Rethinking armed groups and order: Syria and the rise of militiatocracies

YANIV VOLLER[*]

Relations between armed groups, states and societies have attracted increasing attention as students of conflict have recognized that such groups are political, social and economic actors that have become part of their countries' political orders. Scholars have sought to conceptualize these relations and understand their dynamics, identifying, for example, the rise of such orders as *warlordism* and *rebelocracies*.[1]

This literature has nevertheless generally overlooked one category of armed groups and its potential impact on political order—pro-government militias (PGMs). PGMs are irregular armed groups recruited on an ad hoc basis to serve as auxiliaries to regular security forces in counter-insurgency and routine security activities.[2] Such actors have a long history. However, the increase in the frequency of civil wars in the post-Cold War era has witnessed a rise in the number of PGMs, with one study finding 61 governments relying on militias between 1982 and 2007.[3]

The present article contends that, like warlords, rebels and other armed groups, PGMs, too, are social and political actors whose actions shape political and social

[1] Kimberly Marten, 'Warlordism in comparative perspective', *International Security* 31: 3, 2006, pp. 41–73; Roland Marchal, 'Warlordism and terrorism: how to obscure an already confusing crisis? The case of Somalia', *International Affairs* 83: 6, 2007, pp. 1091–106, DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2346.2007.00675.x; Paul Jackson, 'Warlords as alternative forms of governance', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 14: 2, 2003, pp. 131–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310412331300716; Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel rulers: insurgent governance and civilian life during war* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy: social order in the Colombian civil war* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Reyko Huang, *The wartime origins of democratization: civil war, rebel governance, and political regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Ana Arjona, 'Civilian resistance to rebel governance', in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly, eds, *Rebel governance in civil war* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 180–202.

[2] Following Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell, I include under this term a variety of armed groups, described elsewhere as vigilantes, proxy warriors, death squads and civil defence forces. See Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, 'Progovernment militias', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 20, 2017, p. 128, DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-051915-045433.

[3] Sabine S. Carey, Neil J. Mitchell and Will Lowe, 'States, the security sector, and the monopoly of violence: a new database on pro-government militias', *Journal of Peace Research* 50: 2, 2012, pp. 249–58. Robert Bates has associated state collapse in sub-Saharan Africa with the increase in militia activism: see Robert H. Bates, *When things fell apart: state failure in late-century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Stathis Kalyvas has pointed out the growing number of militias in so-called 'new' civil wars: see Stathis N. Kalyvas, '"New" and "old" civil wars: a valid distinction?', *World Politics* 54: 1, 2001, pp. 99–118, DOI: 10.1353/wp.2001.0022.

orders. I will go on to argue that in some cases the existence of PGMs has given birth to a new political order, defined here as a *militiatocracy*. In such orders, PGMs, through their participation in fighting, become intermediaries between their communities and the central government, leveraging this position to integrate themselves into circles of power in the country. The article illustrates the relevance of this framework by analysing the case of Syria during the civil war. Before moving on to explain the selection of this case, I will first define the concept of 'militiatocracy' and defend its relevance in relation to other existing frameworks.

Distinguishing militiatocracies from other orders

Outbreaks of violence in many states have compelled observers to rethink the nature of the actors involved in conflict and modes of governance created. The first attempts to recognize such new orders identified the rise of warlords and warlordism. Warlords, namely local strongmen commanding loyalist fighters,[4] were seen as exploiting the vacuum created by the state's debilitation. Kimberly Marten has described this reality as warlordism, in which 'trained, armed men' take advantage of state collapse to take over territory and, relying on their charisma, form networks of patronage to attract fighters and supporters. Warlords are able to, and usually seek to, disrupt attempts to reform the remnants of governance or trade in their regions. Somalia, Afghanistan and Liberia have often been cited as cases of warlordism.[5] Warlords are generally seen as motivated primarily by material interests and greed rather than ideology;[6] hence, warlordism has been associated predominantly with the collapse of state authority.

   Later studies of conflict have reminded us that even those that weaken central authorities do not necessarily result in the absence of governance. Governance, as Kasfir and colleagues remind us, 'is a more encompassing phenomenon than government, because it embraces informal, non-governmental mechanisms of persons and organisations as well as formal institutions'.[7] Ken Menkhaus has suggested that conflict areas may exhibit a system of 'mediated stateness', which echoes past feudal systems, 'in which a central government with limited power and capacity relies on a diverse range of local authorities to execute core functions of government and mediate relations between local communities and the state'.[8] This notion has given birth to the study of rebel governance. Rebels who have

[4]   Marchal, 'Warlordism and terrorism'; Paul B. Rich, 'The emergence and significance of warlordism in international politics', in Paul B. Rich, ed., *Warlords in international relations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 1–17; Jackson, 'Warlords as alternative forms of governance'; Alice Hills, 'Warlords, militia and conflict in contemporary Africa: a re-examination of terms', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 8: 1, 1997, pp. 35–51, DOI: 10.1080/09592319708423161.

[5]   Marten, 'Warlordism in comparative perspective'.

[6]   Marchal, 'Warlordism and terrorism', pp. 1095–6.

[7]   Nelson Kasfir, Georg Frerks and Niels Terpstra, 'Introduction: armed groups and multi-layered governance', *Civil Wars* 19: 3, 2017, p. 258, DOI: 10.1080/13698249.2017.1419611.

[8]   Ken Menkhaus, 'Governance without government in Somalia: spoilers, state building, and the politics of coping', *International Security* 31: 3, 2006, p. 78. See also Nora Stel, 'Mediated stateness as a continuum: exploring the changing governance relations between the PLO and the Lebanese state', *Civil Wars* 19: 3, 2017, pp. 348–76, DOI: 10.1080/13698249.2017.1396096.

successfully driven out government forces and institutions have often found themselves controlling territories they claim and the populations who live there. Under such circumstances, rebel leaders have taken it upon themselves to provide the population with rudimentary services to guarantee their support and even lay the foundations for a state in the making. 'Like warlordism', Zachariah Mampilly contends, 'control of civilian populations by rebels is an alternate form of nonstate political authority that prioritizes security.'[9] Notwithstanding the centrality of security needs in this model, the idea of rebel governance has also advanced the notion that conflict still allows political, economic and social development to take place, albeit at different levels in different places.[10] Rebels' capacity to control territories depends on what Mara Revkin and Ariel Ahram describe as some level of both offer (namely the rebels' offering of services and protection to the population) and acceptance (namely the population's receptiveness of this offer, even under coercion).[11]

Building upon the broad concept of rebel governance, Ana Arjona has offered a territorially based conceptualization of such governance, that of rebelocracy. With an eye to future outcomes and potential for controlling their state, rebels often turn to establish mechanisms to enable dispute resolution, regulation of private and public life, and taxation of the local population, all with the aims of both supporting the continuation of the struggle and securing legitimacy, domestically and internationally.[12] Arjona demonstrates the validity of the rebelocracy framework with the case of Colombia, but the framework has been used to describe the political situation in other countries. In fact, Syria has been a popular site for the study of rebel governance, with the territories under the control of, respectively, the separatist Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, henceforth PYD) in the north-east of the country and the Islamic State (al-Dawla al-Islamiyya) in the east portrayed as under rebel governance.[13]

