

THE
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SYRIA

Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces

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About the Project:

The Syria Conflict Mapping Project is an initiative launched by The Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program. Funded jointly by The Skoll Global Threats Fund and The Carter Center, the initiative examines the massive volume of citizen-generated information related to Syrian conflict that is available online. Specifically, the project:

1. details the growth of paramilitary groups in various governorates within Syria;
2. illuminates the evolution of armed opposition hierarchies at the local, regional, and national levels;
3. shows the current geographic delineation of pro and anti-government forces; and
4. provides up-to-date analysis on the current state of the conflict.

For best visibility, it is strongly recommended that these reports be viewed online or printed in color.

Acknowledgements:

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Lockheed Martin's LMEnsemble has been enormously useful in gathering and making sense of information coming out of Syria. Their software platform has helped the Center stay up to date on developments in Syria and has automated much of the data gathering required to undertake this project.



Archives of armed group formations kept by researchers of the Syria Conflict Monitor have been an enormous help to The Carter Center's Syria Conflict Mapping Project. These detailed records have facilitated research and provide an unparalleled historic record of the progression of the Syrian conflict.

Special thanks go out to Russell Shepherd, whose programming skills and expert knowledge of network analysis tools have greatly facilitated the Center's analysis.



Figure 1: Pro-government paramilitary forces celebrate the fall of Qusayr. Source: Mohamed Azakir/Reuters

Executive Summary

In Syria, the ranks of pro-government paramilitary groups are growing, signaling a further decentralization of state authority. The most prominent of these is the National Defense Forces (NDF), an umbrella organization, under which several pro-government local militias operate. There are similarities with the Free Syrian Army, a brand that encompasses a wide array of opposition groups ranging from seculars to global jihadists. The reformulation of the government's armed forces from a traditional military into militias could lead to a growth in warlordism. These units may seek to establish their power in areas where the state is absent, either due to pressure from the opposition or increasingly strained resources. The new commanders of these paramilitary groups may seek to provide services as well as protection, which will add more players to an already complex mosaic of militias, warlords, and local powerbrokers. Mediators may at some point need to deal with this plurality of actors, instead of just negotiating with President Assad and his government. It is also likely that some warlords, enjoying their newly found wealth and power, could strive to block attempts to end the conflict.

Having drawn most of its fighters from minority communities, the NDF are widely perceived as sectarian. As NDF units gain power and take charge of more positions - replacing the regular Syrian army - the sectarian aspect of the war in Syria will grow even more pronounced. Further, even if President Assad's government were to suffer significant military reversals, units like the NDF have the potential to outlive the government, at least in some form. Much more so than the regular army, they are grounded in their home communities. They have been formed out of the sense of existential threat, perceived by so many of Syria's minorities. These fears are unlikely to dissipate soon. This suggests that these pro-government militias could be a feature in Syria for

some time, and these groups, in turn, could give Iran, and other Syrian government allies, a bridgehead for a long term proxy-war in the country.

Introduction

In an interview given in January 2013, a Qusayr-based opposition activist noted that the number of pro-government fighters in the province of Homs had recently swelled significantly due to the influx of fighters from the National Defense Forces.¹ Five months later, after capturing every opposition-held town south of Homs, tank columns and government soldiers accompanied by Hezbollah forces and a sizable detachment from the National Defense Forces² paraded down the main street in the city of Al-Qusayr. In the days following the fall of Al-Qusayr, a leaked video showed the commander of government forces in Aleppo pleading with a crowd of men from two Shiite villages north of the city to provide him with a force of a thousand men to help break an opposition siege on Menagh Airbase.³ The general promised them a government salary and heavy weapons to protect their villages in return for their services.

The past year has seen a surge in the number of pro-government paramilitary groups, growing from local protection units into an estimated force of 60,000 men⁴ under the banner of the National Defense Forces. Skilled in urban and guerilla warfare, the increasing mobilization of these groups signals a shift in the Syrian government's military tactics, and the fact that they are comprised mainly of religious minorities threatens to further deepen Syria's sectarian strife. Training provided to these groups by Iran and Hezbollah exacerbates this sectarian tension, and risks further internationalization of the conflict. While Iran and Hezbollah's involvement with these groups serves to bolster President Assad's government, it also serves to hedge against the possible collapse of the government by creating proxy militant groups. The proliferation of pro-government paramilitary groups indicates a growing decentralization of the Syrian state's authority, risking an increase in the same style of warlordism that is already pervasive in many opposition held areas. There is also evidence correlating the deployment of pro-government militias to specific atrocities committed against civilians.

