A Vicious Cycle: An Examination of How the Feedback Loop Between Coup-proofing and Regime

Insecurity Helped Facilitate the Rise of Pro-Government Militias in the Syrian Conflict

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the emergence of pro-government militias (PGMs) within the context of the post-2011 intrastate conflict in Syria. It investigates the factors that contributed to the breakdown of Syria's armed forces during their counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign. By inquiring into the mechanisms that drove the unravelling of Syria's coercive machinery, this thesis sheds light on why the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad specifically resorted to leveraging irregular forces to which security functions conventionally reserved for the state were outsourced. As such, this thesis asks the following research question: What are the drivers underpinning the employment of PGMs in the post-2011 Syrian conflict?

This thesis progresses in four main parts. First, it introduces the purpose, relevance, and methodology of the research, followed by a literature review that engages with the scholarly work surrounding the use of PGMs in COIN settings. Second, it highlights how Syrian President Bashar al-Assad coup-proofed his coercive forces, prioritizing coup risk mitigation over military effectiveness. The subordination of the coercive institutions in accordance with strategies deliberately intended to divide them resulted in a dysfunctional security sector that third, was incapable of cohesively performing combatively and withstanding the advances of insurgents once the uprising had militarized. Fourth, it demonstrates that as the Syrian regime became more insecure, it outsourced greater functions to PGMs in order to compensate for the depletion of the state's official armed and security forces. This thesis ultimately argues that a vicious cycle between coup-proofing and regime insecurity created a feedback loop that motivated the Syrian regime to resort to incorporating PGMs into its COIN effort.

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DEDICATION

In memory of my mother, Elvira, whose warmth and sense of humanity remains unparalleled.

And in memory of my Ammo Kamal, who taught us that love is not a momentary feeling, but rather, a way of life.

Nearly 15 years after Elvira's passing, and over two years after Kamal's, they still continue to inspire the most genuine of smiles.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research inquiry posed by the thesis. It begins by providing a brief overview of the backdrop against which the research question exists. After addressing the political and security climate in which PGMs emerged in Syria, it outlines the objective of the study and provides an abridged summary of the argument. This chapter proceeds to explain the methodology applied in order to develop a framework that provides a sufficiently satisfactory answer to the research question. This includes defining its main terms in addition to the timeline of the study and an acknowledgement of its methodological limitations. The chapter then concludes with an articulation of the relevance of the research, which situates the study of PGMs into academic currents that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, widespread protests swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The responses of regimes across the MENA region ranged on a continuum from the promise of reform to a recourse to extreme repression, with some states oscillating between the two or conducting them simultaneously. After the ouster of Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi, the authoritarian regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad became unrivalled in its utilization of extreme force in quelling the popular uprisings.

Often referred to as the "Arab Spring,"[1] the transnational protest movement engulfing the region began galvanizing the Syrian street in early 2011. However, the country's largely civic uprising had evolved into an armed revolt within months owing to the heavy-handed response of the military and security apparatus.[2] By 2012, an organized armed rebellion had territorially crystalized and posed a serious challenge to the regime's coercive forces alongside non-violent anti-government activism.

By 2013, it had become apparent that the Syria was were mired in a deepening intrastate conflict. In the wake of the collapse of Syrian military defences across the country and the robust reliance on PGMs in responding to insurgent advances, two things had become resoundingly apparent. First, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had suffered substantial decay over the course of the first two years of conflict. Second, the mobilization of PGMs had become an undeniable feature of the state's security landscape. Providing an explanation that accounts for these interconnected developments constitutes the basis of this thesis' research inquiry.

PURPOSE

The research question this thesis addresses is: what are the drivers underpinning the employment of PGMs in the post-2011 Syrian conflict? As such, it aims to draw on the dynamics present in the conflict to illustrate why, when faced with significant challenges to their rule, the political and military leaders of the Syrian regime either mobilized, or authorized the utilization of, PGMs. To sharpen its focus, this project's investigation is guided by the following subset of questions: Why did Assad resort to using PGMs to carry out functions conventionally executed by the armed and security forces of the state? What type of conditions existed in order to create a security context conducive of such outsourcing? What are the benefits associated with the decision to subcontract security operations in Syria to irregular coercive actors outside the direct control of the institutions of the state?

While there exists a growing body of literature on Syria that alludes to the utilization of PGMs during wartime, very few texts thoroughly examine the role of institutional factors in helping to drive this outsourcing process. Put differently, an analysis of the specific mechanisms that explain why the politicization of a state's coercive forces impacted their institutional decay during the conflict has rarely been combined with a comprehensive look at how such forces disintegrated and at what

particular junctures PGM outsourcing occurred. Combining both the why and the how (so to speak) constitutes the rationale behind this research inquiry.

ARGUMENT AND SCOPE OF STUDY

This thesis argues that in the post-2011 Syrian conflict, PGMs emerged as a result of a vicious cycle in which coup-proofing and regime insecurity reinforced one another. Specifically, the case of Syria demonstrates that as regime security dwindled, Assad, who presided over a coup-proofed security infrastructure, was impelled to delegate a host of security operations to PGMs in an attempt to reinforce his regime's eroding coercive capacity and break the detrimental feedback loop that hindered their COIN campaigns.

The argument advanced in this thesis progresses in three main parts. First, it illustrates how Assad heavily coup-proofed his armed and security forces, prioritizing the mitigation of palace coups over generating effective personnel. The president's coup-proofing system, inherited from his father, Hafez, leveraged counterbalancing and the overreliance on ethnosectarian and familial bonds as tools intended to structurally divide his coercive forces. Moreover, he allowed corruption to thrive within his coercive institutions, enabling illicit avenues for self-enrichment in order to secure the allegiance of the officer corps. Together, these dynamics broadly fashioned dysfunctional forces with low operational capacity. Second, it elucidates that role that each of these tools played in contributing to the decomposition of the SAA during the Syrian conflict, undermining its ability to withstand and repel the advances of insurgents, in spite of its military superiority on paper. This led to a vicious cycle in which coup-proofing and regime insecurity reinforced one another, perpetuating a detrimental feedback loop that further impeded the regime's COIN efforts. Third, it maps the link between regime insecurity and the reliance on PGMs, demonstrating that as Assad became more insecure, his regime's incorporation of PGMs deepened. As head of state, he progressively outsourced

greater functions to exogenous security actors as his coercive forces eroded under the stress of combat.

The timeline under consideration for this thesis is from 2011-2019. Whereas Syria saw varying degrees of clandestine PGM mobilization after 2011, the formalization of PGMs as state-aligned actors officially materialized in early 2013. Using this timeline, this thesis draws on the dynamics present in the Syrian conflict to illustrate that as regime insecurity soared, the outsourcing of security operations to PGMs increased. When faced with significant challenges to their rule, the political and security elite in Syria undertook concerted efforts to preserve their power by paradoxically relinquishing one of the state's key functions – its role as the sole authoritative entity responsible for the enforcement of coercion, otherwise commonly known as the "monopoly of the legitimate use of force."[3]

Here, a note is due on the application of a counterfactual. While some PGMs may have organically emerged due to the security vacuum that arose during the war, two points are worth addressing. First, there is the matter of causality. The argument laid out in this thesis draws on the feedback loop between coup-proofing and regime insecurity as a causal mechanism that helped lay the groundwork for the disintegration of the coercive forces, and, by extension, the fragmented security context in which the proliferation of PGMs occurred. Second, even among actors who may have initially organized militias independent of the state, the role of the regime in providing support – whether through arms, training, financing, security coordination, and/or legal authorization – *ipso facto* showcases its acceptance of this security configuration, as it nevertheless served its COIN efforts. This sequence of events is explored further in Chapter 4.

This thesis acknowledges that in Syria, political decisions made by the Assad regime fuelled the insurgency by alienating broad segments of the population. However, it examines the security vacuum largely through the lens of the feedback loop that unfolded between coup-proofing and

regime insecurity. Said differently, although this thesis recognizes that elements beyond this feedback loop contributed to the fragmented security context in which PGMs proliferated, it explores their emergence in relation to this dynamic. For example, while a combination of poverty, sectarian discrimination, and state repression inspired resistance from overwhelmingly Sunni movements within the Syrian street, this thesis generally examines such grievances insofar as they affect security actors who are part of the state's coercive forces. A comprehensive account of how Sunni grievances sustained the insurgency in Syria is simply outside of the scope of this thesis.

This thesis excludes from its focus the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, as its relationship with the central government and its leadership does not fit the purpose of the study. Although the group is alluded to, it is passively examined within the context of its role as a contentious non-state actor that rivals the authority of Damascus – not as a PGM.

CLARIFYING TERMS:

For regime insecurity, this thesis formulates a working concept that borrows from Brian Job[4] and Richard Jackson.[5] It defines regime insecurity as the condition where governing elites, those representing the highest echelons of the political and coercive machinery of the officially recognized government, are vulnerable to violent contestation to their rule. Although regimes tend to refer to the institutional character of the state and its system of governance, the case in question is marked by a high degree of personalistic leadership.

While the author recognizes that regimes, governments, and states are not by definition interchangeable, in authoritarian systems the demarcation line is often muddled. This is particularly true for regimes that can be defined as patrimonial or sultanistic. Given the nature of their political configurations, a great degree of embeddedness in one another complicates the ability to definitively delineate their margins, making it a matter of philosophical contention. This point is succinctly articulated by Jeff Goodwin:

> The distinction between state and [political] regime can become quite blurred in the real world. This happens the more that states and regimes interpenetrate one another, as when the armed forces (a key component of the state) directly wield executive power, or when a one-party regime penetrates key state organizations, or when important state officials are the personal clients of a powerful monarch or dictator, sultanistic or otherwise. In these instances, the fate of both the state and regime tend to become fused…[6]

Although the term "regime" denotes a more permanent political arrangement than a specific government,[7] distinguishing between the two is often difficult. For example, in Syria, one can argue that the political regime and the government – embodied in the authoritarian rule of the Assad dynasty – are interconnected to the extent that the structures put in place by the former, for the purpose of our study, can hardly be conceptually detached from the latter. Though the paper at times utilizes the terms interchangeably, it should be noted that the usage of the term "regime" here has a dual meaning: It refers to the modality of governance, in addition to the ruling governmental elite. To this end, it is also utilized in order to refer to the Assad government's variant of authoritarianism, as no two authoritarian regimes are identical.

This project defines the dependant variable, PGMs, as armed actors, separate from the regular forces within the state's coercive apparatus, that have been mobilized and/or organized into clusters that principally fight on behalf of the state's central government. They are therefore meant to indicate "armed groups linked to the government and separate from the regular forces."[8] While terms such as "paramilitary" and "militia" are more commonly employed, this thesis avoids using them except when the context warrants it, such as when their relationship with the government is ambiguous or when such terms appear in the literature review and in particular discussions in which they are featured within quotes and passages. This is to avoid confusion, as the term "paramilitary" may also imply a category of the armed forces that is "inclusive of regular professional units such as police forces and border guards,"[9] while the term "militia" may refer to any armed group operating within a state – whether aligned or opposed to the ruling government/regime. What matters for the purpose

of this discussion is the presence of armed actors employed within the Syrian COIN campaign are not wholly part of the official state security architecture. They generally tend to operate outside of the formal hierarchical command and control structure central to the institutions of the state yet possess varying degrees of alignment to the armed and security forces. Therefore, this thesis excludes from its investigation a focus on security firms/private military contractors.

At the time of writing, much of the academic literature surrounding the usage of militias, paramilitaries, and PGMs are situated within the intersecting theoretical terrain of COIN, security studies, and civil-military affairs. This thesis thus draws on concepts from these sub-fields – including military organizational studies – in order to develop the framework needed for an articulate and comprehensive thesis. Terms like "rebel," "insurgent," and "militant" will also be used interchangeably and will refer to armed actors with varying levels of organization that principally function in an anti-government capacity. Since this paper excludes actors with a privatized component, these labels allude strictly to anti-government forces waging an insurrection against the ruling order. Relatedly, the terms "civil war," "intrastate conflict," and "insurgency" will be used to denote violent conflict within a state in which an officially recognized government and at least one other armed nonstate actor compete over the state in question.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this thesis consists mainly of process tracing using secondary sources. It incorporates an assortment of qualitative and quantitative secondary data that draws on both academic as well as non-academic resources. These include scholarly peer-reviewed publications, newspaper articles, policy papers, essays, periodicals, books, and documentaries.

To measure regime insecurity, this thesis aims to assess key indicators of the regime, such as military and political cohesion. As these indicators contain an element of subjectivity, they are operationalized quantitatively by examining the condition of their institutional landscape, especially

the state of both the security elite and the armed forces. Defections, desertions, personnel mortality rates, and battlefield performance are examined at key junctures, alongside the status of important elements of the political class. Whenever possible, the integrity of units, brigades, and divisions belonging to the armed and security forces are examined. This is augmented by a measure of territorial control.

Potential Methodological Issues
This thesis recognizes that the research presented here is not without its methodological issues. First, there exists a lack of reliable primary, local sources regarding information on the inner dynamics of the Assad regime. Due to its authoritarian nature, credible and verifiable governmental primary data is generally secretive and is not made public. Owing to the inaccessibility of accurate information produced by official government entities, deciphering the extent to which its military degraded over the course of the conflict draws in part on the research of experts that use an amalgamation of sources – including open-source intelligence – to corroborate their analysis. These assessments of military capacities are based on intelligent estimations from prominent sources. A network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local news outlets, and citizen activists have played a role in contributing to the literature on Syria. Though this thesis reviews a wide array of sources in order to compensate for this potential methodological shortcoming, it cannot definitively rectify these issues.

Second, the conflict in Syria has been subject to politicisation. Washington-based think tanks, Russian and Iranian-funded analysts, and journalists from various media agencies have the tendency to represent the agendas of their sponsors, whether corporate or state-based. Conflicting narratives are often complicated by intellectual factionalism, restrictive editorial lines, and journalistic sensationalism.

Third, given the nature and timeline of the research inquiry, several elements remain open-ended, as the conflict in Syria is ongoing. Impartial academic literature on the events that occurred

post-2011 is in its infancy, while think tank analysis and journalism has saturated the discussion regarding both cases. Accessing concrete and objective information is an ongoing challenge.

Fourth, due to a combination of account suspensions, violations of community protocols, and unstable web links, a virtual library of social media content that once existed on the Syrian conflict is no longer accessible. Hundreds of videos, pictures, and communiques previously viewed by the author have been removed from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram since this researcher set out to explore PGMs. What remains pales in comparison to the once-massive reservoir of content that could be utilized to produce independent analysis free of secondary input.

RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH: WHY STUDY PGMS?

The aftermath of the Cold War brought with it a tectonic shift in political science and international relations scholarship. No longer exclusively fixated on the state as the sole referent object in international relations, the concept of security underwent a broadening beyond the traditional emphasis on superpower politics.[10] Mutually Assured Destruction, alliance structures, the balance of power, and other tenets of the realist school of thought that had once dominated the academy began to make way for a new body of literature that gradually paid as much attention to substate and nonstate actors and dynamics as it did to developments within the global political arena marked primarily by relations between and among states.

Although different varieties of non or 'extrastate' actors have featured in virtually every protracted armed conflict since 1947, it was not until the end of the 1990s that a focus on PGMs began to emerge in the academy.[11] As part of an eruption of literature that focused on the prevalence of the so-called "new wars,"[12] the study of PGMs was part of a wave of scholarly texts that analyzed the role of actors below and beyond the state, such as warlords, criminal enterprises, gangs, police forces, mercenaries, and paramilitaries,[13] the latter term often used interchangeably with PGMs. Present in approximately two-thirds of all "irregular wars" since 1989,[14] the increasing visibility of PGMs in

the aftermath of the Cold War sparked an interest among academics who viewed them as a growing component of the security landscape of intrastate conflicts in the developing world. Though PGMs have, in one form or another, existed since antiquity, their pervasive utilization in recent years has effectively made them an "inextricable part of research on political violence."[15]

However, studying PGMs does more than just contribute to a discussion on political violence. It informs academic and policy conversations on the diverse variants of security relations that may exist between states and armed actors operating within their territory that, at times, fight at their behest. Their tendency to oscillate between state and nonstate realms can be seen as a reflection of a greater academic interest unfolding that looks at 'not-entirely state' and 'not entirely private' policy solutions to common problems.[16] Though conflict provides a useful analytical anchor, a critical dissection of the drivers underpinning the mobilization of these actors helps open up a space for more substantive conversations in the field of critical security.[17] Among other important arenas, this includes pre and post-conflict politics, the different approaches to civil-military affairs that exist across democratic and authoritarian regimes and their various subtypes, and the evolving face of sovereignty in states mired in fragility, instability, and sociopolitical fragmentation. In fractured states across the MENA region, the growing role of PGMs in contributing to hybrid security governance is of particular relevance.[18] It is within this theoretical current that this thesis on the incorporation of Syrian PGMs was conceived. The hope is to attempt to add an additional perspective to the literature on this pertinent and pervasive phenomenon.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION:

This chapter reviews the literature on PGMs. It provides an overview of PGM typologies, then proceeds to discuss the various incentives driving governments to resort to their mobilization. Their utility as agents of clandestine repression and their value as security force multipliers respectively enable insecure governments to exercise deniability and fill a void caused by their dwindling coercive capabilities, specifically their loss of manpower. Moreover, their ability to deliver local knowledge can strengthen a military's COIN operations by providing valuable insights on insurgent movements while their co-optation alongside regular forces as semi-official personnel creates an aura of legitimacy for governments struggling to repel both armed and ideational challenges to their rule. Using state weakness as a conceptual transition, this chapter examines the link between PGMs and civil-military affairs. Concepts such as the "civil-military problematique" and the "guardian dilemma" are introduced in order develop a theoretical framework that explores the causal relationship between authoritarian regimes, military effectiveness, and PGMs, thereby engaging with the literature to construct a broader analytical framework regarding one specific aspect of the context in which these armed actors form. This chapter concludes by introducing the concept of coup-proofing, laying the groundwork for the next chapter's exploration.

PGMS, ARMED CONFLICT, AND THE STATE

PGMs

Though they vary in terms of purpose, structure, membership, and mandate, the prominence of PGMs in conflict settings has received much attention. In this regard, understanding their levels of affiliation with their central governments, while varying across security contexts and PGM typologies, helps illuminate the patterns of relations they tend to share with their host states. It also characterizes the policy challenges encountered by states in their utilization of PGMs during armed conflict, and significantly, in its aftermath.

Broadly speaking, the study of PGMs has generally come from two fields of research, the first of which is through the lens of COIN and/or irregular warfare, and the second of which focuses on explaining the brutality associated with these actors.[19] Though the groups often overlap, the first subset of scholars primarily aims to assess the logistical and operational advantages of mobilizing PGMs throughout conflict settings, while the second seeks to provide explanations regarding why these armed clusters seem so inherently prone to human rights abuses.[20] Both camps nevertheless outline the rationale driving governments to utilize PGMs as well as the issues that arise in doing so. Rather than examine them as distinct categories, the following section highlights the common themes that pervade the literature in order to shed light on the incentives that drive governments to outsource repressive processes to PGMs.

PGM Typologies
There are several typologies of PGMs, ranging from "death squads" to "auxiliary" forces. Such labels seek to capture the type of mobilization by referencing its core functional and organizational dynamics. For example, 'self-defence' groups and civilian guards, commonly cited in the literature as civil/civilian defence forces (CDF)[21] or local defence forces (LDF),[22] suggest arrangements in which collective or group security constitutes a focal point for these mobilizations. These categories generally refer to armed groups that recruit civilians or former rebel combatants, operate locally, and are ostensibly intended to be defensive rather offensive.[23]

However, definitions regarding these coercive mobilizations have been a matter of taxonomical contention. Goron Peic, for example, goes beyond these variables to assert that CDFs must also include a condition based on ethnic composition, insisting that their membership should be drawn from the same ethnic group as the rebels.[24] Moritz Schuberth, however, collectively refers to all such locally-operated militias as "community-based armed groups," or CBAGs.[25] According to Shchuberth, the boundaries of the community can be defined in terms that are linked to territory,

blood ties, and identity.[26] Though they may be "hired by national political actors in order to defend or topple a regime," he reasons, "the community that serves as [a] referent object for CBAGs is by definition incongruent with the nation state. Rather, the community is a localized subunit of the nation; in some cases, it transcends state boundaries."[27]

Significantly, by asserting that the ontology of CBAGs inherently puts them at odds with the state, the alignment of such actors with governments therefore represents a secondary focus overshadowed by their communal outlook and orientation. This conceptualization denotes a condition of impermanence among PGMs that operate locally, suggesting that their co-optation by governments represents a temporary arrangement. The allusion to the impermanence of the relationship between governments, PGMs, and the state is captured by Corinna Jentzsch et al, who define militias as armed groups that are "often controlled or co-opted by government representatives," but whose loyalties and agendas may shift to become incompatible with the interests of the state.[28] To them, the critical component pervading PGMs is their "anti-rebel dimension."[29]

Other typologies, such as "death squads"[30] and "vigilantes,"[31] while important, are more prone to politicization, particularly owing to their normative undertones. For example, though the term vigilante can refer to any armed group operating extra-judicially,[32] Schuberth contends that they are often explored through the framework of state failure, whereas militias explicitly linked to the government usually arise within the context of "new wars" and "new barbarism," and "tend to be investigated through the lens of patronage and clientelism."[33] However, as Julie Mazzei points out, "self defense group and death squad are [often] rhetorical devices used by the organizations to insinuate virtuosity and legitimacy."[34] Thus, when subjected to politicization within the academy, even if unconscious, these terms have the tendency to obscure, as opposed to enrich, our understanding of the topic. While there indeed exists a proclivity to use certain categories of PGMs

as death squads, absent an elaborate conceptual explanation, the label itself does not sufficiently encapsulate the dynamics of such groups.

