

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SYRIAN MILITARY'S "FERVENT SUPPORT" OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD

Distinct from its regional counterparts, the elite Syrian military has withstood mounting strife and domestic unrest since the Arab uprisings ignited in Dar'a in mid-March 2011. Since then, many inside Syria, within the region, and in the West have predicted the demise of the Alawite regime. It is quite apparent why many believed that Bashar al-Assad's days were numbered. By the summer of 2011, many of al-Assad's Arab counterparts had been removed from office. Tunisia's Ben Ali went into exile in Saudi Arabia; Egypt's Hosni Mubarak faced trial for crimes against his countrymen; Muammar Gaddafi was killed by street fighters after they pulled him from a ditch; and Yemen's Ali Saleh was forced to abdicate the throne to seek medical treatment in Saudi Arabia. To many inside and outside of Syria, al-Assad was the next dictator-domino to fall. Events in and around Syria seemed to support this prediction. What began as isolated, peaceful, and chaotic protests in early March 2011 morphed into nationwide, violent, and unified protests toward the end of summer. Moreover, by the end of 2011, the Alawite security apparatuses were exhausted; defections began to rise; fissures within the Alawite community spiked; the country's treasury was depleted; and regional and international actors alike began to call for al-Assad's departure. The Alawite military could have easily replaced al-Assad with another Alawite dictator (or a puppet Sunni leader) in an attempt to appease the crowds. However, against all odds, the military's elite, dominated by Alawite officers, displayed *fervent support* for the regime's policies.

The task of explicating the Syrian military's response presents a host of problems and is likely a fundamental reason why it is little studied or understood. The regime is secretive, opaque, and oversees a highly controlled police state. With power highly centralized in this authoritarian state, al-Assad and a handful of other Ba'ath Party leaders in the regime's inner circle have employed state security services, in combination with

military units, to brutally stamp out demonstrations. With fabrications on both sides, incomplete coverage by foreign media, and blame cast on the meddling of outside players, including Israel, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, the West, and militant Islamists, the long-term decision-making calculus of the military remains an open question. So far, however, military elites have staunchly supported the regime, calculating that there is little to gain and much to lose from switching sides.

Background and Timeline of the Uprising

Syria is a cauldron of disparate people, religions, histories, and interests. For centuries, it has been fought over by great powers, religions, and ethnic groups. Maps have been drawn and redrawn; towns populated, razed, and repopulated again. Architectural antiquities stand next to modern structures. They are a people with a short history of nationalism undergirded by a time-worn foundation of ethnic and religious differences. It is home to Muslims, Christians, and Jews; Alawites, Druze, Turkomans, Circassians, and Kurds; Ba'athism, Islamism, pan-Arabism, and Westernism. Sects have both coexisted and competed for centuries.

Syria's social uprising was birthed and shaped by this heterogeneous setting. The initial pangs of societal frustration within Syria had less to do with sectarian and religious conflict and more to do with a lackluster economy, a repressive police state, and limited political freedoms. Additionally, the grievances of protesters at the beginning of the Syrian revolution were characterized by the levels of relative deprivation separating the poor from the rich, the countryside from the cities, and the youth from the older generations. As the revolution moved into the latter half of 2011, however, the initial grievances (economic, political, relative deprivation) gave way to deep-rooted and historical ethnic and sectarian strife. Finally, what was initiated as a domestic conflict morphed into a chess game between regional and international powers seeking to further their interests. By early 2012, the social uprising had evolved into a civil war with little chance of reconciliation.

The social uprising in Syria has morphed through several phases since its beginnings in March 2011. For the purposes of highlighting the military's decision-making calculus during this period of social upheaval, I will expound upon four of these phases. Phase I occurred from January to late March 2011. Protests during this phase were sporadic, small, unorganized, and mostly peaceful. Although a few gatherings took place in Syria's capital, Damascus, the hub of protests centered primarily in and around the southern city of Dar'a. The protesters demanded multifarious changes to the government, yet their petitions did not include the replacement of the

regime. Many still revered al-Assad. The problem lay with his government, not with the young reformer himself, they posited. In this inchoate stage of the uprising, the government's response was mostly decentralized and uncoordinated. Like other Arab regimes during this period, the regime offered an assortment of carrots and sticks to appease the protesters and dissuade further unrest. The state media widely dismissed the protests as spawned by agitators and outside meddlers who despised the Syrian people. The military played a limited role in this phase. Because the protests were small and isolated, this was a matter that the police and internal security apparatuses attempted—and failed—to handle.

The social uprising moved into a second phase beginning late March through July 2011. Popular protests spread from the restive Dar'a province in the south and engulfed most of the country. Protesters began targeting the key cities of Aleppo and Damascus. Because of the heavy-handed response of the security forces in March, many demonstrators began calling for the removal of al-Assad. Statues of the "lion of Damascus" began to topple.¹ In reaction to the spreading popular unrest, the government's actions became more centralized and repressive. Although al-Assad's regime continued to offer concessions to the protesters, it relied more heavily upon its security services to squash the rebellion. Force, not appeasement, was becoming more attractive. The growing magnitude of the protests also necessitated the intervention of the Armed Forces across the country.

From August to December 2011, the revolution entered a decisive phase. The protests were no longer isolated and peaceful. Many protesters offered their support to organized political and military opposition groups (the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army, respectively). Calls for the end of al-Assad's regime became more vehement. Protests engulfed Aleppo and Damascus. Opposition groups hoped to destroy the Alawite regime's informal alliance with the cities' merchant classes. In response, Syria's military took up a nationwide operation to crush the protests, typically one city or town at a time. This was a pivotal phase for the military. As 2011 drew to an end, the military witnessed increasing casualties and losses on the battlefield. Defections among their ranks increased. Fissures in the Alawite community became apparent. The Alawite-led military faced a huge challenge in maintaining the loyalty or acquiescence of its Sunni-dominated rank-and-file, quelling a mounting insurrection and deterring external intervention. In the Middle East as well as internationally, there was an avalanche of calls for al-Assad to step down. Many from both inside and outside of Syria predicted that the fall of al-Assad was inevitable.

Phase IV clearly demonstrated the military's fervent support for al-Assad despite rising internal and external pressures to distance itself from

the regime. Starting in January 2012, the military decided upon a strategy of overwhelming military force to squash the opposition movement. Instead of seeking to restore law and order to Syria's periphery, the military embarked on a strategy of wanton destruction. Towns were razed. Civilian casualties ballooned. Syrians fled the country in droves. The Alawite-led military believed this year-long struggle was now a matter of survival. There could be no compromise. The strong would do what they could, and the weak would suffer what they must.² The battle gradually deteriorated into a sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Alawites. The bulk of Syria's other minorities (Druze, Christians, Kurds) stood on the sidelines, watching to see who would prevail. This was no longer a conflict centered on economic and political grievances; it had quickly morphed into a civil war in which many Syrians became more concerned with ethnic and family affiliations than with political or economic interests. Outside actors also began meddling with Syria's civil war. Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia supported the Alawite regime, while the Gulf states and the West supported the opposition. Money and weapons flooded the battlefield.