More recently, the concept of rebelocracy has come under scrutiny, chiefly for excluding a range of actors that do not fall into the dichotomy of either governments or rebels, and thus missing more complex dynamics of governance.[14] Arjona has also identified cases in which rebel groups have limited their interest in the local population to security and taxation, 'leaving other matters in the hands of others—be it the state, traditional authorities, civic leaders, or other actors',[15] defining such cases as 'aliocracies' (aliocracy meaning the 'rule of others'), as distinct from rebelocracies. For their part, Kasfir and colleagues make

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[9] Mampilly, *Rebel rulers*, p. 50.
[10] Arjona, 'Civilian resistance'.
[11] Mara Redlich Revkin and Ariel I. Ahram, 'Perspectives on the rebel social contract: exit, voice, and loyalty in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria', *World Development*, vol. 132, 2020, art. 104981, DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.104981.
[12] Arjona, *Rebelocracy*; Isabelle Duyvesteyn, 'Rebels and legitimacy; an introduction', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28: 4–5, 2017, pp. 669–85, DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2017.1322337.
[13] Revkin and Ahram, 'Perspectives'; Victoria Gilbert, 'Sister citizens: women in Syrian rebel governance', *Politics and Gender* 17: 4, 2021, pp. 552–79, DOI: 10.1017/S1743923X20000136.
[14] Corinna Jentzsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, 'Militias in civil wars', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59: 5, 2015, pp. 755–69, DOI: 10.1177/0022002715576753.
[15] Arjona, 'Civilian resistance', pp. 182–3.

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a case for a multilayered approach to the analysis of relations between different actors in civil wars. They suggest that the study of the relations between authority (either state or rebel) and the local population should take into account other armed actors, including local militias or police forces.[16] This idea by Kasfir and colleagues highlights the potential role of militias as political actors in establishing multilayered governance at times of conflict. Writing in the same journal issue, Corinna Jentzsch develops the point further by noting that 'auxiliary armed forces are crucial for both the state and armed groups to create links between them and the local population they control'.[17]

These initial steps are key to identifying the social and political roles of PGMs. However, they still fall short of fully capturing the unique role PGMs may play and the distinct order a heavy reliance on PGMs may produce, not only in the regions in which PGMs operate, but at the national level. In militiatocracies, like those that emerged in Syria, Iraq or Sudan in the early years of the twenty-first century, the central government delegates its security commitments to allied militias. These militias then assume much of the burden of fighting insurgents, while the presence of regular forces is thin to non-existent. In a fashion similar to that prevailing in the so-called aliocracies, PGMs in militiatocracies do not seek to fill the administrative vacuum in their regions, but assume only security responsibilities. Unlike rebels or warlords, they do not seek to undermine the central government or destroy the political order. Rather, for various reasons, they are interested in preserving this order and the government's (at least symbolic) presence, both in the country as a whole and in the region in which they operate. In contrast to the other models of multilayered governance presented above, the leaders of local PGMs and their patrons view their alliance with the central government as an opportunity to secure a stronger presence at the centre of power. The presence of the central government bestows legitimacy upon the PGMs and their leaders, while the latter become crucial for the survivability of the government and its own legitimacy, in what becomes a synergetic relationship. The following section explores how such an order may evolve.

Understanding militiatocracies

Militiatocracies emerge when an incumbent government entangled in a civil war faces the decline of its regular armed forces, forcing it to resort to the ad hoc recruitment of irregulars. Local auxiliaries are often recruited because of their knowledge of the terrain and its people, considered superior to that of forces coming in from outside.[18] Governments may form such a force from the outset of a civil conflict; but they may also enter into alliance with existing local forces and strengthen them by providing them with arms, economic support, training and legitimacy. In Iraq, the Sahwa militias were composed of tribal fighters who

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[16] Kasfir et al., 'Introduction'.

[17] Corinna Jentzsch, 'Auxiliary armed forces and innovations in security governance in Mozambique's civil war', *Civil Wars* 19: 3, 2017, p. 327, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2017.1412752.

[18] Kasfir et al., 'Introduction', p. 262; Jentzsch et al., 'Militias in civil wars'.

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had initially sided with Al-Qaeda against the central government.[19] In Sudan, the Janjaweed were formed out of Libyan-supported mercenaries and tribal groups who had already been engaged in tribal and ethnic skirmishes in Darfur.[20] Previous Sudanese governments had set up local guards to fight southern rebels during the 1960s.[21] In Syria, the initial irregulars were formed out of criminal gangs with ties to the regime—gangs whose existence dates back to the 1970s. And the Syrian regime armed tribal forces to police border regions and prevent the flow of arms to Iraq during the insurgency in the country from 2006 to 2008.[22] In either case, the recruitment of local communities takes place with the mediation of local proxies, such as religious leaders, tribal sheikhs and village elders.

These local forces ally themselves with the incumbent regime for various reasons. Their motives may include greed, rivalries with other groups or individuals within their own community (including blood feuds), or even ideological disagreements with rebels.[23] In other cases, they may come from smaller and vulnerable communities, experiencing episodes of persecution and uncertainty, making use of the opportunity and the government's need for them to take up arms and defend themselves against an external aggressor. In Iraq, for example, this was the case with members of the small Albu Risha tribe, who pioneered the Sahwa movement.[24] In Sudan, too, the Janjaweed drew heavily from smaller tribes, such as the Gimr, Tama, Kinin, Salamat or Saada.[25] And in Syria, minority communities were the preferred targets for government mobilization efforts.

What turns this process of recruitment into a militiatocracy is the ability of militia leaders and patrons to become intermediaries between the authorities and the local populations, mainly in the course of recruitment. Incumbent regimes are usually wary of forces outside direct state control because of their unruliness and potential for disloyalty and poor performance.[26] However, a weak central government is compelled to rely on such forces and also limited in its ability to prevent predation and targeting of local populations, even when these processes undermine government interests.[27]

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[19] David Kilcullen, *The accidental guerrilla: fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2011).

[20] Richard Cockett, *Sudan: Darfur and the failure of an African state* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[21] Daniel S. Blocq, 'The grassroots nature of counter-insurgent tribal militia formation: the case of the Fertit in southern Sudan, 1985–1989', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8: 4, 2014, pp. 710–24, DOI: 10.1080/17531055.2014.946336.

[22] Dawn Chatty, 'The Bedouin in contemporary Syria: the persistence of tribal authority and control', *Middle East Journal* 64: 1, 2010, pp. 29–49, https://doi.org/10.3751/64.1.12.

[23] Ben Oppenheim, Abbey Steele, Juan F. Vargas and Michael Weintraub, 'True believers, deserters, and traitors: who leaves insurgent groups and why', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59: 5, 2015, pp. 794–823, DOI: 10.1177/0022002715576750.

[24] Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: my journey with General David Petraeus and the remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 127.

