

COMMENTARY



# Brothers in Arms

In recent years Syria's military has been characterized by an unprecedented degree of sectarianism.

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In a [recent study](#) written for the Omran Center for Strategic Studies, I underlined that every single one of the top 40 posts in the Syrian armed forces was held by a member of President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect. My study also showed that the officers hailed from a narrow geographical region.

The entire Syrian military is not built on one particular sect. But in recent years the institution has been characterized by an unprecedented degree of sectarianism. This follows from decades of Alawite domination of the officer corps. There are historical reasons that have brought the army to this level of dependency on one sect to the exclusion of all others. Where does the problem lie, and what are the ways of reforming the Syrian military?

The answer boils down to two issues—the mechanisms for entry into Syria's various military colleges, institutes, and schools, and the process of promotions and appointments in senior military ranks. Addressing the difficulties ensuing from them would demand a fundamental organizational and legal overhaul of both processes.

The method of enrolling in military colleges, from where officers graduate, is at the heart of the problem. Graduates of these institutions form the basis of the Syrian officer corps, so the way that enrollment takes place can allow for a lack of balance in terms of the regional and sectarian origins of recruits. Custom and informal networks mean that despite the lack of any legal justification for this, preference is systematically given to Alawites. This phenomenon has exploded in recent years compared with the period before

2011, as the regime has succeeded in militarizing the Alawite community in the face of a popular uprising.

Officially, there are no sectarian quota systems for jobs or positions in Syria, including recruitment to officer education schools. **The constitution** outlaws sectarianism and explicitly bans any political activity, party, or grouping that is based on religious or sectarian foundations. But in reality the regime practices sectarianism with great effectiveness, specifically with regard to the military and security sectors. Since the Ba'th-led coup in 1963, and following the late president Hafiz al-Assad's "**corrective movement**" in 1970, Alawites have monopolized all leading positions in the army and the security forces, starting with enrollment in military colleges.

This, together with the **unofficial networks of Alawite officers** within the military, mean that applicants from different sects and regions face profoundly unequal opportunities. Such measures have consolidated the sectarianism pervading in military colleges and consequently the military establishment as a whole.

Military Intelligence plays a key role in the admissions process, through a security assessment of each applicant, none of whom can be accepted unless he or she is found to be sufficiently loyal to the regime. Individual, family, and geographical factors are all taken into account. Those hailing from certain backgrounds or have kin with a history of political opposition are rejected. Preference is also given to Ba'th Party members. Party membership is all but obligatory from high school onward, and anyone considering joining the military must take into account that being a member will boost his or her chances of entering a military college.

The ideal solution would be to install a consistent, balanced mechanism for entry into military colleges, based on regional quotas that consider the population of each governorate. Basic rules would prevent **bureaucratic measures** in civilian departments of the state that allow some applicants to bypass this process. The mechanism would be transparent and citizenship emphasized above all other factors. Within a few years, this would roll back Alawite domination of the officer corps—something unimaginable for the regime.

A similar mechanism to the current enrollment process in officer education schools also applies to promotions and appointments to senior military posts. This process is selective, unprofessional, and sectarian. It is also totally subject to the approval of Military Intelligence and a commission of officers headed by the president of the republic, in his capacity as commander in chief of the army and armed forces, and including the chief of staff and other officers.

Organizationally, the military's Office of Human Resources decides which officers are eligible for promotion, in compliance with a legal framework with regard to years of service and in light of available vacancies. But the final decision is made by the Officer Affairs Wing of Military Intelligence, also known as Branch 293. Since 1973, Military Intelligence and its Branch 293 have been headed exclusively by Alawites. This poses another challenge for reform efforts.

Syria's **Military Service Law** (Legislative Decree No. 18 of 2003 and subsequent amendments) sets the legal basis for the promotions and organization of serving military personnel. Under this law, each member has two files—one containing documents and data pertaining to his or her service, the other a secret file with classified reports. These files are managed according to the orders of the chief of staff and, ultimately, Syria's president, as commander in chief.

Branch 293 has complete control over the classified file, through security officers deployed in the army. The unit plays a pivotal role in the promotions process throughout the military hierarchy, reporting to the head of Military Intelligence. He in turn reports to the officers' commission mentioned earlier.

Through this mechanism, officers are promoted on the basis of loyalty and the nature of relationships in the unofficial networks pervading the military. Little attention is given to an officer's level of professionalism. In some cases a suitable vacancy is created for a person enjoying favor within such networks. This does not necessarily mean that officers from other parts of society are never promoted.

In September 2019, President Bashar al-Assad **issued a ruling** awarding officers having the rank of colonel or above with the qualification necessary to

join the general staff, even if they had not completed the required training (the equivalent of the United Kingdom's higher command and staff course). This extended the qualification to officers who had been on active duty. The ruling, based on Article 39, Section B of the Military Service Law, effectively paved the way for their promotion to higher ranks. But it did not give them the military expertise needed to command larger military units. Perhaps that's because the battle that the Syrian military has been waging against nonstate armed groups since 2011 is different than military operations against organized armies.

A small circle exclusively made up of military figures is responsible for overseeing the promotions process, with zero transparency, accountability, or oversight from civilian agencies of the state. The process has therefore remained captive to the interests and desires of the political leadership as it seeks to remain in power. This has led to the current situation in which all the leading positions within the Syrian military are held by members of the same sect.

The Syrian regime is based on three foundations: the Ba'th Party, the military, and the Alawite sect. Together, all three have played a fundamental role in preventing the regime's downfall. The Ba'th, despite its diminished status under the 2012 constitution, plays a leading role in state and society and has pervaded the ranks of the military establishment. Many officers hold leading posts in the party, both within its Central Command and on its Central Committee.

The military, meanwhile, has come under the complete control of Alawite officers and is thus directly linked to the regime's third foundation stone, the Alawite sect. The latter, in turn, has become almost totally militarized and integrated into the regime. In light of this triumvirate, any reform effort on the level of affiliation, promotions, or appointments is bound to fail for as long as the regime retains a sectarian approach to military politics. This foreshadows further social divisions in Syria, as we have seen since 2011. The regime's mindset will also be a stumbling block to efforts to create a professional national army with a hierarchy that is independent of political calculations. Such dynamics have even blocked efforts by Syria's main ally Russia to reform the military.

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