At any point during the social uprising, the Syrian military (or a faction within the military) could have attempted to remove al-Assad from office. Military coups had taken place in Syria in the past, and there was both motive and opportunity for a coup to occur in 2011–2012. However, through all four phases of the Syrian revolution, the military demonstrated fervent support for al-Assad. With little to gain and much to lose, the military casted its lot with the al-Assad regime due to its low interest in overturning the status quo paired with the strict restraints imposed by the al-Assad regime.

Phase I: Protests Begin, Dar'a Fumes, the Government Downplays, the Military Watches (January to Late March 2011)³

Arab leaders love to chide US policymakers for how little they understand the events in the Middle East. In many cases, these criticisms are well substantiated, but January 2011 was not one of these. During a *Wall Street Journal* interview in January 2011, to a question on whether the social upheaval spreading through Tunisia and Egypt would engulf Syria, President al-Assad responded with a curt "no." Despite more challenging domestic circumstances than those in Tunisia and Egypt, al-Assad asserted that Syria would remain stable because the regime was "closely linked to the beliefs of the people."⁴ While hindsight clearly reveals this to be a significant misunderstanding of his own people on al-Assad's part, it is worth exploring what informed his statement.

Carsten Wieland describes the following variables as Syria's traditional sources of domestic stability: pro-Palestinian rhetoric, pan-Arab rhetoric, secularism, inclusion of religious minorities, social balance, and a ubiquitous security state.⁵ A cornerstone of the al-Assad dynasty's legitimacy has been the alignment of its foreign policy with public opinion. Syrians pride themselves on their resistance to Israel, their defiance of the West, and their role as advocates for displaced Palestinians. Unlike other Arab leaders, al-Assad could proudly assure his people that he was not a mere lackey of the West. Many Syrians also tolerated the Alawite regime because they viewed it as the safest option to maintain internal security. While many among the majority Sunni Arab group (66 percent) chafed under the minority rule of Alawites (a mere 12 percent of the population), Syria's other minority groups (Kurds 8 percent and Christians/Druze/Isma'ilis 4 percent) accepted the Alawites' monopolization of power as a guard against a return to sectarian and religious violence.⁶ They had witnessed the devastation of civil war in Lebanon and Iraq and wanted to avoid a similar escalation in violence. Furthermore, secular Sunnis appreciated the Ba'ath Party's lack of tolerance toward political and militant Islamists. Finally, Syrians had come to view al-Assad as something of a benevolent dictator. Al-Assad did not flaunt his political power or his wealth; rather, he described himself as a man of the people. Many described him as calm, humble, sympathetic, and wielding no sense of entitlement.⁷ He requested that his government remove posters of his image across Syria and even ordered the state media to stop glorifying his father, Hafiz al-Assad, and reduce its use of hyperbole in describing the effectiveness of Syria's state policies. Additionally, many of Syria's poor received generous health care, subsidized gas, and free education. Oftentimes, the government would purchase farmers' crops at twice the market value.⁸ Many Syrians tolerated al-Assad and his regime not because they believed they couldn't do any better, but because they feared they would fare much worse in his absence.

The aforementioned list seems to support al-Assad's claim to the *Wall Street Journal* about the regime's close link to the beliefs of its people. However, there was a quiet unease growing among the members of the Alawite regime concerning the unrest that was creeping toward Damascus. On January 26, Hassan Ali Akleh, a peasant from the Kurdish city of al-Hasakah, set himself on fire to demand government reforms. In a most likely unrelated instance, a group of 20 people gathered in Damascus on February 2 in solidarity with the protest movement taking place in Egypt. Organizers tried to assemble a "Day of Rage" on social media from February 4 to 5, but their attempts failed. Two weeks later, on February 17, a large demonstration of 1,500 assembled in the al-Hamidiyah *Souq*

(marketplace) in Damascus in denouncement of a policeman's beating of a local shop owner. The Minister of Interior quickly arrived on the scene, promised justice, and dispersed the crowd. On February 23, the first fissures in a seemingly united Parliament became apparent when a member proposed that Syria's antiquated "Emergency Laws," which had been in place since 1963, be reviewed. This political stunt surprised the regime and was quickly voted down by the other parliamentarians.

The protests, though small in scale, were quite alarming to the Syrian regime as well as to a majority of its people. Syria's garrison state simply did not tolerate any forms of popular opposition against the regime. Fresh in many Syrians' minds was the government's merciless response to protests in Hama in 1982, which resulted in the deaths of 10,000 to 30,000 Syrians.

The confluence of historical events that took place in March further raised the regime's concern over the nascent protests. The object of many Syrians' anger, the Ba'ath Party, had been formed 48 years ago on March 8, 1963. It so happened that March 12 was the seventh anniversary of a violent protest in the Kurdish town of al-Qamishli. Kurdish and Arab youth rioted in the aftermath of a disputed soccer game, and it culminated in the regime killing 30 Kurds and arresting hundreds of others. Finally, March was the anniversary of Lebanon's March 8th and 14th movements in 2005 after the Syrian-planned assassination of Lebanon's prime minister, al-Hariri, in 2005. Anniversaries can be a powerful catalyst for social upheaval. In the context of the popular uprisings taking place across the Arab world at that time, these anniversaries proved to be a perfect storm to throw Syria into open turmoil.

Cognizant of current regional events as well as these anniversaries, al-Assad's regime endeavored to diffuse social upheaval before it began. In February, the government increased subsidies on heating fuel, created a social security fund for the poor, reduced taxes on everyday goods, and promoted government employment.⁹ On March 7, the Ministry of Social Issues and Work informed all Syrian governorates that they would have to treat Syrian Kurds, thought of as foreigners, as true Syrians in matters relating to work and employment.¹⁰ Al-Assad also announced a large irrigation project in the northeast (Kurdish area) to alleviate drought conditions.¹¹ The next day, President al-Assad issued a legislative decree granting amnesty for crimes Syrians committed before March 7. Syria's state media hailed these decrees as further examples of al-Assad's benevolent rule in Syria and Syria's superiority over other Arab countries.