[25] Julie Flint, *Beyond 'Janjaweed': understanding the militias of Darfur* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2009), p. 28, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-WP-17-Beyond-Janjaweed.pdf.

[26] Vanda Felbab-Brown, 'Hurray for militias? Not so fast: lessons from the Afghan local police experience', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27: 2, 2016, pp. 258–281; Ariel I. Ahram, 'The role of state-sponsored militias in genocide', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26: 3, 2014, pp. 488–503; Carey and Mitchell, 'Progovernment militias'.

[27] Brandon Bolte, 'The puzzle of militia containment in civil war', *International Studies Quarterly* 65: 1 2021, pp. 250–61, DOI: 10.1093/isq/sqab001.

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The militia leaders' ability to commit their people to protect the regime and its interests, and to use this commitment to provide their communities with government protection, the means to protect themselves and other benefits, is the basis for the emergence of a militiatocracy. This process produces symbiotic relations between the two sides. PGMs become essential to the government's survival, while these forces' steadfastness, legitimacy among the local community and ability to fight regional threats depend on the government's durability and support. The state's resilience and the ability to exert its coercive authority in parts of the country and maintain its institutions, while relying on loyalist proxies drawn from local populations, is an essential feature of militiatocracies. Central governments in militiatocracies, even though facing challenges on multiple fronts, retain a semblance of legitimacy and functionality. Unlike in other orders, the incumbents are not passive bystanders but cooperate with the armed groups.

The next stage in the consolidation of a militiatocracy is the ability of militia leaders and their patrons to use the alliance with the regime to advance their communities' interests and personal aspirations on the national level. Collaborating with the government offers militia commanders substantial sources of income in the form of business ventures or government consent to illicit activities. It also provides opportunities for political and social integration. And it is when militia leaders and their communities take advantage of such opportunities that a militiatocracy consolidates. This process stands in contrast to the competition over resources and legitimacy that characterizes rebelocracies, aliocracies and warlordism. And so, in militiatocracies such as Iraq, Sudan and Syria, individuals who formerly had limited impact on national and regional politics have found themselves in positions of power in regional and national parliaments, as kingmakers, and as part of their countries' business networks and circles of power.

Thus the emergence of a militiatocracy takes place in a sequence of fairly identifiable stages. First, the eruption of civil war results in the weakness of the regular armed forces. Facing a challenge to its integrity on multiple fronts, the struggling incumbent regime identifies potential allies in the regions where fighting is occurring. Notwithstanding the insurgent threat, the government remains in place and enjoys some control and legitimacy in parts of the country. Targeting groups interested in preserving the existing order, or vulnerable communities threatened by the insurgents, the regime allies itself with members of these communities, arms them, and organizes them into fighting forces under the command of members of those same communities. As the fighting continues, militia leaders assume a growing influence over the region and become government representatives in the areas where they are fighting. They also become intermediaries between the authorities and the population. They do not seek to assume governance responsibilities, only to facilitate the government's presence in the region. Through this process, militia leaders secure a place in the country's political system and access to circles of power. As fighting subsides, incumbents may seek to reduce the influence and power of militia leaders; however, militia recruits and leaders are heavily invested in their collaboration with the authorities, and reversal from this position

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is often impossible. Hence, especially as conflicts de-escalate, bargaining about the place of militias, their recruits and leaders is likely to take place.

Certain militias, even those that participate in the militiatocracy, may have existed before the emergence of this system. What distinguishes contemporary Syria, Iraq and Sudan from the previous era—what makes them militiatocracies— is the balance between government power and militias. The importance of militias in the new order has gone beyond their role as ad hoc auxiliary forces. They have become critical stakeholders in the region's security, militarily and politically. Moreover, they have become their communities' representatives and a link between the government and local populations, a connection that has empowered not only the militia commanders but also their communities.

In short, a militiatocracy is a complex system involving the devolution of security responsibilities to peripheral irregulars without contestation of the incumbent regime's legitimacy to govern. The fact that militiatocracies emerge from this symbiosis between the regime and PGMs in the periphery does not render this order stable in the long term. Like any other system, this one too may face evolutionary pressures and be transformed, for 'the nature of cooperation is likely to change over time as the balance of forces among these actors changes'.[28] From the incumbent regime's perspective, a militiatocracy is a compromise that means the delegation of aspects of sovereignty. New factors may drive the incumbent to reconsider this system and restore its powers *vis-à-vis* the periphery. As in the case of rebelocracies, for instance, external support for the incumbent may drive it to try to push back actors that may seek to develop a strong sense of autonomy. In Iraq, for example, Iranian support for Shi'a militias emboldened Baghdad to act against the Sunni militias that served the government against Islamist insurgents.[29] In Syria, Iranian and Russian support reduced some of the pressure on the regime and its allies, even driving it at some point to consider ways of disbanding some of the PGMs.[30] Yet, even if militiatocracies may eventually transform themselves, their existence is bound to shape the politics and societies of their countries. This reality necessitates their conceptualization and analysis.

The empirical part of this article employs the case of the Syrian militiatocracy. Although not the earliest example of a militiatocracy, Syria, to use Robert Yin's categorization of case-studies,[31] is both a representative and a revelatory case. Entering the second decade of civil war at the time of writing, Syria affords us a laboratory in which to observe and understand the stages in the evolution of a militiatocracy. Given that the civil war has taken place across the nation, a thick analysis of the Syrian militiatocracy offers us insights into PGMs in different settings and circumstances. As in other civil wars,[32] the PGMs here have taken

[28] Kasfir et al., 'Introduction', p. 265.
[29] Ibrahim Al-Marashi, 'Iraq's popular mobilisation units: intra-sectarian rivalry and Arab Shi'a mobilisation from the 2003 invasion to Covid-19 pandemic', *International Politics*, publ. online June 2021, DOI: 10.1057/s41311-021-00321-4.
[30] Christopher Phillips, *The battle for Syria: international rivalry in the new Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).
[31] Robert K. Yin, *Case study research design and methods*, 4th edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009).
[32] Kasfir et al., 'Introduction'.

different shapes, from independent local forces that the regime allied itself with to ones formed by the authorities. Despite the different circumstances, the spread of the Syrian militiatocracy across vast parts of the country demonstrates the robustness of this framework. Admittedly, a comparative analysis would have presented a more comprehensive understanding of militiatocracies. Yet a detailed analysis of a single case, which follows the development of the militiatocracy order both thematically and chronologically, could serve as a stronger starting point from which to develop and apply the militiatocracy framework. The analysis in the next section follows the stages of the evolution and consolidation of the Syrian militiatocracy chronologically to demonstrate the relevance of the process delineated above.