¹“Syria builds paramilitary force aided by Iran: NGO.” AFP, January 21,2012. Accessed October 29, 2013. http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ieoZUM4Nws5_cKdOGDUqWB-0zL5w?docId=CNG.57fbc89c875ff2813e5605f4ea70d382.1f1.

² “Hezbollah-backed Syria troops overrun Qusayr.” France 24, June 5, 2013. Accessed July 24, 2013. <http://www.france24.com/en/20130605-hezbollah-backed-syria-troops-overrun-qusayr>.

³ “Speech Brigadier Mohammed Khadour gave on Tuesday.” Albawaba, June 5, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.albawaba.com/video/zAt7L9Lz12c>.

⁴ “The regime digs in.” The Economist, June 15, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21579494-president-bashar-assad-and-his-forces-have-won-new-lease-life-regime-digs>.

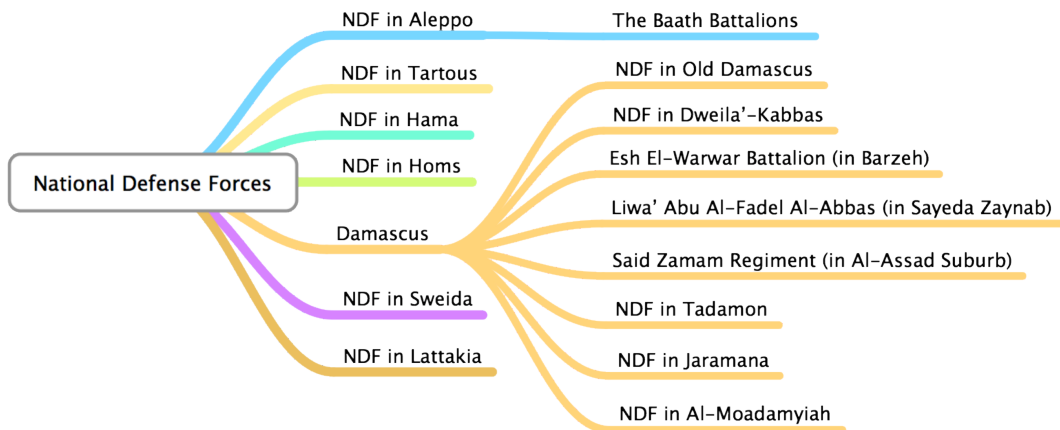


Figure 2: Known NDF units and areas of deployment.

An Erosion of Government Control

Close analysis of the major atrocities against civilians that have been committed over the course of the conflict in Syria reveals a pattern which suggests regular paramilitary involvement, and a particular concentration of incidences along the borders of historically Alawite areas of Syria. The map below shows the locations of major incidents that can confidently be linked to pro-government paramilitaries, including the NDF and less formal, localized units.⁵

⁵ The Carter Center's list of incidents involving paramilitaries is derived from a substantial body of existing media and social media reports, further refined with an analysis of patterns of targets and tactics that have appeared frequently in such incidents. Reported paramilitary involvement in atrocities was considered credible when three or more of the following targets or tactics were observed: stabbing, burning of bodies, killing women and children, execution style shootings, looting, and "mop up" operations after shelling by the Syrian military.