Though the conceptual demarcation between various militia subtypes is subjective, they nevertheless provide instructive categories for analytical exploration. Sabine Carey et al, who developed the first comprehensive dataset on PGMs,[35] constructed useful taxonomies to capture these armed groups. After collecting data on 332 PGMs that existed between 1981 and 2007, they define them as actors that are armed, fight in a pro-government capacity (either nationally or subnationally), are identified as being separate from the regular security forces, and possess some basic level of organization.[36] Moreover, Carey et al fundamentally differentiate between two categories of PGMs: "informal" and "semi-official." According to them:

> Informal PGMs are armed, supported by or act on the side of the government and are described as progovernment, government militia, linked to the government, government-backed, or government-allied. Examples include the Young Patriots in Cote d'Ivoire, the Ansar-e Hezbollah in Iran, and the Interahamwe Militia in Rwanda during the early 1990s. 'Death squads', even when closely linked to the government, are normally informal and clandestine, and are categorized as informal PGMs. A semi-official PGM has a recognized legal or semi-official status, in contrast to the looser affiliation of informal PGMs. A semi-official PGM is separate from the regular forces and identified as a distinct organization. Examples of semi-official PGMs include Village Defence Committees in India, the Revolutionary Committees in Libya under Gaddafi, and the Rondas Campesinas in Peru.[37]

Here, the application of the term "death squads" avoids normativity and is instead situated within a broader definitional framework that focuses on the linkages between this PGM category and the government with which it is affiliated. Informal PGMs generally represent situations in which a government tries to establish distance between its political representatives and the groups to which it outsources repression. Due to their covert nature, informal PGMs are far less institutionalized into the state's apparatus.[38] In contrast, semi-official PGMs are commonly trained, equipped, and paid openly, and tend to receive regular compensation. Because semi-official PGMs usually operate publicly, they often attract the labels "auxiliaries," "paramilitary forces," and "state-aligned

vigilantes."[39] Here, the term "state-aligned vigilantes," by using the mobilization's relationship with the state as a conceptual focal point, provides an instructive definitional category as well.

In a subsequent study, Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell[40] survey the literature in order to expand on this typology. To them, PGMs have two crucial elements – links to government and links to society – the degree to which these connections crystalize vary across context and PGM subtype. The first element is separated into the informal and semi-official PGM conceptualizations mentioned above, while the second can be broken down into two further classifications, defined by whether or not these groups recruit and operate locally.[41] According to them, membership characteristics in these formations can be driven by a number of factors and are often facilitated by ideological, religious, and ethnic divisions.[42] Moreover, tribal, ethnosectarian, and partisan cleavages may further induce recruitment in what they classify as "civilian mobilizations." "Non-civilian mobilizations," by contrast, usually include off-duty police or military personnel, former members of the state's coercive apparatus, as well as forces acting in a mercenary capacity.[43] However, the authors note that sometimes these labels can converge and reinforce one another.

Huseyn Aliyev offers a slightly different conceptualization for PGMs. Building on their work, he distinguishes between what he calls "state-manipulated" militias characteristic of the Cold War and "state-parallel" militias, which represent an increasingly widespread phenomenon.[44] According to Aliyev:

> [T]he plurality of paramilitary organizations in recent history falls into two generic yet inherently distinct categories of 'state-manipulated' and 'state-parallel' paramilitaries. The former includes the majority of the typical self-defence units, death squads and pro-regime 'enforcers' that dominated civil wars and irregular conflicts from the start of the Cold War era until the late 1990s. The latter…are more widespread and influential today. These groups include, but are not limited to, popular mobilization forces, offensive substate counterinsurgents, and tribal or traditional militias.[45]

Citing the robust role the Popular Mobilization Forces played in fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq, he argues that a qualitative difference exists between the two PGM categories, as state-parallel militias' "superiority—either military or structural—over conventional armed forces, their financial and structural independence from the host regime, and their indispensability for the survival of the state elevate these groups to a position parallel to that of the state and place them beyond the state's control."[46] Therefore, as opposed to being utterly reliant on their host governments, the horizontal power configuration of these actors makes the government dependent on them for survival when faced with armed rebellions that challenge their authority.

However, state-PGM relations are dynamic and subject to ongoing change, as militia subtypes can transform and evolve depending on the context.[47] This is particularly because they generally exist in fragile settings marked by conflict and post-conflict security climates. As such, they occupy a wider spectrum of relationships than is commonly perceived. Using this typology, formations that act as state-manipulated PGMs at one point in time may garner enough power and resources to effectively become ones that rival the state. Similarly, groups that operate as state-parallel militias may, for any number of reasons, be relegated to become dependent on the government. This same logic applies to informal and semi-official PGMs.

While these classifications contain important differences, it is best to think of PGM configurations as fluid. The balance of power between the two entities can shift based on any number of factors internally and externally, including the duration of war, the level of strength of the central government, and the degree to which PGMs are able to accrue financial support from private patrons, outside states, and illicit operations – such as smuggling, racketeering, kidnapping, and extortion. For example, in 2011, prior to their broad mobilization into the National Defence Forces (NDF) and other PGMs, the *shabiha* of Syria strictly acted as shadowy, state-manipulated or informal government-backed mobilizations, representing an arrangement in which these armed clusters executed operations

outsourced to them by the Assad regime.[48] However, as the conflict became protracted, the *shabiha* were significantly empowered by their nominal integration into such structures, utilizing their membership to pursue a culture of warlordism – a condition in which armed actors exercise local and/or regional control over both political and coercive power – while the regime's grip on power grew increasingly tenuous.

Given their fluidity, it is best to examine PGMs in relation to the strategies adopted by states in dealing with them. Paul Staniland[49] agrees that government-PGM relations are much more diverse than what the conventional wisdom suggests, yet he argues that regime ideology shapes how governments perceive and deal with militias operating on their territory. According to Staniland, militias can be "violently targeted by regimes, absorbed into the state apparatus, or contained as a low level but endemic challenge. They are not intrinsically subservient junior partners of governments."[50] Accordingly, he outlines four main strategies that states can pursue in relation to militias: suppression, incorporation, containment, and collusion, the latter described as "a strategy of active, sustained cooperation between a state and an organized armed actor, ranging from explicitly holding back police and military action against armed actors to actively providing guns, logistics, and training to them."[51] For the purpose of this chapter, collusion represents the most important strategy. The following section examines the incentives driving the usage of PGMs.

Literature on Incentives to Use PGMs

There exists an emerging mass of literature that attempts to make sense of the usage of PGMs during armed conflict. What accounts for their pervasiveness in wartime? Specifically, what incentivizes governments to mobilize PGMs? What type of benefits does their deployment yield? When does this option become attractive? What can they teach us about the application of such irregular forces?

In a study conducted by Peic,[52] he found that governments that did not have links to militias at the outset of a conflict did so by the end, with relations developing on average four years in.

Analyzing two cross-national datasets of insurgencies that occurred between 1944 and 2006, he concludes that a state is 53% more likely to eviscerate the threat emanating from insurgents through the deployment of CDFs as an instrument of COIN strategy. Given that this finding represents a view often alluded to in the literature, it is worth examining why. Why do PGMs help governments produce victorious outcomes against anti-government forces? What role do they play in doing so?

The four main benefits associated with PGMs relate to their deployment as force multipliers, their capacity to act as a source of local or indigenous knowledge, their utility as agents of repression for which the state can claim plausible deniability, and their ability to help governments maintain legitimacy.[53] These will be examined in order.

Force Multipliers
First, PGMs often serve as force multipliers. Also referred to as "auxiliary forces,"[54] the role they play as augmenters of coercion gives emaciated militaries a much-needed boost to their capacity to engage in armed combat. Their ability to buttress governments struggling to put down civil unrest or crush insurgencies provides desperate and insecure rulers with a tool to amplify their military capabilities against unconventional adversaries. This helps them continue battling during COIN campaigns or civil wars in which the regular forces are exhausted, demoralized, and depleted due to the duress suffered under conflict. The particularly gruelling nature of intrastate conflict makes this process all the more likely.

The fact that PGM mobilization occurs on average four years into a conflict suggests that conflict must endure long enough or be impactful enough to motivate governments to seek exogenous security support from such actors. It also indicates that the incorporation of PGMs (particularly semi-official PGMs) into a government's COIN campaign commonly occurs out of necessity, resulting from the attrition of official forces and the inability to decisively obtain victory over insurgent

combatants. In this regard, PGMs provide an attractive solution for governments seeking to fill a void left by the diminution of regular personnel.

The utilization of irregular forces that are cheap and expendable can deliver a quantitative advantage to militaries suffering from impeded operational capacities due to defections, desertions, and death.[55] This permits the regular forces to pursue offensive operations against insurgents while PGMs, in principle, secure territory.[56] For example, the delegation of policing functions to PGMs makes possible their incorporation into localized security arrangements, thereby relinquishing the need for official units, which can instead be deployed to strategic battlefronts. Administering community watches and patrols, as well as operating checkpoints and outposts within neighbourhoods/villages and along key roads, all contribute to augmenting the overall security efforts of the state.[57] Beyond their intended defensive role, however, they are often used in an offensive capacity to substitute for eroding military capabilities among conventional forces, whose numbers relative to rebel mobilizations may not permit them to advance and recapture land, let alone consolidate control. As we will see in Chapter 4, PGMs in Syria, beyond defensive operations, were dispatched in an offensive capacity to retake territory from armed militants.

Local Knowledge
Second, PGMs can provide local, specialized knowledge. This is generally the case with formations that rely on local recruits and operate in areas within which they possess intimate ties, such as LDFs and other community-based militias, including former rebels. The specialized knowledge which is derived from the diversification of forces and integration of local insights is an invaluable tool in routing out insurgents. Since the insurgents' "ability to hide in plain sight is a critical subelement in the competition for security,"[58] the proper identification of anti-government combatants and their extended infrastructure is arguably the most foundational component of any successful COIN strategy.[59] Therefore, acquiring accurate, on-the-ground intel is often key to orchestrating operations

against rebels and other insurrectionists. Here, the ability of PGMs to function as auxiliary sources of intelligence helps optimize the allocation of government resources, which also tend to dissolve as the conflict protracts.

While local collaborators can assist insurgents, they can also aid government forces. The insights of LDFs and their extended networks, which also include civilian supporters, can often be channelled to strike at targets that are key to sustaining insurgent capabilities.[60] For example, during the 2003 Iraq War, one of the greatest obstacles faced by Coalition and Iraqi forces was their inability to identify the insurgents in what later became known as the "Sunni Insurgency."[61] This dilemma was overcome only after the U.S. Army partnered with the *Sahwa*/Sons of Iraq (SOI) – local tribal militias consisting primarily of disgruntled Sunni Muslims who had previously joined the insurgency – which then provided American soldiers with valuable intelligence regarding the composition and location of cells belonging to Al-Qaeda in Iraq.[62] The provision of local intelligence is especially crucial when the areas are of considerable strategic value or when the governments battling insurgents wish to minimize civilian casualties, otherwise known as "collateral damage."

Additionally, such intelligence can help governments, should they choose, utilize tactics associated with the "hearts-and-minds" COIN doctrine[63] in order to either regain or maintain the loyalty of populations once under the control of insurgents, or ones potentially receptive to their message. For example, the previously mentioned partnership between the SOI and American forces in Iraq was credited with almost completely defeating AQI by 2010. The drastic reduction in casualties for both militaries in part stemmed from the co-option of the SOI, which helped Americans build bridges with Iraq's disenfranchised Sunni communities. This was partially the result of the implementation of what then-General Petraeus, who oversaw the program, called a "surge of ideas," which above all stressed the "the explicit recognition that the most important terrain in the campaign in Iraq was the human terrain."[64]

Deniability

Third, PGMs deliver an element of deniability. In civil wars, shadowy informal PGMs to which coercion is outsourced are often used so that governments can commit atrocities while distancing themselves from such acts. Here, the application of severe violence serves two primary purposes under the umbrella of deniability. First, it enables rulers to send a strong – albeit tacit – message to rebels and segments of the population with whom they are viewed sympathetically. Second, it removes constraints associated with the use of force by permitting governments to exercise brutal and indiscriminate repression in order to more efficiently put down rebellions with little-to-no regard for the civilian populations. The clout provided by the aura of deniability, governments often reason, makes possible the use of extreme volumes of force while evading culpability in the eyes of loyalist segments of their population in addition to external states.[65]

As Ariel Ahram point outs, deniability as an incentive is most often associated with low-capacity autocracies and weak democracies who are the recipients of foreign aid.[66] According to Ahram, the usage of shadowy, informal PGMs by rulers represents "the enactment of distinctive repertoires of violence" that occur between state and nonstate "specialists" in violence, with the efficiency and effectiveness of covertly deploying the former facilitating what he describes as "state-organized crime."[67] While Carey et al find this correlation to be highest among weak democratic regimes, whose reliance on such aid makes them particularly likely to embrace informal ties to militias, they nevertheless agree regarding the desire to avoid culpability, arguing that PGM deployment should be viewed as a "deliberate government strategy to avoid accountability."[68]

The calculus at the core of the decision to use PGMs here is to maintain, at the very least, a veneer of innocence as not to jeopardize forfeiting financial assistance. While the foreign governments from which they receive support may view human suffering as inconsequential, they often seek to avoid being perceived as associated or implicated in atrocities committed by

governments with which they openly enjoy good relations. One study even found the presence of PGMs to be a reliable predictive indicator of state-led mass killing, helping governments that face internal threats "tip the balance" by lowering the cost of repression.[69] This is because they can be utilized as death squads, whose primary "job" is to commit extra-judicial murder.[70] Since PGMs are generally dispatched as governmental proxy forces, the covert subcontracting of the state's monopoly of coercion to these actors fits within a rational choice model in which the state seeks exogenous support when needed.[71] Central to deniability, paradoxically, is the desire to conduct repression with impunity.

Legitimacy

The fourth primary utility of PGMs is that they permit the ruling government to maintain legitimacy.[72] This builds on both their deployment as force augmenters and their role in upholding the veneer of deniability. With regards to the latter, the government's ability to distance itself from criminality organized at its behest is critical for maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the general populace. Although elements of the populace that are recipients of repression committed by informal PGMs are often cognizant of government culpability, the ability of governments to conceal their role in this process to the majority of the population helps them retain support when faced with challenges to their rule.

Here, the type of PGM used is particularly important. Broadly, the incorporation of informal PGMs with clandestine links to the government sustains the element of deniability as a source of legitimation. With regards to the role that semi-official PGMs play as force augmenters, however, legitimacy is derived from the government's ability to claim to assert territorial control in formal partnership with these actors. Particularly in revolutionary conflict, where the legitimacy of the government and the very nature of the state becomes a matter of ideological contestation due to competing claims to sovereign rule (reinforced by the significant coercive capacity of rival actors),[73]

the presence of PGMs can serve as a propaganda boost by reminding civilians of the reach of state authority – even if that authority is embodied in armed actors that commonly operate outside of officially established chains of command. This is especially true when the PGMs tasked with administering security governance begin as variants of LDFs that develop organically in response to security concerns and are later mobilized by the government into robust national PGMs with a certain degree of legal recognition.

Depending on the mandate, conduct, and type of PGM, this can help the government maintain an image of normalcy. By stating that these armed actors, once 'professionalized,' are operating under its auspices, governments can claim that they are winning the war, repelling insurgents, and re-establishing law and order. The reassertion of territorial control and the optics surrounding the reestablishment of 'orderly' social, political, and security relations helps ultimately denote the functional value of PGMs as governmental purveyors. Beyond allowing governments to militarily capitalize on PGM outposts, it serves as a reminder that the state is present.

STATE WEAKNESS: CAUSE OR CONSEQUENCE?

The question regarding the causal relationship between PGMs and the state is a contentious one that gives rise to several perspectives. Some scholars point to state weakness as one such determinant, claiming that weak states tend to have a greater reliance on these actors.[74] Aliyev, for example, claims that two conditions must exist for PGMs to be present. The first, which he considers "an essential precondition," is state weakness while the second is armed conflict.[75] Similarly, Ahram makes seven conclusions regarding PGMs, but asserts that above all, "low state capacity is singularly correlated with the appearance and activity of all forms of PGMs."[76] Michael Klare, however, argues that when a state is *already* in decline, PGMs expedite the process of state failure by making its downfall irreversible.[77] Robert Bates contends that militias, specifically those that emerge when rival politicians create 'private' armies, point to one of the variables that evidences state failure.[78] He

examines them as part of a trajectory characterized by a situation in which rulers employ their coercive mechanisms not for the purpose of protecting wealth, but for preying on it.[79]

Such analyses, in one way or another, view the prevalence of PGMs in terms of the degree to which a state is considered weak,[80] and therefore, vulnerable to nonstate challengers. While the conventional bifurcation between "strong" and "weak" states is a matter of theoretical and definitional debate, understanding the principal differences between states classified as strong or weak is helpful for our discussion. Instead of viewing states as operating strictly in a dichotomous fashion, Robert Rotberg[81] argues that weak states exist along a broad continuum. Nevertheless, he conceptualizes the core attributes associated with weak states within the literature. According to Rotberg:

> Weak states include a broad continuum of states that are: inherently weak because of geographical, physical, or fundamental economic constraints; basically strong, but temporarily or situationally weak because of internal antagonisms, management flaws, greed, despotism, or external attacks; and a mixture of the two. Weak states typically harbor ethnic, religious, linguistic, or other intercommunal tensions that have not yet, or not yet thoroughly, become overtly violent. Urban crime rates tend to be higher and increasing. In weak states, the ability to provide adequate measures of other political goods is diminished or diminishing. Physical infrastructural networks have deteriorated. Schools and hospitals show signs of neglect, particularly outside the main cities. GDP per capita and other critical economic indicators have fallen or are falling, sometimes dramatically; levels of venal corruption are embarrassingly high and escalating. Weak states usually honor rule of law precepts in the breach. They harass civil society. Weak states are often ruled by despots, elected or not.[82]

To be sure, a state need not possess every attribute in the passage above to qualify as weak. That said, Rotberg's characterization aptly highlights the most common trends among weak states.

With regards to PGMs, however, the emphasis on state capacity often blurs the line between cause and consequence. Indeed, to argue that weak state capacity is both a cause and consequence of the emergence of PGMs creates a causal sequence in which the actions of the government, propelled by its inherent weakness, entail the outsourcing of coercive authority to armed actors which then have the power to rival the state altogether, ultimately weakening it. While this causal sequence –

specifically, the sequential process underpinning the decentralization of state power – warrants greater theoretical extrapolation, it is outside of the scope of this thesis. Thus, instead of engaging in a discussion in which state weakness is both a cause and a consequence of PGM formation, the following section focuses on one constant that can concretely be applied[83] to both cases under examination in this thesis in a manner that provides a clear theoretical delineation. Here, the point is to critically engage with an explanation that directly accounts for why PGMs in the Syrian context were utilized to begin with. Why did Syria's coercive forces under Assad erode against insurgents that were qualitatively and quantitatively inferior? Why did the regime view PGM formation as necessary? In order to answer these questions, we must address the final sentence of Rotberg's passage, namely that weak states are often ruled by despots.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND MILITARY PERFORMANCE

Scholars of civil-military relations have written extensively on patterns underlining how the armed and security forces of the state intersect with both its political institutions and society at large.[84] At its core, the field is propelled by the attempt to theorize how coercive and non-coercive realms of the state co-exist, including questions regarding who controls the military and how, in addition to prescriptions that aim to ascertain its appropriate role in the polity.[85] Said differently, the interaction between the repressive apparatus and the polity is driven by an effort to understand and, arguably, resolve what Peter Feaver calls the "civil-military problematique."[86] According to Feaver:

> The civil-military challenge is to reconcile a military strong enough to do anything the civilians ask them to with a military subordinate enough to do only what civilians authorize them to do. This is a special case of the general problem of political agency: how do you ensure that your agent is doing your will, especially when your agent has guns and so may enjoy more coercive power than you do?