Oftentimes, the course of history is driven by relatively minor events. For Syria, a seemingly inconsequential event in Dar'a in early March would have historical consequences. Twenty-five fourth-graders were arrested by

the police after they chanted “The people want to topple the regime”¹² during recess. Instead of brushing this episode aside as a moment of tomfoolery, the security services whisked the children away to Damascus and tortured them. When the childrens’ families petitioned Dar’a’s chief of municipal secret service for leniency, he reportedly retorted: “Forget your children. Go sleep with your wives and make new ones or send them to me and I’ll do it.”¹³ Although this quote was most likely shaped to create a narrative of police intransigence, it fueled the flames of discontent in many of Syria’s rural communities.

March 15, 2011, was the first significant day of protests in Syria. Protesters labeled it as Syria’s Day of Rage to convey dissatisfaction with the status quo. A Facebook page devoted to starting a protest movement in Syria garnered 40,000 followers by early March, most of them youth. On March 15, thousands of protesters congregated in al-Hasakah, Dar’a, Dayr az-Zawr, and Hama. A smaller coterie of protesters roamed the quarters of Damascus. The protests were sporadic and tenuous. Tension about the regime’s pending response was in the air. People chanted “God, Syria, liberty,” “Syrians will not be humiliated,” and “Where are you, O, Syrian?”¹⁴ The next day, a small congregation of protesters demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Interior in Damascus to demand the release of certain prisoners. The government dispersed the crowds and arrested an unknown number of protesters. In Dar’a, the government wielded a heavier hand. In clashes with the police, four protesters were killed and dozens of others wounded and detained.

Protests flared again on Friday, March 18. On this “Day of Dignity,” many Syrians learned about the children in Dar’a being arrested and tortured. In Dar’a, roughly 200,000 took to the streets to mourn for the dead and call for reforms and an end to corruption. Over the next several days, protests raged in Damascus, Homs, Baniyas, al-Qamishli, and Dayr az-Zawr; however, the most aggressive contestation continued to center on Dar’a. In this restive southern city, protesters grew increasingly violent. Men tore down a statue of Hafiz al-Assad. They also set afire the local Ba’ath Party headquarters and a local branch of Rami Makhlof’s cell phone company, Syriatel.¹⁵ The government responded by dispatching more police to Dar’a, and on March 19, the government sealed the city off.

During the first phase of Syria’s popular uprising, the government responded to protests in a familiar pattern. The state’s media conducted a public relations campaign to discredit the protests as meddling from outside powers. The *Al-Watan* newspaper ran an editorial that suggested that the Israeli Ministry of Defense had incited the protests by way of text messaging to thousands of Syrians. Other articles blamed the United

States. Spokesmen for the Syrian government downplayed the protests as Facebook failures or as ploys from agitators who wished to tarnish the valid claims of peaceful demonstrators. Security officers on the street chided demonstrators for their nearsighted demands, stating “Do not let the world gloat over our condition . . . You are our family . . . You are our family . . . Do you want us to become like Libya?”¹⁶ The government also made public statements promising political reforms. On March 19, al-Assad announced the reduction of mandatory military service from 21 to 18 months. He also pledged to form a committee to investigate the events in Dar’a so as to assuage the protesters’ anger. The overall strategy of the government seemed to be to minimize the scope and importance of the protests across the nation while dealing more concertedly with the protests in Dar’a.

The events of March 2011 had disproven al-Assad’s earlier statement that the region’s social upheaval would not reach Syria. By March 21, small pockets of protests were spreading throughout the country, and Dar’a was engaged in a pitched battle against the national police. The government’s strategy of offering concessions and downplaying the protests as either insignificant or the offspring of foreign powers seemed impotent to quell the growing unrest. As protests grew and casualties began to mount among both protesters and the police alike, Syria’s social uprising began to enter a new phase.

Phase II: Protests Spread and the Military Intervenes (Late March to Late July 2011)

With Dar’a being the exception, the protests during the first phase of Syria’s uprising were comprised mainly of disaffected youth and remained small and primarily nonviolent. The government’s heavy-handed response in Dar’a would soon alter the course of the revolution. In phase II, the popular uprising moved from Dar’a and quickly spread to Syria’s other provinces. Simultaneously, the protest movement stalled in Damascus and Aleppo. The key players in Damascus (minorities, the Sunni merchant class, and state employees) feared the protests would threaten their interests and believed the government should be granted more time to resolve the issue. They “were loath to see a provincial underclass reassert itself and thus potentially threaten their interests within a well-established social hierarchy.”¹⁷ In response to the growing uprising, the government offered further concessions to the Syrian people and increasingly relied on violent repression to stamp out the unrest. Unfortunately, al-Assad’s carrot-and-stick approach was destined to fail. On one hand, the protesters believed the ongoing security operations had delegitimized the government’s concessions. On the other hand, the security forces resented al-Assad’s dovish approach. After

months of muddled responses to social disquietude, al-Assad decided to alter his strategy in July: he would rely solely upon the military to terminate the uprising.

On March 21, demonstrators in Dar'a reportedly killed seven policemen. After nearly a week of protests, the people of Dar'a had become increasingly agitated against the government and turned to violence as a means to break the impasse. Then, on March 22, Dar'a's residents began calling for the overthrow of al-Assad. Demonstrators burned local Ba'athist buildings, desecrated the statues of Hafiz al-Assad, and chanted "No to Iran, no to Hezbollah, we want a God-fearing Muslim." The behavior of Dar'a's crowds had sent a clear message to the Alawite regime in Damascus: "We want a Sunni Muslim running the country."¹⁸ In response, the government sent in the Armed Forces to help the national police pacify the city. Reports had surfaced that the national police were "physically exhausted, analytically confused... [and] let down by the leadership." After days of fighting protesters in the streets, the national police called for other security institutions to "shoulder part of [the] challenge."¹⁹

The military sprung quickly into action. On March 23, reports trickled out of Dar'a that the elite Republican Guard, led by al-Assad's brother Maher al-Assad, had killed upwards of 100 people. The military disrupted the mobile phone service to Dar'a and set up checkpoints throughout the city. Content to play the positive side of the Alawite regime, al-Assad dismissed the regional governor of Dar'a, issued another legislative decree granting state employees and military and civilian retirees an additional 1,500 Syrian pounds a month, and promised to consider lifting Syria's emergency laws that had been in place since 1963.