The Syrian militiatocracy

The collapse of the Syrian armed forces

As the protests developed into an armed uprising, the Assad regime began facing attacks on multiple fronts. The nominally anti-sectarian Free Syrian Army (al-Jaysh al-Suri al-Hurr, FSA), which led the fighting at the outset, was soon joined by Islamist groups, such as the Free Men of the Levant (Ahrar al-Sham), the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) and later the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the north-east, Kurdish separatists led by the PYD and its armed wing, the People's Defence Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), gained control over the predominantly Kurdish-populated territories. The regime lost vast territories, encompassing between 30 and 50 per cent of the Syrian population.[33] Some of these territories, as noted above, became areas of rebel governance run by the PYD and ISIS. Under pressure, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) began collapsing as the war advanced. It lost nearly half of its soldiers in the first year of fighting, through defections, desertions and deaths, and was thinly spread across territories under regime control.[34]

To reduce the Syrian civil war to a matter of sectarian hostilities would be grossly inaccurate, as many factors contributed to the eruption of violence.[35] However, one can identify a correlation between sectarian affiliation and the sides in the civil war. As a result of colonial legacies, the SAA officer corps has been drawn disproportionally from minority groups, particularly Alawites, but also Druze, Ismailis, Greek Orthodox and others. Sunni Arabs were overrepresented

[33] Aron Lund, *The political geography of Syria's war: an interview with Fabrice Balanche*, special report (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2015).

[34] Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi, 'Outsourcing state violence: the National Defence Force, "stateness" and regime resilience in the Syrian war', *Mediterranean Politics* 24: 2, 2019, pp. 157–80, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2017.1385169; Philippe Droz-Vincent, 'The Syrian military and the 2011 uprising', in Holger Albrecht, Aurel Croissant and Fred H. Lawson, eds, *Armies and insurgencies in the Arab Spring* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), pp. 168–82.

[35] Jan Selby, Omar S. Dahi, Christian Fröhlich and Mike Hulme, 'Climate change and the Syrian civil war revisited', *Political Geography*, vol. 60, 2017, pp. 232–44; Alexander de Juan and André Bank, 'The Ba'athist blackout? Selective goods provision and political violence in the Syrian civil war', *Journal of Peace Research* 52: 1, 2015, pp. 91–104; Phillips, *The battle for Syria*.

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among the rank and file and the junior ranks. According to Hicham Bou Nassif, most defectors in the first stages of the conflict were disgruntled Sunni soldiers and officers, who justified this move by their sense of marginalization.[36] This resentment, and increasing attacks by Islamists on religious minorities, drove members of these communities to withdraw their support from the opposition. These fears came to play in favour of the battling Assad regime.

Militias as the solution

The regime's desperation for manpower and support drove it to seek alternatives to the regular armed forces in the form of irregular forces. Some of these auxiliaries were local self-defence groups already operating against insurgents, which the regime co-opted. Other groups were formed by the regime itself. The militias that first came to prominence fall into the former category. The regime's clients in different parts of the country, including criminal networks,[37] who became concerned about the regime's survival amid the growing unrest, took local initiatives to thwart anti-regime protests. These groups appeared in the Alawite strongholds of Latakia, Tartous and Banias,[38] and among Sunni tribes and clans, such as Al-Berri and Al-Asasna (among others), who had a history of supporting the regime.[39] In Hasaka, in response to the Kurdish takeover, members of Arab tribes who had settled in the region in previous decades with government encouragement began serving as informants to the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*).[40] There was little coordination among these groups, which were referred to derogatorily by the opposition as Shabiha (ghosts).[41]

The appearance of the Shabiha demonstrated to the regime the irregulars' potential to contribute to counter-insurgency. With this realization came recognition of the need to bring these forces under the regime's control, to exploit them more effectively and to channel the communal violence. Consequently, the authorities began organizing popular committees (*lijan sha'biya*). Security officials contacted local supporters, handing them weapons and assigning them missions. Out of convenience, as these forces were already organized along communal lines, and in tandem with the regime's strategy of strengthening communal cleavages, the popular committees drew volunteers from local communities. One example

[36] Hicham Bou Nassif, '"Second-class": the grievances of Sunni officers in the Syrian armed forces', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38: 5, 2015, p. 644, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2015.1053604.

[37] The regime, too, described the Shabiha as 'criminal gangs': 'Syria unrest: who are the Shabiha?', BBC News, 29 May 2012, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14482968.

[38] Aron Lund, 'Chasing ghosts: the Shabiha phenomenon', in Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin, eds, *The Alawis of Syria: war, faith and politics in the Levant* (London and New York: Hurst and Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 213.

[39] Matthew Weaver and Brian Whitaker, 'Syria crisis: rebels "execute Shabiha" in Aleppo', *Guardian*, 1 Aug. 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2012/aug/01/syria-crisis-aircraft-attack-aleppo-live; 'Kutla' wa-jurha' bi-'ishtibakat bayna mukatilai Al Berri wa-Al-Asasna fi Halib … wa-l-tafasil' [Dead and wounded in skirmishes between al-Berri and al-Asasna fighters in Aleppo … details], Step News Agency, 8 Nov. 2019, shorturl.at/fuAV9.

[40] Haian Dukhan, 'Tribes and tribalism in the Syrian uprising', *Syria Studies* 6: 2, 2014, p. 11.

[41] As the Shabiha started spreading, the term was applied to many of the regime's supporters, including SAA soldiers. See Lund, 'Chasing ghosts', p. 208.

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is the Christian Kasouha clan in the town of al-Qusayr in the Homs governorate. The opposition in the region blamed clan members for serving as regime informants, and they became targets of harassment, kidnapping and assassination. The *mukhabarat*, in response, armed clan members and placed them in checkpoints across the town.[42] Alawite business owners in Homs and Aleppo turned to relatives serving in the armed forces to get arms to protect their businesses.[43] The Ba'ath Party revived a defunct paramilitary group, the Ba'ath Brigades (Kata'ib al-Ba'th), numbering around 5,000 predominantly Sunni Arab fighters, to police Aleppo and Damascus.[44] The next step took the shape of the formation of the National Defence Forces (Quwat al-Difa' al-Watani, NDF).

The NDF and the consolidation of the Syrian militiatocracy

The NDF marked a new stage in the role of militias, primarily through increased government involvement. First, the government regulated PGMs' recruitment by passing Legislative Decree 55, allowing the Ministry of Interior's Office of National Security to contract private companies with uniformed guards to protect money transfers and minerals.[45] The NDF fighters were expected to wear insignia, and many received a weekly salary. They also received basic and some even specialist training in Iran.[46] Statistics about the number of NDF fighters is fluid, as the transition into this framework was gradual. However, according to some estimations, the number of NDF fighters reached 100,000 already at its formation,[47] with 30,000 fighters mobilized in the Homs area alone.[48]

Examples of the rise of PGMs are abundant, but some demonstrate particularly vividly the interdependence that evolved out of the recruitment drive. In the predominantly Druze south-western governorates of al-Suwayda and al-Quneitra, the communities initially sought to remain neutral in the civil war.[49] A small but not insignificant number of Druze turned against the regime, either refusing to fight other Syrians or rebuffing the regime's efforts to increase enlistment of Druze into the SAA.[50] Some local groups, such as the Men of Dignity

[42] Sam Dagher, 'Syrian conflict draws in Christians', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 2012, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303644004577524653025270434.

[43] Aziz Nakkash, *The Alawite dilemma in Homs: survival, solidarity and the making of a community* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2013), pp. 13–14, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/09825.pdf.