The paradoxical predicament outlined by Feaver is at the heart of the field. Also referred to as the "guardianship dilemma," this "existential imperative gives rise to one of the oldest dilemmas of governing, for a guardian strong enough to protect the government is also strong enough to impose

its own preferences on the polity."[87] According to Blake McMahon and Branislav Slantchev, a government has two fundamental policy avenues at its disposal for responding to this predicament: it "either creates the forces it needs and takes its chances that they may turn on it or avoids that danger altogether by leaving itself exposed to the other threats."[88]

In a sense, all civil-military configurations are an attempt to rectify this dilemma and develop pathways for optimizing the relationship between governments and their security forces. The policies adopted by governments impact national security due to their role in dictating the strategic assessments of the people in charge.[89] However, democratic and authoritarian regimes tend to have different priorities, and thus, divergent approaches.[90]

In democratic regimes, an emphasis on safeguarding the state – i.e., "national security" – reinforced by structural and constitutional checks and balances, principally drives all considerations. This broadly results in more coherent military and security institutions, leading to higher performance on the battlefield. In the first significant study of its kind, Allan Stam and Dan Reiter examine why democracies enjoy a proclivity towards victory during wartime.[91] Aside from the tendency among democratic regimes to be more selective in the conflicts they wage, Stam and Reiter contend that higher operational capacity within their armed forces stems from the more efficient allocation of assets, but also because promotions are more likely to be based on merit. As a result, democratic military institutions tend to enjoy leadership that is less politicized and troop morale that is generally higher.[92] In light of their emphasis on performance – not politics – officers who preside over positions of authority are expected, in principle, to have proven capabilities that are empirically corroborated by extensive track records. While it is difficult to avoid politicization in its entirety, accountability, transparency, and openness to criticism in democratic military structures foster institutional cultures in which improvement on the battlefield is an ongoing pursuit, thereby facilitating constant evolution

and reform. Though not without their defects, the same underlying logic is presumed to apply to the security agencies.

In contrast, in authoritarian regimes, rulers prioritize their own personal security over that of the state. As such, they are more likely to view the armed and security forces with suspicion. Their response to the civil-military problematique and the guardianship dilemma is therefore to commonly engage in a practice known as "coup-proofing," which refers to an aggregation of strategies, tactics, and mechanisms that function to prevent the threat of mutiny that may emanate from the security forces.[93] While varying across authoritarian subtypes, the general ontology is driven by the desire to counterbalance security forces against one another. This process of counterbalancing is particularly associated with personalist authoritarian structures defined by weak formal institutions (as well as pervasive informal linkages to the ruler), narrow support bases, and a lack of unifying ideologies.[94] As opposed to democracies, which view coup-proofing as less necessary and less effective,[95] the strategic assessments in dictatorships prioritize promoting the concerns of the ruler – chief among them, the fixation on indefinitely prolonging their grip on power – over the cultivation of strong and effective militaries.

While instituting coup-proofing mechanisms may protect autocratic rulers from being deposed by the armed forces, it also severely weakens the strength and resilience of their coercive institutions. This is not simply because coup-proofing prioritizes the preservation of the ruler ahead of the integrity of the armed and security forces – and by extension, the state – but because it does so *at their expense*. Time and effort are allocated away from fostering professionalism and towards composing an institutional apparatus that rewards loyalty and divides the security infrastructure as to render it incapable of meaningfully challenging the head of state. Here, counterbalancing serves to structurally neutralize the capacity of the armed forces to formulate a united bloc capable of dethroning the ruler.[96] In essence, however, this denotes the politicization and subordination of the

armed forces in a manner that hinders their ability to coherently and independently function. Since this deliberate process leads to a lack of cohesiveness within their institutions, they consistently under-perform during armed conflict.[97] One large-N study analyzing the link between coup-proofing and military performance in interstate wars empirically demonstrates how the former negatively impacts the latter.[98] Citing coup-proofing's adverse effect on military leadership qualities, initiative, and coordination, the authors state that "the higher a country's coup-proofing efforts relative to its opponent, the worse its effectiveness on the battlefield."[99]

Therefore, coup-proofing often plays a role in contributing to the "militiafication"[100] of the armed forces during conflict. This is particularly likely to occur in intrastate conflict marked by gruelling levels of attrition, especially when such conflicts contain ethnic, sectarian, and/or tribal dimensions or when the militaries and security agencies are dominated by one particular ethnoconfessional component of society,[101] as is common across states in the MENA region containing heterogenous societies. Said differently, "the tendency of some Middle Eastern states (notably Syria and Iraq) to 'coup-proof' their militaries render them even more dependent on militias when faced with sustained internal revolt, as their regular armed forces collapse under the stress of combat. In this respect, there is a direct link between 'coup-proofing,' dependence on irregular auxiliaries in civil war, and the erosion of the state's integrity."[102] Since the attributes needed to combat armed actors opposing the government – leadership, morale, transparency, cohesiveness, ideological unity – are absent due to coup-proofing, militaries often erode fairly quickly. The next chapter examines the coup-proofing variant utilized by Assad, illustrating how it ultimately laid the groundwork for his reliance on PGMs to substitute for the loss of personnel and the erosion of the command structures of the army.

CHAPTER 3 - COUP-PROOFING UNDER ASSAD

INTRODUCTION:

This chapter introduces a general framework for coup-proofing in the Middle East. It then examines the coup-proofing variant utilized by the Assad regime, highlighting how it deliberately undermined the cohesiveness of its coercive forces in order to insulate the head of state from the prospect of violent overthrow through a palace coup. The construction of multiple chains of command and the development of elite units that operated as parallel militaries fomented a deeply dysfunctional armiy. Moreover, the production of a plurality of rival intelligence agencies that were tasked with spying on the populace, the armed forces, and on one another, meant that these institutions were designed overwhelmingly to preserve the presidency. The appointment of 'trusted' elements of society based not on merit but on perceptions of loyalty sectarianized these institutions by drawing heavily on Assad's own ethnoconfessional community – the Alawites. This created a class of officers drawn to these positions because of the material privileges they entailed as a reward for their loyalty, resulting in systemic levels of corruption. Overall, his regime's coup-proofing practices impeded the ability of the military to function, exacerbated sectarian divisions within society, and ultimately set the stage for a destructive feedback loop in which the military-security elite turned to PGMs in order to substitute for the loss of their personnel and rapid erosion of the command structures of the armed forces.

COUP-PROOFING IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

Coup d'états have featured heavily in the contemporary Middle East. In the region's Arab states alone, for example, fifty-five coups were attempted between 1949 and 1980, half of which were successful.[103] Acutely conscious of the region's post-colonial legacy of mutinies, coup-proofing became viewed by Middle Eastern despots as a means to insulate themselves from the likelihood of violent deposition orchestrated by their coercive forces.

In a seminal book on the practice, titled *Coup d'etat: A Practical Handbook*,[104] Edward Luttwak catalogued a number of practices pertaining to modern coups. Iraq and Syria feature in his book as being among the most likely states to succumb to a coup not just regionally, but globally.[105] In fact, prior to the ascension of Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein, Syria is believed to have witnessed as many as 20 coup attempts,[106] seven of which were successful, while Iraq underwent six coups. In 1936, the latter experienced the first coup in the modern Arab world.[107]

Coup-proofing, much like the name implies, refers to the "set of actions a regime takes to prevent a military coup," the essence of which is "the creation of structures that minimize the possibilities of small groups leveraging the system to such ends."[108] Though the models of coup-proofing vary from one case to another, three elements are particularly common in the Middle East: counterbalancing, the provision of material incentives to maintain the allegiance of the officer class, and the exploitation of communities considered 'trustworthy' – generally those from which the ruler hails. In possibly the first comprehensive paper on the topic written in the post-Cold War era, James Quinlivan[109] identifies five main strategies utilized in coup-proofing by Middle Eastern dictatorships, three of which are pertinent to our discussion: first, the exploitation and manipulation of family, ethnic, and religious loyalties; second, the establishment of an armed security force that runs parallel to the military; and third, "the development of multiple internal security agencies with overlapping jurisdiction that constantly monitor the loyalty of the military and one another with independent paths of communication to critical leaders."[110] The development of parallel elite units, which function as "praetorian guards," are utilized as a "counterweight [to] the regular armed forces—forces that can be used against the regime in a coup," and are usually "bound to the regime through special loyalties and social relationships."[111]

For example, both Saddam and Hafez presided over regimes that officially espoused Ba'athism, a romanticized ideological offshoot of Arab Nationalism centered on a syncretic mix of

socialism, Pan-Arabism, and secularism. Yet despite Ba'athism's emphasis on secularism and rejection of sectarian and tribal identifiers, both rulers nevertheless depended heavily on the exploitation of these communal cleavages, staffing their respective security elites largely with elements drawn from their own familial, ethnoconfessional, and tribal constituents. This tendency was so pervasive that it has become a cliché to refer to the Iraqi regime constructed under Saddam as "Tikriti" and the Syrian regime developed under Hafez as "Alawite" – the former based on Saddam's hometown and the latter in reference to the minority religious denomination from which Hafez hailed.[112] Therefore, while perceptions of communal loyalty do indeed matter, they are less indicative of an attempt to elevate the status of any particular religious, ethnic, or tribal group *per se*. Rather, they are best thought of as self-interested tactics implemented by authoritarian rulers to bind certain groups, especially those from which they hail, to their rule.

This process is intended to induce mass buy-in for these communities, which then come to form the spinal cord of the coercive apparatus, the aim of which is to deter their potential rebelliousness by raising the stakes for defection.[113] Beyond simply preventing coups, such strategies tie the state's security infrastructure to the regime in a manner that makes them mutually dependent on one another, particularly in systems in which "patrimonial linkages between the regime and coercive apparatus further enmesh the two."[114] This is especially true when the community associated with regime constitutes a minority, adheres to a collective narrative of historical persecution, or exists in a setting in which contestation for the state foments distrust and violence between its members and their ethnoconfessional counterparts.

COUP-PROOFING IN ASSAD'S SYRIA
Historic Precursors: Minority Insecurity and the Rise of the Alawites
In the period immediately preceding its independence, Syria was ruled by France as part of the Mandate system. This lasted formally between 1923-1943. During this time, the French instituted a

series of policies that resulted in lasting social and political consequences. Among such policies, they sought to effectuate the enlistment of large numbers of minorities into the military.[115] In particular, Syria's Alawites, an offshoot of Shia Islam with a heterodox character, were encouraged partially for what French colonial advisors perceived as their supposed "war-like" character and receptiveness to non-Islamic rule.[116] They were also viewed as potentially more loyal than their Sunni counterparts, particularly the urban elite, which maintained historic ties with Turkey in part due to their collaboration in governing under Ottoman rule.[117] Many of the Alawites, who resided primarily in the mountains adjacent to Syria's Mediterranean coast, benefitted from this arrangement, as it granted them the possibility of utilizing military recruitment as a vehicle for attaining upward social mobility. This represented one of the few available options for escaping the abject poverty present in their rural communities, which had stemmed in large part from a history of persecution and subordination under 'Sunni' majoritarian governance.[118]

As the Mandate system came to a close, many of Syria's religious minorities, key among them the Alawites, began to rally under the banner of Arab Nationalism. The gravitation towards this ideology, which at its core is secular, was envisaged by politically conscious elements of the community as a path towards the development of an inclusive society in which they could attain a degree of security from alternative ideological currents that placed a heavier emphasis on Islam as a source of identity.[119] This dynamic gained momentum in post-independence Syria, and against this backdrop, minorities in general – and Alawites in particular – continued to disproportionately enlist in the military as a means of social advancement. Some also pursued careers in the intelligence agencies, which were originally modelled after the French Deuxième Bureau.[120] The newly formed coercive institutions of the state became an important post-colonial destination for employment among members of the community. For example, by 1955, the Alawites, who constituted between 10-12% of the state's demographic composition, made up 65% of non-commissioned officers – a

disproportionate balance that remained a major legacy of the French period.[121] With a history "[a]s a degraded minority, the Alawis saw the military as the only professional arena into which they could penetrate."[122] In part due to the desire to ensure that their rights as citizens would be protected, many of these officers eventually leaned towards Ba'athism, which in the 1960s had gained popularity amongst the country's minority sects. Its promise of achieving social progress, along with its promotion of secular principles, made it particularly attractive to the Alawites, as it underlined a sense of identity that superseded ethnosectarian and tribal affiliations.[123] It is within this context that Hafez came to power in 1970.[124]

Hafez' Meticulous Coup-Proofing Apparatus
In 1970, after years of careful plotting, Hafez launched a coup that resulted in his capture of the state. Dubbed the "Corrective Movement" by Hafez and his followers,[125] the putsch culminated in the overthrow of fellow Alawite officer Salah Jadid, who was the last remaining member of the five-person Ba'athist military junta that had effectively ruled Syria behind the scenes from 1963 to 1970.[126] Hafez, who had been a member of the secret committee until his falling with Jadid, ousted the officer and purged his faction's known supporters from the institutions of the state. He then utilized his unrivalled authority to launch a set of crackdowns and 'reforms' that were instrumental in his consolidation of power.[127] Having installed himself through a military coup, Hafez and his officers, many of whom were Alawite, became part of a regime that presided over a society in which their authority was widely viewed as illegitimate. Since opposition to the new regime existed across Syria's political, social, and ethnoconfessional landscape (including from among his co-religionists, many of whom supported the Jadidist left-wing faction of the Ba'ath),[128] the authoritarian ruler devised and implemented a system of coup-proofing methods that sought to keep him in power indefinitely. These methods relied heavily on balancing religious communities against one another in

a security apparatus designed overwhelmingly to insulate the head of the regime – Hafez – from being overthrown.

Leveraging Communal Insecurity: A Calculated Balancing Act

The Assad regime under Hafez drew on a comprehensive system of coup-proofing mechanisms. While the regime's claim to be serving a Ba'athist doctrine and acting on behalf of "the Party" gave it the appearance of secularism (indeed, the Syrian constitution did not discriminate on a religious basis), it unofficially utilized a series of sectarian strategies with the deliberate intention of coercively balancing religious communities against one another. For example, within the SAA, "leading positions in brigades and divisions were assigned through an unwritten but well known [sic] formula – to Syrians at least: if the leader is Sunni, it means that the deputy must be Alawite, while a third leading position is reserved for other groups like Christians or Druze."[129] "The only exception to this formula," however, occurred in the intelligence agencies, "where Alawites always enjoyed a comfortable majority both in numbers and in leadership positions."[130]

This process of "sectarian stacking" has long been central to the regime's coup-proofing apparatus and features heavily across coercive institutions.[131] Within the SAA, for example, while the rank-and-file consists mainly of Sunni Muslim conscripts, who constitute roughly 70% of the country's population, the vast majority of career soldiers, including the officer corps, are drawn from Syria's Alawites, who have composed roughly 80-85% of every new cohort that has graduated from the military academy since the early 1980s.[132] Though the trend of Alawite enlistment in the military predated both Hafez' rise and the ascendance of the Ba'ath Party, it accelerated under his tenure, resulting, among other things, in the vast under-representation of Syrian Sunnis in the officer class.

Sectarian stacking was also supplemented with a demographic component. In order to counter the numerical preponderance of Syria's Sunnis, Hafez encouraged urban migration among his coreligionists into key strategic cities. As Fabrice Balanche notes in a report for the Washington

Institute for Near Policy, Hafez altered the demographic contours of Syria's urban centers, engineering in the process a mixture of "divided" and "encircled" cities.[133] Damascus became the quintessential encircled city, surrounded by a large concentration of military garrisons that could insulate the capital from the rest of the state in the case of an uprising.[134] Moreover, in the northeast quarters of the overwhelmingly Sunni-inhabited city, a settlement stacked predominantly with Alawite SAA officers, often referred to colloquially as the "Assad suburb," or the "army of slipper-wearers" (a pejorative term referencing how they are perceived as uneducated ruralites),[135] was designed to act as a coercive outpost that could potentially be mobilized against the rest of the population. By disproportionately appointing Alawites to positions within the military-intelligence complex, Hafez was able to informally partition or surround important cities with his clients, thus extending his power base and creating a demographic check on a potentially hostile majority.

Although it may seem like this sectarian stacking is reflective of a broader policy intended to subjugate Syria's ethnoconfessional communities, particularly its Sunnis, to Alawite hegemony, upon closer examination, such arrangements point to a different trend. This configuration, while reserving most of the elite positions to a small circle of trusted Alawites, illuminates motives that are not inherently sectarian, but rather, utilize communal fissures within Syrian society as an instrument intended to keep the armed and security forces divided. Here, leveraging intercommunal apprehensions serves to ensure that the cohesiveness needed to stage a coup is effectively compromised. Since the majority of officers are Alawite while most rank-and-file conscripts are from the country's Sunni Arab majority, Hafez' configuration was intended to exploit mistrust between the two communities to ensure that the former would not be able to command the support of the latter should they opt to stage a coup, and vice versa. This strategy was meant not simply to impede their chances of conducting a successful coup, but also to act as a deterrent: Given the pervasiveness of sectarian checks and balances and the vast penetration of informants into the SAA, the futility of

attempting a mutiny was designed to be such that the very notion would generally be accepted as self-defeating, thus intuitively precluding members of the armed forces from contemplating the idea altogether.

To compound this strategy, Hafez ensured that he integrated into his entourage a group of Sunni politicians and officers invested not just in his regime, but in him personally. The president "handed out key positions to his close allies, creating a circle of loyal followers to ensure control even in a relatively decentralized system."[136] Ba'ath party officials, for example, developed extensive ties with Damascus' overwhelmingly Sunni business elite, meaning that patron-client networks forged under Hafez generated buy-in for those wanting to preserve their material interests. This made them "dependent enough upon him to render the presidency indispensable to the survival of the whole system."[137] The president made certain that he became synonymous with the regime itself and shrewdly exploited his position as the vital element through which its structure was bound together. Hafez "consistently saw to it that he was surrounded by well-placed Sunnis who had a direct interest in maintaining the government's stability for the sake of the material privileges that they derived from it."[138] However, "he kept them under his thumb or watched them closely to stifle any intentions they might have to take power for themselves."[139] As Raymond Hinnebusch puts it, "[h]aving taken power through alliances with senior Sunni military officers and party politicos…Asad, initially at least, had to share power with them. He…deliberately co-opted prestigious Sunnis into the party and state machinery, and stood above and balanced between elites of different sectarian backgrounds.[140]

As part of this balancing act, when Hafez became ill and had to temporarily step down from governing in 1983, for example, he created a six-member committee, all of whom were Sunni, to run the country. This maneuver was deliberately executed with the knowledge that these figures, as Sunnis, did not exercise control over the SAA and therefore could not conceivably envision turning against him without the support of the Alawite officer corps.[141] Coupled with his strategy of

designating "trusted Alawi kinsmen and clients to key 'coup-making units' and the appointment of Alawi deputies to Sunni commanders in other units," Hafez was able to give the regime a "parallel network of sectarian control,"[142] and thus maintain a delicate balance of power between the sects, particularly Sunnis and Alawites.

Through this system of communal checks and balances, Hafez kept the armed forces divided, thus ensuring that no significant threats would emanate from its ranks. Based more on perceptions of trust than on religious identity, the regime's security architecture was therefore designed in order to cater to the ruler's paranoia. Within the regime's power structure, the SAA, "far from being a monolith, is differentiated into three distinct but overlapping groups: the Alawi security barons in Asad's inner circle, Ba'athist officers, and professional officers."[143] However, since Hafez' security barons were both the bedrock of his personal power base and paradoxically his main source of potential threats, he removed them or split their responsibilities whenever they displayed signs of generating personal fiefdoms.[144]

These coup-proofing efforts were intensified after his younger brother, Rif'at, who spearheaded the 1982 Hama massacre that quelled the Muslim Brotherhood uprising, tried to stage a mutiny in 1984 by utilizing his own parallel forces, the Defence Companies. Considered the "foremost baron" of the regime at the time,[145] Rif'at's Defence Companies "had become a highly mobile private army 55,000 strong, with its own armour, artillery, air defence, and a fleet of troop-carrying helicopters."[146] Indeed, "Rif'at, self-consciously the shield of his brother's regime," ensured that his men received priority when it came to equipment, funding, and salaries.[147] Thus, his attempted coup in the aftermath of the uprising psychologically shook Hafez, reinforcing his suspicions regarding the ubiquitous threat of being dethroned. This had the effect of exacerbating the president's paranoia. After the coup was blocked with the help of loyalist divisions,[148] Hafez resorted to greater measures to nullify the ability of the coercive forces to function autonomously.

Prior to Rif'at's putsch, the regime established praetorian guard units, elite forces with specialized training that functioned to preserve the president's personal security. These units mainly operated as parallel militaries to be leveraged against the regular forces. In the aftermath of the aborted coup, Rif'at's Defense Companies, the most important of such mobilizations, were disbanded, and the remaining detachments were subjected to massive reshuffling and absorbed into other elite mobilizations. The praetorian guard units came to comprise the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division, and the Special Forces, which collectively constituted the only "the only troops authorized to set foot in the capital."[149] In 1987, an assessment issued by the CIA went as far as to single out Hafez' management of Syria's elite units as key to his hold on power:

> Syria's elite military units, including the Special Forces, the Republican Guards, and, until the spring of 1984, the Defense Companies, deserve much of the credit for the longevity of President Hafiz al-Assad's regime. They have prevented serious coup plotting and ruthlessly quashed internal dissent. Without the protection of these units, the Assad government probably would have long since fallen pretty to the internal maneuvering that brought down so many Syrian governments before Assad came to power in 1970…another crucial factor behind Assad's long-lived regime has been his shrewd manipulation of the various power blocs within the Syrian officer corps – particularly the elite units charged with protecting him. He has deftly played potentially rival forces against each other…[150]

Under Hafez, the Republican Guard was especially important. Formerly referred to as the "Presidential Guard" and initially headed by the president's cousin and brother-in-law, Adnan Makhlouf, it began as a small force numbering 1,000 that was tasked with upholding the president's personal security and protecting the presidential palace and visiting dignitaries.[151] However, in the years following Rif'at's coup, it ultimately grew to a 10,000-man mobilization that functioned both to protect the presidential palace and maintain security throughout central Damascus.[152] According to the CIA, in 1985, it was the first SAA mobilization to receive T-72 M1981/3 Russian tanks, previously unobserved among non-Soviet forces.[153] Until it was displaced in importance by the 4th

Division once Bashar became president, it operated as the pre-eminent praetorian unit, intended to be leveraged as a counterweight against all other units – and the last line of presidential defence.