The government's heavy-handed approach in Dar'a backfired. Instead of quelling social unrest, it served as a catalyst for protests in other areas of Syria's long-neglected periphery. Major upheaval spiked in Syria's coastal cities of Latakia and Baniyas. Abroad, a prominent Sunni cleric in Qatar, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, congratulated the "train of revolution" for reaching the "Syrian station."²⁰ Opposition leaders in exile also issued statements calling for the removal of al-Assad. The Syrian government's response was immediate. The regime organized hundreds of pro-government rallies across the country. President al-Assad also dismissed a number of government officials and appointed Naji al-Otari as the government's interim caretaker. Additional military units rolled out of their bases and lumbered down Syria's highways to restore order in Latakia and Baniyas. Syria's Grand Mufti, a Sunni and apologist of the regime, issued a statement justifying the security services' attacks as self-defense and called for reconciliation. Finally, on March 30, President al-Assad addressed the country for the first time since the protests began. He

blamed the protests on foreign meddling and assured the Syrian people that he would relook at the feasibility of lifting Syria's emergency laws.

For the next several days, the Alawite regime continued its crackdown in Dar'a, Latakia, Baniyas, and other cities in the periphery while simultaneously embarking on a charm offensive to court the majority of Syrians still viewing the historic unrest from the sidelines. Al-Assad awarded regime supporters 60 free minutes on their cell phones as a gift from the president. In a nod to religious Sunnis (primarily on the periphery, not the merchant classes in Damascus and Aleppo who were by and large secular), al-Assad announced that female teachers could adorn the niqab in the classroom. Seeking the Kurds' support, al-Assad granted Kurds in the al-Hasakah province Syrian Arab nationality. Finally, al-Assad pledged to release hundreds of political prisoners.

Al-Assad's charm offensive reached its pinnacle on April 16 when he appeared on television to issue his second address to the nation. His second speech was far more conciliatory than his first. Al-Assad empathized with the protesters' grievances and promised a series of reforms, including the termination of the aforementioned emergency laws established in 1963. The tone of the speech was one of solidarity with the Syrian people on the need for reforms. On April 21, al-Assad followed through with his promise to the Syrian people and terminated the country's 48-year-long state of emergency.

Al-Assad expected this series of historic concessions to earn him some goodwill. If there was to be peace in Syria, al-Assad reasoned, surely now was the time. Al-Assad was wrong. A day after the termination of Syria's emergency laws, protesters took to the streets in the bloodiest and most pivotal day since the uprising began. Deemed the "Great Friday" of protests, rallies demanding the end of al-Assad's regime erupted in cities across Syria. At this point, the Syrian revolution turned decidedly more violent. Massive and unyielding protests spread from the southern province of Dar'a and Syria's coastal cities to the central provinces of Hims and Hamah as well as the suburbs of Damascus where poor and disaffected Syrians resided. On April 8, the state media reported that 19 members of the police and security forces were killed in Dar'a. The next day, nine soldiers in the Syrian army were gunned down while traveling in a convoy to subdue the unrest in Baniyas. Then, on April 18 and 19, protesters in Homs assassinated two senior leaders in the Syrian military, Brigadier General Abdo Kheder al-Tellawi and Colonel Mohammad Abdo Khaddour.

Syria's security services responded to this uptick in casualties in kind. On Friday, April 22, Syria's security forces gunned down roughly 100 Syrians. The military began deploying more of its units to cities across the

country. There were reports that military units deployed to Dar'a, Latakia, Baniyas, Homs, and ar-Rastan had killed hundreds more. News trickled out that the Armed Forces had also laid siege to Dar'a by cutting off its water, electricity, and food supplies. In response to this uptick in violence, droves of Syrians began fleeing into Lebanon in early May.

The cycle of protests-military siege-protests spread like inkblots from late April through July. Resentment and enmity between the Alawite government and the Sunni-dominated protesters was escalating precipitously. By June, significant protests shifted north and engulfed the northern province of Idlib. The military responded by conducting large-scale operations in Maarat an-Numan and Jisr ash-Shugur along the Syrian-Turkish border. The violent clashes pushed thousands of Syrian refugees into Turkey. Syria's historic uprising was stretching the Armed Forces' resources. The military struggled to maintain control of the scope and direction of the protests. Before they could effectively quell social unrest in one city, riots would erupt in another town, city, or province. However, conflict, at this point, remained mostly localized and disconnected between Syria's provinces.

With consideration of the particulars of the situation on the ground, the military's seven regional commanders devised separate plans to crush the rebellion as it erupted in the areas they operated.²¹ First, for each regional commander, the Armed Forces would coordinate its response with the local police. Second, before initiating a military operation, the military and the local police would lock down the main lines of communication and avenues of approach leading into and out of the city. Third, each regional commander would make an assessment of the severity of the protests, security forces on hand, and the ethnic composition of the town/city in question before devising a plan to subdue the demonstrations. Conversations between the security forces and the town's leadership may or may not occur based upon circumstances surrounding the protests.

In some instances, according to a mid-level US government official, regular army units would establish an outer cordon, while Special Forces and Military Intelligence units raided the houses, employed snipers, and abducted the opposition leaders. According to this source, the military's elites (Republican Guard, Military Intelligence, or Special Forces) may not trust some regular army units to do the "bloody work" because they tended to be too sympathetic with the population.²² In other cases, the regional commander would send regular army units into the towns to subdue the protesters, with the more loyal and elite forces providing overwatch from buildings and cleared neighborhoods. Soldiers who hesitated to clear the demonstrators from the streets faced a sniper's bullet or execution after the

operation. In most cities, the military would establish a foothold in loyal neighborhoods before pressing the fight into rebellious quarters.

During this phase, the military's Republican Guard units most likely remained in and around Damascus to protect the regime. Other elite units such as the Fourth Mechanized Division and the Fifth Armored Division would serve as a mobile reserve to extinguish the uprising in strategic areas, such as Dar'a in the opening days of the revolution, traditional areas of Sunni unrest (e.g., Hama and Homs), and the important coastal cities of Baniyas and Latakia (hubs of trade, oil refineries, and the Alawite community). If the regime questioned a unit's loyalty, then it would confine them to their military base. If soldiers refused to obey commands or shirked their duties in the midst of combat, then they would be summarily executed on the spot by the regime's stalwarts. A former US army attaché stationed in Damascus asserted that the Syrian military's tactics were not new: "the technique they used to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s is the same technique they are using now."²³

As spring 2011 moved into summer, the leaders of Syria's various protest movements moved to consolidate the nation's uncoordinated demonstrations into a unified resistance. In this process, they began designating Fridays with particular foci: "Solidarity with the people of Dar'a," the "Friday of Freedom," the "Friday of Children," and the "Friday of Tribes." A particularly interesting focus was assigned to June 17. Organizers called this Friday the "day of Saleh al-Ali," a famous Syrian Alawite who led the Syrian rebellion against the French occupation in the 1920s. Protesters hoped this overture would rally the support of poor Alawites in the countryside or persuade a group of Alawites within the security apparatuses to overthrow the regime.

