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The Behavioral Implications of Factionalism in Militaries
Serving Embattled Regimes: An Analysis of Arab Uprisings in
Egypt, Libya, and Syria

The uprisings that have shaken the Arab world since late 2010 share many root causes, but have unfolded in astonishingly different directions. A major part of this variation has been caused by the different attitudes Arab militaries have taken towards their embattled governments. Many of these militaries also have long histories of internal factional division, the causes of which vary, but include sectarian, tribal, religious, personal or other differences. Given that some of these faction-ridden militaries have abandoned their governments, and others have not, an important question emerges: What are the different ways in which the presence of a factional divide inside a country's armed forces can affect whether or not the military will defect from an embattled regime?

This paper investigates this question using as cases studies three countries that have recently undergone or are in the midst of a revolution. The three countries are: Libya, Syria and Egypt. Each provides a distinct example of how the presence or lack of factional divides within the military can affect the behavior of military actors when a regime is in crisis. In Egypt, the military acted cohesively, and broadly enforced its collective decision not to use violence against protesters. This has enabled a transition from Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship to something resembling democracy without widespread bloodshed. Moammar Qaddafi, the longtime strongman of Libya, deliberately weakened and divided Libya's military along tribal and regional lines, seeking to prevent it from deposing him. As a result of this, when Qaddafi's government in Libya faced a popular uprising in 2011, the military splintered largely along regional and tribal lines and much of it turned on him, resulting in a civil war that the rebels were only able to win with significant Western intervention. In turn, as Bashar al-Assad's Alawite-dominated government in Syria has faced a popular protest movement led by Syria's

Sunni majority, it has maneuvered extensively to avoid triggering major defections in Syria's armed forces motivated by sectarianism. These maneuvers, including selective deployment of politically loyal army units, a clear-and-hold counterinsurgency strategy and the arming of pro-government paramilitary organizations have resulted in large-scale population displacements within Syria, a convergence between Assad's regular and paramilitary forces, and a weakening of Assad's ability to project force. These factors have helped create an increasingly Syrian military, polarized along sectarian lines, as well as enormous suffering outrage all across Syria, both of which are fueling the escalation of Syria's civil war.

When an autocratic regime faces a time of severe civil disturbance, and its internal security forces prove inadequate to crushing opposition, the regime will often turn to its military. In such cases, the military will be obliged to choose between using deadly force against its own people or abandoning the regime and facing the consequences. As David Sanger, of the *New York Times* has written, "There comes a moment in the life of almost every repressive regime when leaders-and the military forces that have long kept them in power-must make a choice from which there is usually no turning back: change or start shooting."¹ This choice involves a carefully considered cost-benefit analysis both for the military leadership and for the rank and file, with different actors often making different choices based on their own perceived interests. Two of the chief determinants of whether a struggling government can survive are whether the military can maintain cohesion and if so, whether its institutional preferences remain aligned with the regime.

Many Middle Eastern autocrats have deliberately sown divisions into their country's security architecture, with consequences that are only now beginning to play themselves out. In order to understand why they do this, it is useful to consider these autocracies as regimes in which a national leader expands his personal power at the expense of the formal institutions that could pose a threat to his rule.² Among the most potentially threatening institutions are the military and the internal security forces. In order to control these security institutions, the leader will try to divide them and balance them against each other.³ This often includes separating the various command structures and forcing them all to report directly to the leader, who then can monopolize control over security coordination, interagency communication, and the direction of foreign aid and investment. This strategy gives the leader greater control and tends to prevent the emergence of powerful rivals, but also makes individual components of the coercive structure more prone to defections in the event of mass protests.⁴ This is so because the separation of the different parts of the coercive apparatus allows these parts to develop different institutional priorities, which may or may not coincide with those of the regime during a moment of crisis.

Within the military, the presence of deep factional divides will deeply complicate the process of choosing sides, and thus potentially the outcome of the revolution. Military officers and enlisted men who have long resented their leaders' autocratic rule, corruption, nepotism or neglect of the military may jump at the opportunity for rebellion. Old rivalries that may be sectarian, tribal, or even personal, will re-emerge, potentially resulting in major splits within the military as well as potential splits between the military and other security institutions. For soldiers considering defection, the prospect of

potential retribution in the future is perhaps the most critical factor in their calculus. Members of the military who feel that the regime is likely to succeed in stamping out the opposition will fear the potential consequences of abandoning the government and incurring its wrath. In contrast, members of the military who believe that the government is a sinking ship will be afraid of waging an unwinnable, bloody war against the masses and potentially facing mob justice or a revolutionary tribunal after the government's collapse.