After 1984, Hafez, having survived an armed uprising by Sunni militants, at least two coup attempts by Alawite Jadidist officers, and a mutiny by his most trusted baron, responded by instituting two measures. First, after neutralizing suspected elements of each camp by conducting periodic purges of the coercive institutions, he elevated the SAA's sectarianization, a process that Hicham Bou Nassif calls the "Alawitization of the Syrian military."[154] For example, in 1973 (three years after Hafez seized power), two out of the SAA's five regular divisions were headed by Alawites, yet by 1985, this number rose to six of nine regular divisions, and by 1992, seven of the nine regular divisions were led by the president's co-religionists.[155] Second, he augmented the intensification of sectarian stacking with a growing reliance on immediate familial bonds.

Although Hafez' incorporation of familial networks existed all throughout his rule,[156] after Rif'at's failed coup attempt, the heads of the elite divisions, which were already usually reserved for close Alawite associates, became exclusively entrusted to his immediate kin. Maher, Bassel, and Bashar, three out of Hafez' four sons, were tasked with either heading or overseeing the command of the Republican Guard,[157] along with the armed forces at large. In fact, in 1994, when then-head of the Special Forces and one of the SAA's most skilled commanders, Major General Ali Haydar, objected to Hafez's decision to recall Bashar to Syria following the death of the president's eldest son, Bassel – who was originally being groomed for presidential succession – he was immediately relieved of his position and arrested shortly after.[158] This is extremely revealing, as Haydar's rapid mobilization of 10,000-15,000 "shock troops" of the Special Forces was *instrumental* in obstructing Rif'at's coup and preserving Hafez' presidency.[159] Haydar was then replaced by General Ali Habib Mahmud, and the Special Forces, known for their specialized airborne assault training and rapid light infantry mobilization ability, were subsequently restructured and their command reduced. Hafez re-

allocated some of the Special Forces into the 14th and 15th Divisions, which then fell under the purview of the 2nd and 1st Corps respectively.[160] The former operated along the Lebanese border while the latter was oriented across the south.[161] Notably, the SAA's five elite force structures, which came to count the 17th Reserve Division stationed in northeastern Syria, in contrast to its conventional divisions, were organized to include a mixture of brigades and rapid maneuver regiments.[162]

As the Republican Guard in particular has acted as parallel military unit capable of preventing coups, its operation under the auspices of Hafez and his sons is an illuminating demonstration of the paranoia that pervaded the president's mindset and the importance of the notion of trust – to which only his immediate kin became deserving in the latter years of his presidency. The Alawitization of the SAA mentioned earlier went hand in hand with the appointment of proven loyalists, particularly close family members. The senior Assad was therefore, arguably, as apprehensive of potential rivals from his Alawite constituency as he was of the restive Sunni majority, taking measures to ensure that neither community could pose a credible threat to his rule.[163]

The Intelligence Apparatus: A Paranoid Substructure

Similar to the armed forces, the invasive security apparatus of the regime is heavily coup-proofed by design. Under Hafez, four main security agencies flourished: the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), the Political Security Directorate (PSD), the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID), and the dreaded Air Force Intelligence Directorate (AFID). On paper, the first two fall under the MoI and the latter two are subordinate to the MoD. In reality, however, the first two overpower the MoI and all four agencies nominally report to the Bureau of National Security of the Ba'ath Party.[164] As part of the state's security infrastructure, Syria also has military police force, a military security force, and a presidential security force.[165] "Each of the security agencies has a head who coordinates closely with the president," assert Lina Khatib and Lina Sinjab. "Each main agency, in turn, has several branches and sub-branches clustered around cities, towns, and villages," with the president "defin[ing] the roles

of each body."[166] These institutions are often collectively referred to as the *mukhabarat*, Arabic for "intelligence agencies." That said, the distinction between the security and intelligence agencies is not always clear, partially due to their secretive nature and the occasional overlap of their functions in practice.

In principle, each intelligence organization has a distinct mandate.[167] The GID oversees and commands control of the border guards, the civil police, the Ba'ath Party apparatus, the civilian bureaucracy, and the general populace. The PSD focuses on political intelligence and security, as opposed to criminal and civilian policing matters. It is further divided into Internal and External Security Departments, the latter formerly separated into three units: Arab Affairs, Refugee Affairs, and "Zionist and Jewish Affairs." The MID monitors military officers and the military police, which cater to the regime's ruling elite, and centrally safeguards the loyalty of the military as a whole. Under Hafez, "it was the largest intelligence agency in terms of manpower, and was allegedly responsible for more torture and death in Syria than any other security organization."[168] During the Syrian occupation of Lebanon (1976-2005), the MID also played a large role in enforcing Syria's political policies under then-security chief Ghazi Kanaan.

The notorious AFID was historically the closest to Hafez and largely led the infiltration and surveillance of the Syrian Air Force, hereafter referred to as the SAAF, while the Presidential Security Council, originally "chaired" by Hafez' most trusted confidante, oversaw all other agencies and resolved minor disputes between them. However, the AFID is often considered the most powerful agency, containing an Investigative Branch in addition to a Special Operations Branch based in the Mezzeh military airport in Damascus.[169] Having rose to power through the SAAF, Hafez heavily monitored the institution in addition to the ground forces to ensure that no commander would be capable of replicating the insidious process that made possible his seizure of the state. As Bou Nassif puts it, "Al-Asad opponents have long argued, in this regard, that the AFID and the MIS [MID] –

both notorious for torturing officers suspected of disloyalty to the regime – were more focused on quashing dissent in the armed forces than collecting data relevant to national security."[170]

In order to keep them coup-proofed, however, Hafez orchestrated a system relegating the intelligence institutions into competing organizations, each of which was prohibited from independently communicating with the others. Instead, its heads reported directly to him. He did this largely by conducting outgoing phone calls, deliberately accepting incoming calls from "only a handful of people, perhaps no more than three or four security chiefs, [who] had the right to ring him."[171] As opposed to coordinating and pooling information, they essentially constituted disjointed and "rival institutions, as is usual under paranoid governments."[172] As Khatib and Sinjab put it, "originally conceived by Hafez al-Assad, this power structure was designed so that the agencies monitored not only the public but also each other, the aim being to keep the balance of power in the hands of the president."[173] Consisting of a chain of command carefully selected from ardent loyalists, though dominated by Alawites, appointments were based on nepotism, favouritism, and familial relations – not merit. Indeed, proven ability, experience, and professionalism were less consequential in the selection process than their perceived allegiance.

In reality, it is difficult to ascertain with absolute precision the demarcation line between these organizations. Though the breakdown outlined above is commonly regarded as true, their authority, in practice, often overlaps. Moreover, the *mukhabarat*'s ubiquitous tentacles meant that, under Hafez, collaborators could be found within virtually every formal state institution.[174] The fact that the intelligence apparatus maintained an army of informants to spy on the SAA was an open secret: While exact numbers are difficult to confirm, the degree to which they penetrated its ranks prevented personnel from trusting one another, thereby lowering the prospect of organized armed dissent. Everyone was a potential agent, especially as the Ba'ath Party, too, was transformed "into an adjunct to the security apparatus…tasked with spying on the sectors of society from which ideational

challenges to the regime could occur."[175] Due to the disproportionately high ratio of Alawites in the intelligence agencies and the tendency for the regime to utilize state sector employees, cab drivers, and university faculty to spy on the population, the minority community was often thought to be an incubator for *mukhabarat* operatives working under cover. This is hardly unusual given that, by "the early 1990s, conservative estimates put the number of people working for different intelligence organizations in Syria at 50,000; other conjectures maintained that the number was three times higher."[176] These perceptions deeply exaggerated reality, however, by overstating the average Alawite's relationship to the regime in general and the intelligence agencies in particular, whose spies were recruited from across Syria's communal landscape.

Like Father, Like Son? Bashar's Coup-Proofing Infrastructure
Bashar al-Assad came to power in 2000 upon inheriting his father's presidency, a practice that is commonplace in authoritarian regimes. After Bashar took office, he continued many of the polices instituted by his father, to which coup-proofing was no exception. His inheritance therefore also entailed an adoption of the divide-and-rule framework utilized by Hafez vis-à-vis the armed and security forces, the structures and mechanisms of which were leveraged to institutionally neutralize their attempt to launch coordinated mutinies. To illustrate this point, a report by the intelligence agency Stratfor, published at the outset of the 2011 uprising in Syria, described the following:

> Syrian Alawites are stacked in the military from both the top and the bottom, keeping the army's mostly Sunni 2nd Division commanders in check. Of the 200,000 career soldiers in the Syrian army, roughly 70 percent are Alawites. Some 80 percent of officers in the army are also believed to be Alawites. The military's most elite division, the Republican Guard, led by the President's younger brother Maher al Assad, is an all-Alawite force. Syria's ground forces are organized in three corps (consisting of combined artillery, armor and mechanized infantry units). Two corps are led by Alawites. Most of Syria's 300,00 conscripts are Sunnis …Even though most of Syria's air force pilots are Sunnis, most ground support crews are Alawites who control logistics, telecommunications, and maintenance, thereby preventing potential Sunni air force dissenters from acting unilaterally. Syria's air force intelligence, dominated by Alawites, is one of the strongest intelligence

agencies within the security apparatus and has a core function of ensuring that Sunni pilots do not rebel against the regime.[177]

The Republican Guard, contrary to what is stated, did indeed contain some Sunni officers at the time of the Stratfor publication, many of whom shared links to the regime's elite. Nevertheless, the passage is revealing. While the structures and mechanisms set up by Hafez remained relatively intact, Bashar slightly modified his father's strategies. Distrustful of the old guard to which the military belonged – possibly due to his privileged civilian upbringing and suspicion that many others shared Ali Haydar's opposition to presidential succession – he sidelined the SAA as an institution. In its place, he preferred to disproportionately rely on the praetorian guard units and the intelligence apparatus, even more so than the elder Assad.[178] Under both father and son, the armed forces – save for the elite divisions – had broadly been considered weak, inept, underfunded, and politically marginalized.[179] However, "Bashar saw the army as less reliable than it had been under Hafiz, whose authority had been unquestioned; the regime's alliance with it weakened and its morale declined as its funding dropped, its enrichment activities in Lebanon were lost after 2005, and its arms and equipment fell far behind those of Israel."[180] As a result, opportunities for advancement within the SAA diminished.

Bashar inherited not just the police state left by his father, but the vast patron-client networks that he had developed.[181] However, as opposed to Hafez, he overwhelmingly retrenched these clientelist supply chains, enabling elements of his familial entourage to monopolize the means of corruption. In 2005, Bashar shuffled Ba'ath Party leadership at the 10th Syrian Party Congress in order to make way for a project to liberalize the economy,[182] an endeavor that ushered in a new era of crony capitalism of which the largest benefactors were members of his extended family.[183] Together, these maneuvers had the effect of "entrenching patronage, opportunities, and corruption in its hands at the expense of other regime clients" and "narrow[ing] loyalties from party to family core, a bad move for authoritarian structures."[184] The partial erosion of Hafez' network due to Bashar's 'liberal' reforms

entailed a greater focus of wealth in the hands of his inner circle, including his cousin, notorious oligarch Rami Makhlouf, who came to dominate over 60% of the Syrian economy.[185] The top tier of the coercive establishment, dominated by the extended Assad-Makhlouf-Shalish clans with which the president shared familial bonds, expanded its riches as it was permitted to muscle in on the economic transition away from 'state socialism,' thus intertwining the security and financial elite.[186] Many elements of the former simply exploited their status to reposition themselves as the oligarchs of the new order. By restructuring the economy, he limited the avenues for illicit income that had benefited a swath of actors under the previous system, which had been relatively decentralized in this regard.

The new president's campaign to sideline the SAA and push out elements of the old guard, combined with growing economic inequality, had the effect of disgruntling the majority of its personnel. Since Bashar had preferred to shuffle around officers who once kept their positions indefinitely under Hafez,[187] many chose not to kick down their profits from illicit activities. They instead sought to accumulate as much material wealth – as rapidly as possible – during their tenure in office. According to a 2011 report by the International Crisis Group:

> The young president removed key figures who operated with a high degree of autonomy under Hafez and had run mafia-style empires, accumulating personal wealth but also doling it out to lower-ranking officers to purchase their loyalty. The new appointees act differently; they hold their jobs for shorter periods, seek quick personal enrichment and thus no longer see any point in redistributing their ill-begotten wealth.[188]

In 2009, Bashar encroached on their illicit sources of income with the launch of an "anti-corruption" campaign. The campaign's timing was telling: it occurred one year after the president reshuffled his officers[189] due to a claim by his brother, Maher, to have discovered a coup plot.[190] Since Bashar's anti-corruption operations disproportionately targeted the military, including, on occasion, some elements of its junior officer class – while exempting senior officials regarded as close to the Assad family to whom the informal economy circled back – the SAA lost strength, cohesiveness, and

morale, especially as those investigating corruption realized that their efforts had been pointless given its systemic prevalence throughout coercive and judicial institutions.[191] The inconsistencies of such campaigns, which were viewed as theatrical by most, caused resentment, especially among junior officers, whose salaries were far less than members of the top brass. Additionally, they lacked access to the types of lucrative profits accrued from smuggling – often in conjunction with *shabiha* smuggling cartels linked to the Assad clan and high-ranking intelligence officers – and oil rents that enriched members of the elite units who had shared close linkages to the Assad family.[192] Often, "[t]o compensate, the regime turned a blind eye when mid-ranking and junior officers took bribes in exchange of granting soldiers rights to leave, or engaged in different kinds of petty extortion."[193]

The military and security apparatus fashioned by Hafez and slightly altered by Bashar attracted career personnel for reasons that had little to do with the institutions themselves. Rather, they primarily sought the privileges associated with higher positions even though corruption was nevertheless endemic. A defected major from the Syrian Air Defense provides a revealing testimony regarding the pervasive and systemic nature of corruption within the SAA:

> Combat preparedness is good when 80 per cent of a company's heavy weaponry (tanks, artillery, and military transport) is operational. Military inspectors on tours have often found that less than 40 per cent of the equipment is properly maintained. Yet they wrote reports stating otherwise, in exchange for bribes they get from military commanders who want their companies to look sharp on paper. The corruption of military inspectors is one of the worst-kept secrets in the armed forces. Alawi senior officers must know about the practice. But they don't do much to stop it because they benefit from it, and also, because they don't care.[194]

In fact, in 2008, a study published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies calculated that of the 4,950 battle tanks and 4,500 armoured personnel carriers (APC) and infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) reportedly in the regime's possession, close to half of the tanks and most APC and IFV fleet were considered outdated.[195] Lots of equipment was believed to be operationally limited.[196]

Meanwhile, similar to his father, Bashar staffed many of his top political and diplomatic positions with Sunnis in order to reinforce rivalry between the Alawite-dominated coercive forces and Sunni political class. This was intended to keep both groups perpetually distrustful of one another given where each was situated within the regime's informal sectarian structure. As a result of the growing economic gap between the different strata of the coercive forces under Bashar, merit fell even more as a factor motivating enlistment and promotions. Moreover, not only had the "all-in-the-family tactics indeed remained a feature of the Syrian military under Bashar," the armed and security forces underwent even greater sectarianization.[197] By 2011, of the 12 regular divisions comprising the SAA, only the 7th and 10th Divisions had Sunni commanders, the rest of which were headed by Alawite generals.[198] Manaf Tlass – a Sunni who, up until his defection in 2012 was a brigadier general of the Republican Guard, son of the former defence minister under Hafez, and close personal friend of Bashar – estimated that out of Syria's 40,000 officers, 30,000 had been Alawite at the time of his split from the regime.[199] Moreover, Maher, acting on his brother's behalf, was thought to have become the *de facto* operational commander of the SAA, effectively leading both the 4th Armored Division[200] and the Republican Guard.[201] At the uprising's outset, Syria's coercive forces had been fraught with dysfunction.

In Syria, the coup-proofing apparatus presided over by Assad produced dysfunctional armed and security forces. By prioritizing coup risk mitigation over military effectiveness, he impaired the ability of his coercive institutions to function cohesively and autonomously. The utilization of counterbalancing and the exploitation of sectarian and familial bonds often reinforced one another in a manner that demoralized personnel not aligned to the networks of power within the top tiers of the officer corps. Against this backdrop, the tacit sanctioning of widespread corruption forged institutional landscapes beset with a host of detrimental practices, often molding officers concerned more with exploiting their positions for financial gain than with reasons related to professionalism.

Since the regime's elite valued allegiance over proven ability, they tolerated corrosive levels of corruption and installed their cronies across institutions. The following chapter demonstrates how coup-proofing undercut the effectiveness of the SAA within the context of the Syrian conflict, helping to set in motion a vicious cycle that eroded its ability to implement an effective COIN campaign. The resulting feedback loop caused Assad to turn to PGMs and other exogenous security actors in order to break the cycle and reinforce the eroding regular forces.

CHAPTER 4 – REGIME INSECURITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF PGMS

INTRODUCTION:

This chapter examines the context in which PGMs emerged in post-2011 Syria. Building off the previous chapter, it showcases the role that coup-proofing mechanisms played in helping to generate a detrimental feedback loop that contributed to the progressive unravelling of the coercive forces as the conflict unfolded. Though repression and discrimination served as a catalyst for greater anti-regime mobilization from the Syrian populace, sectarian stacking and corruption helped expedite the erosion of security forces by contributing to defections and desertions. Moreover, counterbalancing meant that once the uprisings had militarized, the Syrian president was forced to disproportionately rely on 'trusted' elite units with specialized training as opposed to the largely neglected regular SAA. These units became overstretched and suffered considerable losses as the insurgencies intensified. Amid the vacuum of security that followed the militarization of the uprising, this chapter develops a timeline that establishes how regime insecurity prompted Assad to outsource security processes to PGMs and other exogenous actors in order to compensate for the dissipation of his coercive forces.

A VICIOUS CYCLE: COUP-PROOFING, INSECURITY, AND THE SYRIAN COIN CAMPAIGN:

In the post-2011 Syrian conflict, coup-proofing and regime insecurity reinforced one another in a feedback loop that eroded the regime's ability to implement an effective COIN campaign. The utilization of sectarian stacking positioned Alawites as disproportionate stakeholders in upholding regime security while providing alienated Sunnis with less incentive to remain invested in the status quo. This accelerated the attrition of the coercive forces, as the regime's elite was forced to rely mostly on its Alawite constituency. Moreover, counterbalancing meant that the more the regular SAA faltered, the more the elite units were needed to compensate for their erosion. However, the more they were used in lieu of the regular divisions, the more they decayed, and the more vulnerable the Syrian

leadership became. Similarly, the detrimental implications brought on by corrupt practices within the coercive forces helped weaken the SAA's military positions. Yet as the insurgency expanded, so too did the avenues for illicit self-enrichment among the coercive forces, many of whom exploited the vacuum of security to accrue profits. This is explored below.

How Coup-proofing Set in Motion a Vicious Cycle that Eroded the SAA
In Syria, sectarian stacking, counterbalancing, and corruption, all of which were deeply ingrained into the Assad regime's coup-proofing machinations, significantly contributed to the decay of the SAA throughout the conflict. Sectarian stacking alienated Sunni personnel, prompting their defection and desertion as rebellious regions populated primarily by Sunnis were violently subdued by an amalgamation of elite units, *shabiha* irregulars, and *mukhabarat* officers consisting largely of trusted Alawites operating at the directive of members of the president's extended family. The more Sunnis split from the regime, the more it became dependent on 'loyalist' units with high Alawite composition, leading to the attrition of the elite mobilizations and the exhaustion of the Alawite community at large, the latter ultimately going to great lengths to avoid forced conscription. Meanwhile, corrupt practices – long permitted by the regime to secure the allegiance of the officer corps – boomed as the conflict protracted, enabling a culture of self-interested opportunism in which officers exploited their positions for self-enrichment, even when it came at the cost of the state's COIN effort and the survival of the regime to which their privileges were tied. Ultimately, the legacies of coup-proofing helped set in motion a feedback loop, interacting with regime insecurity in a manner that undermined the SAA's COIN capacity. These dysfunctional dynamics are explored below.