By mid-June, the revolution had claimed nearly 2,000 Syrian lives. There were growing calls from the international community for al-Assad to cease his violent crackdown. The Arab League, the United Nations, and the United States all condemned the violence. On June 20, President al-Assad addressed the nation for the third time. His speech was a complete departure from the concessions and the placating tone of his prior address. While issuing assurances that the government would move forward with a new Constitution to address the people's grievances, he pinned the responsibility for the social upheaval on "vandals," "radical and blasphemous individuals," and "foreign conspiracies."²⁴ He also likened the pervasive reach of the protests to the spread of "germs"—a reference which many demonstrators considered insulting, since it too closely resembled Muammar Gaddafi's assertion that Libya's protesters were mere "rats." The following day, the ruling Ba'ath Party organized pro-Assad rallies across several Syrian cities in solidarity with al-Assad.

Al-Assad's third speech fell as flat upon the ears of protesters as did his first and second speeches. The demonstrators were in no mood to receive President al-Assad's overtures. Besides, at this point, the die had been cast and the protesters' options were limited. If they put down arms and stayed at home, they were sure to be arrested. As such, the cycle of protests-military crackdown-protests continued unabated. On June 24, roughly 200,000 Syrians took to the streets of Hama, and nearly 15,000 demonstrators marched along the portions of the highway linking Damascus with Aleppo. By July 1, the ranks of Hama's protesters swelled to 500,000. Organized protests also began to find ways into the central districts of Syria's two most important cities—Aleppo and Damascus. By the latter half of July, the regime was quickly losing steam. Despite the military's lethal responses in cities across Syria, the protest movement continued to surge. Once isolated in Dar'a, the revolution now boasted of sustained and heavy resistance in the southern, coastal, central, and northern provinces. Syria's military would now be faced, for a third time, with the decision to support or depose the regime.

Phase III: The Opposition Unites, International Isolation, and Military Fatigue (Late July to December 2011)

The third phase of Syria's revolution was a decisive moment for Syria's military. Would the military escalate its security operations across the country? Or would Syria's military fracture along regional or sectarian lines as did those of Yemen and Libya? Or would a small group of officers stage a coup d'état in hopes of ending the violence? At the close of 2011, circumstances seemed to suggest one of the latter two options. The number of casualties and defections began to rise. The military was exhausted; the months-long military operations appeared impotent to subdue the rebellion. The traditional alliance between the Alawite community and the Sunni merchant classes in Aleppo and Damascus had been shaken as a result of the military violence across Syria. The opposition had begun to coalesce into political and military groups as well. Increasingly, regional and international powers condemned, isolated, and called for the removal of al-Assad from office. Even Syria's erstwhile ally, Iran, criticized Syria's violent strategy.

By the end of July 2011, al-Assad devised a security solution to vanquish social upheaval. After months of vacillating between offering political concessions and utilizing military force, President al-Assad believed it was time for the military alone to force Syria's restive communities into submission. Military engagements became increasingly bloody, indiscriminate, and sectarian. Major operations surged in Dar'a, the coast, Homs, Idlib, and the suburbs of Damascus. The government became less concerned

with maintaining its legitimacy and more concerned with its very survival. The military also began to rely more heavily upon the *shabbih*a—hired militiamen who wore plainclothes and swarmed into the protesters' ranks with clubs, knives, and other weapons.²⁵ By August, human rights activists recorded that over 3,000 people had been killed in six months of fighting. Homs had the most recorded casualties with 761 deaths. Next was Dar'a at 594, Hama at 350, Idlib at 319, Damascus at 90, and Aleppo at 44. Key political opponents were also being targeted. In September, security forces tortured and killed a Sunni cleric, Shaykh Adnan al-Arour, who was outspoken in his criticism of the al-Assad regime.²⁶ And in October, security forces assassinated a Kurdish leader, Mashaal Tammo, in al-Qamishli after he joined the oppositions' Syrian National Council.²⁷

The regime's "military-first"²⁸ strategy produced mixed results. On one level, it succeeded in solidifying the Alawite and ethnic minorities' support for the regime. The increasingly sectarian nature of the military's operations pulled many of the Alawites (rich and poor, city and countryside) into a tighter circle. An Iraqi politician who traveled to Hama reported hearing the following chant: "The Alawi in the coffin, and the Christian to Beirut."²⁹ In response, Ignace IV of the Greek Orthodox Church informed his followers in Damascus that it was better to support the known status quo with the Alawite than an unknown future with the Sunnis.³⁰ The regime began to encourage in earnest this narrative of the majority Sunnis versus the historically persecuted minorities. First, President al-Assad replaced his Alawite defense minister with a Christian to solidify this message. Second, the regime focused much of the military operations on Sunni-dominated areas but exercised restraint in southern areas inhabited by Druze and the Kurd-populated eastern regions. However, on another level, al-Assad's decision to escalate military operations proved highly counterproductive. The violent and indiscriminate use of force served to unite the opposition, produce fissures in some corners of the Alawite community, and further isolate Syria from the international community.

Besides enflaming ethnic strife, the Syrian military crafted a strategy to isolate the nation's protest movement into disparate cities and towns. The military's control over Syria's major lines of communication made it problematic for protesters to link their movements together.³¹ However, the regime's military-first strategy from late July to December 2011 did not engender the same results as its infamous siege of Hama in 1982. President Hafiz al-Assad's brutal repression of Hama left anywhere from 10,000 to 30,000 dead and put an immediate end to internal unrest. Visitors to Hama in the aftermath of the violent crackdown likened it to a ghost town and a mass grave. There was simply nothing and nobody left. While Syria's

military employed a similar strategy in the fall of 2011, many Syrians refused to kowtow to the Alawite regime any longer. To them, dignity was more important than death. One member of the opposition group summed it up this way: "People reached the point at which they preferred death to humiliation. The only thing the regime can do is kill us."³² While it is true that scores of Syrians caught in the crossfire of war began to depart Syria for refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, the majority remained in their homes to continue the resistance or protect their property. The protesters' resilience had a debilitating impact on the Syrian military. The Syrian military grew increasingly exasperated that its use of lethal force could do little to extinguish the rebellion.

