

Pax Syriana: Neither Vanquished, Nor All-Conquering

By Zero Hedge

Submitted by Kamal Alam, military analyst and Fellow for Syrian Affairs at The Institute for Statecraft, and updated exclusively for Zero Hedge

Former British spy and diplomat Alastaire Crooke, [writing in Consortium News over the weekend](#), correctly outlines a new Middle East trajectory based on Syria having weathered the storm of a six year long proxy war while remaining largely intact: "Plainly, Syria's success – notwithstanding the caution of President Bashar al-Assad in saying that signs of success are not success itself – in resisting, against the odds, all attempts to fell the state suggest that a tipping point in the geopolitics of the region has occurred." At the same time, *Foreign Policy* predicts in its latest Syria analysis, headlined [Israel Is Going to War in Syria to Fight Iran](#), that Israel will continue ramping up hostile actions against Syria as "Israeli officials aren't shying from confronting Tehran's forces - since no one else will."

Such desperation has increased due to the entirely new geopolitical order which has emerged as a result the Syrian state's perseverance and which runs directly counter to Israeli plans in the region. As Crooke explains further, "But, aside from the geopolitics, the Syria outcome has created a physical connectivity and contiguity that has not existed for some years: the border between Iraq and Iran is open; the border between Syria and Iraq is opening; and the border between Lebanon and Syria, too, is open. This constitutes a critical mass both of land, resources and population of real weight." Crooke also assesses that Western officials have been "wrong on almost everything pertaining to Syria." Failed predictions, miscalculations, and an underestimation of the Syrian state's resolve has defined much of both Israel's and West's approach to Syria throughout the war.

This is perhaps because missing in nearly all commentary from professional analysts and the so-called 'experts' over the past years has been a thorough and systematic attempt to understand the nature of the Syrian Army and its relationship

to the state, as well as the pre-2011 experience which forged the army over a period of decades facing insurgencies inside and outside of Syria (especially in Lebanon).



The Syrian Army has fought on now for more than six years without disintegrating as had been predicted by many commentators. Indeed it is the Army of the Syrian Arab Republic (*al-Jaysh al-Arabi as-Suri*) which has kept the state intact. The Syrian state institutions of which the Army is the foremost guarantor have held firm in the onslaught of all the non-state actors as well as regional neighbours. But how is it that the Syrian Arab Army has held together?

Contrary to what most observers say, the overwhelming factor in this has not been because this was an Alawite army. Had this been the case, it would not have been able to hang on for so long. The most prominent Chiefs of Staff and General Staff officers have been a combination of Sunni, Christian and Alawite. Nor was the army constructed along sectarian or ethnic lines. To take its three major contemporary personalities—Mustafa Tlass, Fahd Jassem Frejj and the late Daoud Rajiha—they are respectively Sunni and Greek Orthodox. The elder Tlass is now retired, but he was the man who shaped the Syrian armed forces with Hafez al Assad in the 1970s.

History, ethnicity and structure of the Syrian Army

However to understand how the Syria Army became what it is today one has to delve into the history of the Syrian state since

independence and how the military shaped the state. Since March 1949, Syria has experienced sixteen army coups - nine of which were successful in overthrowing the incumbent rulers. The army had never really gone back to barracks before the arrival of Hafez al Assad.

After independence from the French, Syria had eight years of parliamentary rule (1945-1949) and (1954-1958). After March 1963 members of the armed forces who were sympathetic to the Arab Socialist Party acted to bring in their version of parliamentary rule, backed by a strong military presence. This Army-Baath faction that has ruled Syria now for the last four decades was not an all-out dictatorship. Far from it: it has been a combination of a balance between rural and urban Syria, mercantile and tribal Syria, and the political families that have urged the army to intervene one way or another from Syria's inception, whether these families were leftists, Nasserites, pan-Arabists or business-focused. These divergent business interests and feudal family politics converged on the armed forces, with the aim of ensuring that a strong stable Syria had some leverage over Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan.

While the French had only encouraged non-Arabs and non-Muslims to join the army in mandate-Syria, with the departure of the French came a change of policy. The Homs and Hama military academies took Sunnis of all backgrounds and it was Sunnis that made up the majority of the army elite in the 1970s and 1980s, and into today. According to the late scholar and historian of modern Syria Patrick Seale, the Syrian Army under Adib Shishakli, became an "unashamedly political instrument". However, it had done away with its mostly French policies of sectarian divisions within the army. Under Hafez this policy continued and a mixture of all classes and sects continued to join the army. Hafez did however begin the process of depoliticizing the Syrian army.

Bridging the Gap

The Syrian Army has consistently bridged the gap and eased the friction between the rural and urban centres of Syria and the rich and the poor. It is first necessary to take a closer look at some of the ethnicity and religious affiliations of key figures that have shaped the Syrian Army in the run up to the takeover

by Hafez al Assad. Colonel Haydar al Kuzbari was a Sunni who played a key role in ending the union between Egypt and Syria. General Abdel Karim Zahareddine was a Druze Chief of Staff of the military and took over after affairs settled once Syria had firmly established itself, out from under Egypt's grasp. Ziad al Harriri was a Sunni head of the army and defense minister in 1963. Amin al Hafez was another Sunni head of army and presided when the Baathists crushed a Sunni uprising in Hama in 1964 through aerial bombing, including mosques.