Sectarian stacking significantly undermined the SAA's cohesion throughout the conflict. First, sectarianism as a coup-proofing tool led to the broad demoralization of Sunni personnel. Although Syria's Sunnis did enjoy a certain degree of official representation in the military, social stratification within the SAA institutionalized an informal sectarian hierarchy in which Alawites often

received greater opportunities relative to their Sunni counterparts. Since Sunnis had far fewer financial privileges than the predominantly Alawite security elite, they had less incentive to remain loyal.[202] Though this was particularly true of rank-and-rile conscripts – who made up the majority of SAA personnel and whose conditions were generally miserable regardless of confessional affiliation – it also applied to many junior and intermediate Sunni officers. Their lack of prestige compared to their Alawite superiors – and in some cases, deputies – alienated them. Therefore, as the regime escalated repression against Sunni areas in order to quell the uprising, Sunni troops suffered from a loss of morale as their co-religionists came under fire by an organized and repressive force drawn heavily from Alawites linked to, or mobilized by, the top echelons of the state's military-intelligence complex.[203]

In December 2011, the European Union (EU), citing violence against demonstrators, sanctioned seven of fourteen members of the Assad-Makhlouf-Shalish families who were also among the top commanders in the state's coercive apparatus.[204] That same month, in a report published by Human Rights Watch (HRW), defectors, the majority of whom were "low-level conscripts," attributed their split from the regime's ranks directly to their moral objection against killing largely unarmed protestors.[205] Their testimonies pointed to the culpability of a series of elite division commanders, the highest of whom was Maher al-Assad.[206] Moreover, they stated that in many cases, the SAA was accompanied by the *shabiha*, which were mobilized into a clandestine militia force by Assad's cousins[207] and deployed across the governorates of Daraa, Damascus, Deir Ezzor, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Latakia, and Tartous.[208] Along with intelligence officers – key among them those within the AFID's Special Operations Unit – they reportedly shot troops who objected to violently quelling protestors, while engaging in arbitrary violence and widespread looting against civilian populations.[209] Notably, the crackdown against protestors, even in confessionally mixed towns, took

place primarily in Sunni districts, meaning that the recipients of state violence were mostly Sunni. In response to the regime's utilization of familial and confessional bonds to subdue a predominantly Sunni-populated uprising, the military began "bleeding Sunnis who did not want to take part in the killing of Sunni civilians anywhere in Syria, let alone in their own towns and villages."[210] The decline in allegiance of the SAA's Sunnis was compounded by the fact that most of them had roots in the countryside, where "parochial relations and identification remain strong."[211] When forced to choose between allegiance to a repressive regime characterized by Alawite hegemony and their own communities, many chose the latter.

As a result of their disenfranchisement within the SAA, Sunnis came to overwhelmingly populate the ranks of the myriad rebel groups. Prior to absorbing large numbers of civilian recruits, armed opposition factions were initially led by defected soldiers and officers. As Bou Nassif points out, broadly speaking, "defection remained a Sunni phenomenon; very few non-Sunnis joined the [armed] uprising."[212] This dynamic culminated in the defection of up to 3,000 Sunni officers by 2014,[213] which, according to the testimonies of defected soldiers, represented half of Syria's overall number of Sunni officers.[214] A recent study conducted by the Global Public Policy Institute underscores a similar trend in the SAAF.[215] Of the 165 pilots who defected from the SAAF between 2011 and 2015, with the exception of one, all had been identified as Sunni.[216] Moreover, just two years into the conflict, the overwhelmingly Sunni Free Syrian Army (FSA) – an umbrella rebel organization under which ostensibly moderate anti-government militants came to operate – claimed to have established a network of sympathetic informants within the SAA.[217] Sectarian stacking thus effected the coercive forces' precipitous fracture along such lines, driving Sunni personnel to defect or desert in large numbers.

Second, since Sunnis composed the majority of SAA personnel, the gap in coercive means left by their absence led to substantial manpower shortages. In a vicious cycle, the more defections

grew, the more Sunnis were treated as a fifth column for the armed opposition. The greater their

alienation, however, the more likely they were, in turn, to abandon the regime. Many defected Sunni

officers revealed that, prior to their split from the SAA, they experienced persecution and grew to

worry that false denunciations of disloyalty would elicit punitive measures against them.[218] By mid-

2012, the regime was estimated to have killed thousands of soldiers attempting to flee, in addition to

imprisoning approximately 2,500 officers and lower-ranking personnel in the notorious Seidnaya

prison, north of Damascus.[219] According to opposition sources, the compound was emptied of

political prisoners to make room for military staff-turned-inmates.[220] Growing defection and desertion

rates also dissuaded the regime from dispatching Sunni personnel, thereby further exacerbating these

shortages.[221] Owing to the Alawite-dominated security elite's increasing hesitation to rely on Sunni

personnel for fear that they would defect, the number of deployable units shrank as the insurgency

dragged on. A 2013 report by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) captures this well:

> Bashar al-Assad's reliance on a small core of trusted military units limited his
> ability to control all of Syria. He hedged against defections by deploying only the
> most loyal one-third of the Syrian Army, but in so doing he undercut his ability to
> prosecute a troop-intensive counterinsurgency campaign because he could not use
> all of his forces. Defections and attrition have exacerbated the regime's central
> challenge of generating combat power.[222]

The mutually reinforcing dynamics of Sunni alienation and sectarian reservations among the security

elite therefore had the effect of aggravating the quantitative dilapidation of the SAA, as it lowered

the regime's reservoir of dispatchable troops. This was made worse by the fact that capable Sunni

personnel were isolated from the regime's COIN campaign. In response to the earlier waves of

defections, a number of career Sunni officers that were in charge of commanding infantry brigades

were reshuffled by the regime and assigned administrative positions with "little to no direct contact

with soldiers."[223]

As defections and desertions grew, so too did the regime's propensity to depend strictly on 'trusted' units. The disinclination to rely on Sunni personnel due to concerns regarding political loyalty exhausted so-called loyalist elements within the SAA while accelerating battlefield losses. The regime's reluctance to trust many of its Sunni troops with manning checkpoints or deploying to active frontlines,[224] particularly in urban settings, meant that it was forced to instead depend on units with high Alawite composition. As a result, armoured divisions operated by trusted personnel were often dispatched to rebellious zones in counteroffensives without infantry reinforcements, only to be ambushed and outmaneuvered by the urban guerrilla tactics employed by the rebels.[225] By the time PGMs like the NDF had growingly featured as infantry support in counteroffensive operations alongside armoured divisions in 2013, the military had lost no fewer than 1,800 T-55, T-62, and T-72 tanks and BMP units – some of which were seized by the rebels – collectively amounting to 25% of the regime's armoured vehicular arsenal.[226] Here, maintenance issues, compounded by the corrupt inspection process mentioned in Chapter 3, played a role as well.

The overreliance on elite units, which were also inordinately stacked with Alawites, led to their attrition. This is because, as the most capable mobilizations, they were disproportionately deployed in combat operations, particularly as the conflict intensified. Having received the most robust military preparation, funding, and equipment, they were needed to compensate for the ill-equipped and ill-trained personnel of the SAA's regular divisions, who lacked the logistical capacity to perform combatively. Thus, the 4th Armoured Division, Special Forces, and Republican Guard, alongside key elements of the 14th, 15th, and 17th Division, were all made to play an "unsustainably heavy role in fighting on the conflict's main frontlines since mid-2011," as they scrambled to put down insurgent operations across the country.[227] In order to reinforce the regime's COIN campaign, these elite units decentralized their structure by dividing their command and dispersing their formations across the SAA's inadequate regular divisions.[228] However, this placed them in unfamiliar

terrain outside their traditional territorial theatres of operations. For example, the Republican Guard, which was designed to operate in Damascus and its vicinity, had by 2013 been active on multiple fronts spanning three governorates.[229] By 2015, its regiments were active in five separate governorates.[230]

Though this adaptive strategy kept the regime's COIN effort somewhat loosely intact, it also led to the institutional decay of the elite units. In a 2019 study published by the Middle East Institute on the degradation of the SAA over the course of the conflict, elite units were shown to have incurred significant losses.[231] Not only had certain Special Forces regiments been destroyed or demobilized in their entirety, the 4th Division had lost many of its most effective officers, "leaving inexperienced commanders in charge of low-quality recruits."[232] The decay of the 4th Division is particularly revealing, as it had become the principal praetorian mobilization under Maher's command, functioning as "Bashar al-Assad's indispensable elite unit."[233] The dependence on trusted elements of the armed and security forces deepened as defections and desertions rose, prompting the regime to mobilize intelligence agencies such as AFID to deploy personnel in an urban combat capacity to compensate for military decomposition.[234]

Third, sectarian distrust at times forged conditions in which Sunni personnel could abandon their posts. Since the security elite growingly came to distrust Sunni soldiers after the initial round of military defections, they often confined them to isolated barracks and outposts in rural areas.[235] Yet as the regime progressively atrophied, however, it prioritized holding urban centres at the expense of the countryside, paradoxically making it easier for these troops to split from its ranks. Thus, unlike many of their Alawite, Christian, and Druze counterparts, whose defection carried the risk of sectarian reprisals from anti-government forces, many Sunnis abandoned the regime the first chance they received.[236] Defections and desertions grew as a result, particularly as insurgents calibrated their

guerrilla offensives to target neglected bases in the countryside. Operations targeting these garrisons also led to a surge in captured weapons caches among different rebel factions. Rooted in sectarian factors, the splintering of the SAA set off a chain of events, reinforced in a feedback loop, that weakened the regime's COIN campaign.

Yet, not only had the sectarianized structure of the SAA helped trigger Sunni splintering and lead the regime to intensify its dependence on trusted units, it also encouraged it to disproportionately target the Alawite community for conscription to compensate for manpower shortages. However, as casualties multiplied among the poorly performing SAA, the conflation of mandatory military service with death soared, causing panic among the Alawites, whose inflated association with the regime's repressive apparatus instilled in the community a fear that the rebel seizure of the state would lead to their widescale slaughter. This fear grew as the opposition gradually radicalized. In the fall of 2012, in response to rising SAA fatalities, a campaign by members of the Alawite community crystalized that called for rejecting conscription.[237] By the spring of 2015, Alawites, growing numbers of whom had been fleeing the country for years to avoid the implications of the draft,[238] began actively resisting deployment outside of their respective regions. Though many Alawites came to enlist in offensively oriented PGMs in order to collect higher salaries, demoralization meant that large segments of the community went to great lengths to avoid being dispatched to distant battlefields in 'defence' of Sunni areas they considered foreign and thus not worth salvaging. Ultimately, the community played a disproportionate role in militarily preserving the regime due to apprehensions over an increasingly intolerant opposition, yet those who possessed the means avoided the frontlines whenever possible.

In addition to sectarian-centered factors, systemic corruption gave rise to practices that weakened the SAA's positions while facilitating the advance of the rebels. The pervasive culture of corruption within the coercive forces had institutionally normalized a range of unlawful and illicit practices over a course of generations. As such, once the uprising had militarized, corrupt officers

instinctively sought to capitalize on the security context for financial aggrandizement. The well-established rent-generating practice among officers of accepting fees in exchange for permitting personnel absenteeism became widespread. Officers routinely solicited bribes from their subordinates that permitted conscripts to forgo military service or be stationed to specific areas deemed safer than others.[239] Naturally, as the demand increased owing to the desire among troops to avoid the mounting levels of violence associated with the conflict, so too did the rewards from such transactions.

Augmenting these conventional sources of petty profiteering, moreover, were the new avenues for illicit self-enrichment made strictly possible by the conflict. Corrupt officers sold arms to the opposition, exploiting the vacuum of security that occurred in order to turn a profit.[240] This trend became widespread. For example, in June 2012, a member of the FSA's Suqour al-Sham faction in Jabal al-Zawiya informed a reporter that roughly 40% of his formation's armaments and ammunition were acquired through deals made with crooked regime officers.[241] Officers also rented out checkpoints to private individuals and sold re-captured land back to the rebels.[242] Even as the balance of power shifted and the regime visibly faced strain, corrupt rituals continued unabated. Together, these practices undermined the regime's ability to hold positions while also making it easier for soldiers to defect, desert, and flee the country to avoid conscription. Additionally, kidnappings-for-ransom, another lucrative business that boomed under the fog of war, fueled forced disappearances at checkpoints manned by intelligence officers and the *shabiha*.[243] This further eroded faith in the regime and its security forces, including among its own personnel, many of whom were likely motivated to split from its ranks as the unhinged corruption they witnessed starkly contradicted the romantic framing of the regime's security effort depicted on state media.

The remainder of this chapter explores the context in which PGMs emerged in Syria, illustrating how the Assad regime faced mounting levels of insecurity when it chose to formally incorporate these actors into its COIN efforts.

REGIME INSECURITY

Phase One (2011-2012): Defections and Rebellion Amid Security Force Repression

In Syria, protests began evolving into an armed insurgency sometime between the spring and summer of 2011 in response to security force repression. Initially deployed under the pretext that they were combating armed "terrorists" and "Salafists" seeking to topple the state and foment chaos, rank-and-file troops and junior officers followed orders, at times aiding and abetting the regime's campaign of violence. Soldiers were reportedly given shoot-to-kill orders, often issued by their commanders, who, as previously mentioned, were instructed to do so by their superiors, as well as by trusted *mukhabarat* officers and *shabiha* irregulars.[244] Through extreme force, the regime sought to subdue public displays of civil disobedience in order to preclude the emergence of a zone occupied by protestors, similar to Tahrir Square in Egypt.[245]

Yet the situation changed after many of these soldiers began to see evidence contradicting the regime's narrative regarding the unfolding events. As a result, from April to August 2011, the regime experienced its first discernible wave of military defections. Some accounts suggest that elements of the SAA's 5th Division, a largely Sunni division that had been historically stationed in southern Syria, began clashing with Maher's forces as early as the siege of Daraa – then the epicenter of the uprising – in late April.[246] Spearheaded by Maher, the assault on Daraa saw 4th Division personnel violently storm the city with tanks, helicopters, and snipers, trapping 15,000 civilians inside, many of whom were either abused or arbitrarily detained.[247] Defections and desertions multiplied throughout the summer as the template used to quell unrest in Daraa was replicated across multiple restive areas, increasingly prompting troops to defy orders and abandon the regime. Pitched battles between the

security forces and an armed insurgent movement, while still in its infancy, became more frequent in response to the regime's brutal crackdown.

By the summer of 2011, an armed rebellion had begun to take form alongside continued civic activism as defectors, the vast majority of whom were Sunni, split from the SAA in response to the regime's ignominious use of repression. In June, in the northern town of Jisr al-Shughour, troops who disobeyed orders to shoot at rioters were killed by intelligence officers, prompting a "watershed moment" in the conflict: the first case of mass defection.[248] This was followed by the first large-scale attack against the SAA, as the defected contingent successfully ambushed a military convoy dispatched to pursue it. 120 soldiers were killed as helicopters and tanks, believed to be led by Maher, were deployed to stamp out the defectors.[249] Though defections had been reported in Tal Kalakh in Homs and in sites across the governorate of Daraa, this was the largest escalation yet.[250] Within days of the events, Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush of the SAA's 11th Armored Division[251] held his military identification card to the camera and, citing the protection of protestors, announced his defection "in what became a paradigm of a thousand similar videos."[252] Six weeks later, a number of defected SAA officers, commanded by Colonel Riad al-Assad, declared the formation of the FSA from Turkey.[253] From this point on, protests emerged alongside a growingly organized armed opposition.

Within months of the first protests, the Assad regime had already faced challenges to its longevity, as its coercive machinery displayed its first signs of unravelling. Liberal calculations at this stage of the insurgency placed military defections and desertions in the tens of thousands.[254] Rural Idlib, most notably in the Jabal al-Zawiya region located between the industrial center in Aleppo and the 'loyalist' stronghold of Latakia, became a meeting point for defectors-turned-rebels. "Defectors also gathered in the towns and villages of the Homs countryside, demonstrating the extent of the collapse of the old Baathist cross-sect alliance, for this was a rural Sunni constituency…and

was still a traditional military recruiting ground, perhaps the country's primary source of Sunni officers."[255] For example, the town of Rastan in Homs, previously a bastion of Sunni support for the Assad regime that included the high-profile Tlass family, became the "first city to resist the regime with organized, armed opposition in September 2011."[256]

Since defections and desertions mushroomed across the country, loyalist forces were dispatched to multiple theaters in an attempt to quell an armed rebellion that had begun inflicting damages on the security forces. Already by August, the Syrian Violations Documentation Center – an NGO founded and run by Syrian citizen-activists – reported that security force casualties reached as high as 500.[257] Moreover, defectors-turned-rebels, while most prominent in the countryside, nevertheless proliferated in several suburban pockets across the country. For example, by October, the SAA had reportedly deployed 250 tanks and other armoured vehicles to Rastan in pursuit of over 2,000 military defectors operating in Syria's northern countryside.[258]

That same month, its forces were dispersed all the way to Al Bukamal on the Iraqi border, while defections reached areas in suburban Damascus such as al-Ghouta.[259] This placed armed contenders within range of the city centre. While multiple other examples exist, what matters is that the SAA had preliminarily struggled to counter an insurgent movement, whose expansion was outpacing the regime's attempts to subdue it. Additionally, al-As'ad stated from Turkey that he commanded a force of 15,000 rebels in Syria under the banner of the FSA with whom he had been coordinating.[260] Potential exaggerations notwithstanding, the integrity of the regime's coercive institutions, chiefly the army, had begun to erode in tandem with the emergence of a growing rebellion. These dynamics – defections, desertions, insurgent gains, and military casualties – significantly accelerated throughout 2012. The following section explores this further.

Phase Two (2012-2013): An Eroding SAA is Challenged by An Evolving Insurgency

Throughout 2012, the insurgency expanded, as did the regime's inability to militarily halt its momentum. As a result of a combination of SAA dynamics mentioned earlier in this chapter – low logistical capacity, corruption, the rural roots of Sunni officers, and the placement of Sunni personnel in isolated rural barracks – a political geography of armed rebellion crystalized in Syria's countryside. This stretched from rural Idlib in the north to the town of Zabadani in the south, with Homs and the Qalamoun mountains northeast of the capital serving as a source of transit that facilitated the mobility of anti-government forces.[261] The Qalamoun mountains, which separate Syria from one of its several porous borderlands with Lebanon, acted as conduit that created a north-south axis of insurgent control over a non-contiguous, but proximate, constellation of villages and towns scattered in the countryside. Zabadani, situated along the Damascus-Beirut highway just 10 km away from the Lebanese border and 50 km away from metropolitan Damascus, was captured in full by the rebels in January,[262] who boasted that it was one of three dozen areas to have fallen to them.[263] Weeks later, they drove security forces out of Rastan and established full control.[264] However, they later withdrew to avoid the type of indiscriminate shelling to which the SAA had increasingly resorted in light of its inability to simultaneously dispatch personnel to multiple arenas due to intensifying manpower shortages.[265] In Homs City, the regime was facing stiff resistance from an insurgency that had occupied large parts of the Sunni neighbourhoods of Baba Amr and al-Khalidyeh.[266]

In the months that followed, an "urban-rural stalemate" ensued in which the regime growingly prioritized holding cities as opposed to engaging rebels into the countryside, where they had been enjoying far greater success.[267] In fact, between January and April 2012, guerrilla raids against regime positions more than doubled, while the effective application of roadside bombs increased to nearly 100%.[268] In rural areas, the rebels, through a combination of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), hit-and-run operations, border post assaults, and tactical sieges of airfields, had pressured the regime

to retreat from territory over which military control was deemed too costly to maintain.[269] This exhausted Syrian security forces, whose broad lack of professional military preparedness made them ill-equipped to deal with the nature of conventional warfare, let alone these asymmetrical tactics. Even in areas as strategically significant as the Alawite stronghold of rural Latakia, Sunni insurgent pockets had destroyed a number of armoured vehicles and inflicted heavy casualties on SAA personnel throughout the spring, prompting the regime to use helicopter gunships to make up for a depletion of its reservoir of dispatchable military units.[270] The incapacity to contain the insurgency, even in vital loyalist territories, was a clear testament to the growing dissipation of the regime's COIN efforts.

The demoralization of Syrian security forces soared as casualties and defections increased in response to growing rebel successes. This encouraged the regime to continue escalating repression to countervail its loss of personnel. "Throughout 2011, the regime relied on selective brutality," a 2012 report by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) asserted, "but in 2012, it decided that the cost of retaking terrain with maneuver forces alone would be too high. Rather than isolate a rebel stronghold and clear the area of opposition, the regime stayed on the periphery and used indiscriminate shelling to force the opposition to capitulate."[271] The capacity to implement the "clear-and-hold" component of COIN operations progressively dwindled as the regular forces eroded.