In the years after Egypt's historic peace with Israel in 1979, the Egyptian army began to lose the ideological force that used to bind it together. Quickly, it became deeply riven by various disruptive factions, including a faction of Islamic fundamentalists, and a gulf between former Defense Minister Hamid Abu Ghazala, and a growing division between junior and senior officers. Thus, it came as a surprise to many when the Egyptian Armed Forces successfully undertook a large-scale collective action during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, by collectively not firing upon the protesters and thus implicitly taking sides. This was surprising not just because some of the military seemed to be protecting the protesters, but because it seemed that *all of the military* was. Thus, two important questions emerge: How did the Egyptian military successfully reduce the effects of factionalism within its ranks, and how did this sense of institutional unity manifest itself in the military's decision not to fire on the protesters?

In 1981, Egyptian military officers upset by the recent peace agreement with Israel assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Sadat's assassins-Colonel Abboud Zumur, Lieutenant Khalid al Islambouli, Sergeant Hussein Abbas Muhammad and their accomplices, were all fervent Islamists.⁵ Thus, the assassination raised enormous fears

about the infiltration of Islamic extremism into the Egyptian armed forces, especially among enlistees and junior and middle ranked officers.⁶ Compounding this fear was the fact that one of the key goals of Islamic Jihad at the time was to recruit within the Egyptian military, a fact attested to by current Al-Qaida leader and former Islamic Jihad member Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁷

As Vice President Hosni Mubarak assumed power, he rapidly moved against the Islamists. Immediately, he commissioned an internal study to investigate the reasons for the growth of Islamic militancy in Egypt, especially within the armed forces. The report identified economic distress and poverty as the driving factors.⁸ Soon the Egyptian army began to educate conscripts, on the grounds that literacy would allow them to think for themselves and reject extremism.⁹ The military also began trying to preemptively screen out *mutaasibin*, or religious fanatics, by investigating soldiers' family backgrounds, especially if they were seeking important positions.¹⁰ In addition, the military created an internal oversight institution in order to root out Islamists already inside the military, and to prevent future ones from entering.¹¹ All of these developments reduced Islamist militancy in Egypt's military.

Mubarak's regime also undermined extremist factions within the Egyptian military by keeping the military far away from any contact with Islamic fundamentalism. Despite numerous acts of religiously inspired violence in Egypt during the 1990s, the army played only a very minor role in the Mubarak regime's campaign against Islamic extremists. This occurred because involvement in suppressing growing Islamic fundamentalism would have exposed the army to fundamentalist infiltration.¹² In addition, "The Egyptian military has gone to great pains, chiefly through the

establishment of military cities, to isolate military personnel from civilian society in the hope of stemming such infiltration.”¹³ The army made sure to deliver journals designed to discredit Islamic fundamentalism and fundamentalist groups to soldiers living in the military cities. One representative article that was distributed was titled, “The Extremists Commit Major Sins In Order To Avoid Small Ones”, and was designed to show how fundamentalists were willing to kill over trifling violations of religious law.¹⁴ By the time of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the Mubarak regime had already gradually eliminated the vast majority of the Islamic fundamentalist faction from the Egyptian military.

Between 1981 and 1987, another major source of factious tension within the Egyptian military was the defense minister, Abdul Hamil Abu Ghazala. Widely regarded as the second most powerful man in Egypt at the time, Abu Ghazala displayed independence, prominence and ambition that Mubarak found deeply threatening.¹⁵ Abu Ghazala dominated cabinet meetings with his intellect and energy, was particularly forthcoming in his desire to secure American military aid to benefit Egypt’s defense industry, and presented Egyptian national security needs to foreigners with verve.¹⁶ Furthermore, Abu Ghazala was articulate, cosmopolitan and fluent in English, while Mubarak was “a particularly stultifying speaker whose aura of ‘bovine stupidity’ prompted the nickname of ‘le vache qui rit,’ the laughing cow and the name of a bland processed French cheese popular in Egypt at the time.”¹⁷ If left to his own devices, as defense and war production minister, Abu Ghazala had a sufficient constituency to create his own power-block within Egypt’s armed forces, one that could rival Mubarak for control. In 1987, Mubarak removed Abu Ghazala’s threat to his leadership by removing

him from his post as Defense Minister, ostensibly to continue the civilianization of the political process that Sadat had initiated.¹⁸