[44] Edward Dark, 'The pro-regime Sunni fighters in Aleppo defy sectarian narrative', *Al-Monitor*, 14 March 2014, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/syria-aleppo-sunni-quds-baath-brigades.html.

[45] Gregory Waters, *The lion and the eagle: the Syrian Arab Army's destruction and rebirth* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 18 July 2019), https://www.mei.edu/publications/lion-and-eagle-syrian-arab-armys-destruction-and-rebirth.

[46] Lund, 'Chasing ghosts', p. 219.

[47] Sam Dagher, 'Syria's Alawite force turned tide for Assad', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 Aug. 2013, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708.

[48] Kheder Khaddour, *Strength in weakness: the Syrian Army's accidental resilience* (Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016), p. 4, https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968.

[49] Mahmoud Al-Lababidi, *The Druze of Sweida: the return of the regime hinges on regional and local conflicts* (Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2019), https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/63924/MED_2019_12.pdf.

[50] Sarah Hunaidi, 'ISIS has not been defeated. It's alive and well in southern Syria', *Foreign Policy*, 3 April 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/03/isis-has-not-been-defeated-its-alive-and-well-in-southern-syria/.

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(Rijal al-Karama), fought both the SAA and insurgents.[51] However, as the fighting progressed, the regime desperately needed to rally the Druze to its side, not only to compensate for manpower shortages but also to retain a semblance of control over the south. The regime and one of its foreign allies, the Lebanese Shi'a organization Hezbollah, whose forces had a presence in the south, intensified pressure on local leaders to ally themselves with the government.[52]

These efforts, along with the progress of Islamist insurgents towards the south, drove more Druze into alliance with the regime.[53] In 2013, a militia named the Army of the Unitarians (Jaysh al-Muwahideen, AOU), began to operate in al-Suwayda. The AOU's commanders declared themselves to be operating in the name of protecting the Druze in Syria.[54] Soon after, following a Nusra Front attack on a Druze NDF in Rif Dimashq, which resulted in the death and imprisonment of a large number of fighters, more Druze began joining pro-regime forces.[55]

To be sure, even after allying themselves with the regime, many of the Druze recruits have reiterated their desire to preserve their autonomy *vis-à-vis* Damascus, though without undermining the legitimacy of the regime.[56] Notwithstanding these statements, Druze participation in the regime's counter-insurgency proved crucial to its ability to control territories in the south. In one of the more important campaigns, the Dar'a and al-Suwayda offensive, the AOU and other local forces pushed back the FSA and regained control over al-Tha'la airbase in al-Suwayda.[57] Celebrating the victory in al-Tha'la, the state-owned newspaper, *Tishreen*, interviewed local NDF fighters. The 'defenders of the airport' were all residents of the region, reported to have continued holding the airport, while the village houses were 'turned into kitchens for preparing food'.[58]

A similar development occurred in predominantly Christian areas, as a combination of regime pressure and fear of Islamists drove many Christians to ally themselves with the regime. Some joined the SAA, with several Greek Orthodox holding senior positions.[59] Others joined the popular committees in their

[51] 'Tu'rifu 'ala' fasil "Mashayeh al-Karama" al-mudafi' 'an al-Druz fi-l-Suwayda' [Learn about the 'Sheikhs of Dignity' faction that defends the Druze in Al-Suwayda], BBC Arabic, 27 July 2018, https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-44980774.

[52] 'Paper: Samir Kuntar, believed killed in drone strike, was in Syria seeking Druse support', *Jerusalem Post*, 4 Aug. 2015.

[53] Aaron Y. Zelin and Oula A. Alrifai, 'The Islamic State in southern Syria', *CTC Sentinel* 8: 11, 2015, pp. 23–8.

[54] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 'A case study of "the Syrian Resistance", a pro-Assad militia force', *Syria Comment*, 22 Sept. 2013, https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/aymenn-al-tamimi-speaks-to-ali-kayali-and-profiles-the-syrian-resistance-a-pro-assad-militia-force/.

[55] Firas Choufi, 'Syria's Druze reject autonomous statelet despite growing ISIS threats', *Al-Akhbar English*, 5 July 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20170309012842/http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20452.

[56] Paul McLoughlin, 'Syria insight: Suweida's autonomy threatened by new economic uncertainties', *New Arab*, 21 June 2020, https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/syria-insight-suweidas-autonomy-threatened-new-economic-uncertainties.

[57] Leith Aboufadel, 'Druze from Sweida mobilize to route the militants at Tha'lah airbase', *Al-Masdar*, 11 June 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20190416124120/https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/druze-from-sweida-mobilize-to-route-the-militants-at-thalah-airbase/.

[58] 'Tishreen tursid mu'aniyyat al-mudafi'in 'an Matar al-Tha'la' [*Tishreen* presents the views of the defenders of al-Thula Airbase], *Tishreen*, 2015, https://rb.gy/bgtivs.

[59] A notable example was Daoud Rajiha, Bashar al-Assad's minister of defence and chief of army staff, assassinated in 2012.

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towns: for instance, the Kasouha clan (mentioned above) evolved into an NDF unit operating in the west. Their joining the NDF in turn motivated insurgents to target Christians. This was the story of the small Armenian community in Aleppo. The Armenians have traditionally practised 'integration, not fusion';[60] yet the violence and growing social cleavages prompted many Armenians to enlist in popular committees and then in NDF units in their neighbourhoods.[61]

The regime made strongly focused attempts to target Syriac/Assyrian communities on the fringes of the Kurdish-controlled areas, as part of its relentless efforts to eradicate the PYD-led rebelocracy in the north-east, which undermined Assad's claim to be the only figure capable of securing stability.[62] In 2014, the regime successfully drove a wedge between the Christians in Qamishli and those in other parts of the Hasaka governorate. Some fighters in Sutoro, a Syriac defence force allied with the YPG, defected and formed Sootoro (to distinguish itself from the other group). Sootoro forces joined the NDF and became crucial for the regime in preserving its remaining strongholds in Qamishli.[63] They continued to skirmish with the YPG even at times when the regime was negotiating with the Kurdish leadership, in what one Kurdish official described in 2016 as a 'general feature of the city of Qamishli'. Thus they helped Assad to keep the Kurds at bay while still having cordial relations with them.[64] Following these clashes, Sootoro was able to determine borders in Qamishli with the Kurdish forces, and these remained in operation even after ISIS withdrew from Hasaka.[65] Consequently, the NDF in Hasaka served as a tool for creating social and political realities, on top of their contribution to fighting the insurgents.

The use of militias to exacerbate communal tensions and rule a region has extended to most sectarian and ethnic enclaves. After the SAA had abandoned the town of Salamiya, an Ismaili centre in the Hama governorate, fighting against ISIS was left in the hands of a local NDF unit.[66] This decision led to clashes between Ismailis and Sunnis in the governorate, as ISIS advanced in the region.[67] In Hasaka, again with the aim of quelling Kurdish rebel governance, the regime exploited historical tensions between Kurds and Arab tribes that had settled in the area in the 1970s. In 2015, the authorities recruited members of the Tayy and Al-Shaytat tribes into the NDF to fight both ISIS in Deir ez-Zor and the YPG.[68] In Dar'a and

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[60] 'Armenians in Syria, after the conflict', *Al-Akhbar English*, 10 Feb. 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20140209125319/http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/armenians-syria-after-conflict.