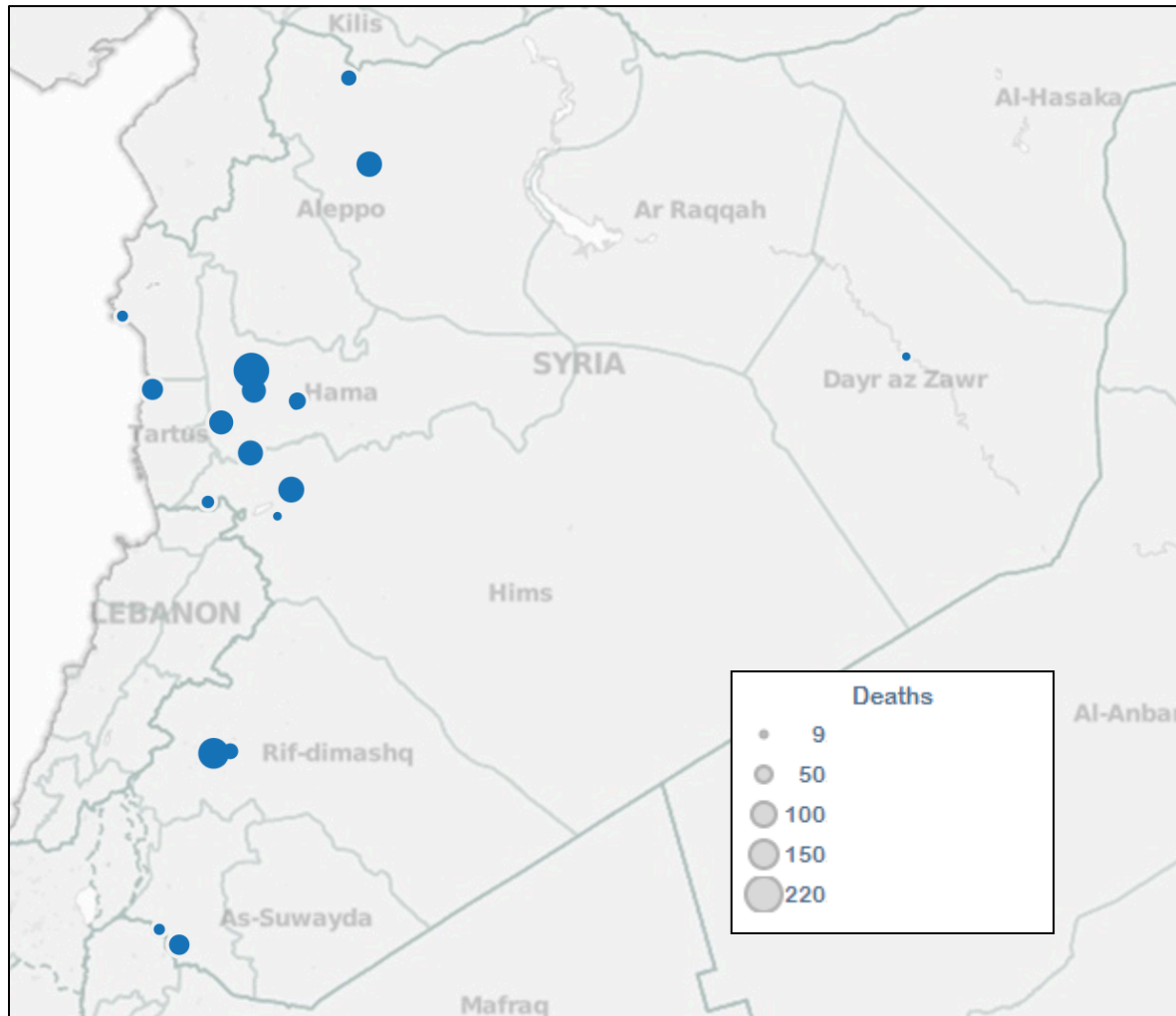


Figure 3: Locations of major attacks against civilians that can confidently be linked to paramilitary forces. The size of each location marker represents the number of people reported killed in each event. Data visualization produced using Tableau Public.

Before the formalizing of paramilitary forces' role in the Syrian army, the groups were often used as “clean up” after government shelling of a village or urban area. Despite a move to formalize the engagement of paramilitary forces by creating, supplying, and training the NDF, they are still, at their core, community-based militias whose local interests may at times be at odds with national-level government strategies. Many are clearly sectarian in nature and some, particularly in the Alawite community, have tribal affiliations. As the conflict has progressed, they have increasingly engaged in looting and other crimes, and it is rumored that the Syrian military has had to forcefully prevent some of these groups from committing further atrocities.