Though it is important to recognize that specific anti-factional initiatives taken during Mubarak's rule did help improve military cohesiveness by driving out Islamists and Mubarak's rivals, it was not the crucial factor driving this trend. According to noted Egypt scholar Ahmed Hashim, "The key factor in ensuring the military's allegiance to Mubarak during the long years of his rule was the enormous autonomy granted to officers in creating and running a lucrative military-industrial-business complex."¹⁹ According to the scholar Elizabeth Picard, reductions in the military budget in Egypt in the 1980s led the military to begin taking part in privileged, frequently monopolistic private sector activity to make up the difference. Participants could include military organizations, companies owned by the military, or senior and retired military officers leveraging their connections to the armed forces.²⁰ It is worth noting that military corporations are at a significant advantage when compared to their private competitors in Egypt. They do not pay taxes, nor do they have to deal with the stifling bureaucratic red tape that private corporations must contend with.²¹

The military-industrial-business complex has developed enormous influence throughout numerous sectors in the Egyptian economy. Ken Stier famously described it in *Time* magazine as a "vast military-run commercial enterprise that seeps into every corner of Egyptian society."²² The single most important way that Egypt's military has involved itself in the economy is its role in land reclamation. Egypt's army is attempting two enormous and highly contested 30-year projects in the northern Sinai and southwestern desert to make these areas more suitable for human habitation, thus

potentially allowing the country to disperse its large population of 20% of its landmass, as opposed to the 5% it uses now.²³ The military also exercises a monopoly over arms production, which is guaranteed by emergency legislation that prohibits the industry from legislative or press oversight.²⁴ Additionally, there is no legislative oversight of the military budget.²⁵ Since the establishment of the Administration of National Service Projects in 1979, this organization has dramatically expanded the scope of the military's economic involvement. By 1994, it was already running 16 factories employing 75,000 workers, and dedicating 40% of its production towards producing agricultural machines, fodder, cables, medications, pumps, ovens and other products for the civilian market.²⁶ Additionally, military-owned companies have taken up major roles in the water-management and electricity production industries.²⁷

Taking advantage of the growth of Egypt's cities, the military has also profited enormously by selling land that had in prior years been used for military bases, and by selling land that had been developed using the inexpensive labor of conscripted soldiers.²⁸ The government also provides the military with income by paying the army to fight illiteracy in Egypt's desert rural areas, organize medical expeditions to the western desert, improve water access for nomads and to distribute medicine among the general population.²⁹ Since the 1990s, the Egyptian military has involved itself in the manufacturing of equipment for water purification, desalination, waste-water treatment, and garbage disposal, as well as high-precision industries.³⁰

This military-industrial-business complex has played a major unifying role in Egypt's military for several reasons. First, it allowed the military to continue paying regular salaries and providing decent housing, fringe benefits such as low-interest loans

and special shopping facilities, despite a falling budget.³¹ This was important because it helped to head off discontent among the conscripts and junior and midlevel officers who otherwise would have borne the brunt of budget cuts. Second, despite disparities between senior and lower ranked officers, the military-industrial-business nonetheless provided Egyptian soldiers of poorer backgrounds with opportunities for future advancement, provided that they remain loyal to the armed forces. Third, it provided a useful outlet of activity for an army that had largely sat idle since Egypt's conclusion of a peace treaty with Israel, helping develop the army's national prestige and healthy self-image.

Though the Egyptian military-industrial-business complex certainly unified Egypt's armed forces, its existence was predicated on American military aid in a major way. The Egyptian military has received \$1.3 billion annually in military aid, since Egypt's peace agreement with Israel.³² This aid is distributed as credits, with which Egypt's military can buy American weapons systems. Despite this, neither U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates nor Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen had a close relationship with their Egyptian counterpart at the outset of Egypt's 2011 Revolution. However, in the week before Mubarak was forced from power, Gates made four calls to Egyptian Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, pushing him to keep sufficient peace on the streets for talks on a power transition to begin.³³

Of course, Tantawi was in a very awkward position by this point. Installed in his post for his fierce loyalty to Mubarak rather than his competence, he had earned the nickname among his subordinates, "Mubarak's poodle". Unquestionably, he owed his power to Mubarak. However, it could not have escaped Tantawi that if the Egyptian military were to side with the Mubarak regime, the military as an institution would have

faced severe risks that. Cracking down on protesters would have almost certainly resulted in widespread deaths of Egyptian civilians. This could have had devastating effects on the military. First, it would have endangered the \$1.3 billion in annual American military aid that Egypt's military relied upon so heavily, by creating a huge public relations problem for the US government. Second, orders to fire on the protesters could have resulted in a new major factional split and infighting within the military itself between senior officers giving the orders and the rank and file and lower level officers loath to enforce them. Such a conflict could tear the institution apart. Third, if the military were to side with a regime that ultimately proved unsustainable, the military could face retribution and emasculation at the hands of the successor government that might include human rights tribunals, the dismantling of the military-industrial-business complex and stringent civilian oversight of its political activities. When on February 11, 2011, Mubarak resigned from office and handed over power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), it became apparent that Tantawi and other high-level military officers had chosen the military's interests over those of Mubarak.