A series of events in mid-July had put increasing pressure on al-Assad's regime to end the violence. First, the disparate and disconnected opposition movements began to organize their resistance, albeit from a distance. In July, reports surfaced that a number of defected Syrian soldiers had formed a paramilitary force, called the Free Syrian Army. Similarly, Syrian opposition groups created a political organization called the Syrian National Council in Istanbul, Turkey, which met in August. The Syrian National Council touted itself as representing Syria's diverse groups both internal and external to Syria. Among its members were five individuals from the Muslim Brotherhood and various tribes, four Kurds, a Christian, five independents, six from the local coordination committees, one from the Assyrian community, and four liberals led by an academic-in-exile residing in Paris.³³

Second, pressure from regional and international states calling for an end to the violence continued to mount. In early August, the United Nations Security Council, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Arab League each demanded an end to the military's savage tactics. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia condemned the violence in his televised address to the Arab world, and the region's other powerful Sunni states, Turkey and Egypt, began distancing themselves from al-Assad. Reports leaked from Ankara that Turkey would not rule out military intervention into Syria. In mid-August, Western states began applying a series of economic, military, and energy sanctions against al-Assad and his inner circle. President Obama along with the governments of Canada, Germany, France, and England called for al-Assad to step down. The United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights also threatened to refer President al-Assad to the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. In November 2011, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership. Even Syria's longtime ally, Iran, began criticizing President al-Assad by referring to the protesters' demands as legitimate and chastising al-Assad for pursuing a violent solution to the domestic impasse.

Al-Assad was wholly unaffected by the international opposition to his tactics; in fact, the West's opposition to al-Assad played right into the regime's narrative that the protests were a result of Western meddling. Syria's state media used the West's criticism of President al-Assad as a pretext to claim that the West supported democratic movements in the Arab world so it could conduct further invasions of Muslim lands similar to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya.

As summer transitioned into fall, fissures appeared within the security services and the Alawite community. In July, one high-profile supporter of the regime, Manaf Tlas, a commander in the Republican Guard and a relative of Syria's former Defense Minister, refused to participate in the regime's violent military crackdown. Tlass was a friend of al-Assad and had worked hard to diffuse the uprising by negotiating with local leaders in Syria's restive quarters. Tlass' defection set in motion a series of further notable defections. In the middle of August, led by a former Minister of Information and a close associate of the Assads, Mohammed Salman, 41 former Ba'ath and current government officials called for a political transition to end the conflict. On September 1, the Attorney General of Hama resigned in protest over the brutality of the Syrian forces.

Among Syria's Armed Forces, defections occurred primarily among Sunni mid-level officers and Sunnis in the rank-and-file. Lack of credible data complicates any assessment of the extent of the defections; however, by October 2011, the Free Syrian Army had enough fighters to begin organized attacks against the loyalists within the Syrian military.³⁴ Describing the Free Syrian Army in early July 2011, Wissam Tarif, director of a Syrian human rights group, claimed: "We're talking about around 2,000 soldiers, maybe more, who left [the military]."³⁵ As the autumn months wore on, thousands more claimed to have defected. There were reports that 100 Air Force intelligence agents had defected to the opposition. Many defecting soldiers expressed their anger at having been forced to shoot at unarmed protesters. As the number of military defections grew, so did reports of the formation of opposition military units. Defectors claimed affiliation with military units such as the Khalid ibn al-Waleed Brigade, Hamza al-Khateeb Brigade, Al-Qashoosh Brigade, the Free Syrian Army, and the Free Officers Movement.³⁶ Some sources reported the strength of the Free Syrian Army at 10,000 near the end of 2011.³⁷

Al-Assad's military-first strategy from late July to December 2011 also created fissures among the Alawite civilian community. On September 12, three Alawite clerics located in Homs condemned the government's violent crackdown on protesters and denied the regime's suggestion that Sunnis were indiscriminately targeting Alawites. Elsewhere, in the Alawites'

traditional heartland along the coastal mountains, the Alawite League of Coordinating Committees and Figures on the Syrian Coast also disavowed the regime's heavy-handed tactics against demonstrators. They complained that the shabbiha were mere "toys in the hands of the Assad family" and not representative of the larger Alawite community. The group called for unity and an end to violence.³⁸

As 2011 drew to a close, Syria was aflame in civil war. Al-Assad's military-first strategy had largely backfired. Demonstrations continued to rage across the country; protests and car bombs threatened the merchant-military complex in Damascus and Aleppo; defections and casualties spiked³⁹; and the Syrian regime faced growing isolation from regional and international powers alike. Outside actors predicted that the Alawite security services could not keep up their sustained aggression much longer. Syria's economy was ravaged, the government's treasury depleted, and the military's resources drained. In contrast, the opposition was appearing more unified, organized, and emboldened. As Syria's historic uprising entered its second year, many wondered if 2012 would witness the military's removal of or fervent support of President al-Assad. Amidst increasing opposition, would the military remain intact or disintegrate?

Phase IV: The Military's Scorched Earth Strategy, Defections Peak, an International and Regional Chess Game Begins (January 2012 to December 2012)

As I began writing this chapter in the summer of 2013, the Syrian civil war was entering its third year. To date, various groups suggest the number of deaths range anywhere from 70,000 to 100,000. More than a million have sought refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Many more are displaced within Syria. Momentum on the battlefield seesawed for much of 2012 and early 2013. Both the Free Syrian Army and the loyalist Syrian military have claimed victories and suffered defeats. Islamic militants from across the world have answered the call of jihad to defeat the heretical Alawite regime. In response, paramilitary fighters from Hezbollah as well as military advisors from Iran have lent their support to President al-Assad. Syria appeared enmeshed in a protracted civil war, which pits the Syrian opposition, militant Islamists, the GCC, and the West against the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, Iran, portions of Iraq, Russia, and China. Money, aid, and military equipment from outside powers continued to flood the battlefield. Because of immense outside support to both sides, it was difficult to forecast the course of battle in the months or years ahead. What remained remarkable was the fervent support the Alawite-led military continued to

lend President al-Assad. Before the Syrian uprising began in earnest in March 2011, the military stood at approximately 200,000. By the end of December 2012, analysts suggested that the military stood at half this number but could only depend on the loyalty of 50,000 elite troops.⁴⁰

On January 10, 2012, President al-Assad addressed the nation for the fourth time. He was defiant. In a speech that lasted roughly 90 minutes, he informed Syrians and the world that he had no intentions to step down as president. According to him, he had come to power by the will of the people and there he would remain. He likened nondemocratic countries that demanded Syria enact democratic reforms (e.g., the GCC) to a “physician advising others to quit smoking with a cigarette dangling from his lips.”⁴¹ By the end of January 2012, the Alawite regime devised a new strategy to subdue the uprising. It would focus its military might on major disruptive areas in the strategic area linking Damascus, central Syria, and the coast instead of spreading its forces across the nation to quell multiple areas of unrest simultaneously.