The SAA's inability to retain territorial control in its rural and peripheral regions, home to most of its discontented Sunni personnel, also had the consequence of exacerbating its capacity to consolidate control of urban terrain, as the loss of the countryside made it easier for rebels to encircle and penetrate cities. For example, regime withdrawal from key positions in Syria's northeastern countryside throughout the spring, such as in Deir Ezzor, made possible the gradual seizure by insurgents of urban areas across the governorate. By April, virtually all of Deir Ezzor's countryside had been in the hands of insurgents, while control of Deir Ezzor City itself became contested with

Syrian security forces.[272] Its Muhassen neighbourhood, previously described as a "reservoir of Sunni officers," was effectively transformed into a "defectors' hub," following the same trajectory of large-scale secession as the Sunni loyalist stronghold of Rastan in Homs.[273] The uncontested acquisition of significant portions of Deir Ezzor helped facilitate the loss of Aleppo's countryside, 90% of which, according to one rebel commander, fell under his effective control by late May.[274] It also facilitated the influx of thousands of insurgents into urban Aleppo in July.[275] The rebel operation in Aleppo captured considerable portions of the eastern part of the city and gave opposition factions a base in the country's industrial capital, which was thereafter partitioned into zones demarcating rebel control (east), regime control (west), and YPG control (north).[276]

The more the regime retreated from rural areas, where it had overwhelmingly lost Sunni support, the more the rebels could surround and penetrate important cities and pressure security forces into holding increasingly tenuous positions. This dynamic also led to insurgent advances in several urban and suburban settings in western Syria. For example, by May 2012, between 15-20% of the city of Homs fell under insurgent control.[277] Moreover, in June, Damascus' suburbs, both north and south of the city centre, were the target of a coordinated rebel offensive intended to exert pressure on the security elite by attempting to penetrate the capital.[278] Pitched battles were heard within 2 km of Syria's parliament, while clashes in the neighbourhood of al-Midan, just 5 km from the presidential palace, elicited the deployment of armoured SAA units and snipers in order to neutralize insurgent activities.[279]

In light of these losses and the growing scope of the insurgency, the regime's hyperextended military accelerated efforts to recede from terrain deemed less strategically vital to the regime's survival in order to reinforce key cities in western Syria, the most important of which was the capital. From July to September 2012, the SAA retreated from several areas in the north and northeast in

order to focus on Damascus' periphery.[280] The decision to recalibrate strategic focus on key urban centres in the western part of the county was also partly shaped by mounting tensions between Syrian security forces in the northeast and YPG militias.[281] As a result, the regime engaged in a "coordinated withdrawal" that tentatively transferred territory to the YPG.[282] This enabled the Democratic People's Union (PYD), the Kurdish political party to which the YPG was attached, to operate over large territorial swathes of the state with a deepening degree of political and coercive autonomy.[283] Though the relationship between Damascus and the PYD is complex, the former's relinquishing of authority to a somewhat hostile non-state actor with separatist inclinations was a testament to its coercive degeneration and its incapacity to enforce its repressive monopoly across the country.[284]

Between July and August, the cohesion of the regime seemed significantly jeopardized. On July 6, the Tlass family, long considered Sunni stalwarts of the Assad regime and a key link to Syria's Sunni business community, defected,[285] becoming the most prominent family to denounce Assad. Following the Tlass family's defection, the national security headquarters in Damascus was bombed on July 18. The bombing targeted a meeting for the central command unit of the regime's "Crisis Management Cell," an *ad hoc* security committee tasked with quelling the uprising.[286] Four top security chiefs were killed in the blast, namely Defence Minister Daoud Rajha, Assistant Vice President and Presidential Security Advisor General Hassan Turkmani, National Security Advisor Hisham Bekhtiyar, and Deputy Minister of Defence Assef Shawkat.[287] Shawkwat, Bashar's brother-in-law, was one of Syria's leading intelligence figures tasked with overseeing the committee.[288]

Though responsibility for the bombing is disputed, what matters is that important elements of the regime – peripheral sections of the military-security elite surrounding Bashar and Maher – had begun to disintegrate. With one explosion, up to a third of the command of the Crisis Management Cell was liquidated.[289] To add to this, the SAA was plagued with personnel shortages. Based on calculations made by high-level defectors, Turkish intelligence, and several other sources, an ISW

report in the spring of 2012 assessed that roughly 20-30% of the SAA had either defected or deserted.[290] Moreover, virtually none of the 80,000 conscripts summoned for compulsory military service reported for duty throughout the year.[291] So depleted was the SAA that it began calling up reservists within the first half of the year to replenish its ranks.[292] The regime, by most indications, was considerably shaken.[293]

In addition to the decay of its military command, the regime's COIN efforts were impeded by its reduced mobility along roads targeted by insurgent operations. Since the countryside had become an acute site of rebel ambushes, transportation between important battle zones carried with it the risk of succumbing to attacks. For example, in late July 2012, over 30% of a 23-vehicle SAA convoy that had left Idlib to assist in Aleppo was ambushed and destroyed along the way.[294] The M-5 highway that links Daraa in the south to Aleppo in the north (the country's most vital highway and trade route)[295] was also sporadically targeted, key parts of which fell into rebel hands.[296] This meant that the SAA was also vulnerable to attacks along key transportation routes. Such operations were aided by the capture of terrain immediately situated on the border. By August 2012, a fragmented arc running around the Turkish, Lebanese, and Jordanian borderlands had fallen to non-state actors bent on either toppling the regime, or in the case of the YPG, establishing autonomous zones outside of its jurisdiction.

As the SAA was disintegrating, insurgent forces were swelling. By mid-2012, an internal US intelligence report estimated that over a 1,000 rebel groups had been operating in Syria.[297] ISW, surveying a composite of sources, estimated that insurgents had grown to number 40,000.[298] Moreover, from 2012-onwards, the SAA was embroiled in fighting, on any given day, in 80-100 locations nationally.[299] Rebel advances appeared to succeed in cornering the security forces, which had now largely retreated to western Syria – save for a few scattered pockets across the eastern half of the country. Here, the loss of Syrian territory obstructed the regime's supply lines while also

enabling anti-government factions to increasingly establish their own.[300] This made it easier for insurgents to smuggle weapons and fighters across Syria's porous borders as they progressively came under their control. It also meant that they could territorially penetrate the state from virtually every corner. Although foreign sponsorship of rebel groups deepened after late 2012,[301] the seeds to Syria's security force decomposition had been planted in the feedback loop set in motion by the regime's coup-proofing apparatus.

Testing the Limits of a Coup-Proofed Military
By the end of 2012, the Syrian regime had largely lost control of the state's security situation, as the insurgency seemed to have tested the limits of a coup-proofed military. The territorial advances of the rebels across the governorates of Homs, Hama, Idlib, Damascus, Damascus Countryside, Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Daraa, and Aleppo had increasingly obstructed the regime's supply lines, led to a surge in seized bases, and isolated security forces into holding increasingly tenuous positions. Moreover, they had encircled and penetrated urban centers. This was aided by their expanding arsenal of captured and delivered weapons.

In addition, the Syrian capital and its nearby weapons stockpiles proved unimmune from rebel advances, as demonstrated not only in the latter's push into suburban neighbourhoods but also in their seizure of the Marj al-Sultan Airbase, located a mere 15 km away from Damascus, in late November.[302] That month, the roads to Damascus International Airport were cut off by the rebels, prompting the regime to suspend all international flights.[303] Despite its sharp turn to the SAAF as the primary mechanism for repression – which in August had begun indiscriminately striking rebellious residential neighbourhoods – the SAA was still losing ground. Less than a third of Syrian territory was estimated to have remained in the hands of state authorities by the end of the year.[304]

By late 2012, the regime also had to increasingly contend with jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria at the time, which were emerging as important players. While

the regime preferred the optics of a jihadist opposition over one stacked with moderates, the organizational capacity of such groups nevertheless made them a formidable threat militarily. For example, from December 2011 to December 2012, al-Nusra claimed responsibility for over 600 attacks, including 40 suicide bombings that had targeted the *mukhabarat* and other security forces. [305] Both al-Nusra and other hardline Islamist groups began establishing cells and bases across Syria.

Additionally, elements of the coercive and political leadership were eroding at an accelerated pace. In another blow to the regime, General Abdulaziz Jasim al-Shallal, head of the military police, defected in December, the latest of dozens of generals to do so.[306] Together, the defection in the latter half of the year of the Tlass family, Prime Minister Riad Hijab, and Foreign Ministry Spokesman Jihad Makidissi – alongside multiple other diplomats, officers, and public figures – combined with the assassinations of high-level security chiefs and the military gains of the rebels, all "gave the impression of a regime on the verge of collapse."[307]

With limited manpower and uncertainty regarding reliability and loyalty, the regime struggled to put down a rebellion that for some time seemed to pose an existential threat to the presidency.[308] Its COIN campaign faced a series of significant obstacles. As Emile Hokayem illustrates:

> The regular military, comprising units of differing quality and loyalty, proved incapable of conducting joint armoured-infantry operations or coordinating ground-air operations. It focused on securing static assets and supply routes, but was undermined from within by loss of life, desertions and low morale. Concerns about defections made the infantry less deployable, forcing the recourse to air power and artillery and causing immense human and material damage. The regime's armoured capabilities were threatened by anti-tank weaponry seized from bases, and its air dominance was challenged by the rebels' capture of military airports and possession of anti-aircraft artillery. In many cases, civilian combatants possessed better situational knowledge and intelligence than Assad forces.[309]

The regime needed a supplemental force in order to compensate for its diminished coercive capacity – one that could address gaps that resulted from the feedback loop driving the SAA's attrition, reverse the trend of military losses, and ultimately disrupt the momentum of the insurgency. As the SAA

crumbled, the regime looked towards mobilizing irregular auxiliaries. Although this process had been preliminarily initiated during the first two phases of the conflict (discussed below), in mid-to-late 2012, the regime, with the help of its allies, began expanding and restructuring PGMs in preparation for their formalization – a strategic course it viewed as critical to its survival. In order to resuscitate its eroding COIN campaign, it formally diffused coercive authority across PGMs, publicizing its links to many of these actors and elevating their status within Syria's security landscape. This is explored below.

Phase 3 (2013–early 2014): PGMs Formally Emerge, Yet Insecurity Continues to Rise
PGMs emerged as a robust national and semi-official force in early 2013. Prior to 2013, however, there is less agreement regarding the process surrounding the emergence of local popular committees, hereafter referred to as PCs, the precursors to PGMs that were formally reconstituted as part of the state's COIN campaign. Though some observers claim that PCs developed as organic defensive initiatives sometime between the spring and fall of 2011 due to the vacuum of security caused by uprising's descent into conflict, particularly along sectarian lines,[310] others underline the role that the *mukhabarat* played in organizing, arming, and coordinating with these coercive bodies.[311]

Whether or not this initially arose as a spontaneous process independent of the security apparatus, the incorporation of these structures into the regime's COIN campaign was a testament to its inability to maintain centralized coercive control as its forces disintegrated. The recourse to PCs, which were quietly formed in the first phase and expanded across the country in the hundreds throughout the second,[312] was therefore a direct response to the regime's failing COIN campaign. As auxiliaries, their contribution to localized security and policing in conjunction with the security forces[313] served the regime's security effort[314] largely by enabling the SAA to reduce its footprint in areas where PCs were active.

Regardless of their disputed origins, PGMs underwent a drastic reformulation in mid-to-late 2012 when the regime's survival was at stake.[315] As demonstrated in the previous section, regime insecurity loomed as its growing erosion vis-à-vis an expanding insurgent tide forced it to retract. The regime responded by invoking Article 10 of the Syrian constitution's Military Service Law, which permits the use of "other [armed] forces as deemed necessary," to supplement its security effort.[316] It also passed legislative Decree 55, enabling the use of irregular – and private – security contractors to protect energy facilities.[317] A metamorphosis occurred, during which the regime formally transformed elements of the PCs and *shabiha* into semi-official PGMs, the largest of which was the NDF. The regime haphazardly initiated this process in 2012 before leveraging the support of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah to spearhead this restructuring.[318] Though launched in 2013, the NDF had been "preliminarily active through late 2012, with the IRGC officers embedded within individual units."[319] Even prior to the formalization of PGMs, the need for an additional force was so great that they unofficially began accompanying the SAA in offensive missions to combat the accelerating military advances of the rebels.

The regime incentivized recruits to join PGMs like the NDF, where fighters were often dispatched in assaults on distant battlefields,[320] by offering higher salaries relative to the SAA, in addition to armaments, licensing, and the ability to count membership towards mandatory military service.[321] In the months that followed the NDF's official establishment in January 2013, the organization grew to approximately 50,000 with the aim of swelling to 100,000.[322] As SAA defenses crumbled, the role of indigenous PGMs in the regime's COIN campaign evolved from localized security in conjunction with the intelligence agencies to their growing incorporation in an offensive capacity outside of their home regions.

The official formation of the NDF occurred alongside the formal establishment of a host of other indigenous PGMs, ranging from the Ba'ath Brigades to the Syrian Resistance.[323] It also

coincided with the growing mobilization and/or importation of a number of foreign Shia PGMs by the IRGC, most of which initially consisted of Iraqi Shia fighters. Prominent Iraqi PGMs that deployed fighters to Syria included the Badr Corps, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Liwa Imam Hussein.[324] Hadi al-Ameri, the commander of Badr, served as Iraq's minister of transportation and thus facilitated the flow of Iraqi PGMs to Syria.[325] Liwa Abu Fadhl al-Abbas, or LAFA, included both local Syrian residents and foreign Iraqi and Lebanese fighters.[326]

As the SAA decayed, the regime resorted to splitting the command of its elite mobilizations and specialized units to leverage their experience across regular divisions.[327] In doing this, it also tasked devoted loyalists within the SAA and *mukhabarat* with forming hybrid civilian-military PGMs loosely affiliated with its command. For example, Suheil al-Hassan of the AFID, having proven both his loyalty and willingness to kill for the regime, was tasked by the commander of the agency with establishing The Tiger Forces, which functioned as a mobile mechanized assault force.[328] Domestic patrons of the regime such as Rami Makhlouf[329] and the loyalist criminal bosses, the Jaber brothers,[330] are often listed as the primary financers of different indigenous PGMs while Iran is believed to finance foreign fighters mobilized by the IRGC.[331] Though the funding sources of PGM factions vary, what matters is that patrons of the regime, in coordination with the security apparatus, consciously mobilized to assist it through the formation of irregular forces.

Following the increased reliance on PGMs, the forces operating within the pro-government camp made a number of important strategic advances in the spring of 2013.[332] Operations focused on holding the line in the capital (and engaging in limited counterassaults in the surrounding areas) while restoring control of the country's western borderlands by securing important terrain throughout Homs and Damascus.[333] For example, the offensive launched in the spring of 2013 carved a path by clearing terrain across the Qalamoun mountains and its adjacent areas that culminated in the reacquisition of

the Syrian-Lebanese border town of Qusayr in May. The assault featured 2,000 Hezbollah fighters, likely of its elite "special forces," and marked the first time the Lebanese group led a military assault within the conflict.[334] The incorporation of PGMs and other exogenous security actors would periodically increase as the regime faced strain.

In spite of recapturing land in western Syria, efforts by the pro-government camp to militarily counter the advance of the rebels increasingly manifested in zero-sum terms, as eastern Syria overwhelmingly remained outside of its control. The regime lost significant territory in Aleppo and Raqqa throughout the winter and spring, coinciding with the deepening expansion of the YPG into Kurdish-inhabited areas. By February 2013, the YPG controlled 80% of "Rojava," a region comprising Afrin, Kobane, and Jazeera that features in Kurdish aspirations for statehood.[335] The transformation of these areas into semi-autonomous cantons effectively signified their territorial consolidation under non-state actors that aspired to connect them to form a contiguous land mass outside the jurisdiction of Damascus. The YPG then moved to secure complete control of the oil fields in the northeast after security forces capitulated in early March.[336]

By mid-2013, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that the SAA had shrunk to half its prewar size.[337] Moreover, ISW estimated that out of a pre-war SAA figure of 220,000 career soldiers, the regime was left with 65,000-75,000 loyal "deployable" troops, only 27,000 of whom were from regular divisions.[338] This severely restricted its supply of forces that could be dispatched to combat settings. At least 70 high-ranking officers from the SAA and security forces had announced their defection through social media, 30 of whom were considered "high profile."[339] Moreover, the regime's withdrawals – even when temporary – from a number of bases in rural areas led to the loss of large quantities of its arsenal. Throughout 2013, insurgent seizures of the Taftanaz Airbase in Saraqeb, the Al-Jarrah Airbase in Aleppo,[340] the military complex and arms depot near

Khan Touman,[341] and the SAA's 38th Division Air Defense Base in southern Daraa[342] led to substantial losses in both positions and weaponry. Between Taftanaz, Al-Jarrah, and Khan Touman, the SAA ceded roughly 20% of its pre-war stock of helicopters, multiple MiG fighter jets, and large inventories of heavy weapons arsenals, rockets, and ammunition.[343] In the latter case, these included 122-mm Grad artillery rockets, 82-mm tank shells, and AT-3 Sagger anti-tank guided missiles.[344]

By mid-2013, the regime was also militarily struggling to keep rebel assaults at bay. A much more coordinated offensive saw the rebels advance further into suburban Damascus. As Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami note:

> By the summer of 2013, better-armed and organised opposition offensives had brought the Damascus front line to the edge of the city centre and only five miles from the presidential palace. For the regime this represented a greater challenge than the brief offensive of the previous summer; besieged in the Ghouta suburbs, rebels had nevertheless established and kept a bridgehead as far as Jobar and Abbassiyeen Square from which they might launch future strikes on the capital's key installations. Repeated regime offensives had failed to dislodge them.[345]

Indeed, the suburbs of Qaboun, Douma, Mo'adimaya, Eastern Ghouta, Adra, Barzeh, Jobar, Hajr al-Aswad, and Yarmouk had all largely fallen to the rebels.[346] By late July, despite non-stop regime bombardment of these areas, the rebels launched an additional phase of the offensive that drove deeper into government-held districts in Jobar, Barzeh, and Qaboun.[347] To underline the growing threat of the insurgency, by August, amid the context of intensified assaults on pro-government positions in Damascus, rebel mortars managed to strike a military convoy carrying the president.[348] Though rebel mortars had in March bombarded central Damascus, placing them within range of headquarters belonging to the Ba'ath Party, AFID, and state television,[349] they had never jeopardized the personal security of the president. Indiscriminate rocket fire, while sporadic, increasingly featured as a rebel tactic employed against urban centers like Damascus and Latakia, the former the political and military capital, and the latter the home to the president's co-religionist base.

Table 1– PGM Use in Syria's COIN Campaign (Phases 1-3)		
Phase	**PGM Involvement**	**Role and Function**
1 (Spring to Fall 2011)	• *Shabiha* embedded in regular SAA units • Emergence of PCs	• *Shabiha* – deniability, counterbalance against regular Sunni SAA units • PCs – Local security/policing in coordination with the security services, intelligence gathering
2 (2012-2013)	• PCs become widespread • Many PCs reorganized into the People's Army and, ultimately, the NDF and various sub-factions • NDF preliminarily active though not yet advertised by state media • Foreign (mainly Iraqi) PGMs begin operating mainly in Damascus	• Semi-defensive missions • Allow SAA to re-allocate personnel to priority fronts • Local knowledge • Holding forces • Filling manpower shortages • NDF – limited offensive deployments • Force augmenters
3 (2013- winter 2014)	• Regime openly advertises its relations to host of semi-official PGMs and foreign Iraqi factions • NDF alone has 60,000 personnel with plans to expand to 100,000 • Foreign PGMs growingly operate outside of vicinity of Damascus	• A mix of offensive and defensive operations • NDF increasingly deployed in counterassaults as infantry and in clear and hold capacity • Hybrid PGMs – specialized operations

By mid-2013, an estimated 65-70% of state territory was now firmly outside the effective control of the pro-government camp.[350] The coercive forces had failed to retain territory in light of their attrition and the growing strength of the rebels. Moreover, defections reached as high as 80% among Sunni personnel in the most affected units.[351] Thus, the reliance on foreign PGMs, namely Iraqi and Lebanese fighters, deepened at this stage of the conflict as personnel shortages increased, the rebels seized larger swathes of land, and the regime's coercive capacity disintegrated.[352] Groups like LAFA, for example, absorbed larger amounts of foreign fighters, alongside other factions, expanding their operations beyond the vicinity of the capital where they were initially active.[353] Similarly, the NDF and other PGMs were rapidly replacing or augmenting SAA divisions on offensive battlefields. The former was estimated to have grown to at least 60,000 by this stage of the conflict.[354]

Phase Four (Spring 2014 – Winter 2015): a Shifting Balance of Power

Despite the combat intensive roles undertaken by a patchwork of PGMs and their successes in western

Syria, from the fall of 2013 until the spring of 2014, the gap between both camps had significantly

been reduced as insurgent groups swelled. By the spring of 2014, opposition fighters, both moderate

and Islamist, were estimated to have numbered between 100,000-120,000,[355] quantitatively placing

them on par with the SAA, which is thought to have possessed less than 125,000 troops in its ranks.[356]

While one force was growing, the other was substantially shrinking.

To make up for SAA shortages and the accelerating shift in the balance of power, the regime

had relied on as many as 100,000 NDF PGM personnel by this stage of the conflict, reinforced by

thousands of other PGM recruits outside of the NDF's structure and anywhere between 3,500-7,000

Hezbollah fighters.[357] General Hussein Hamedani – a senior commander within the IRGC who played

a vital role in developing Syria's PGM landscape – claimed in the spring of 2014 that Iran had already

helped mobilize a domestic Syrian PGM force of at least 70,000 fighters consisting of 42 groups and

128 battalions.[358] In a testimony to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, veteran COIN

scholar and practitioner David Kicullen asserted that even in the best-case ratio of 2:1 pro-government

forces to insurgents, the Assad regime – which now nominally held under 25% of Syrian territory –

fell drastically below the personnel requirements needed to establish a successful COIN campaign.[359]

In June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) launched a sweeping offensive

across Iraq and Syria, further dislodging the regime's COIN efforts. After capturing the Iraqi cities

of Mosul, Bayji, and Tikrit and dissolving the border between Iraq and Syria, ISIS overran Brigade

93 of the SAA's 17th Division in Raqqa,[360] summarily executing hundreds of SAA detainees.[361] It

then captured the nearby Tabqa Airbase and cemented control of most of Deir Ezzor and practically

all of Raqqa,[362] effectively utilizing its transborder protostate, a 56,000 km land mass,[363] to

reinvigorate its expansion into both countries. By the fall of 2014, ISIS grew to preside over a territory

encompassing a third of Iraq and Syria – a landmass roughly the size of Great Britain[364] – while expanding its ranks to at least 31,500 fighters.[365] Moreover, its acquisition of close to half a billion dollars from reserves it seized at Mosul's central bank,[366] combined with its control of oil fields in eastern Syria and western Iraq – which had enabled it to pump out 50,000 barrels per day – gave the group an estimated net worth of $2 billion.[367] This resulted in a substantial spike in its ability to self-finance operations and bankroll recruits. ISIS' capture of hundreds, possibly thousands, of bullet-proof US-made Humvees in northern Iraq also significantly strengthened its capacity on the battlefield,[368] as it enabled the militants to utilize these vehicles to conduct blitzkrieg operations that penetrated Syrian and Iraqi defenses through the use of suicide bombings.[369] The seemingly limitless repository of jihadist ideologues gave the organization's leadership an army of expendable recruits.