While the Syrian government has trained more and more paramilitary groups, only those deployed to the front lines receive compensation. Others, like some members of the popular committees, remain in their home villages, without pay, to fight when necessary. This compensation structure likely serves multiple purposes. It helps formalize the relationship

between the Syrian army and these militias, possibly increasing centralized control over them. And, the payments put resources into the hands of Syrians who are loyal to the government.

Background

The Syrian Baath party, particularly during the rule of Hafez al-Assad, has a history of relying on paramilitary forces for taking and holding political power. Faced with the Muslim Brotherhood's uprising in the early 1980s, Hafez al-Assad resorted to arming Baathists in order to man checkpoints around the country and counter the Islamist insurgency.⁶ These armed Baathist militias formed the Jaysh al-Sha'bi (the Popular Army), a largely secular entity. This organization remained as a reserve force until Bashar al-Assad's presidency, which saw efforts to demilitarize Syrian society, including the ruling Baath Party.

As the Syrian uprising spread in 2011, neither al-Jaysh Al-Sha'bi, nor other Baath cadres provided the government with its pseudo-civilian arm. Instead, spontaneous formations of enthusiastic government loyalists, mostly civilians, took upon themselves the task of battering protestors, gathering information about dissidents, and organizing neighborhood watches. These groups were known as *Lijan al-Sha'bia* (Popular Committees); the opposition labeled them *Shabiha* (thugs). *Shabiha* is a name derived from the smuggling groups that hailed from Syria's Alawite minority; the term later became a brand name for all government loyalists who either break up protests or take up arms against the opposition. These groups did not remain independent for long. They were quickly linked with different branches of the security apparatus, which coordinated their presence at checkpoints, outside mosques, and in neighborhoods where protests were growing.⁷ At first, these local committees were lightly armed, highly decentralized, and cross-sectarian, but they evolved rapidly.

By late 2011 the protest movement had morphed into an armed rebellion in the city of Homs. People were divided along sectarian lines, and Alawite popular committees rushed to arm themselves as armed insurgents in adjacent Sunni neighborhoods were overrunning government checkpoints. When the government decided to recapture opposition strongholds in Homs in early 2012, these impromptu militias helped guide government forces in their assault. The militias later took control of many checkpoints in the recaptured areas and around the city. It is unclear whether the involvement of these paramilitary units was of a strategic necessity or convenience, but it was certainly a boon to government forces. After Homs, as the war expanded to most of Syria's urban centers, the struggle became more sectarian. Islamist and Jihadist opposition groups attacked minority villages and neighborhoods.⁸ More men from Alawite, Christian, and Druze communities took up arms and took responsibility for sealing off their areas⁹.

⁶ Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1988), 327.

⁷ Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, "Inside Syria's shabiha death squads", June 15, 2012. Accessed October 29, 2013. http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/06/15/inside_syrias_shabiha_death_squads.html.

⁸ "Syria: Attacks on Religious Sites Raise Tensions", Human Rights Watch, January 23, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013 <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/23/syria-attacks-religious-sites-raise-tensions>.

⁹ "Minority militias stir fears of sectarian war in Damascus." Reuters, September 7, 2012. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/07/syria-crisis-militias-idUSL6E8K61HT20120907>.

Formation of the NDF

The expanding geographic scope of the war and the intensity of the fighting took their toll on the government's forces. Defections, desertions, battle losses, the challenges of urban warfare, and the war of attrition waged by the opposition significantly depleted the number of men available to fight. Furthermore, the loyalty of many fighting units became a serious concern for the government. The Syrian Army's soldiers come from diverse backgrounds, and many were connected to communities that were sympathetic to the opposition's cause or that had suffered from the government's attacks. The government's experience with loyal militias in Homs provided a blueprint for addressing their personnel problems.

