

Position Paper

The Phenomenal Defections of the Syrian Regime

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In an organised manner, there have been several defections from the Syrian regime that has plunged the army, and the whole country, into a confrontation with the Syrian rebels. The more the regime expands its crackdown on war, the more it causes defections on its institutions. Due to its fanatic structure, the regime can only increase war, relying upon regaining its control of Syrian society, and even enduring a toll of non-stop defections.

Defections: The Facts

The first defection occurred amongst the military cleavages. General Hermosh Hussein deserted the regime in June 2011 and formed the "Brigade of the Free Officers". Within less than a month, Colonel Riad Al-Assaad also abandoned the regime and formed the "Free Syrian Army", which has become a broad umbrella of the armed resistance within the country. Defections within the military soon followed in various regions of the country and amongst the various ranks in the army, including brigadiers and colonels. Among the most famous dissidents was Brigadier Manaf Tlass, officer in the Republican Guard, and the son of the former defence minister, whose family was close to the Assad family. A few days ago, General Mohammed Faris broke away. He is the only Syrian astronaut who flew in a Russian spacecraft in 1986. It is estimated today that the number of defected officers includes 100 brigadiers in Turkey, and less than half of whom are involved in the fighting.

In August saw Colonel Yarub Shara, who was Chairman of the Information Branch of the Political Security Office withdrew his support towards the Syrian regime and Deputy Afaq Ahmed of Air Intelligence had announced his departure in November of last year.

More months have passed since the departure of high ranking of diplomats in the regime. In the past month of July, Nawaf al-Fares, Ambassador of the Syrian regime in Baghdad departed, followed by the Syrian Head of Mission in Cyprus, the Syrian Ambassador in Belarus, the Chargé D'Affaires in Britain and a diplomat at the Syrian Embassy in Amman. Last March also witnessed the departure of Abdo Husamedin, the Syrian Oil Deputy Minister. However, the most important government official to leave was the Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab, who barely spent two months in his position as head of government - a move that Al-Assad wanted to portray as part of internal reforms. A number of media representatives also declared their withdrawal from the regime, and departing the country.

From Parliament that was elected just three months ago, in a move that was meant to show a reform, two members, Ikhlas Badawi and Ali Al-Besh, defected.

Defections: The Characteristics

Defections within the Syrian regime have unusual characteristics. Mentioning them may shed some light on their potential impact for the regime.

The first of these characteristics is that these sudden departures affect "the State" and not "regime" public institutions and not the special agencies or the "deeper state". Defections have so far affected the army, the diplomatic corps, the government, the legislature and the media, but not the hard core of the regime, neither the political nor security backbone. What has distinguished the Assad regime for decades is that the actual centres of power are not vested in the state organs. The latter is merely an umbrella for a real power that generally relies on kinship and trust, and not on actual efficiency and qualification. Thus, what we have mentioned of the division of Colonel Yarub Shara and Deputy Afaq Ahmed from the security services does not change a thing.

The second characteristic of defections is that they are not of a collective nature. They are just defections by individuals or small groups. There have not been mass defections by a military brigade, or even an entire battalion. The root of the sectarian composition of the security units of the Syrian army is also not affected. If the commander of one of the units is from one sect, his deputy will be from another different sect, and the security officer in the unit from a third sect. This keeps confidence at the level of the units as a whole low, so they cannot act on the actions of one man.

The same applies to the embassies that are often described as branches of security, whose purpose it is to monitor Syrian expatriates, instead of defending the interests of Syrian abroad.

The third characteristic is that whenever there is an announcement of defection of any important military or civilian figure from the regime, the family of such a figure must have already been secured, because it is a norm of the Syrian regime to take revenge on the children, parents and siblings of the dissidents. This must have been well-known to figures like Abdel-Halim Haddam, Manaf Talas and Riad Hijab. Thus, they only declared their defection after insuring that all members of their families were safe. This characteristic indicates that leaving the system is not really possible without defecting against it, and defecting against it requires that one must leave the country in order to survive. Otherwise, they must face the regime with force, which is what some military dissidents are doing.

