. At this point, one should focus on the very question of whether the 25<sup>th</sup> Division will be allowed to bypass the Syrian Arab Army's conventional chain of command (something that *praetorian* units such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and the Republican Guard enjoy), or General Suheil al-Hassan's unit will be kept under strict and centralized control. The latter scenario would mark yet another repetition of decades-long Syrian Baathist practice, namely, not letting any political-military figures to overshadow the Assad rule's absolute supremacy.

➤ At first glance, the establishment of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division can be seen as Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub's successful move to 'tame' an uncontrollably rising, Russian-backed general who enjoys popularity among the Syrian Arab Army ranks. Without a doubt, the rise of a powerful Alawite general, who was personally praised by Putin, would make the core elites of the regime uneasy. Besides, the Tiger Forces sidelined the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in several campaigns at Moscow's behest, something that can seriously anger Maher al-Assad and his close circles.

➤ Considering the rivalry between Rami Makhlof and Maher al-Assad (and reportedly between Rami and Bashar lately), the confiscation seems to be a part of 'power-consolidation' measures taken by the old guard. Likewise, previously the Baath regime disbanded pro-Assad militia groups funded and commanded by the oil tycoon Jaber family, and then seized the family's economic assets. Yet, the Makhlof family and Rami Makhlof himself are bigger pieces to swallow compared to the Jaber family.

➤ Some analysts concluded that the reported decline of Tiger Forces and Rami Makhlof could lead to the emergence of other militia groups in Syria<sup>7</sup>. Although such a trajectory is well within realms of possibility, the paramilitary 'business' has depended on war economy in the course of the Syrian Civil War. The bulk of Jaber's forces, for example, were successfully absorbed by the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps and the Republican Guard without leaving any room for mushrooming militias.

➤ One should not underestimate the very fact that the Tiger Forces have always contained various groups (widely reported as 'regiments') and militia sub-units. Operating a loose mix of military and paramilitary units fundamentally contradicts with the Russian strategic priority of restoring the monopolistic role of its Soviet era-remnant client, the Syrian Arab Army. Secondly, many other figures of the Syrian Arab Army enjoy Russian endorsement, and although Suheil has been a valuable investment, no one is indispensable for the Kremlin. Thus, for the time being, one should avoid assuming extreme scenarios such as labeling the establishment of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division as a regime move to curb Moscow's influence, or considering General Suheil al-Hassan to be a Makhlof clan protégé.

➤ Yet, one thing is clear. The 'DNA' of Hafez al-Assad's legacy and strategic pillars of the Syrian Baath regime are centered on playing emerging figures and security branches against each other, pursuing power consolidation continuously, and being mistrustful and vigilant always. The Assad rule is the product of a coup. It, in essence, remains a sectarian minority dictatorship that should walk a fine line both internally and externally. The system that Hafez al-Assad designed is a complex one. The *raison d'être* of the Syrian state apparatus is to protect the president against all challenges, foreign and domestic. One should not forget that Bashar has inherited this very political-military legacy which, ironically, led to the Sunni uprisings, and at the same time, kept the regime's resiliency so far.

➤ While it is certain that the Baath regime opts for power consolidation, it is not clear whether the recent changes would empower Bashar al-Assad or Maher al-Assad in the long term. The Tiger Forces have emerged as an operational rival to Maher's 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in various campaigns. Besides, it is known that Maher al-Assad and Rami Makhlof were at rivalry on many occasions in the past. However, at the end of the day, one should keep in mind that brothers' quarrel is not unusual in the Syrian game of thrones, and in the past, Rifaat Assad came an inch close to overthrowing his brother Hafez.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory, Waters. "The 25th Division: Syria's Tiger Forces Get Rebranded," <https://international-review.org/the-25th-division-syrias-tiger-forces-get-rebranded/>, Accessed on September 8, 2019.



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