Mubarak's abrupt departure from office could not have happened without a transition from factionalism to functional unity within Egypt's military. This involved suppressing Islamic fundamentalism and powerful personalities, but most importantly in this process was the development of Egypt's enormous military-industrial-complex, which provided the military a uniform set of institutional interests, which ultimately did not coincide with Mubarak's continued rule. These uniform institutional interests provided the basis for the broad, cohesive action the military took when it chose to not fire on the protesters and to nudge Mubarak from power. Mahmoud Zaher, a retired

general in Egypt's military intelligence apparatus, put it this way: "What happened is that the very strong and legitimate desire of the people of the revolution of Egypt in this moment became inherent to the military institution."³⁴

In September 1969, a 27-year-old captain in the Libyan Air Force named Moammar Qaddafi led a group of 13 junior military officers in staging a successful coup against Libya's King Idris. These officers were members of the Free Officers Union, an underground anti-monarchy faction of young military officers.³⁵ After the coup, Qaddafi took the reins of leadership in Libya, heading the Revolutionary Command Council, which was made up of his fellow military officers.³⁶ Though Qaddafi seized power through the military, ultimately he would seek to divide that military along tribal lines and weaken it as an institution, in order to prevent it from challenging him. In so doing, he lay the foundation for a future rebellion within the military against his rule that was part of what enabled a successful revolution in 2011.

In the early years of his rule, Qaddafi relied primarily on the military and the power of the state in order to maintain his authority. Gradually, however, Qaddafi realized that he could use Libya's tribal system to his advantage as a means of building political support, reinforcing loyalties, awarding patronage and ensuring his regime's security.³⁷ Of the approximately 140 tribes in Libya, 30 of them are politically significant.³⁸ Under King Idris, power in Libya had been distributed mainly through the Sanusi tribe in Cyrenaica and those tribes aligned with the Sanusi.³⁹ Thus, in order to root out potential opposition among the Cyrenaican elites who had benefitted from the previous regime, Qaddafi purged the Cyrenaican political, business and military elites

from almost all positions of power and influence in the country.⁴⁰ He would proceed to shift the country's political and economic power base from Cyrenaica, where the monarchy had been based, to Tripolitania and Fezzan, among whose tribes and elite Qaddafi would cultivate his power.

Under Qaddafi's authoritarian system, no civil society or political organizations were permitted. Therefore, according to Anthony Bell and David Witter's impressive study of the 2011 Libyan revolution, under Qaddafi's rule, "the tribes became an essential way to aggregate political and economic interests with the state. In many respects, Libya underwent a period of re-tribalization, in which the importance of tribal identity was strengthened in regard to each tribe's standing with the regime. Members of certain western tribes that closely aligned with Qaddafi were awarded and empowered through high-ranking positions in the government and security forces. Most of the eastern tribes, especially those previously aligned with the Sanusi, and rival elements in the west such as the Berbers, were all but excluded from the regime. Because the Cyrenaican tribes had been aligned with the monarchy, few officials in Qaddafi's inner-circle or the paramilitary forces hailed from the restive region or held their position on merit...the real authority lay in the regime stacked with members of the loyal western tribes. Qaddafi used the loyal tribes Tripolitania and Fezzan as recruiting grounds for his paramilitary forces that guarded the regime from internal threats, most of which emanated from Cyrenaica and within the military."⁴¹

By the late 1970s, growing political divisions within the Revolutionary Command Council had weakened Qaddafi's hold on the army, and thus his political power.⁴² After a series of attempted military coups against him in 1975, Qaddafi realized that in order to

maintain power he needed to make the transition to a revolutionary regime and reduce the power of the military.⁴³ Thus, in March 1977, he declared Libya to be the “Socialist People’s Libyan Arab *Jamahiriyah*, or “state of the masses”, a strange authoritarian system mixing elements of capitalism and socialism that he outlined in his *Green Book*.⁴⁴ Within the *Jamahiriyah* he established revolutionary committees to serve as his political and coercive apparatus, in order to balance against the regular military, of which he was suspicious. These revolutionary committees eventually grew into a paramilitary police force charged with internal security, and the suppression and elimination of opposition.⁴⁵ One of the most notable revolutionary committees, the Revolutionary Guard Corps, (RCG) functioned as a praetorian guard for Qaddafi and was among the last and most trusted lines of defense in his security apparatus. The RCG was composed of approximately 3,000 men handpicked from the Qadadfa and other loyal tribes, and was under the command of Qaddafi’s trusted cousin, Hasan al-Kabir Qaddafi.⁴⁶ The RCG’s duties were critical, including guarding Qaddafi’s fortified Bab al-Aziziya compound in Tripoli and major military installations in the capital.⁴⁷ Due to its high value in protecting Qaddafi, it was among the best-trained and well-armed units at Qaddafi’s disposal.⁴⁸

