



The Tiger Forces in Damascus

OE Watch Commentary: Syrian Army Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan recently took command of the loyalist campaign to retake the rebel-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus. Al-Hassan (aka “The Tiger”), a former paramilitary commander in the regime’s Air Force Intelligence, has risen to become the loyalist camp’s most effective military commander. He leads the so-called “Tiger Forces,” the regime’s most capable strike force which is credited with key battlefield victories in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, the Syrian Desert and Deir Ezzor. Al-Hassan has also emerged as Russia’s favored Syrian commander. When President Vladimir Putin and Russian military leadership visited the Hmeimim Airbase in Syria in December 2017, al-Hassan was the only Syrian at the table besides President Bashar al-Assad.

Al-Hassan’s appointment to lead the Ghouta offensive, according to the first accompanying article, came at Russia’s behest. The article, published in the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, cites an exchange on Facebook in which Alexander Ivanov, the spokesman for the Russian forces in Syria, calls al-Hassan’s appointment “necessary given his abilities to lead battles that many others have been unable to.” The statement came in response to a comment from a supporter of Colonel Ghayath Dallah, from the Syrian Army’s 4th Armored Division, whom the comment’s author insinuated was “as capable if not more so than Suheil al-Hassan” and that if the Russians “[provided] Colonel Ghayath Dallah with half of what you gave al-Hassan” they would be able to see it for themselves.

The deployment of the Tiger Forces to Damascus will have an impact on Syrian military politics. The Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division, which are considered the Syrian Army’s elite units, traditionally guard the capital’s various entry points, increasingly with help from allied and dependent militias. In early January, rebels took terrain from Republican Guard forces in Harasta, a strategically located Damascus countryside suburb that had been under an informal truce for some time. According to the second accompanying passage, from the pro-opposition Lebanese news site *al-Modon*, the losses in Harasta meant that “legions of militias came to the city and its surroundings to regain what the Republican Guard had lost.” Harasta became a “site to display victories, earn the trust of leaders and marginalize others.” The field commander for the Tiger Forces’ deployment to Damascus, the article notes, is a collaborator of Suheil al-Hassan’s from Harasta.

The Ghouta Front is considered among the most complicated and treacherous from within, given the multitude of competing interests and goals within both the loyalist and opposition camps. Al-Hassan and his forces are to operate in tandem with elite Syrian Army formations, Shi’i militias, local militias (of uncertain loyalties), private militias and regime paramilitary forces, all of whom seek to curry favor with their backers and hope to control the spoils and terrain that would result from loyalist advances. Russia has placed its bet on al-Hassan succeeding in this complex environment, which is why he is now being shadowed by a Russian personal security detail, as the third passage from the pro-opposition news network *Orient News* describes. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

Source:

موسكو تدعم النمر لاقتحام الغوطة

“Moscow Supports ‘The Tiger’ to Storm the Ghouta,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 24 February 2018. <https://goo.gl/5QZYGa>

In a message posted on the [Hmeimim] Center’s Facebook and Telegram account, a member of the “Ghayath Forces” led by Colonel Ghayath Dallah... alleges that “There are officers that are as capable if not more so than Suheil al-Hassan, but unfortunately you marginalized our campaign and halted the attack when the rebels were on the brink of defeat... [you should provide] Colonel Ghayath Dallah with half of what you gave al-Hassan”... The Hmeimim Center’s Spokesman Alexander Ivanov responded that “The land forces mentioned in the message were given sufficient opportunity to end the presence of extremists, and they were excluded following the end of a predetermined period for doing so.” Ivanov praised “the appointment of Syrian officer Suheil al-Hassan as commander of the operations to destroy the terrorist Nusra Front in Eastern Ghouta [which] was necessary given his abilities to lead battles that many others lack”...