[61] 'Armenians in Syria, after the conflict', *Al-Akhbar English*.

[62] José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, 'Stifling stateness: the Assad regime's campaign against rebel governance', *Security Dialogue* 49: 4, 2018, pp. 235–53, DOI: 10.1177/0967010618768622.

[63] Semiane Mohammed, 'Al-Qasmishli: tawatur bayna Wahdat al-Himaya wa-Sootoro al-Nizam' [Qamishli: tensions between the Defence Units and Sootoro], *Al-Modon*, 13 Jan. 2016, shorturl.at/giwLM; Karlos Zurutuza, 'Conflict: Syrian split divides Christians', Inter Press Service, 4 May 2014, https://www.ipsnews.net/2014/05/syrian-split-divides-christians/.

[64] Mohammed, 'Al-Qasmishli'.

[65] Kamal Sheikho, 'Asharq al-Awsat tours Hasaka and Qamishli where Kurds, Syrian regime vie for control', *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, English edn, 9 March 2018.

[66] ''Itlaq hamlat "tahia li-hamat al-watan" fi madinat al-Salamiya' [Launching of the campaign 'salute the nation's defenders' in the city of Salamiya], SANA, 26 June 2015, https://www.sana.sy/?p=234605.

[67] Kareem Shaheen, 'Isis launches assault on pro-Assad forces in western Syria', *Guardian*, 25 March 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/25/isis-launches-assault-on-pro-assad-forces-in-western-syria.

[68] Haian Dukhan, *State and tribes in Syria: informal alliances and conflict patterns* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

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Badia, the regime wooed members of tribes with which it had longstanding ties to fight protesters and later ISIS insurgents.[69] In 2017, the local intelligence branch in Dar'a formed the Tribal Army (al-Jaysh al-'Asha'iri).[70]

The benefits of the militiatocracy to the regime

A militiatocracy entails not simply the ubiquity of PGMs, but the interdependence between them and the incumbent regime. From the Syrian regime's perspective, the recruitment of PGMs has had many clear tactical advantages. The regime justified the recruitment of NDF on the grounds of their intimate knowledge of their territories.[71] The local fighters also had an interest in combating the insurgents, mainly to protect their families and communities.

In addition, the formation and arming of PGMs intensified intercommunal tensions, serving the regime strategically and tactically. Rebel retaliation against militia recruits pushed members of vulnerable communities further into the regime's hands. In the south, even after ISIS was militarily defeated, Druze villagers continued joining the NDF to defend themselves against remnants of the organization in the area.[72] Islamist attacks on Christian towns and villages in Wadi al-Nasara drove more Christians to join PGMs.[73] A report examining the situation in Syria over the last nine years concluded that 'a regime insistence on weaponizing Alawites and Shi'as, recruiting them into pro-regime and Hezbollah-supported militias, has both left thousands of young men dead and created deep divides between once-connected communities that are now distrustful of one another'. Targeting these minority groups for recruitment by '[cultivating] ties with prominent and influential authorities', the regime manufactured 'real, deeply felt, and dangerous divides between once-connected Syrian communities'.[74]

The rise of PGMs also shifted the conflict to the communal level. The recruitment of members of Arab tribes created rifts within these tribes, other parts of which sided with the rebels. The regime's success in forming the Tribal Army, for instance, frustrated the FSA's endeavours to erect a similar force, the Army of Free Tribes (Jaysh Ahrar al-'Asha'ir), near the Jordanian border.[75] This not only exposed Dar'a to the advance of regime forces but also created frictions and deser-

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[69] Yousef Diab, 'Tashkil "Jaysh al-'Asha'ir" fi Dar'a' [The formation of the 'Army of Tribes' in Dar'a], *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 9 Dec. 2017, shorturl.at/fwDU3.

[70] 'Taswih awda' Al-'asharat min abna' rif al-Muhafaza al-Shimali' [Settlement of the situation of tens of the residents of the Northern Governorate's countryside], *Al-Watan*, 4 Dec. 2017, https://alwatan.sy/archives/130003.

[71] 'Hama: Syrian Army regains control of 2 strategic regions, repulses ISIL offensive', FARS News Agency, 24 Aug. 2017.

[72] 'Qalq fi al-Suwayda min hujum jadid li-Da'esh, wa-hamla li-daf' al-shabab ila' milishiat al-Nizam' [Worry in Suwayda amid a new Islamic State attack and a campaign to push youth to the regime's militias], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 31 March 2019, https://rb.gy/qo9ccr.

[73] 'Syria's valley of the Christians under fire', *Al-Akhbar English*, 6 Feb. 2014.

[74] ETANA Syria, *Manufacturing division: the Assad regime and minorities in south-west Syria* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 2020), p. 8, https://www.mei.edu/publications/manufacturing-division-assad-regime-and-minorities-south-west-syria.

[75] Mohammed Al-Arsan, 'Hal 'akada Jaysh al-'Asha'ir safqa ma' al-Nizam al-Suri fi rif al-Suwayda?' [Has the Army of Free Tribes struck a deal with the Syrian regime in al-Suwayda's countryside?], *Ammnnet*, 13 Aug. 2017, https://rb.gy/nwdbu6.

tions within the Army of Free Tribes.[76] The impact of the regime's ability to recruit tribal support also inspired tribes in al-Raqqa to turn against ISIS, which tried to recruit them as part of its effort to build the caliphate's capital in the city.[77]

The existence of militias also helped the regime to claim legitimacy. By recruiting the Sunni Arab tribes, for example, the regime could signal, domestically and internationally, that the war was not a sectarian one and that the regime, as a 'symbol of national unity', had Sunni support.[78] Furthermore, the militias have allowed the regime to maintain a symbolic presence in remote regions. For example, the formation of Druze militias in Suwayda and Quneitra meant the presence of forces that, at least nominally, were subject to the regime's control, rather than to the Hezbollah forces that operated in the region. Even though Hezbollah has at no point sought to challenge the Assad regime's sovereignty,[79] its autonomy in action has undermined Assad's image as a ruler. The Druze PGMs, for their part, refused to be co-opted into Hezbollah, despite the latter's attempts to lure fighters into its ranks. One Druze NDF fighter stressed that 'there is no clear and public Iranian or Hezbollah activity in al-Suwayda … Attempts to recruit the province's youth into Iran's militias is limited to Hezbollah's support of the National Defence'.[80]

Thus the PGMs' existence became essential for the regime's survival, certainly until the arrival of Russian support, but even after that point. While acknowledging the importance of other factors, including Russian and Iranian support and the fragmentation of the rebels, Aron Lund stresses that 'the shift in Bashar al-Asad's fortunes was the mass recruitment of civilian fighters to support and relieve the official Syrian Army, which suffered from poor morale and regular defections of Sunni soldiers'.[81] As Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi emphasize, even if this policy meant the devolution of power, the regime did not collapse, but was able 'to flex and wane its "stateness"'.[82]

The militias in the ascendant

The militia leaders and their communities, too, benefited from this symbiosis. The most immediate benefits were the arms provided to groups and communities that felt threatened by the insurgents and could now defend themselves. Yet political gains have followed, with recruitment offering entry into the political order. Many PGM commanders and their patrons have been elevated to senior

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[76] 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Nabhan, 'Jaysh al-'Asha'ir yuslim mawaqih li-quwat al-Nizam al-Suri wa-yunsahib fi 'itijah al-Aradi al-'Urduniyya' [The Army of Tribes surrenders its position to the regime's forces and withdraws to Jordan's territory], *Al-Quds Al-'Arabi*, 9 Aug. 2017, https://rb.gy/mg8jqy.