Qaddafi faced a deep security dilemma when dealing with the Libyan military. On the one hand, it provided him with a monopoly of force, and the ability to crush internal opposition. On the other hand, the military and the Revolutionary Command Corps were the greatest threat to his rule, since they were the bodies within the state with the most coercive power. This fact was born out in the failed 1975 military officers’ coups against Qaddafi. Thus, after 1975 Qaddafi took great pains to cultivate division and factionalism within the Libyan military, in order to fragment and weaken the institution. In order to

prevent future coup attempts, he kept the military small, poorly-trained and poorly equipped.⁴⁹ He also limited the size of military units to the brigade or battalion size, in order to prevent dissent from spreading across units and against the officer corps from unifying against him.⁵⁰ Qaddafi tried to divide the officer corps by shuffling senior officials around according to political loyalty and tribal affiliation.⁵¹ He also created overlapping chains of command so that loyalists from his revolutionary committees could keep officers under close tabs.⁵²

Qaddafi's fears of the regular military were so acute that he would not even permit the army to conduct training exercises with live-fire, because he was afraid they would turn their ammunition against the regime.⁵³ Therefore, in order to preserve his rule he redistributed resources from the military towards smaller, separate, more loyal paramilitary organizations.⁵⁴ He relied extensively on the armed wings of the revolutionary committees, known as revolutionary battalions, and elite paramilitary forces, to check the army and maintain internal security. The officers and foot soldiers in these were drawn from the tribes considered most loyal to Qaddafi, including the Qadadfa, Warfalla and Maqarha.⁵⁵ The revolutionary battalions had an independent chain of command from the regular army, reporting directly to Qaddafi or his most trusted officials.⁵⁶ The most prominent of Qaddafi's paramilitary organizations was the so-called Khamis Brigade, formally known as the 32nd Reinforced Brigade, and commanded by Qaddafi's fifth son, Khamis. This was an independent, elite unit parallel to the regular army, with heavily armed infantry, armored vehicles, tanks, artillery, composed only of soldiers recruited from loyal tribes.⁵⁷ Qaddafi's security apparatus also included

numerous intelligence agencies, militias, and armed tribes, all of whom also served as checks against the regular military and each other.⁵⁸

When Qaddafi's official Abdullah al-Senussi ordered the arrest of human rights lawyer Fathi Tarbil on February 15, 2011, he inadvertently gave fuel to large-scale protests in Benghazi against the regime that had already been scheduled for two days later called the "Day of Rage".⁵⁹ On February 17, protesters clashed with Qaddafi's security forces and attempted to seize the *Katiba*, Benghazi's local military garrison and prison against heavy fire from regime security forces. On February 20, the protesters overwhelmed the *Katiba* after a vehicle loaded with propane breached its walls, and a unit of the Libyan military that had defected arrived to aid the protesters. Abdel Fattah Younis, the Libyan Interior Minister and Qaddafi's former co-conspirator in the 1969 military coup, led this unit.⁶⁰ Other army units in Eastern Libya, long neglected, weakened and marginalized by the Qaddafi regime, also defected around this time, leaving control of much of Eastern Libya's military assets in the hands of the opposition. Notable defections included the commander of the Tobruk military region, Suleiman Mahmoud, who turned against Qaddafi on February 17, and two Air Force Colonels who flew to Malta to request political asylum.⁶¹ Within a week of the Day of Rage, protesters throughout Cyrenaica, with the aid of defector army units, had driven away the regime's security forces and began to arm themselves with weapons from captured military barracks, preparing to defend themselves against the inevitable counterattack from the regime.

Moammar Qaddafi's deep paranoia about a factional revolt from within the Libyan military, especially in the Cyrenaica area, was both accurate and self-fulfilling.