An unruly, conservative, and impoverished section of Homs, named Baba Amro, became the test bed for this strategy. First, the military encircled the town and established checkpoints to control movement in and out of the area. Next, the military used standoff platforms (tanks, artillery, planes) to bombard the town for several days. Once the shelling ceased, the military entered the town with tanks, armored personnel carriers, and light infantry and cleared the area one street at a time. Afterwards, the military erected checkpoints throughout the town and announced their success at rooting out the terrorists. Then, after the military deemed the town sufficiently destroyed and depopulated, they allowed the shabbiha and soldiers to plunder the buildings.⁴² Allowing the shabbiha and the military to loot people’s belongings maintained the loyalty of the shabbiha and soldiers to the regime and diminished the desire of the inhabitants to return to their homes. Finally, a member of the regime arrived on scene, announced the town’s “liberation” in front of an assembled crowd of regime loyalists, and pledged to use state funds to rebuild the wayward community.

The Syrian military likened this strategy to the counterinsurgency doctrine of “clear, hold, and build” the Americans trumpeted in Iraq. However, unlike the Americans in Iraq, the Syrian regime had no intention of rebuilding “cleared” towns. They also had no desire to beckon displaced civilians back to their homes. Emboldened by their success in Baba Amro, the Syrian military embarked on what some analysts referred to as a series of “scorched earth counter-insurgency.”⁴³ The military increasingly relied upon standoff platforms to destroy towns and cities. It was more accommodating and safer for Syria’s Armed Forces to bombard cities from afar using tanks, artillery, helicopters, and airplanes than to navigate the

city's three-dimensional battle space. Besides shelling the opposition into submission, this strategy had two other advantages: First, it placed less strain on an already exhausted military. Second, it limited the opposition's ability to disseminate propaganda depicting the destruction of the regime's military equipment in urban areas. The Alawite regime hoped that this new strategy would abate the opposition's morale.

This strategy had several immediate consequences. First, the number of dead or displaced civilians skyrocketed. On December 29, 2011, the United Nations reported that Syria's death toll stood at 7,500 with roughly 10,000 registered refugees. By December 2012, the death toll rose to 40,000 with 470,000 registered refugees. By May 2013, the number of deaths rose even further to 80,000 with 1.2 million registered refugees.⁴⁴ Second, the brutality of this strategy led to another spike in defections from the Alawite-dominated regime. In December 2011, the number of key regime defections stood at three. By December 2012, the number jumped to 82.⁴⁵ Two high-profile defections occurred in July 2012. A commander in the elite Republican Guard, Manaf Tlass (mentioned earlier), and Nawaf al-Shaykh Faris, the Syrian ambassador to Iraq, both switched sides. They were joined by Prime Minister Riad Hijab in August and Major General Abdul Aziz Jassem al-Shallal, Chief of the Military Police, in December. Most defectors during this period claimed that they departed the Syrian military for one of three reasons: (1) They believed the regime lied to them about fighting "armed gangs" instead of unarmed civilians in towns; (2) they did not want to fire at unarmed civilians or they were disgusted at the severity of military force required of them; or (3) they were angry that the military targeted their own home town or province, which, as experts believe, was likely the case with Ambassador Faris, who defected due to the military's operations in his home town, Dayr az-Zawr. Despite a tick-up in high-profile defections in 2012, claims of a clear split developing in the military have been unsubstantiated; rather, defections have largely comprised of individuals acting on their own moral conscience⁴⁶ or among groups of soldiers who have no ability to mount serious resistance because of their severe lack of training, equipment, and ability to mobilize.

In the course of 2012, the Free Syrian Army grew more confident in its ability to counter al-Assad's use of military force. The opposition's military tactics were indicative of asymmetrical warfare. To counter the regime's conventional weaponry, the opposition resorted to improvised explosive devices, rocket attacks, and hit-and-run tactics. On occasion, they would initiate more aggressive maneuvers, such as an attack on a military base near Damascus in November 2011, to demonstrate to Syrians and the international community that they were a legitimate fighting force. In July 2012, the Free Syrian Army scored a remarkable victory over al-Assad with

its capture of Syria's second most important city—Aleppo. Emboldened by their success, the opposition turned its focus on Damascus, the prize of the Alawite-led regime. Targeted assassinations threatened those in al-Assad's inner circle of power. On July 18, reports surfaced that four senior officials in the government were killed in Damascus: Daoud Rajha, the Defense Minister; Assef Shawkat, the Deputy Defense Minister and al-Assad's brother-in-law; Hassan Turkmani, the Assistant Vice President; and Hisham Ikhtiar, the head of the National Security Bureau.⁴⁷ Street battles engulfed the capital's suburbs and crept slowly into the central districts. In September, the Free Syrian Army planted bombs near a military headquarters in Damascus. As a result, al-Assad's historical alliance with the Sunni merchant class teetered at the breaking point. In October 2012, the Druze, another important minority ally, retracted their support of al-Assad.⁴⁸ Reports also surfaced that President al-Assad's control of the state's territory had dwindled to a mere 30 percent.⁴⁹

Though the particulars were obviously distinct, both Libya and Yemen faced similar civil wars or national upheaval along sectarian, tribal, or regional lines, yet their militaries fractured in the middle of the uprising. What explains the fervent support and loyal fidelity of the Syrian military to President al-Assad? Despite a death toll of 70,000 to 100,000 Syrians since the uprising began, growing defections and casualties among their minority ranks, fissures within the Alawite community and the Sunni merchant class, and widespread castigation by the international community including the Arab League, the regime and its loyal military elites have remained resolute, repressive, and committed to a path from which there are few opportunities to escape. The military's best chance to maintain a position of influence, it has calculated, is to side with the regime. Their *low interest* in changing the status quo overrides any chafing they might feel due to the *high level of restraints* imposed by al-Assad.

The Syrian Military's High Restraints

In his book *Revolt in Syria*, Stephen Starr argues that Syria's "entire political and security system, and by consequence, Syrian society, have been built with this moment of internal revolt in mind."⁵⁰ He is quite right. To date, President al-Assad has defied an unprecedented social uprising, international condemnation, and numerous calls for his removal. He stood on the precipice of regime change for over two years, yet was unwavering in his penchant to hold onto power. While President al-Assad undoubtedly benefited from the support of Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, the cornerstone of al-Assad's survival was, and continues to be, the Syrian military. Their *high level of restraints* and *low level of interests* in overturning the status quo

have made them particularly loyal to President al-Assad despite increasing internal and external pressures.