Source:

مليشيات النظام إلى حرستا الخلاف على زعامة الحشدر

“Regime Militias to Harasta: Disputes on Leading the ‘Insectarium,’” *al-Modon*, 4 January 2018. <https://goo.gl/PTR2jq>

Areas around Harasta, in Damascus’s Eastern Ghouta, saw hundreds from loyalist militias head to the area over the past several days, with names that do not suggest belonging to a national military, but rather resemble small groups, each with their own leader... For loyalist militias, Harasta became a site to display victories, earn the trust of leaders and marginalize others... The Republican Guard, through its 104th and 105th Brigades, has been considered the true military force in charge of Harasta for some time, but the blows that it received during the second stage of the “They Were Wronged” battle, and its loss of sensitive positions, made the regime leadership lose trust in it... Legions of militias came to the city and its surroundings to regain what the Republican Guard had lost. The first of these militias was the “Qalamoun Shield”... [but many of its] fighters defected [to the opposition], fought the Republican Guard, and handed areas over to the opposition. The “Qalamoun Shield” was unable to absorb opposition attacks and a campaign by loyalist and backers of the 4th Division began against the “Qalamoun Shield” and those who had entered truces with the government... As soon as the [4th Division’s “Ghayath Forces” arrived] the disagreements with the Republican Guard began, and they recurred in every battle that joined the two, regarding deployment and movement as well as leadership over the battle. The “Ghayath Forces” took over the area of “al-Balaa” in Qaboun... [and] began their shelling independently of other formations and without coordinating with them, which increased tensions between the groups amidst constant recriminations against the Republican Guard and assertions that their positions should be handed over to the 4th Armored Division...

The Harasta highway has in the past few days become an arena to flex one’s muscles. A group linked to Suheil al-Hassan’s “Tiger Forces” arrived in the area, led by Abu Arab Shuhaymi, a regime loyalist from Harasta and former confidant of Dhu al-Hima Shalish who has worked with Suheil al-Hassan for years. Having always been associated with fronts in the north and the east of the country, the Tiger Forces sought to make their presence felt in rural Damascus, to have a seat reserved in Damascus.

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Continued: The Tiger Forces in Damascus