By continuously undermining and dividing the regular military by tribal affiliation, so as to prevent the institution from becoming powerful enough to challenge him, he bred deep pockets of resentment within it. Furthermore, since his fears were particularly directed towards the eastern tribes he perceived as disloyal, he treated them and their military assets particularly poorly, making them even more likely to defect when given the opportunity. Once the eastern tribes turned against Qaddafi, military units in the east followed, and there was no turning back. According to the scholar Wolfram Lacker, in his article “Families, Tribes and Cities in the Libyan Revolution”, “In many cases the defections of senior officers and politicians in the first weeks of the uprising reflected their tribes’ decision to turn against Qadhafi. The first to do so were the tribes of the northeast, where regime repression started.”⁶² This is not to say that tribes in other areas of the country did not play an important role in the revolution, but simply that those in Cyrenaica played a major role in encouraging a factional split in the Libyan military. Of course, this factional split within the military would not prove nearly enough to depose Qaddafi. It would require a major air campaign by Western powers against Qaddafi’s armor and air assets, as well and almost a half of a year of civil war, before he was removed from power.

In Syria, what began as a protest movement in 2011 against Bashar Al-Assad’s Baathist rule with broad currency across Syrian society has been met with brutally repressive measures by Assad’s regime, with widespread human rights violations that included numerous killings and instances of torture. Unfortunately, as a result this conflict has gradually devolved into a civil war an opposition led by Syria’s Sunni majority, and Assad’s Alawite-dominated government and security apparatus. The

Alawites are a heterodox Shi'a sect, making up about 12% of the Syrian population.⁶³ Syria's civil war is partly a result of extreme sectarian polarization within Syria's armed forces. In order to understand why, it is necessary to understand Syria's tragic history of factionalism within its armed forces.

From 1942 to 1963, Sunnis, urbanites, and people from conservative political parties occupied the most senior and influential positions in the Syrian power-elite, while members of religious minorities were heavily under-represented in important institutions. After the combined Baathist-Nasserist military coup March 8, 1963, these roles switched dramatically. Members of the heterodox Islamic faiths, including Druze and Isma'ilis but especially Alawis, and people from rural areas were able to gain relative over-representation in the principal power institutions, while political life came to be dominated by progressive forces originating among people from the lower-middle classes. Gradually, the mainly Alawite Baathists gained the upper hand over the mainly Sunni Nasserists in Syria's armed forces, and asserted their primacy. However, according to Nikolaos Van Dam, an expert on Syrian politics, "The pivotal role of sectarian, regional and tribal ties in the power structure of the Ba'th regime did not imply that the all-powerful Alawi rulers or others were eager to exploit these ties or would not have like to do without them. In fact, Ba'thist leaders as well as many less prominent Ba'thists strongly disliked the idea of exploiting sectarianism and other traditional social loyalties, which they considered as backward and contrary to the ideal of secular and egalitarian Arab nationalism."⁶⁴

On November 13, 1970 Hafiz Al-Assad took power in Syria through a military coup, effectively neutralizing the civilian Ba'ath party apparatus and purging the army of

officers who opposed him. He then monopolized political power in his own Alawite officers' faction, relying primarily on them to maintain control and keep other officers in check.⁶⁵ In 1971, Assad became Syria's first Alawi president. In order to secure his control, he increasingly concentrated power in people with whom he had close personal relationships, including family and friends as well as people from his own tribe and original village area.⁶⁶ When Bashar Al-Assad inherited power, he also inherited the Alawite-dominated power structure his father had created within the military, internal security institutions and civil society.

According to Joseph Holliday's landmark study, "The Assad regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War, in the summer of 2012, the Syrian conflict shifted from an insurgency to a civil war."⁶⁷ This occurred because Bashar al-Assad initially attempted to utilize the same strategy his father used to put down the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the early 1980s: "carefully select and deploy the most trusted military units, raise pro-regime militias, and use those forces to clear insurgents out of major urban areas and hold them with a heavy garrison of troops".⁶⁸ This strategy inadvertently transformed the conflict into a civil war in the summer of 2012 in several ways. First, Assad's reliance on only a small portion of his security forces in order to prevent defections has severely curtailed the regime's total combat power, and allowed the rebels to gain traction in many parts of the country.⁶⁹ Second, the regime's brutality has stoked such intense fears of retribution among Alawites that there has been a major convergence between Assad's conventional and paramilitary forces, resulting in a broadly cohesive, ultra-nationalist, and mostly Alawite combined force fighting for survival.⁷⁰ Third, Assad's attempts to clear insurgents from urban strongholds have displaced large populations, deepening

sectarian atomization within Syria.⁷¹ Such developments are a direct result of a sectarian factional divide within Syria's military, that pits Alawites and other minority groups privileged by the regime, against the Sunnis who make up a majority of the Syrian population and despite discrimination, make up a significant portion of the Syrian armed forces.⁷²