While ISIS consolidated control over larger swaths of central, eastern, and northern Syria alongside the Turkish and Iraqi borders, other factions were entrenched in various positions across the country. Syria's borderlands were now overwhelmingly outside of the territorial grasp of pro-government forces.

By the end of 2014, the regime, despite being reinforced by a number of exogenous actors, failed to decisively hold ground in the face of mounting pressure from insurgents that were receiving much greater support from foreign sponsors. Not only had the SAA suffered significant duress, however, the regime faced backlash from a more vocally resentful Alawite community that had grown discontented with the status quo.[370] This sparked a conscription crisis, as evasion of military service soared among Syrians in general and Alawites in particular – a dangerous development for a security elite that depended on the latter as its primary source of military manpower throughout the conflict. The regime responded by raiding universities and setting up checkpoints across areas it governed in search of males to fill its depleted ranks.[371] Overall, half a million Syrians were reported to have been wanted for conscription by December 2014.[372] The SAA's offensive ground force capacity had

depleted to such an extent that, in lieu of its ability to conduct assaults, it had cemented a pattern of occasionally bombing military facilities seized by the rebels in order to hinder their ability to operate captured military hardware.[373]

The regime once again increased its reliance on exogenous security actors as insurgent factions captured ground across the country and it was forced to retrench to an even smaller sliver of land in western Syria. In order to compensate for personnel shortages, it sharply escalated its dependence on PGMs, markedly relying on larger volumes of foreign fighters. This is examined below.

Phase 5 (Spring – Fall 2015): From Insecurity to Near Collapse

Exogenous security assistance reached unprecedented levels in the spring of 2015. At least 125,000 PGM fighters and 5,000 Hezbollah operatives were believed to be involved in reinforcing the regime's COIN campaign during the early stages of this phase.[374] Moreover, dozens of "locally-focused" formations multiplied in tandem with PGMs recruits who operated offensively.[375] In light of its frailty, the regime outsourced operations to such actors while continually dispatching detachments of the Republican Guard, 4th Division, and Special Forces to "reinforce priority fronts" across the country.[376] By February 2015, the regime's degradation was such that two journalists who had recently visited Syria, in an article published by OpenDemocracy, wrote that they had rarely encountered any soldiers throughout their entire 12-day dispatch across 1,200 km of regime-held territories.[377] With the exception of a few "special forces" in Aleppo, the roadblocks they encountered were operated by PGMs.[378]

Despite an outgrowth of PGMs and other exogenous actors (and in spite of the regime's significant territorial retrenchment), the pro-government camp seemed increasingly incapable of launching offensives and retaining ground control. In late March, rebels led by al-Nusra captured the strategic city of Idlib in northern Syria.[379] Then, in early April, ISIS and al-Nusra had jointly besieged

Yarmouk.[380] Although the capital was fortified by a bulwark of pro-government forces, the offensive nevertheless placed both ISIS and al-Nusra within a few kilometers of the presidential palace. Between late April and early May 2015, The Army of Conquest, a new 6,000-strong coalition of Islamist rebels,[381] captured the strategic town of Jisr al-Shughour.[382] The defenses of the SAA's 88th Brigade[383] largely collapsed in the wake of the assault, chaotically retreating from their positions.[384] The insurgents continued the offensive and were narrowly prevented from crossing the barrier at the Al-Ghab plains in Hama that separated Jisr al-Shughour from the Alawite heartland. Increasingly, Latakia, "Assad's Achilles Heel," had been militarily exposed.[385]

Against this backdrop, ISIS had captured the strategic city of Palmyra in Homs,[386] giving it "control of a key route to the capital while cutting supply lines to beleaguered Syrian forces farther east in Deir al-Zour province."[387] The group's largely uncontested access to the desert in central Syria enabled it to navigate across axes, using Homs as a land bridge to expand into its bordering governorates and sustain its own supply lines through Iraqi and Turkish borderlands.[388]

On July 25, after months of setbacks in the aftermath of the rebel seizure of Jisr al-Shughour, Assad acknowledged in a televised speech that the SAA was facing severe manpower shortages, and, owing to these shortages, was forced to withdraw from certain areas to preserve those considered of greater strategic value.[389] The diminution of military manpower was so widespread that the regime even issued an amnesty for deserters.[390] Compounding these shortages was the exhaustion not just of the regular military, elite forces, and Alawite-dominated PGMs, but of the Alawite community at large, which had lost, according to one popular estimate, up to a third of its military-aged men fighting on the frontlines.[391] Scores of others were rendered unable to fight due to the gravity of their injuries. So atrophied was the regime that some observers seriously anticipated either its collapse[392] or its

permanent retrenchment to a so-called "Alawite state,"[393] while others referenced the notion of state partition – both as a prescription and a *de facto* reality.[394]

As a result of the sectarianization of the insurgency and growing SAA losses and fatalities, conscription evasion at times evolved into outright refusal to enlist and fight on distant battlefields. Some Alawite mothers in the mountains adjacent to the coast even reportedly erected roadblocks to prevent regime officers from entering and forcibly conscripting their sons.[395] In light of the regime's desperation, it acquiesced to the reality underlining conscription resistance by creating PGMs strictly mandated to function locally, such as the Coastal Shield Brigades in rural Latakia, thereby permitting large amounts of Alawites to fortify positions on their home turf.[396] Between July and October, the regime established an additional 25 PGM recruitment centres across the Alawite heartland.[397] Similar defensive PGM arrangements were made with other communities who resisted conscription, such as the restive Druze populations in the southern Suweida governorate, some of whom agreed to partner with Damascus after the encroachment into their area of hardline insurgent groups.[398]

The lack of capable and willing indigenous fighters was exacerbated by the departure of many militiamen belonging to Iraqi PGMs who had returned to Iraq to fight ISIS on their soil. To fill the void in fighters, Iran expanded its deployment of IRGC personnel to the frontlines in Syria, as did Hezbollah – which was already stretched thin – while launching new PGM recruitment drives in Iraq[399] and escalating efforts to import foreign Shia PGMs from Afghanistan and Pakistan.[400] By 2016, anywhere between 3,500–20,000 Afghan fighters belonging to the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade were estimated to have been on the frontlines in Daraa, Idlib, Aleppo, and Palmyra as a result of the IRGC's expanded recruitment efforts.[401] These fighters, who consisted of Hazara refugees residing in Iran,[402] were utilized specifically as cannon fodder.[403] Predominantly dispatched as snipers and light infantry, they acted as "barriers for rebel advancement."[404]

Table 2 – PGM Use in Syria's COIN Campaign (Phases 4 and 5)		
Phase	PGM Incorporation	Role/Function
4 (Spring 2014 – Winter 2015)	• More PGM factions are formed • NDF grows to at least 100,00 • Foreign PGMs deployed across the country	• PGMs replacing SAA on offensive missions • Secure/consolidate territory • Clear and hold
5 (Spring 2015 – Fall 2015)	• Local PGMs mushroom o 25 PGM centres open across the coast alone • Afghan Fatemiyoun grow in numbers • Iraqi fighters recruited in new campaign	• Assaults • Holding a defensive line to secure strategic retrenchment • Operating checkpoints

In the summer of 2015, it looked increasingly likely that the regime would fall. Russia, possibly owing to a military assessment provided by Soleimani himself when he visited Moscow that summer,[405] intervened in late September to rescue the regime from collapse amid fresh rebel gains, security force disintegration, and growing PGM fatigue. At the time of its intervention, pro-government forces, according to a report by Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, are believed to have controlled under 16% of Syrian territory.[406] Moscow's support, particularly through air strikes, helped the pro-government camp triple the territories under its control by mid-2018.[407]

At every stage of the conflict, the Assad regime required some form of exogenous security assistance to supplement the official institutional infrastructure of the coercive forces. Between 2011 and 2012, popular committees emerged and expanded, elements of which were then absorbed into the NDF and other PGMs that were formally launched in early 2013. PGMs like the NDF were growingly tasked with offensive deployments. This occurred alongside the regime's overt collaboration with a range of indigenous and non-indigenous PGMs. Between mid-2013 and early 2014, Hezbollah was increasingly directing battles, while IRGC advisors devised strategies, Iraqi PGMs deployed to the frontlines in greater numbers, and Syrian PGMs growingly replaced the SAA in an offensive capacity. By 2015, the IRGC accelerated efforts to import foreign fighters on Assad's behalf, followed by a direct Russian intervention in order to save the regime from collapse. As a result

of a dysfunctional feedback loop, the coup-proofed security forces required external reinforcement at practically every significant stage of the conflict.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to identify the drivers underpinning the employment of PGMs in the post-2011 Syrian conflict. It set out to provide an analytical framework with which the militiafication of the coercive forces could be understood, and, in doing so, attempted to answer the question of why the armed and security forces decayed and how this process unfolded. Both the why and the how proved interconnected, and, as such, both were devoted a fair amount of attention throughout the study.

Chapter 2 presented a review of the literature and addressed the utility of PGMs in COIN campaigns. It discussed how their employment as covert enforces and their value as force multipliers, respectively, enable insecure governments to exercise deniability and fill a void caused by their dwindling coercive capabilities, specifically as a result of declining manpower. Moreover, their ability to deliver local knowledge can strengthen a state's COIN operations by providing valuable insights on insurgent activity, while the formalization and subsequent co-optation of PGMs alongside regular forces creates an aura of legitimacy for governments struggling to repel both armed and ideational challenges to their rule. This chapter explored how literature on state weakness and civil-military affairs have contributed to the scholarly discussion on PGMs and the militiafication of the armed forces. The "civil-military problematique" and the "guardian dilemma" were introduced in order to develop a theoretical framework that sharpens the relationship between coup-proofing, military effectiveness, and the incorporation of PGMs. The theoretical discussion connected the argument's core tenets and delineated how authoritarian rulers often coup-proof their coercive forces to resolve the core predicament at the heart of civil-military configurations, yet in doing so, develop militaries that perform poorly, and thus, are likely to require exogenous support from PGMs during intrastate conflicts.

After engaging with the literature to construct a framework regarding the context in which these armed actors often emerge, Chapter 3 turned to a discussion of the modality of coup-proofing applied by the Syrian president. As the examination of his coup-proofing apparatus demonstrated, Assad utilized a mixture of coup-proofing techniques commonly implemented in authoritarian regimes in order to structurally divide his coercive forces. Sectarian stacking (underlined by the leveraging of familial networks), counterbalancing, and the production of overlapping intelligence agencies which monitor the public and one another fomented deeply dysfunctional forces. The dependence on elite units that acted largely as praetorian guards and the creation of separate chains of command that linked directly back to the ruler limited his coercive machineries' capacity to function autonomously, free from politicization. Together with the enabling of corruption to secure the allegiance of the officer corps and the neglect of their rank-and-file personnel, his coup-proofing efforts formulated overwhelmingly incompetent forces – save for the elite mobilizations, which were more materially and professionally capable. The bulk of his military personnel in particular therefore possessed adequacy neither in training nor morale.

In Chapter 4, an examination of how the vicious cycle between coup-proofing and regime insecurity helped fuel coercive decomposition was explored within the context of the Syrian conflict. Building off the framework laid out in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 demonstrated the role that the coup-proofing tools applied in Syria played in driving the institutional decay of the SAA. In Syria, social stratification within the coercive forces largely took on a sectarianized element, with Alawites often being afforded greater opportunities relative to their Sunni counterparts. This helped motivate the fragmentation of the SAA on a sectarian basis, as most defectors and deserters were demoralized Sunni personnel. This also caused the regime to place greater emphasis on trusted units inordinately stacked with Alawites, including specialized divisions, which suffered greater attrition because of the disproportionate role they were then forced to play. This process was compounded by corruption,

which saw Syrian officers engage in a host of illicit practices. All this detrimentally impacted the regime's COIN campaign. From mid-2012 on, regime insecurity periodically soared, followed by the formal reliance on PGMs and external military allies, such as Iran, Hezbollah, and ultimately, Russia. The latter's intervention rescued the regime from collapse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The utilization of PGMs in intrastate conflict is a dynamic that has received increased attention over the past few decades. Analyzing the role that these actors have played in conflict and post-conflict settings and their security relations with the states in which they operate opens itself up to a myriad of thematic angles and interpretations. A comprehensive understanding of why these actors come about and how they function significantly enhances our understanding of intrastate conflict, particularly in weak states governed by authoritarian regimes.

An inquiry into PGMs also offers a window into how civil-military affairs may determine the response undertaken by authoritarian rulers when faced with challenges to their rule. In this regard, the research presented here underlines the importance of developing more refined examinations of the link between civil-military affairs and the dynamics of COIN campaigns. While there exists a growing body of literature addressing the incentives that drive governments to utilize PGMs during wartime, directions for future research on PGMs should consider inquiring into how political decisions undertaken by governments *prior* to the eruption of armed conflict may impact their inclination towards leveraging these irregular actors. A closer examination into the political processes that lead to the emergence of PGMs is needed. In coup-proofed states, the formulation of dysfunctional coercive institutions may help play a role in precipitating the militiafication of the armed and security forces, yet the employment of PGMs during wartime is also a demonstration of their creativity and adaptiveness.[408] Between authoritarian dysfunction and resilience lies a space in which important analytical insights can be derived and applied to the field of security studies.

Endnotes

[1] Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013). In what has become a seminal text on the Arab uprisings that swept the MENA region, Marc Lynch claims to have coined the term "Arab Spring."

[2] For excellent accounts of the trajectory of the Syrian uprising and its subsequent militarization, see the following: for an early account, see Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising*. 1st ed. (Hurst Publications, 2012). For publications that include the conflict's evolution at an advanced stage, see Nikolaos van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, First (London: I.B. Tauris 2017, 2017 Ibooks Version), and Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019; Ibooks Version).

[3] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," p. 1 http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf

[4] Job defines the regime as "the small state of persons who hold the highest offices in the set and/or are the elite that effectively command the machinery, especially the coercive forces." See Brian Job, *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1992), p. 15.

[5] Jackson defines regime security as the "the condition where governing elites are secure from violent challenges to their rule." See Richard Jackson, in *Contemporary Security Studies*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 187.

[6] Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements*, *1945-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 13.

[7] Robert M. Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime: Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy," *World Politics* 42, no. 3 (April 1990): p. 428

[8] Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, "Pro-Government Militias and Conflict," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, October 26, 2016, p. 3

[9] Ibid

[10] See Barry Buzan, *People, States & Fear: An Agenda for International Security in the Post-Cold War Era* (Colchester, England: European Consortium for Political Research Press, 2007).

[11] Huseyn Aliyev, "Strong Militias, Weak States and Armed Violence: Towards a Theory of 'State-Parallel' Paramilitaries," *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 6 (December 2016): p. 499

[12] Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 1st ed. (Cambridge England: Polity Press, 1999).

[13] For a critical examination of the concept of new wars, see Edward Newman, "The 'New Wars' Debate: A Historical Perspective Is Needed," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 2 (2004): pp. 173-189

[14] Jessica A. Stanton, "Regulating Militias," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 14, 2015): pp. 899-923

[15] Aliyev, "'State-Parallel' paramilitaries," p. 499

[16] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*, cited in Carey, Sabine C. and Neil J. Mitchell, "Pro-Government Militias and Conflict," p.2

[17] For an essential reading on the field of critical security studies, see Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. Routeledge, 2014. Also, for a succinct yet incisive discussion on the current state of critical security studies, see Carl Bjork, "The Field of Security Studies: In Rude Health or a Chronic State of Disrepair?" https://www.e-ir.info/2015/03/18/the-field-of-security-studies-in-rude-health-or-a-chronic-state-of-disrepair/#_ftn1

[18] Frederic Wehrey, "Armies, Militias and (Re)-Integration in Fractured States" (Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 30, 2018), https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/armies-militias-and-re-integration-fractured-states-21525. This is part of a joint initiative between the Italian Institute for International Political Studies and the Carnegie Middle East Center that examines hybrid security orders in fractured Arab states. See https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/10/30/hybridizing-security-armies-and-militias-in-fractured-arab-states-pub-77596 for more information. Also, for an interesting discussion on the study of hybrid security configurations focused not on the state as the referent object, but rather, those impacted by these governing arrangements, see Robin Luckham and Tom Kirk, "Security in Hybrid Political Contexts: An End-User Approach" (Justice and Security Research Programme, October 2012).

[19] Ariel I. Ahram, "Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 3 (October 2016): p. 209. Notably, the first camp is best represented by scholars such as David Kilcullen, Seth Jones, David Ucko, Paul Staniland, and Geraint Hughes, while the second most frequently features academics such as Michael P. Colaresi, Sabine C. Carey, and Neil J. Mitchell.

[20] Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 2015): pp. 850-876

[21] Danny Hoffman, "The Meaning of a Militia: Understanding the Civil Defence Forces of Sierra Leone," *African Affairs* 106, no. 425 (October 2007): pp. 639-662

[22] Jon Strandquist, "Local Defence Forces and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: Learning from the CIA's Village Defense Program in South Vietnam," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 1 (December 12, 2014): pp. 90-113

[23] Goran Peic, "Civilian Defense Forces, State Capacity, and Government Victory in Counterinsurgency Wars," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (January 2014): p. 165. According to Peic:

A CDF is defined as any government-sponsored auxiliary force that meets the following criteria: (1) it is armed; (2) its rank-and-file is populated mainly by civilians; (3) its personnel is local to the region in which it is deployed for duty, and in the case of ethnic

conflicts has been drawn from the same ethnic group as rebels; and (4) the group performs mostly static (i.e., defensive) tasks such as patrols and the protection of local civilians and infrastructure.

[24] Ibid

[25] Moritz Schuberth, "The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs, and Vigilantes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 2 (July 3, 2015): pp. 296-320

[26] Schubertth p. 299. According to Schuberth:
The boundaries of the community can be defined (1) by territory—such as an urban neighbourhood or a village; (2) by blood ties—as in a family or clan; or (3) by a shared identity—like in the case of ethnic groups. Whatever the nature of their community, its demarcation limits the reach of CBAGs. This means that CBAGs do not seek to take over the state, even though they may be instrumentalized or hired by national political actors in order to defend or topple a regime. Hence, the community that serves as referent object for CBAGs is by definition incongruent with the nation state. Rather, the community is a localized subunit of the nation; in some cases, it transcends state boundaries.

[27] Ibid

[28] Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, "Militias in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): p. 756

[29] Ibid

[30] Bruce B. Campbell, "Death Squads: Definition, Problems and Historical Context," in *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability*, ed. Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 1-26.

[31] Eduardo Moncada, "Varieties of Vigilantism: Conceptual Discord, Meaning and Strategies," *Global Crime* 18, no. 4 (September 14, 2017): pp. 403-423

[32] See ibid

[33] Schuberth, p. 6

[34] Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-Defense Forces? How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 4

[35] Sabine C. Carey, Neil J Mitchell, and Will Lowe, "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (March 19, 2013): pp. 249-258

[36] Carey et al., "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence," p. 250

[37] Carey et al., "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence," p. 251

[38] Ibid

[39] Ibid

[40] Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20, no. 1 (2017): pp. 127-147

[41] Carey and Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," p. 130

[42] Carey and Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," p. 137

[43] Ibid

[44] Aliyev "'State-Parallel' paramilitaries,"

[45] Ibid, p. 500

[46] Ibid, p. 499

[47] Schuberth, p. 6

[48] Uğur Üngör, "Shabbiha: Paramilitary Groups, Mass Violence and Social Polarization in Homs," *Violence: An International Journal* 1, no. 1 (April 8, 2020): pp. 59-79. See also Yassin al-Haj Salih, "The Syrian Shabiha and Their State - Statehood & Participation" (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, March 3, 2014), https://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/syrian-shabiha-and-their-state-statehood-participation

[49] Paul Staniland, "Militias, Ideology, and the State," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (March 30, 2015): pp. 770-793

[50] Ibid, p. 771

[51] Ibid, pp. 774-775

[52] Peic

[53] Carey and Mitchell, "Pro-Government Militias and Conflict**,**" p. 4**;** Geraint Hughes, "Militias in Internal Warfare: From the Colonial Era to the Contemporary Middle East," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (March 21, 2016): pp. 201-202

[54] Tobias Böhmelt and Govinda Clayton, "Auxiliary Force Structure: Paramilitary Forces and Progovernment Militias," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 2 (March 28, 2017): pp. 197-237

[55] Hughes, "Militias in internal warfare," p. 202

[56] Ibid, pp. 202-204

[57] Seth G. Jones, "The Strategic Logic of Militia" (RAND, January 2012), https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR913.html. This point is alluded to periodically throughout the paper.