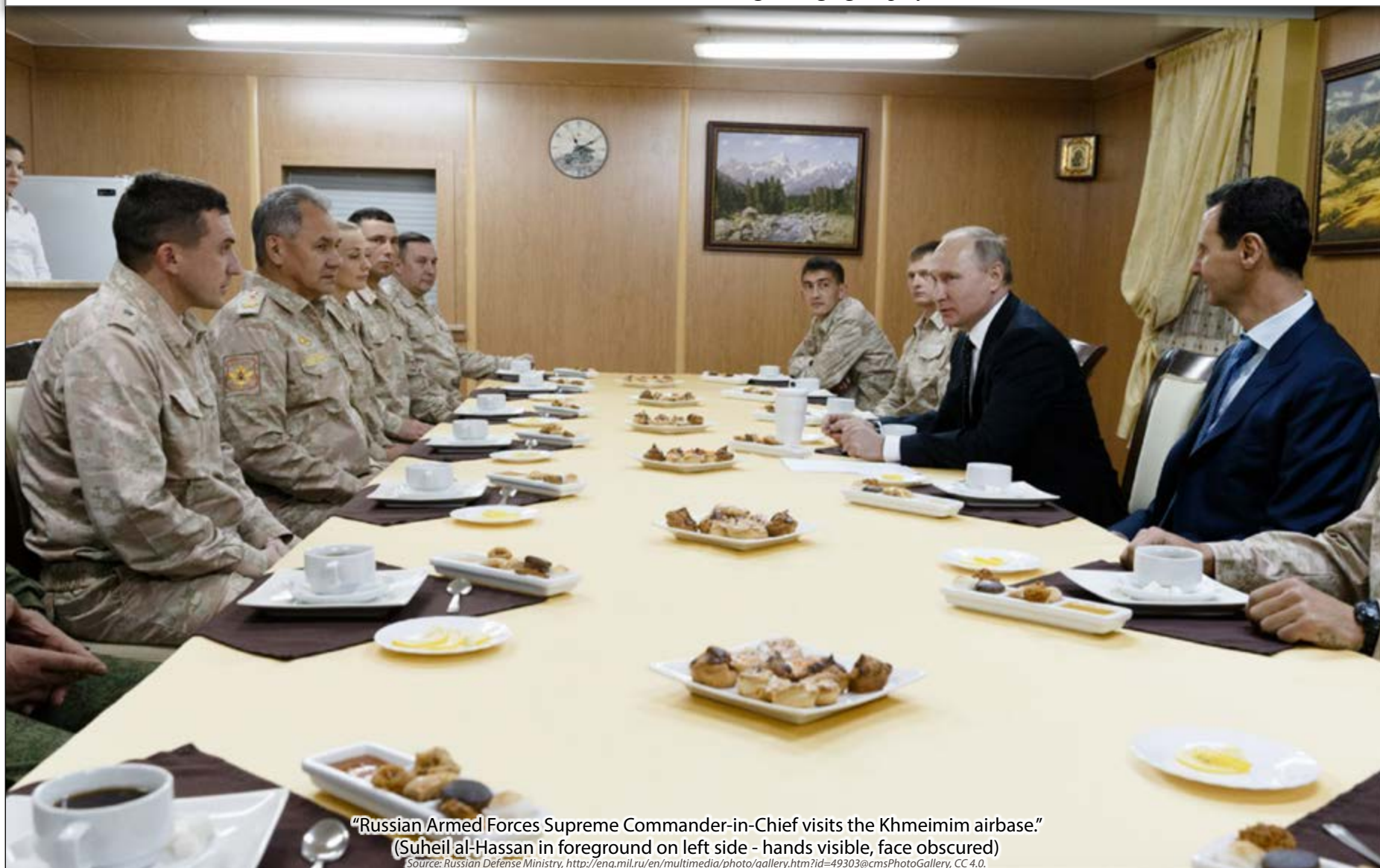
“...Legions of militias came to the city and its surroundings to regain what the Republican Guard had lost...”

Source:

“Special Russian Protection for Suheil al-Hassan,” *Orient News*, 4 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/3W8FTu>

حماية روسية خاصة لسهيل الحسن

Pages loyal to Suheil al-Hassan, nicknamed “the Tiger,” posted images of him on the Eastern Ghouta front accompanied by a Russian bodyguard alongside a regime bodyguard... This is not the first time that al-Hassan appears accompanied by Russian protection, as he also did so in a recent video which shows him near the Eastern Ghouta, addressing a large group of his militia members...



“Russian Armed Forces Supreme Commander-in-Chief visits the Khmeimim airbase.”

(Suheil al-Hassan in foreground on left side - hands visible, face obscured)

Source: Russian Defense Ministry, <http://eng.mil.ru/en/multimedia/photo/gallery.htm?id=49303@cmsPhotoGallery>, CC 4.0.

Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces

By Lucas Winter

This paper looks at the genesis, evolution and growth of the Syrian Army's “Tiger Forces” and their leader Suheil al-Hassan. The paper shows how Hassan has played an important role since conflict began in 2011. It attributes his transformation from special forces commander to leader of military campaigns to an ability to harness the Syrian Army's full infantry, artillery and airpower better than any other loyalist field commander. Given the Syrian Army's manpower shortages, rampant corruption and rivalry-laden bureaucracy, this is no small feat. Al-Hassan has become a key symbol in the Syrian loyalist camp, able to project more combined arms power than anyone else in Syria. His success on the battlefield comes less from tactical or strategic insights than from his ability to thrive within the loyalist camp's opaque and rivalry-laden bureaucracy. For this he has become a symbol to regime supporters, proof that the war can be won by working within the system. (July 2016)

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/194882>