Selective deployment of politically loyal, mainly Alawite units has been one of the hallmarks of Bashar Al-Assad's military campaign against the Syrian opposition. According to Holliday, "Despite Syria's impressive doctrinal force structure, the Assad regime has from the beginning of the conflict been unable to mobilize all of its forces without risking large-scale defections. The single greatest liability that the Assad regime has faced in employing its forces has been the challenge of relying on units to carry out orders to brutalize the opposition."⁷³ One of the strategies that Assad has used to reduce the probability of army defection has been to pair elite units with specifically selected conventional forces. A notable example of this was the operation to clear Deraa in early 2011, when Assad paired three different Special Forces regiments and two conventional mechanized brigades to undertake the assault.⁷⁴ Holliday writes, "Pairing mostly reliable armored forces—capable of establishing checkpoints, cordons, and heavy fire support—with elite troops from the most loyal units has allowed the current regime to leverage its armored capacity while limiting the risk of defections. Furthermore, the regime has been able to rely on Special Forces regiments for the most brutal forms of repression and limit conventional troops' exposure to the population."⁷⁵ The regime has also task-organized its maneuver units, combining and breaking up doctrinal formations in order to consolidate trustworthy sub-units in order to form loyal conventional brigades.⁷⁶

Assad has also utilized four overlapping security agencies to limit defections and ensure compliance with orders. These agencies have shot, as well as detained and tortured, numerous soldiers who failed to comply with orders to fire upon protesters.⁷⁷ Assad's security agencies have also been able to remove commanders from important positions when they show even the slightest sign of suspicion. A good example of this was Manaf Tlass, a Sunni commander of the Republican Guard Brigade, who was removed from command and put under house arrest even before he broke with the regime.⁷⁸ These tactics, along with selective deployment of loyal army units, have helped Assad successfully prevent any major military units from defecting along with their commanding officers.

In 2011, the Syrian Army had an estimated 220,000 soldiers. Despite this, it has only been able to rely on about one third of its army, or about 65,000-75,000 troops troops.⁷⁹ The remaining two thirds of the Syrian Army have been effectively marginalized, because they represent a risk to Assad's regime. According to rebel leaders, defectors only account for about 50,000 to 90,000, or about 20-30%, of the nominally 300,000-strong Syrian Armed Forces (includes the Air Force).⁸⁰ Others might have defected if given the chance, but have been deterred by killings and imprisonment of noncompliant soldiers. The remaining half of the Syrian Army's troops, many of whom are Sunni, have been functionally imprisoned, confined to their barracks since early 2012.⁸¹ According to an opposition leader, "Conscripts are often locked up on bases when there is a security threat and the armed forces are placed on high alert, which has been the case for a year and a half...only trusted groups will be called for a battle, which leaves the rest in their barracks".⁸² Referring to the Sunni officers, he said, "there are still

many Sunni officers on active duty, but they're being kept away from combat for the fear of defection.”⁸³ The regime's overreliance on such a small part of its fighting force has resulted in tremendous fatigue among its soldiers.⁸⁴

Perhaps most incredibly, Assad's regime has thus far been able to sustain such a pattern of selective deployment despite suffering enormous attrition. Conservative estimates of regime casualties published in November 2012 suggest approximately 7,000 killed and 30,000 wounded, a number that has surely risen markedly since then.⁸⁵ Given that the regime has only deployed approximately 65,000-75,000 troops, these represent extraordinarily high casualty figures. This problem may be significantly compounded by the likelihood that the regime's most active and trusted forces have suffered a disproportionate number of those casualties.⁸⁶ It is clear that selective deployment has successfully helped prevent defections of entire conventional Syrian army units against the regime, but has also severely limited the regime's available combat power and ability to project force nationwide.⁸⁷

Bashar Al-Assad's dramatically weakened ability to project force throughout Syria, due to the combined effects of selective force deployment, defections and imprisonments has made him ever more reliant on paramilitary organizations dedicated to the survival of the regime. The first type of these organizations are the *shabiha*, which historically were criminal smuggling networks composed primarily of Alawites and led by members of the extended Assad family.⁸⁸ The second type call themselves the Popular Committees, or *lijan sha'biya*, and generally can be described as associations of minority populations who have armed themselves to protect their communities from rebel

soldiers.⁸⁹ Despite a history of occasional conflict with the government, the *Shabiha* knew they owe their position to Assad's Alawite-dominated regime and have been involved in the crackdown on the largely Sunni opposition since the beginning of the conflict in 2011.

