



New Russian Push to Strengthen Syrian Army, Dissolve Loyalist Militias

OE Watch Commentary: Local reports hint that Russia is embarking on a broad plan to systematically root out looting and corruption within the Syrian Armed Forces, while at the same time pushing the Syrian government to dissolve all loyalist militias. The accompanying excerpted passages from Arabic-language media outlets provide further details on these important developments.

In early May 2018, as the Syrian government was completing its recapture of the Damascus suburbs, images surfaced online of pro-government fighters driving off with truckloads of appliances, furniture and scraps looted from the abandoned and largely destroyed neighborhoods. Several days later, a video circulated on social media showing the arrest of three looters - presumably loyalist fighters - by Russian military police. Syrian loyalist social media reaction was split, with some decrying it as a breach of sovereignty and others applauding the crackdown on lawlessness. The official Facebook page for Russian military forces in Syria, cited in the first accompanying passage from the pro-opposition news website *Orient News*, confirmed the arrests and stated that “Russian forces will not allow violations to occur in the areas that were liberated with our help. Members of one of the fighting groups were arrested for violating the law in an area south of Damascus.”

The second accompanying passage, from the Qatari daily *al-Araby al-Jadid*, claims that the Russian military has begun monitoring and inspecting all Syrian military units and administrative agencies in order to root out corruption and incompetence. The article argues that the “Russians are attempting to slowly restructure the [Syrian] army by removing officers, NCOs, and corrupt individuals, and relying on officers who were previously marginalized and who often were disgruntled with the corrupt officers who marginalized them in the first place. They are now playing an important role in disclosing existing violations, capitalizing on their trust in the Russian commissions’ ability to protect them and change the situation.”

In a parallel move highlighted in the third accompanying article, also from *al-Araby al-Jadid*, Russia appears to have encouraged if not ordered the dissolution of all Syrian loyalist militias. With crucial help from Iran, these militias played a vital role in preventing regime collapse in the early stages of the Syrian conflict. Although this is not the first time that the dissolution of loyalist militias is mentioned, the efforts appear to be serious. All militia-run checkpoints in Damascus are set to be disbanded, recruitment into militias is to end, and militiamen are to either settle their status with the government or join the Syrian military. The first major businessman/militia-leader to be targeted, according to the passage from the Lebanese news website *al-Modon*, is Ayman Jaber. Jaber is married to one of Bashar al-Assad’s cousins but has clashed with other members of the al-Assad extended family. An oil, steel and aluminum tycoon, Jaber together with his brother established and financed the “Desert Hawks,” one of the Syrian conflict’s most effective and successful loyalist militias. Jaber’s fall from grace has been swift, and he is now a wanted man whose properties and funds have been seized and whose militia has been disarmed by force. According to the article’s author, several other loyalist militia leaders are next on the list, including Bassam al-Hassan, a Republican Guard officer credited with establishing the loyalist National Defense Forces (NDF). **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

Source: لحظة إلقاء القبض على شبيحة يسرقون في جنوب دمشق
“Moment Shabbiha Looters Arrested in Southern Damascus (Video),” *Orient News*, 27 May 2018. <https://goo.gl/ueh5xW>

Responding to the [arrest of the looters], Russia’s “Hmeimim Base Central Channel” wrote on its Facebook page, in response to a question on whether the looters had been arrested by chance or from instructions from higher command: “Without a doubt Russian forces will not allow violations to occur in the areas that were liberated with our help. Members of one of the fighting groups were arrested for violating the law in an area south of Damascus.”

Source: تفتيش ورقابة روسية على جيش النظام السوري
Rayan Mohammed. “Russian Inspections and Monitoring for the Syrian Regime Army,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 29 May 2018, <https://goo.gl/Dm2Xbx>

... According to a military source, the Russian military is now undertaking monitoring and inspection of the various Syrian military and administrative units aiming to curb the widespread corruption that permeates it. The Hmeimim base has taken on these responsibilities via inspection and monitoring commissions, through which it controls accountability, appointments and compensation within the military, in addition to controlling all of the regime’s military formations.