[58] Frank G. Hoffman, "Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 37, no. 2 (2007): p. 83, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2355&context=parameters.

[59] This infrastructure ranges from civilian sympathizers to recruiters, all of whom may play a role in concealing and sheltering insurgents, disseminating propaganda, and often even facilitating logistics for potential operations. In fact, the first chapter of the US counterinsurgency manual emphasizes the significance of identifying insurgents and their objectives, as well as their strategic, tactical, and organizational infrastructure, several times. See Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, December 2006). https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=468442

[60] Jones, pp. 15-17; Stathis N. Kalyvas. 2006. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 107-109.

[61] United States Institute of Peace Special Report 134. "Who Are the Insurgents? Sunni Arab Rebels in Iraq" (United States Institute of Peace, April 2005), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr134.pdf.

[62] Nizar Mohamad, "A Coalition of Negatives: The Case of the Sons of Iraq and the US in Their Counterinsurgency Alliance," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 18, no. 4 (August 2018): pp. 149-176

[63] For a critical discussion presenting an alternative perspective on the application of the "hearts and minds" paradigm, see Hannah Gurman, ed., *Hearts and Minds: A People's History of Counterinsurgency* (New York: New Press, 2013).

[64] Petraeus stressed the need to acknowledge the validity of Sunni grievances and the past mistakes made by the US in its "De-Ba'athification" campaign, which came at the expense of the community. David Petraeus, "How We Won in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/29/how-we-won-in-iraq/

[65] Lora DiBlasi offers a slightly different perspective on the conventional wisdom surrounding PGMs and accountability. While Diblasi agrees that utilizing PGMs enables governments to distance themselves from repression while simultaneously reaping its benefits, she argues that they generally resort to this arrangement only after international rights groups have "named and shamed" them. See Lora DiBlasi, "From Shame to New Name: How Naming and Shaming Creates pro-Government Militias," *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2020): pp. 906-918

[66] Ahram. "Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence"

[67] Ibid, p. 208

[68] Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, "Governments, Informal Links to Militias, and Accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (August 2015): pp. 850-876

[69] Ore Koren, "Means to an End: Pro-Government Militias as a Predictive Indicator of Strategic Mass Killing," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 34, no. 5 (September 1, 2015): pp. 461-484

[70] Campbell et al, p. 6

[71] Campbell et al, p. 17

[72] Carey and Mitchell. "Pro-Government Militias and Conflict," pp. 4-6

[73] Tilly 1978; 1993, cited in Goodwin, p. 12

[74] Stanton; Aliyev; Ahram.

[75] Aliyev "'State-Parallel' paramilitaries," p. 502

[76] Ahram. "Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence."

[77] Michael T. Klare, "The Deadly Connection: Paramilitary Bands, Small Arms Diffusion, and State Failure," in *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[78] Robert H. Bates, *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure IN Late-Century Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[79] Bates, p. 5

[80] The arguments in the preceding paragraph are also outlined in Carey and Mitchell, "Pro-government Militias and Conflict," p. 4. Other arguments on the link between state weakness and PGMs are surveyed within their article.

[81] Robert I. Rotberg, *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

[82] Ibid p. 4

[83] While a comprehensive theoretical discussion assessing the relationship between PGMs and state weakness is important, it is outside the scope of this paper, as the variables required to sufficiently assess this relationship are difficult to operationalize given the parameters of this research project.

[84] For an excellent overview of the interdisciplinary field of civil-military relations, Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Civil–Military Relations," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, January 2010, pp. 1-23

[85] Ibid

[86] Peter D. Feaver, "The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control," *Armed Forces & Society* 23, no. 2 (January 1, 1996): pp. 149-178

[87] R. Blake McMahon and Branislav Slantchev, "The Guardianship Dilemma: Regime Security through and from the Armed Forces," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 2 (May 2015): pp. 297-313

[88] Ibid, p. 297

[89] Feaver, p. 149

[90] For an excellent discussion on the nature of civil-military relations in democracies, see Thomas C. Bruneau and Scott D. Tollefson, *Who Guards the Guardians and How: Democratic Civil-Military Relations* (Univ of Texas Press, 2006).

[91] Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[92] Reiter and Stam. These claims are outlined on pages 58-60 and are explored in great detail throughout the chapter.

[93] For a discussion, see Dan Reiter, "Avoiding the Coup-Proofing Dilemma: Consolidating Political Control While Maximizing Military Power," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 3 (June 2020): pp. 312-331

[94] Abel Escribà-Folch, Tobias Böhmelt, and Ulrich Pilster, "Authoritarian Regimes and Civil–Military Relations: Explaining Counterbalancing in Autocracies," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 37, no. 5 (September 2019): pp. 559-579

[95] Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Böhmelt, "Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing? On the Relationship between Regime Type and Civil-Military relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8, no. 4 (October 10, 2012): pp. 355-372

[96] For a counter-intuitive argument to the conventional wisdom regarding the functionality of counterbalancing, see Erica De Bruin, "Preventing Coups d'État: How Counterbalancing Works," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (March 7, 2017): pp. 1433-1458.

Citing 15 separate cases, De Bruin argues that counterbalancing works not by creating barriers to coordination between the coercive forces, but by incentivizing some soldiers to resist attempted coups.

[97] Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca (N.Y.): Cornell University Press, 2015).

[98] Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Böhmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967–99," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 28, no. 4 (September 2011): pp. 331-350

[99] Ibid

[100] The term "militiafication" has been used most commonly among Middle East analysts and observers to describe the multiplication of irregular PGMs in the state's security landscape. This often also denotes the breakdown of the regular forces and either their transformation, supplementation, or replacement by irregular militia formations loosely tied to the central government. See, for example, Charles Lister and Dominic Nelson, "All the President's Militias: Assad's Militiafication of Syria" (Middle East Institute, December 14, 2017), https://www.mei.edu/publications/all-presidents-militias-assads-militiafication-syria. See also Robin Beaumont and Arthur Quesnay, "The Return of the State and Inter-Militia Competition in Northern Iraq" (Noira Research, June 2018), https://noria-research.com/the-return-of-the-state-and-inter-militia-competition-in-northern-iraq/.

[101] Jonathan Michael Powell, "Coups and Conflict: A Coup-Proofing Paradox," *Coups and Conflict: The Paradox of Coup-Proofing* (dissertation, 2012), https://uknowledge.uky.edu/polysci_etds/3/. Powell refers to the "ethnic purging" of particular groups from the armed and security forces and discusses it within the context of coup-proofing and civil war. This is referred to periodically throughout his dissertation.

[102] Hughes, "Militias in internal warfare," p. 196

[103] Eliezer Be'eri, "The Waning of the Military Coup in Arab Politics," *Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 1 (1982): p 70, https://doi.org/10.1080/00263208208700496.

[104] Edward Luttwak, *Coup D'état a Practical Handbook*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[105] Ibid

[106] Eric Pace, "The Syria Take-Over," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1970, https://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/21/archives/the-syria-takeover-countrys-propensity-for-coups-linked-to-major.html.

[107] "Iraq's Bloody Political History," *Al Jazeera*, February 4, 2008, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2008/02/04/iraqs-bloody-political-history/

[108] James Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999): p. 133

[109] Ibid

[110] Ibid

[111] Ibid

[112] Ibid, p. 135

[113] Michael Makara, "Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring," *Democracy and Security* 9, no. 4 (October 17, 2013): pp. 342-343

[114] Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2004): p. 143.

[115] Prominent minorities which were encouraged to join the military in larger numbers included Ismai'lis, Druze, and Alawites.

[116] The secretive Alawite faith significantly deviates from mainstream Islam. Alawism is a unique "amalgam of beliefs, incorporating elements of Christianity, Gnosticism, Zoroastrianism and Phoenician paganism." While the group's religious and social customs are far from monolithic, it is commonly perceived as a "faith [that] does not encourage pilgrimages or fasts, has no mosques, regards prayer as unnecessary and maintains rituals with strong Christian overtones, such as the drinking of consecrated wine Ben Macintyre, "Ghostly Sect Stalks Syria's Future," *The Weekend Australian*, June 9, 2012, https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/alawites/newsstory/bba1b5239aebfa2ed1c5b1b8d8d00b0e?sv=40d28e400a01341b125ea6c3705e8e00. Although the above description is not entirely accurate, it indeed encapsulates how the sect is generally perceived by Syria's other ethnoconfessional communities. It is worth noting that while many Sunnis consider them apostates, the Alawites are regarded by both Sunnis and Shias as *ghulat*—extremists whose veneration of the fourth caliph, Ali, transgresses the acceptable theological parameters of Islam. For an insightful primer on Syria's Alawites, See Leon T. Goldsmith, *Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace* (London: Hurst, 2015).

[117] Oded Haklai, "A Minority Rule over a Hostile Majority: The Case of Syria," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 6, no. 3 (2000): p. 32

[118] Historically "the process of Alawi subordination and isolation was intensified under Ottoman rule…[as] the 'heretical' Alawis were not recognized as a sect of Islam, nor as a separate religious category; they were considered inferior to the non-Muslim sects, and were subjected to the Sharia law and courts, which were dominated by religious Sunnis". Furthermore, "a special tax was imposed on them and they were subject to social discrimination and physical harassment," generally working on land belonging to Sunni landlords for miserable wages. See p. 31 in ibid

[119] Having faced a history of persecution under political and religious figures who had adhered to mainstream Sunni Islam, the Alawites tended to overwhelmingly support movements centered on promoting secularism. Like other religious minorities in Syria, to them, "Arab nationalism's potential strength was its inclusive nature, the possibility that Sunni and Shia, Christians and Muslims, urban and rural populations would all identify together as members of the Arab Nation". See Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, p. 9

[120] Andrew Rathmell, "Syria's Intelligence Services: Origins and Development," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 16, no. 2 (1996), https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/jcs/article/view/11815/12636. See also "Syria: The Roots of Tyranny," *Al Jazeera English*, March 15, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/al-jazeera-world/2017/3/15/syria-the-roots-of-tyranny.

[121] Haklai, p. 33

[122] Ibid

[123] Nir Rosen, who has reported extensively on the Alawites, articulates this point rather concisely:
Minorities, especially Alawites, later saw the ruling Baath party and its pan-Arab ideology as a way to transcend narrow sectarian identities, while state employment and the military offered opportunities for social advancement and an escape from poverty. See Nir Rosen, "Assad's Alawites: The Guardians of the Throne," *Al Jazeera English*, October 10, 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/20111010122434671982.html.

[124] This paper recognizes that the social, political, and regional climate in which Hafez ascended to power is far more nuanced. However, a comprehensive exploration is beyond the scope of this thesis' intended exploration. It therefore chooses as its focal point an emphasis on the ethnoconfessional and ideological context in which the Assad dynasty emerged in order to set the stage for the ensuing discussion.

[125] For a unique and insightful account of the Corrective Movement, see Faysal Mohamad, "How Hafez Al Assad Hijacked the Baath Party – and the State – 50 Years Ago," *TRT World*, November 18, 2020, https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/how-hafez-al-assad-hijacked-the-baath-party-and-the-state-50-years-ago-41587

[126] Significantly, all five members of the junta hailed from minority sects, three of whom were Alawite.

[127] See Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, p. 12. Assad instituted a series of policies meant, among other things, to co-opt the Sunni bourgeoisie while targeting the army and purging the institution of radical leftists and those who may pose a source of opposition to his rule.

[128] Those who opposed the new regime could be found across the spectrum, hailing from circles as diverse as leftist, liberal, and Islamist groups. Significantly, the independent socialist faction of the Ba'ath Party – the party through which Hafez claimed his legitimacy – also opposed the rule of the new president and became marginalized as a result. This branch consisted of left-wing ideologues who were then forced underground to escape persecution. See Hans Gunter Lobmeyer, "Al-Dimuqratiyya Hiyya Al-Hall? The Syrian Opposition at the End of the Asad Era," in *Contemporary Syria: Liberalization between Cold War and Cold Peace*, ed. Eberhard Kienle (London: Tauris, 1997), pp. 81-96 for more detail on the various Syrian political opposition groups that remained after the end of the Cold War.

[129] Mohammad Dibo, "Assad's Secular Sectarianism," *OpenDemocray*, November 27, 2014, https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/mohammad-dibo/assad%27s-secular-sectarianism.

[130] Ibid

[131] Hicham Bou Nassif, "'Second-Class': The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): pp. 626-649, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1053604.

[132] Bou Nassif, "Second Class," p. 632

[133] Fabrice Balanche, "Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018): p. 8, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war-geopolitical-study.

[134] Ibid

[135] Kheder Khaddour, "Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal" (Carnegie Middle East Center, November 4, 2015), https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/11/04/assad-s-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal-pub-61449.

[136] Emily Hawthorne, "Why Syria's Government Has Survived the War" (Stratfor, March 13, 2016), https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/why-syrias-government-has-survived-war.

[137] Ibid

[138] Gilbert Achcar, *People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, First (University of California Press, 2013), p. 173

[139] Ibid

[140] Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria Revolution from Above* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 70

[141] Achcar, p. 173

[142] Hinnebusch, *Revolution from Above*, p. 86

[143] Ibid, p. 73

[144] Ibid, p. 73

[145] Patrick Seale (with the assistance of Maureen McConville), *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 424

[146] Seale, p. 426

[147] Ibid, p. 319

[148] During his attempted coup, Rif'at's forces reached Kafr Sousa, a prominent neighbourhood, located just a few kilometers away central Damascus. Rif'at retreated only after his campaign reached its pinnacle in an intense standoff with his brother, in which his Defense Companies were outmanned by those commanded by the president. After multiple forces close to Hafez – including the SAA's elite units – were mobilized to neutralize the Defense Companies, several of Rif'at's troops, recognizing that they were outpowered, split from the mutiny and defected. The Special Forces, 1st Division, 3rd Division, and Republican Guard each played a role in blocking Rif'at's attempted mutiny. However, the Special Forces were the most consequential in rapidly deploying as a counterweight to Rif'at's forces.

[149] Achcar, p. 179

[150] "Syria's Elite Military Units: Keys to Stability and Succession" (Central Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Assessment, December 22, 2016), p. 1, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp88t00096r000500590001-3

[151] Ibid, p. 9

[152] "Syria's Praetorian Guards: A Primer," vol. 2 (Middle East Forum and the United States Committee for a Free Lebanon, 2000). https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0008_s2.htm

[153] "Syria's Elite Military Units," p. 9

[154] Hicham Bou Nassif, *Endgames: Military Response to Protest in Arab Autocracies* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 128

[155] Hanna Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 227

[156] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, pp. 132-133. See also Batatu, p. 327. Batatu notes the following:
Out of the thirty-one officers whom Asad singled out between 1970 and 1997 for prominent or key posts in the armed forces, the elite military units, and the intelligence and security networks, no fewer than nineteen were drawn from his 'Alawite sect, including eight from his own tribe and four others from his wife's tribe; and of the latter twelve, as many as seven from kinsmen closely linked to him by ties of blood or marriage.

[157] Achcar, p. 174

[158] "Syria's Praetorian Guards: A Primer". One common story surrounding Haydar's arrest is that after he had voiced his objection to the idea of presidential succession in front of his officers, the news inevitably made its (via informants) back to Hafez, who then ordered the MID to arrest him. He is believed to have been imprisoned for six months. See "حافظ الاسد تخلص من اللواء علي حيدر لأنه سخر من بشار [Hafez Al-Asad Takhallasa Min Al-Liwa' 'Ali Haydar Li-Annahu Sakhira Min Bashshar: Hafiz Al-Asad Got Rid of General 'Ali Haydar Because He Mocked Bashshar]," *Beirut Observer*, January 22, 2013, https://www.beirutobserver.com/2013/01/2013-01-22-23-17-18/.

[159] Seale, p. 432

[160] Joseph Holliday, "The Syrian Army: Doctrinal Order of Battle" (Institute for the Study of War, February 2013): p. 8, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/SyrianArmy-DocOOB.pdf.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid, p. 6

[163] In fact, out of the between four and seven coup plots thought to be hatched against Hafez in the first decade and a half of his presidency, no less than three were led by Alawites. See Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, pp. 124-127

[164] Lina Khatib and Lina Sinjab, "Syria's Transactional State: How the Conflict Changed the Syrian State's Exercise of Power." (Chatham House., October 2018): p. 7, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-10-syrias-transactional-state-khatib-sinjab.pdf.

[165] Ibid

[166] Khatib and Sinjab, p. 7

[167] See Rathmell

[168] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, p. 155

[169] "By All Means Necessary!" (Human Rights Watch, December 2011): p. 86. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1211webwcover_0.pdf.

[170] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, p. 155

[171] Seale, p. 341

[172] Achcar, p. 174

[173] Khatib and Sinjab, p. 8

[174] See Nada Mohamed-Aly, "Walls Have Ears: An Analysis of Classified Syrian Security Sector Documents" (The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, April 2019), https://syriaaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/Walls-Have-Ears-English.pdf.

[175] Faysal Mohamad

[176] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, p. 154

[177] Reva Bhalla, "Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis" (Stratfor, May 5, 2011), https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/making-sense-syrian-crisis-0.

[178] Makara, p. 348

[179] Ibid

[180] Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: from 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?," *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (January 2012): p. 99

[181] Hawthorne

[182] Hinnebusch, "'authoritarian upgrading,'" p. 99

[183] Juan Cole, "Syria: Al-Assad Family's Massive Stolen Wealth in Panama Papers Helps Explain Revolution," *Informed Comment*, March 2, 2016, https://www.juancole.com/2016/04/syria-al-assad-familys-massive-stolen-wealth-in-panama-papers-helps-explain-revolution.html. According to Cole:
"The al-Assad clan had opportunities to benefit from insider trading practices, given that they controlled government economic policy, and to receive business licenses and contracts. Already in the time of Hafez al-Assad, his propensity for promoting his friends and relatives inspired other members of his junta to do likewise."

[184] Hinnebusch, "'authoritarian upgrading,'" p. 99

[185] Danny Makki, "The Rami Makhlouf Saga Poses a Dangerous Challenge for Assad" (Middle East Institute, May 6, 2020), https://www.mei.edu/publications/rami-makhlouf-saga-poses-dangerous-challenge-assad

[186] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, pp. 147-151

[187] Khatib and Sinjab, p. 10

[188] "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: the Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution" (International Crisis Group, July 6, 2011): p. 27, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/108-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vi-the-syrian-people-s-slow-motion-revolution.pdf.

[189] "Syria's Assad 'Reshuffles Security Chiefs," *UPI*, October 21, 2010, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2010/10/21/Syrias-Assad-reshuffles-security-chiefs/89111287688825/ and "A Reshuffling of Syria's Security, Intelligence Leaders" (Stratfor, September 30, 2008), https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/reshuffling-syrias-security-intelligence-leaders.

[190] "Syria: Alleged Coup Plot Leads to Military Reshuffle" (Stratfor, July 11, 2008), https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/syria-alleged-coup-plot-leads-military-reshuffle.

[191] "Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East," pp. 27-29

[192] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, pp. 137-152.

[193] Ibid, p. 151

[194] Cited in Bou Nassif, "Second-Class," p. 637

[195] Anthony H. Coredesman, With the Assistance of Aram Nerguizian, and and Ionut C. Popescu., "Israel and Syria: The Military Balance and Prospects of War" (Center for Strategic and International Studies in cooperation with Praeger Security International; Greenwood Publishing Group, n.d.): pp. 166-172

[196] This point is mentioned periodically throughout the report. See ibid.

[197] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, p. 137

[198] Ibid

[199] Ibid, p. 133

[200] Leela Jacinto, "'The Enforcer' Who Heads Syria's Dreaded Army Division," *France 24*, January 3, 2012, https://www.france24.com/en/20120301-enforcer-who-heads-syria-army-fourth-division-maher-bashar-assad.

[201] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Assad's Brother, the Muscle behind the Throne," *Reuters*, July 18, 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-assad-brother-idINDEE86H08B20120718

[202] Bou Nassif, *Endgames*, pp. 209-212

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By late 2011 the protest movement had morphed into an armed rebellion in the city of Homs. People were divided along sectarian lines, and Alawite popular committees rushed to arm themselves as armed insurgents in adjacent Sunni neighborhoods were overrunning government checkpoints. When the government decided to recapture opposition strongholds in Homs in early 2012, these impromptu militias helped guide government forces in their assault. The militias later took control of many checkpoints in the recaptured areas and around the city. It is unclear whether the involvement of these paramilitary units was of a strategic necessity or convenience, but it was certainly a boon to government forces. After Homs, as the war expanded to most of Syria's urban centers, the struggle became more sectarian.

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The inability of each side to prevail outright in military terms is reflected in the numbers, particularly the correlation of forces. Syrian regime forces of all kinds, including foreign allies, number between 190,000 and 341,000, while opposition forces (both Arab and Kurdish, and including foreign fighters) number between 135,000 and 211,000. Based on these ranges, the best-case force ratio for the regime is roughly 2.5 to 1, and the best case for the rebels is about 1.1. Given Syria's overall population size of 22 million, this leaves the government far short of the traditional 3:1 superiority for victory in a conventional conflict, and with only about half the ratio of 20 counterinsurgents per 1000 population that is traditionally expected for success in a counterinsurgency campaign. The rebels have even less ability to prevail in a conventional conflict, though they are somewhat more likely to achieve success via a protracted insurgent strategy

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