As the conflict has worn on and the regime's conventional military strength has degraded, the *Shabiha* have played an increasingly important role in guaranteeing the regime's survival. They are often motivated not only by loyalty to the Assad family, but also by financial reward, and most importantly by far, the fear of collective reprisals against the Alawite community by an ascendant Sunni majority.⁹⁰ According to Holliday, "Pro-regime militias working closely with the Syrian Army and security forces have become the most important source of reinforcement for Assad's troops. The distinction between Syrian Army soldiers and pro-regime soldiers has become increasingly irrelevant."⁹¹ According to opposition sources, up to 10,000 pro-Assad paramilitaries assisted in a regime offensive in Homs in the beginning of 2013. "They go in infantry formation behind the soldiers", described an opposition source, illustrating how these paramilitaries have become increasingly professionalized, and integrated into the Syrian regime's force structure.⁹²

Finally, Assad's regime's use of a clear and hold strategy has displaced enormous numbers of Syrians, resulting in increased sectarian atomization. Due to the severe constraints on the number of soldiers the Syrian Army can deploy, as described above, the regime has been forced to adopt a strategy of using heavy artillery and airstrikes to clear cities held by the opposition before taking control of them. The February 2012 operation to clear and hold Homs provides the best example of how this works. Regime

forces “relied on indirect fire in order to clear out strong rebel resistance without incurring an unacceptably high loss of ground forces.”⁹³ Furthermore, the use of artillery on towns allows the regime to use heavy firepower against rebels without exposing conventional units to the kind of close-encounter fighting that encourages defection. This kind of use of indirect fire inevitably results in large-scale displacements of civilians.

Furthermore, in Alawite-majority coastal regions, the government has undertaken repeated population clearance operations in Sunni enclaves in the spring and summer of 2011, including in Baniyas, Bayda, Tel Kalakh and Latakia’s Ramal, resulting in enormous dislocations of Sunni populations, who have fled to Sunni majority provinces like Idlib.⁹⁴ In the fall of 2012, the regime began a campaign to bulldoze Sunni neighborhoods in Damascus including Qadoun, Tadamoun and Mezzeh, with the governor of Damascus province describing these as “cleansing operations”.⁹⁵ Most chilling, repeated massacres of Sunni men, women and children throughout Syria have served as perhaps the most effective form of population displacement. To cite just one example of many, in May 2011, pro-regime militias murdered at least 108 villagers in the Sunni village of Taldou, in the Houleh area of Homs province, including 49 children and 34 women, most shot or stabbed at close range.⁹⁶

These brutally violent regime tactics are the primary cause of more than 3.8 million internally displaced people inside Syria, many of whom have fled into sectarian enclaves for protection.⁹⁷ According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, “Following the battle of Homs the number of IDPs began to rise exponentially, creating its own socio-political dynamic that lead to the spreading of the conflict.”⁹⁸ This is born out by statements from radicalized elements of the opposition. After claiming credit for a

major suicide car bombing in May 2012, the radical Islamist opposition group Jabhat Nusra warned Assad in starkly sectarian terms, “Stop your massacres against the Sunni people. If not you will bear the sin of the Alawites. What is coming will be more bitter, God willing.”⁹⁹

It is clear that the deep factional strife in Syria’s armed forces is prolonging the Syrian conflict. On the one hand, the preponderance of the Alawite sect in the military and its powerful, fearful attachment to the regime has enabled Bashar Al-Assad to tenuously maintain his grip on power, at least for the time being. On the other hand, the presence of a large number of Sunni and other elements within the military that are perceived as disloyal has prevented the Syrian Army from deploying its full combat power. This has enabled the rebels to avoid being crushed by the Syrian Army’s superior firepower, to build up their strength and to gradually take control over more of the country. Barring any unforeseen developments, only more violence and stalemate can be expected in Syria’s immediate future.

Egypt, Libya and Syria each provide us with different insights about the behavioral implications of factionalism for militaries serving embattled regimes. Examination of both the Libyan revolution and the ongoing conflict in Syria clearly show both major benefits and costs rulers face when cultivating factionalism within their militaries. On the one hand, sowing division deep into the military can breed discontent that ultimately results in major defections during a time of crisis. On the other hand, encouraging factionalism within military ranks can play to a ruler’s advantage if the dominant faction within the military decides that it is a large stakeholder in the regime. Distinct from both, Egypt offers lessons on how a military’s involvement in a military-

industrial-business complex can unify the institutional interests of the military, and pave the way for cohesive action, whether for or against the regime. Each country provides a powerful illustration of how the presence or lack of factional divisions within the military is an important factor affecting the military's behavior towards a regime in crisis.

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