In early 2013 the formation of the National Defense Forces was announced. Local committees and other volunteers were organized into an ostensibly unified entity under the command of the Syrian military. These men, unlike the civilian-dressed and relatively undisciplined armed members of the local communities, were in full battle gear. This formalization re-branded the stigmatized "shabiha" militias, and provided a more respectable means of mobilization. Volunteers were flocking in, mostly from Syria's minority communities. Some were highly motivated by sectarian sentiments; others were seeking revenge against the rebels. Others still joined the new force to guarantee a steady salary, as well as prize money from looting.¹⁰ Funding for these entities comes from financiers within the government's inner circle, such as the Assad and Makhlouf families¹¹ and other government-linked businessmen.¹²

This new formation meets a number of the government's needs. First, men who joined the NDF did so voluntarily and, as such, the risk of defection is low. Second, the NDF gives a much-needed numerical boost to government forces throughout the country. Third, NDF fighters, as irregular or paramilitary elements, are receiving training in asymmetrical, urban, and guerrilla warfare - a style of war that the Syrian army was not prepared for,¹³ and which happens to be the dominant fighting mode of the opposition. Not all NDF members have completed their mandatory military service (conscription), so the government is allowing members to meet their conscription term in the NDF.¹⁴ Military officers attached to NDF units are in charge of coordinating with the regular army, planning operations, and calling in artillery and air support.

These militias, unlike regular troops that come from different parts of the country, enjoy extensive knowledge of the local neighborhoods-turned-battlefields. A good example of this can be found in Aleppo, where many of the volunteers come from the local pro-regime (and Sunni)

¹⁰ "Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement." Reuters, April 21, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421>.

¹¹ Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," Institute for the Study of War, February 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>.

¹² Yezid Sayigh, "Syria's Strategic Balance at a Tipping Point." Carnegie Middle East Center, June 7, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/06/07/syria-s-strategic-balance-at-tipping-point/g95a>.

¹³ "Syria's Strategic Balance at a Tipping Point."

¹⁴ "Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement." Reuters, April 21, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421>.

Berri clan.¹⁵ Similar to the old popular committees, many NDF formations today are located around certain sectarian communities, serving as a defensive force. However, the most crucial difference between the NDF and the local committees is that some NDF troops are being deployed with the regular army in offensive operations, including missions far beyond their home bases. For example, the commander of the Hama wing of the NDF was killed in a rebel ambush in Aleppo, in July 2013,¹⁶ indicating that the government is using NDF elements from calmer areas to bolster frontline forces, which can be well outside their home communities.

NDF presence has been observed in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartous, and Sweida. Some NDF units have named themselves after their slain commanders, e.g. the Said Zama NDF regiment in Damascus. Others operate under the name of the Baath Battalions (in Aleppo). Perhaps the most notorious sectarian NDF formation is the “Liwa’ Abu Al-Fadel Al-Abbas.” Named after the Prophet Mohammad’s grandson, who is revered by Shiite Muslims, the formation is located in and around the Shiite shrine of Sayeda Zaynab, south of Damascus. This unit is the only NDF formation known to have adopted an overtly religious name, mimicking (though fundamentally opposed to) Sunni Islamist opposition groups.

As can be seen from the following map, while only one wing of the NDF has an overtly sectarian name, the distribution of units clearly indicates the sectarian composition of many (if not all) NDF units in Damascus. In most cases existing popular committees in these neighborhoods evolved into NDF formations which have remained in their home neighborhoods.

¹⁵ Joseph Holliday, “The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War,” Institute for the Study of War, February 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>.

¹⁶ “Military funeral for the commander of the National Defense Forces in Hama, after he was killed in an ambush near Aleppo.” Aks AlSer, July 19, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=7a545aed99ed484475c8d0143b388efc&ar=841645815