[77] Haian Dukhan and Sinan Hawat, 'The Islamic State and the Arab tribes in eastern Syria', in Timothy Poirson and Robert L. Oprisko, eds, *Caliphates and Islamic global politics* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2014), pp. 49–56, https://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Caliphates-and-Islamic-Global-Politics-E-IR.pdf#page=58.

[78] Khaddour, *Strength in weakness*, p. 1, https://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience-pub-62968.

[79] Randa Slim, 'Hezbollah and Syria: from regime proxy to regime savior', *Insight Turkey* 16: 2, 2014, pp. 61–8.

[80] Quoted in Slim, 'Hezbollah and Syria'.

[81] Lund, 'Chasing ghosts', pp. 207–208.

[82] Leenders and Giustozzi, 'Outsourcing state violence', p. 158.

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political positions. Examples are numerous, and they reflect significant changes in the political system. One notable case is that of Dhu al-Himma Shalish. Even as Assad's first cousin, Shalish had had little influence over the regime; however, his organization and command of Shabiha groups in the first days of the war 'catapulted [Shalish and his family] into the ranks of the inner circle because they are willing to do the dirty work for the regime'.[83]

Many other militia leaders have become members of the Syrian parliament, the People's Assembly. The Syrian legislature has no real political power, but membership signals the regime's favour and members' closeness to circles of power. A report from 2020, for example, noted that 'while seats continued to be allocated to traditional elites from minority backgrounds … loyalist elites from Sunni Arab communities—tribal sheikhs and the Sunni religious movement—appear to have been replaced by war profiteers, militia leaders and retired officers'.[84] A study of the 2020 elections identified 31 newly appointed members of parliament that year who were affiliated with PGMs.[85] These new politicians have come from various backgrounds, reflecting the nature of the support for the regime in the periphery. They include, for instance, Fadel Wardeh, an NDF commander from the Ismaili town of Salamiya, and Bassem Sudan, a Ba'ath Brigades commander from Latakia,[86] as well as Christian militia commanders.[87] In Suwayda, militia leaders have replaced the older generation of Ba'athist functionaries,[88] while in the predominantly rural Sunni periphery, militia commanders and military officers have taken the place of tribal sheikhs both as local officials and as representatives in Damascus.[89] In part, this is a story of generational change and the rise of younger leaders to replace ageing figures; however, the close link between militia affiliation and the rise of the younger leadership makes it difficult to separate the two phenomena.

Other militiamen have leveraged their experience to secure lucrative business opportunities. They have entered areas of the formal economy such as the trade in oil and metals,[90] but also illicit markets such as drug trafficking and smuggling.[91] Through the war economy, militia leaders have come to serve as intermediaries

[83] David D. Kirkpatrick and Kareem Fahim, 'Blast strips Assad of a valuable family member and a pair of powerful loyalists', *New York Times*, 18 July 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/valued-relative-and-2-strong-loyalists-die-in-damascus-attack.html.

[84] Ziad Awad and Agnès Favier, *Syrian People's Council elections 2020: the regime's social base contracts* (Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 30 Oct. 2020), p. 1, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/68819/RSCAS_2020_13.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

[85] Karam Shaar and Samy Akil, *Inside Syria's clapping chamber: dynamics of the 2020 parliamentary elections* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 28 Jan. 2021), https://www.mei.edu/publications/inside-syrias-clapping-chamber-dynamics-2020-parliamentary-elections#footnote-ref-21.

[86] 'Majlis a'da' al-Sha'b: Fadel Muhammad Warda' [People's Enemies Assembly: Fadel Muhammad Warda], Horyya.net, 28 July 2020, https://horrya.net/archives/127604; Saleh Malas, 'Man in the news: Bassem Sudan "a parliament member" heads a military militia', *Enab Baladi*, 19 July 2020, https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/07/man-in-the-news-bassem-sudan-a-parliament-member-heads-a-military-militia/.

[87] Liz Sly and Asser Khattab, 'In Syria's elections, some Assad loyalists are crying foul', *Washington Post*, 23 July 2020.

[88] Shaar and Akil, *Inside Syria's clapping chamber*.

[89] Awad and Favier, *Syrian People's Council elections*, p. 11.

[90] Chloe Cornish, 'The men making a fortune from Syria's war', *Financial Times*, 3 Oct. 2019, https://www.ft.com/content/525ec4e4-e4a3-11e9-9743-db5a370481bc.

[91] Martin Chulov, '"A dirty business": how one drug is turning Syria into a narco-state', *Guardian*, 7 May 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/07/drug-captagon-turning-syria-into-narco-state.

between the regime and local populations. Through their contracts with the authorities, PGM commanders across the country have become involved in local enterprises around the conveyance of goods and commodities between provinces, mainly by informally (but with the regime's tacit consent) taxing such transactions.[92] Some militia commanders have even set up non-governmental organizations to channel funds coming from the centre to their regions, describing these as local aid organizations.[93] With this income, militias became the main employers of unemployed men in their provinces, paying them with money received from the regime or gained through looting.[94] In many instances, militias also became responsible for distributing goods arriving from the centre to the local population. In Deir ez-Zor, the NDF took part in distributing food shipments from Damascus—not before looting and hoarding significant portions of this food themselves.[95] NDF and Ba'ath Brigades leaders also teamed up with local profiteers and war merchants to lead reconstruction efforts in the governorate after the government take-over, transforming themselves from 'fighters, merchants and war middlemen into party leaders, local officials and businessmen'.[96]

One important service that militia leaders have provided for their communities has been in resolving issues around conscription. While this was not the NDF's original purpose, it has come to serve as an alternative to conscription into the SAA, which would have seen the conscripts sent away from their provinces. Militia leaders leveraged these forces to enable young people from their communities to avoid military service with the national army. Thus the Tribal Army's leader, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Rifa'i, declared the militia to be open to the 'sons of the Hawran', and said that recruitment to the militias would settle other issues, including collaboration with the rebels or desertion from the military.[97] And indeed, the local NDF units in Dar'a were able to sign a reconciliation agreement with the SAA, allowing local men to choose whether they preferred to join the SAA or the NDF.[98] Most have chosen the latter. In Suwayda, where avoidance of conscription has been rife, the NDF and its commanders have been steadfast in preventing the authorities from imposing military service and in guaranteeing that joining the NDF would serve as an alternative route for Druze youth.[99]

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[92] Lina Khatib and Lina Sinjab, *Syria's transactional state: how the conflict changed the Syrian state's exercise of power*, research paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme (London: Chatham House, 2018), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-10-syrias-transactional-state-khatib-sinjab.pdf.