It is interesting to note that there are hardly any dissidents who remained in the country other than the combatants. No one has ever ventured, not even from the media, to combine participate in the revolution and hide within the country. All the dissidents, other than military personnel (not all), have relocated to Turkey, Qatar or Europe. Some of them are overlooking the Syrians through the Arab media. And even today, not one of the dissidents has returned to participate in the revolution from within.

Hence, a fourth characteristic of the defection is of the role of media. The law here states that any defection which is not broadcast via media has not occurred. Although it makes sense to declare all incidents of defection because of their moral effect, it seems that the effect ends immediately after the announcement.

Defections may also vary in terms of the motives and destiny of the dissidents. It is not always clear if the reason behind defection is patriotic and humanitarian only. All dissidents condemn the regime in their statements and give the impression that their defection was motivated by purposes of conscience and patriotism. But is it likely that there are some unknown political arrangements behind some of the defections? It is possible, although to obtain reliable information on this matter is impossible today.

However, Syrians generally make the distinction between the dissidents. It is frequently mentioned today that there are "five-star dissidents" such as Manaf Tlass, whose defection was announced only a few days after settling in Paris. It was clear from the statement of his defection that he commends himself as a man of the era. In his criticism of extremists on both sides, the regime and the revolution, it sounds like he is presenting his credentials to international players. Has this man defected for purely moral and patriotic purposes? It is hard to believe.

Syrian rebels are also making mockery of the many military dissidents who settled in Turkey and wonder whether these dissidents are planning to carry out a revolution in Turkey!

Defection: The Effects

Based on what is said that the defections affect "the State" and not "the regime", they are not likely to have an imminent decisive impact on the fate of the regime. Indeed, it seems that the internal nucleus of the regime closes on itself and becomes hardened, thanks to the impact of recent defections, and perhaps indicates increasing inclination to suicide, which is not ruled out at any time. Today, it seems that this suicide tendency is solidified as far as the regime falls back to its political and security core. It is conceivable that the entire regime may discard its nucleus, and then function as a blind power that kills indiscriminately. It is not that far from this scenario today. This possibility becomes more likely with the support the regime receives, its political and security – and sometimes sectarian – nucleus of course, from Iran, Russia and Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah's relations are specifically limited to the regime alone and almost disconnected with the State. The support to the regime by its allies is such that the regime remains alive in the foreseeable future, even if "the State" is dead.

However, the defections have been a moral and media blow to the regime, and have provided the rebels with determination and optimism. Besides that, they have left a strong sense of pessimism among the regime's loyalists.

Meanwhile, we must also distinguish between two levels of loyalty among the loyalists. There is a level of loyalty to the regime that does not reach the level of identification with or being part of the regime. This type is becoming more and more loosened. Defections and the general progress made by the revolution has led to the emergence of something like a policy of self-distancing among such loyalists, out of fear that they might be identified with a regime that is already falling, on the one hand, and for their reluctance toward and fear of the revolution, on the other. However, there is a loyalty that reaches the stage of amalgamation with the regime, not the State. Such loyalties cannot be affected by defections. Perhaps they become increasingly attached to the regime and their destiny becomes united with its destiny. The factors determining the various ranks of loyalty to the regime are not unrelated to the sectarian-based divisions in the Syrian society. They become activated during the revolution as much as they become activated each time the existing political order is shaken and is likely to fall.

This phenomenon of defections opens further rifts in the Syrian social structure, and perhaps in the national entity itself. There is no direct correlation between defection and the rifts. Indeed, they interconnect with something different from both of them altogether; the regimes combative approach in dealing with the revolution, and without adherence to the minimum standard of the laws of war. Consequently, the phenomenon of defection that affects the State as a rule and threatens to open rifts in society, which affects the state as an entity, is not likely to come to an end unless its joint origin is terminated: the system of civil war that has existed in Syria for half a century.

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