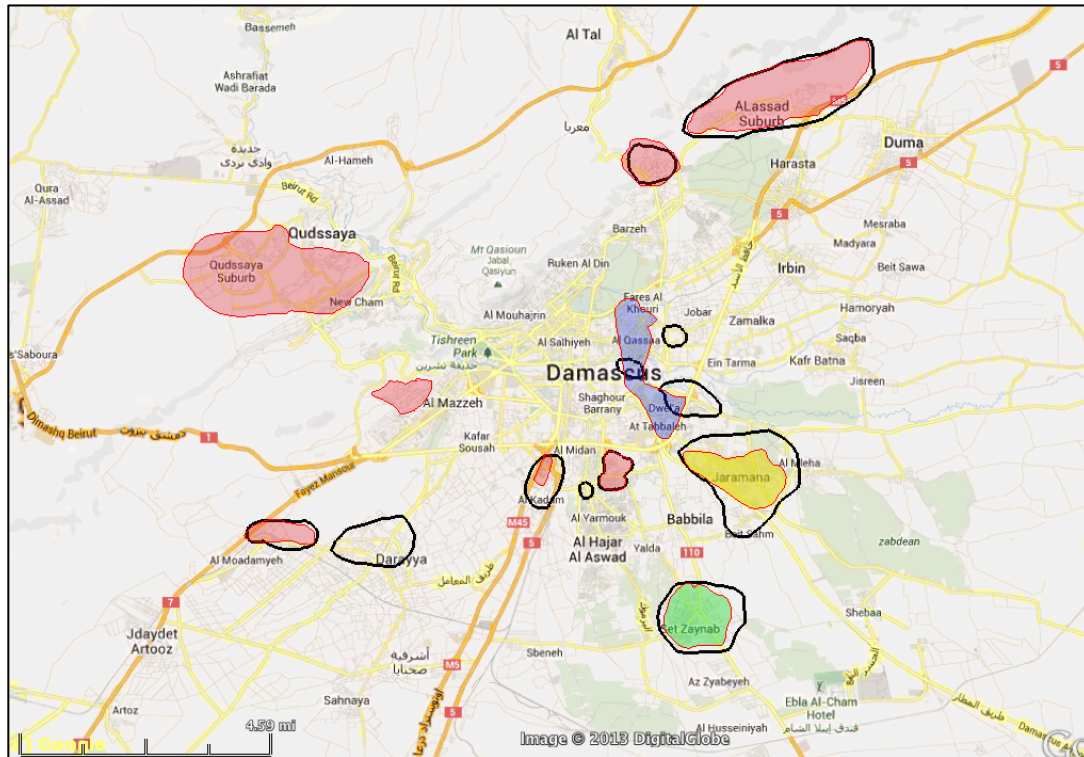


Figure 4: Damascus' minority communities: Red (Alawite), Blue (Christian), Yellow (Druze), Green (Shiite). Locations of NDF units active in Damascus are outlined in black.

Foreign Involvement

Iran, along with its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite factions are involved in training and equipping pro-government paramilitary groups in Syria to serve both short and long term purposes. The exact extent of Iranian involvement in providing advice and training to pro-government militias is difficult to discern. Two senior commanders from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Quds force have been assassinated in Damascus (one in early 2012 and another in early November, 2013),^{17,18} indicating the enduring presence of top-level Iranian experts in paramilitary affairs and asymmetrical warfare. Fighters from Iraqi Shiite militias are reportedly bolstering the pro-regime Liwa' Abu Al-Fadel Al-Abbas NDF regiment around the Shiite holy site of Sayeda Zaynab near Damascus.¹⁹ Fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah are also present in the Sayeda Zaynab area.²⁰ The shrine, in addition to being one of the holiest Shiite sites, is positioned between several opposition strongholds south of Damascus.

¹⁷ "Elite Iranian general assassinated near Syria-Lebanon border." The Guardian, February 14, 2012. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/feb/14/elite-iranian-general-assassinated-syria-lebanon>.

¹⁸ "Iran Revolutionary Guards commander killed in Syria" Reuters, November 4, 2013. Accessed November 4, 2013. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/04/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE9A30H620131104>.

¹⁹ Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria." Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 27, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria>.

²⁰ "Shiite fighters including Iraqi and Lebanese nationals mass to defend a shrine in Damascus." Al-Hayat, March 3, 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://alhayat.com/Details/488797>.

Iran, Hezbollah, and to some extent Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and several Iraqi Shiite factions²¹ have a vested interest in defending the government of Bashar Al-Assad. From their perspective, an opposition takeover in Syria could be disastrous, producing a predominantly Sunni regime aligned with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and possibly the United States. Support for militias like the NDF helps defend the government, but it also hedges against its possible demise. If the "Resistance Axis" is ultimately unable to keep their ally in power, at a minimum, a force like the NDF can prevent other powers from fully dominating Syria. Propping-up proxy militias that outlive the government of Bashar Al-Assad would help guarantee long term Iranian influence in Syria and a corridor to its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah.

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²¹ Jackson Diehl, "Lines in the Sand: Assad Plays the Sectarian Card." World Affairs Journal, May/June 2013. Accessed October 29, 2013. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/lines-sand-assad-plays-sectarian-card>.