[93] Khatib and Sinjab, *Syria's transactional state*, p. 18.

[94] Raymond Hinnebusch, 'The battle over Syria's reconstruction', *Global Policy* 11: 1, 2020, p. 115, DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.12779.

[95] Ziad Awad, *The rebuilding of Syrian regime networks in the city of Deir Ez-Zor: identifying key local players* (Florence: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, 2019), p. 9, https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/61827.

[96] Awad, *The rebuilding of Syrian regime networks*, p. 15.

[97] 'Taswih awda' al-'asharat'.

[98] *Syria: military service, report based on fact-finding mission to Istanbul and Beirut* (Copenhagen: Danish Immigration Service, 2020).

[99] *Syria: military service*, country of origin information report (Brussels: European Asylum Support Office, 2021), https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2021_04_EASO_COI_Report_Military_Service.pdf.

Rethinking armed groups and order

These relationships between PGMs and the regime illustrate the mediated stateness that emerged in Syria during the civil war. Unlike other forms of mediated stateness, such as rebelocracy or warlordism, in Syria PGMs and the incumbent regime have developed interdependence and a shared interest in preserving the regime and preventing the advent of multilayered governance by eliminating threats to the incumbent and enhancing its symbolic presence.

Foreign interventions and challenges to the system

Like other orders characterized by mediated stateness and multilayered governance, a militiatocracy is far from static. Realities on the ground change, and with them the actors' interests. Such shifts pave the way towards renegotiation of relations between the regime and the PGMs. At the end of this process, the militiatocracy may be transformed into a new order, or it may survive. Even though accustomed to devolving power, the Syrian government still inclines to centralization in its core; accordingly it was predictable that, when the balance in the war tilted in its favour, it would seek to restore at least some of its authority. On the other hand, the PGMs, their leaders and their communities were unwilling to abandon their hard-earned privileges.

Foreign interventions have been an important factor affecting the balance between Damascus and the PGMs. All parties to the conflict have received external backing. The insurgents have secured mostly indirect support in the shape of money, arms and political backing from neighbouring states, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The PYD has secured similar support from the Americans. The regime, in turn, has gained support from Iran and Hezbollah, and since 2015 from Russia.[100] While it would be a mistake to underestimate the weight of foreign aid in enabling the insurgency, external support for Assad has been on a far larger scale, and has been essential for the regime's survival. Iran and Hezbollah have orchestrated the flow of Shi'a militias to the country, fighting alongside the SAA and the NDF. The Russians, in turn, have employed their air force against rebel strongholds, tilting the conflict in the regime's favour.

The relevance of foreign intervention to understanding militiatocracies lies in how it contributes to the regime's efforts to change the balance of power in the country. Whereas Iran encouraged and incentivized the regime's reliance on PGMs, and took part in training them, the Russians initially pushed for the demobilization of PGMs and their integration in the regular forces. To facilitate this integration, the Russians helped the regime organize new SAA frameworks to absorb PGMs. These have included the 4th Assault Corps, which recruited NDF fighters and regular conscripts,[101] and the 5th Corps, which recruited at the national rather than regional level. While the 5th Corps as a whole drew volunteers from right across society, its 8th Brigade absorbed defecting militia-

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[100] Phillips, *The battle for Syria*.

[101] Charles R. Lister and Dominic Nelson, *All the president's militias: Assad's militiafication of Syria* (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 14 Dec. 2017), https://www.mei.edu/publications/all-presidents-militias-assads-militiafication-syria.

men.[102] In 2018, the Russians openly declared their intention to disband PGMs, which have 'finished their role in practice'. Assad was reported to have consented to the move, fearing that 'there is a danger that some of the militias' influence turns them into a parallel authority—or even exceeding the regime's authority'.[103]

The regime's endeavours may have helped to reduce the number of NDF fighters somewhat. Nevertheless, the system has survived these attempts well, as indicated by the number of militia leaders in the parliament after the elections that followed these developments. The Syrian militiatocracy has proved to be resilient, showing that PGMs are not likely to lose their relevance to the regime and its stability, and that militiatocracies may represent a dynamic order.

Conclusion

Syria tells the story of the evolution of a new form of governance, in which PGMs have become vital actors in security and, as a result, politics as well. The framework of militiatocracies helps make sense of this order, its evolution and its implications. The interdependence between the Assad regime and PGMs across the country was crucial for the former's survival and existence beyond Damascus. Although garnering power in regional enclaves, militia leaders have not become warlords in that they have not sought to destroy the existing order. Their enclaves did not turn into rebelocracies, not simply because they did not seek to overthrow the government, but because their symbolic and actual presence has been crucial for the militia commanders' legitimacy and the overall sense of security.

This system has resulted in social and political changes. Political elites have been reshuffled to a degree, new figures have emerged in the centre of power, and communities that had been marginalized and intimidated have now carved out new places for themselves in politics and society. It is true that, like other orders, militiatocracies may differ from each other on some levels. These differences, nuanced or significant, can affect the trajectory of these actors in different ways. The introduction of this framework in the present article, nonetheless, serves as a basis for future work comparing militiatocracies and other orders and also comparing militiatocracies.

As well as facilitating an understanding of the current position in Syria, the militiatocracies' framework can shed light on future developments. Much like other security and political systems, militiatocracies are dynamic and malleable. The PGMs and the Assad regime established patterns of collaboration, but these arrangements have required maintenance and involved constant bargaining. The Russian-backed attempts to demobilize PGMs and reintegrate them into the regular forces, though mostly unsuccessful to date, indicate a certain under-

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[102] Kirill Semenov, *The Syrian armed forces seven years into the conflict: from a regular army to volunteer corps*, report (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 17 May 2017), https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-syrian-armed-forces-seven-years-into-the-conflict-from-a-regular-army-to-volunteer-corps-/#detail.

[103] Abbasi Samisem, 'Qarar Rusi bi-hall milishiat al-Nizam fi Suriya' [A Russian decision to dissolve the Syrian regime's militias], *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, 9 June 2018, https://rb.gy/sg49rd.

standing that the path to post-conflict reconstruction necessitates the demobilization and disarming of armed groups that lie outside direct state control. Syria is still at war, but the violence may not last for ever. When the post-conflict transition begins, the question of the demobilization of PGMs is likely to resurface more forcefully.[104] Space limitations here do not allow a discussion of the merits of such a strategy. Nevertheless, the militiatocracy that emerged in Syria during the civil war, and the place PGMs have secured in politics and society, are likely to affect any attempts at demobilization. It is therefore important to establish a thorough understanding of the existing order.

[104] Benedetta Berti, 'Stability in Syria: what would it take to make it happen?', *Orbis* 62: 3, 2018, pp. 422–37, DOI: 10.1016/j.orbis.2018.05.008.

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