Prior to the 2011 uprising, the military's missions consisted of defending Syria's borders, retaking the Golan Heights from Israel, and (most importantly) defending the regime. The military divides Syria into seven military regions (Damascus, north, east, south, southwest, coastal, and central)—each with its associated commander. Additionally, the Syrian army is divided into three major corps. The First Corps, with headquarters in Damascus, is deployed in the south near the borders of Israel and Jordan. Its mission is to defend against an Israeli incursion into Syria. The Second Corps has its headquarters located near the Lebanese border in the town of Zabadani. Its proximity to Lebanon and the highway that connects Damascus with Lebanon's capital, Beirut, undoubtedly gives the Second Corps the control over operations in Lebanon, should the need arise. The Second Corps also protects the outskirts of Damascus as well as the historically volatile province of Homs to the north of Damascus. Perhaps the most significant role of the Second Corps is to protect the regime against dissident military units. The Second Corps' Third Armored Division has the responsibility of defending Syria's seat of political and military power. Lastly, the Third Corps, based in Aleppo, Syria's second most significant city, is charged with the mission of defending northern Syria and Syria's strategic coastal region, which houses its oil refineries and key maritime ports.⁵¹

In terms of organization, the army's three corps are subdivided into three mechanized and seven armor divisions, one Special Forces infantry division, one Republican Guard armored division, one Special Forces group (division equivalent), and an assortment of independent brigades comprising of surface-to-surface missile, infantry, antitank, artillery, special forces, and reserve units. One can ascertain the prioritization Syria's government has placed on the military's three missions by examining the manning, positioning, and capabilities of its military units. Syria's government places the most loyal (primarily Alawite) soldiers and the best equipment with units charged with the defense of the regime. Those same units are either placed in or near Damascus or in areas of potential unrest—such as Homs, Hama, Dar'a, and Palestinian refugee camps—not along Syria's tenuous borders. For example, the military has placed two Special Forces regiments near Palestinian refugee camps, which were thought to breed militant Islamists who opposed the Syrian regime. Another Special Forces regiment guards the regime in Damascus.⁵² This along with other units that protect the government in Damascus—the Third Armored Division and the Republican Guard (commanded by Alawites close to al-Assad)—are the best equipped and most combat-ready. Units less trusted by the

regime are usually sent to the periphery or, ironically, to the Syrian-Israeli front.⁵³ Syria's low defense expenditures (it ranks 14th out of 19 states in the region)⁵⁴ ensure that only the most elite and loyal units receive adequate funding for training, maintenance, and personnel. Other army units are hampered by poor equipment maintenance, limited training, and ineffective logistics structure.⁵⁵

A hallmark of the al-Assad dynasty's longevity has been the creation of an elaborate hub-and-spoke arrangement that guards against military coups. To avoid another military coup reminiscent of 1954, 1963, 1966, and 1970, the al-Assad regime has created several overlapping layers of allegiance. Al-Assad's inner circle of power includes close family members. His brother, Maher al-Assad, controls the Republican Guard. His sister, Bushra, is a power broker and staunch political advocate, and her husband, Assef Shawkat, was the Deputy Defense Minister. This inner circle is backed up by a second rank, termed the "sons of power," comprising the rich sons of former military officers who were close to Al-Assad's father, Hafiz al-Assad.⁵⁶ Should death or disloyalty occur, one member can be easily replaced by another. This seems to have occurred with the assassination of Assef Shawkat in July 2012, after which many wondered how long al-Assad could hold on to power.

The military is also not a unitary actor.⁵⁷ As previously mentioned, the regime divides the military into seven regional commands, three corps, and several independent regiments. Many of these organizations overlap or cross jurisdictions. For example, the Second Corps, Damascus regional command, Republican Guard, and a Special Forces regiment are all charged with the defense of Damascus/regime protection. Redundancy ensures loyalty and continuity of security if one unit is destroyed or becomes disloyal. This practice has proven quite effective. When Hafiz al-Assad fell ill in 1984, his brother, Rifaat al-Assad, attempted to seize power with his elite Defense Companies' military units. To defeat this attempted coup d'état, Hafiz al-Assad called on other elite military units in the Damascus area to defend his presidency. Rifaat al-Assad eventually backed down and was forced into exile later.

The creation of multiple security directorates has also buttressed the regime against widespread defections and high-level assassinations in the military. The military is checked by Syria's four security directorates: Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, State Security, and Political Security. Each service is independent of the others. While the first two services are led by Alawites, the last two are led by Sunnis, likely in an attempt to placate the public. General Hisham Ikhtiar, head of the National Security Bureau, oversees these four directorates and has a direct line to al-Assad.⁵⁸ The army and the intelligence services generally dislike

one another. As an example of the antipathy between the army and the intelligence services, a military intelligence officer and former US army attaché to Syria reported that, when he met a high-ranking Syrian corps commander, the general disparaged the attaché's service as a military intelligence officer by stating that he could not imagine an intelligence branch serving any higher function than to ensure loyalty to the regime.⁵⁹ This antipathy may also be due to the fact that officers in intelligence units receive more privileges than officers in the regular army.⁶⁰ In addition to Syria's four security directorates, the militia-like shabbiha also keeps watch over the military's loyalty. Many soldiers who defected from the regime reported how the shabbiha kept a watchful eye on their activities in order to dissuade defections.⁶¹ In Syria's case, there is little potential for the army to "show an independent voice and start to tell the regime what to do."⁶²

President al-Assad, according to a local journalist, also manipulates bureaucratic and legal processes to restrain the military elites. Like his father, al-Assad has consolidated power through instituting the emergency law, exercising his authorities as Commander-in-Chief, and appointing and dismissing military officers. Even though the emergency law gives the military virtually unrestricted power relative to the populace, the law grants even more power to al-Assad relative to the military. This was clearly seen in al-Assad's accession to the presidency. In 1994, Hafiz al-Assad sacked his longtime commander of the Special Forces, Major General 'Ali Haydar, after he questioned the legitimacy of hereditary succession. He also dismissed a Republican Guard commander, Major General 'Adnan Makhluif; his brother and Second Vice President, Rifaat al-Assad; and other senior officers because he doubted their loyalty to al-Assad. Hafiz al-Assad then replaced many of these leaders with younger officers who had connections with al-Assad.⁶³ After assuming the presidency in 2000, al-Assad took the first few years to assess the loyalty of his military commanders. By 2005, he had replaced the Chief of Staff of the Army, all three corps commanders, and several officers in the regional commands. He also appointed his brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, to lead Military Intelligence and Maher al-Assad to lead the Republican Guard.⁶⁴ While Hafiz al-Assad was known to keep commanders in their positions for 20 to 30 years, al-Assad has preferred to rotate or retire his commanders at a much quicker pace⁶⁵ to ensure they do not have any opportunity to establish bases of power outside his inner circle.

In regard to the Constitution, the document appears to serve the president more than vice versa. For example, although the Constitution calls on the military to "[defend] the homeland's territory and... [protect] the revolution's objectives of unity, freedom, and socialism,"⁶⁶ in practice the regime has emphasized only two functions: to defeat Israel and protect