An officer in the Syrian military told al-Araby al-Jadid that “Russian officers in Syria based in Hmeimim have recently began to undertake monitoring visits to various military units and administrative centers.” He added that the inspections comprise various issues, including food, preparedness, weapons and ammunition. They even investigate issues of illegal absences, as officers are sometimes given open-ended leave in exchange for large sums of money...

The military source believes that “Russians are attempting to slowly restructure the [Syrian] army by removing officers, NCOs, and corrupt individuals, and relying on officers who were previously marginalized and who often were disgruntled with the corrupt officers who marginalized them in the first place. They are now playing an important role in disclosing existing violations, capitalizing on their trust in the Russian commissions’ ability to protect them and change the situation.”

The same source added that “Russian monitoring and inspection offices exist in every regime military administration and unit, providing constant monitoring in this way”...

Russia previously began working to attract trusted military figures who graduated from Russian military academies, and began to highlight them and expand allegiance to Russia within the regime military. Russia appears to be counting on controlling the Syrian military in the period following the political solution, in turn curbing Iran’s role within Syria’s military to a minimal level. Russia currently appears to have absolute control over the Syrian military. Russians also appear to have filled in all the blanks at the top of the regime and high military commands...

(continued)

Continued: New Russian Push to Strengthen Syrian Army, Dissolve Loyalist Militias

“...Russian forces will not allow violations to occur in the areas that were liberated with our help...”

Source: النظام السوري يبدأ بحل مليشياته بقرار روسي
 Yazen Shahdawi. “Syrian Regime Begins to Dissolve Militias Complying with Russian Decision,” *al-Araby al-Jadid*, 8 June 2018. <https://goo.gl/PtFqv8>

Al-Araby al-Jadid, in a new development, learned of various directives issued from the Hmeimim Base on the Syrian coast, most importantly one calling on all security branches of the regime to remove the security barriers within Damascus that are manned by the the popular committees, national defense forces and other militias. These will be handed over to the Syrian Interior Ministry’s police forces, under supervision of the Russian military police.

A directive was also issued calling for the disbanding of all militias and gangs working for the regime’s various branches and senior official, such as Suheil al-Hassan “The Tiger”...

In the same context, an order was issued to stop the recruitment into all these different militias, with the volunteers fighting in them to either have their status resolved, join the regime’s armed forces, or enlist in the 5th Assault Corps...

According to Fahd, a young man in Lattakia, clashes broke out in rural Lattakia and Tartous between Russian military police and Syrian security forces, on the one hand, and Ayman Jaber’s militias, on the other hand, as they refused to hand their weapons and security IDs over to the military, fearing that they would lose their power...

Source: لماذا يُلاحق الأسد رجال أعماله
 Mohaned al-Haj Ali. “Why is Assad Prosecuting his Businessmen?” *al-Modon*, 1 June 2018. <https://goo.gl/Y3avDx>

The timing between the end of the battle for Damascus and its surroundings and the news of the prosecution of Syrian businessmen who until recently were close to the Assad and Makhlof families is no coincidence. These businessmen played a vital role in lengthening the life of the regime and financing militias, from the National Defense Forces to the “Desert Hawks”...

The first target of the regime’s crackdown was Ayman Jaber, an oil man and principal financier of the “Desert Hawks” and “Naval Commandos,” commanded by his brother Mohammed... Many names have been floated as targets after Ayman Jaber, most notably Bassam Marhaj (Bassam al-Hassan), one of the founders of the National Defense Forces and a close figure in the military-security camp of the regime. This is a high-level name, and thus much about him is likely to be leaked in the coming period...



Video allegedly showing Russian Military Police arresting Syrian looters.

Source: Yemen al-Said Facebook Page, Video Screenshot, <https://www.facebook.com/yamman.alsaed/videos/940872589406887>.