Here, it should be noted, almost twenty years before Hafez al Assad's raid on Hama (1982), is a Sunni head of army and state crushing an Islamist uprising. Furthermore in 1952 a prior Hama rebellion was crushed by Sunni officers under a Sunni from Hama, Adib Shishakli. Mustafa Tlass also testified to the non-sectarian nature of the crushing of three Hama rebellions by the Syrian Army spread over three decades. Abdel Karim al Nahlwai, who was also an officer in the army and instrumental in its decision to draw Syria out of Egypt's clutches, was also a Sunni.

The Baathists took on the mantle of educating the army officers throughout the 1970s. The Syrian military ruled through a praetorian-patrimonial model rather than as an outright parliamentary executive power. The army had to adapt itself from not just being a military force to becoming the political guardian of the country. Assad turned the army into a unified force and set about professionalizing it. Ironically, it was also him who oversaw the chaos of Lebanon which was completely riven along sectarian fault lines. There were as many inter-Alawi intrigues as non-Alawi. The Syrian army lost political power during the regime of President Hafiz al-Assad, as he himself was a former officer and knew how to control the armed forces.



Syria's president Hafez al-Asad and Defense Minister Mustapha Tlass, during the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, at the Golan front. Wikimedia/The Online Museum of Syrian History.

In his book, *The Policy of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa*, Manfred Halpern presented the officers' corps as representing the new salaried middle class that emerged in the Arab world as the result of the modernization process. This class also includes teachers, administrators in the civil service and government apparatus, technicians, high school and university professors, journalists, lawyers and others. This explanation helps, at least in part, in understanding the Baath Revolution.

The Baath Party has continued to provide all the forces which play a role in Syrian politics with a common ideological and organizational base: the bureaucrats of the party, government and civil service, as well as senior army officers. It has branches in the army units and security forces, which send representatives to the senior Party institutions. Senior army officers are members of such institutions as the Central Committee (*al-Lajna al-Markaziyya*) and Regional Command (*al-Qiyada al-Qutriyya*), alongside party bureaucrats.

To further demonstrate the non-sectarian nature of the Syrian military high command, it is worth looking at a pivotal moment which defines the Syrian military to this day in the midst of the civil war in 2014. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s there was tremendous external pressure on Syria, none more so than from Iraq, Israel and Egypt. All three threats were different:

Egypt wanted to subdue Syria through the guise of the Arab Union Republic. Iraq and its Ba'th wing were supporting several different factions within Syria. Israel was and still remains in a state of war with Syria. Amidst all this there were the coups and counter coups within the military and government. Hafez al Assad and Mustafa Tlass decided that given the external threats, the army above all must have a nationalist agenda and an institution devoid of politics. It was this ideological agreement between Tlass and Assad that led to the complete purging of politics from the military and a separation of powers not seen before in Syria.

Hafez al Assad also brought senior members of the Syrian Air Force into the military high command. Naji Jamil (Sunni) served as Air Force commander from 1970 to 1978 and was promoted to General Staff committee overseeing defences on the Iraq border. Another Air Force commander was Muhammad al-Khuli who till 1993 held onto coveted logistic positions between Damascus and Lebanon. These commanders, at the peak of their careers at the time of Hafez al Assad's death, included the Air Force Security Administration headed by Ibrahim Huwayji and non-airforce commanders Hasan Khalil, Ali Duba, Ali Mamlouk and Hikmat Shihabi. Other prominent officers above the rank of Brigadier in military and civil defence positions post-2000 were Sunnis, and include Rustum Ghazaleh, Hazem al Khadra and Deeb Zaytoun. Since 1973, the strategic tank battalions of the 70th armoured brigade stationed near al-Kiswah near Damascus have had rank and file Alawis under the command of Sunni officers.



Mustafa Tlass and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Cairo

By the time Hafez al Assad passed on the army to his son Bashar, the Syrian Army had firmly erased its sectarian beginnings, which were very much a legacy of French colonial rule. The deft play between rural and urban, tribal and religious sects was evened out through an education system played along on party lines rather than those of religion. The stage had also been set for the removal of army officers from mainstream politics. Instead the family structure of Syria would be co-opted into the Party while the army would remain stable and neutral.

Few Arab countries have armies based on professionalism. Most are based on a tribal structure, given the importance of family lineage and religion. In Syria however the last forty years have shown that the Army is not a sectarian army. Most of the internal politics within the army has been rooted in power, promotion and performance on the field. Even during the most critical time of the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a good balance of Sunni and Alawi officers. Not all the Alawis supported Salah Jadid whilst prominent Sunni officers such as Lieutenant Colonel Ahmad Suwaydani from Houran supported Jadid. The most revealing test came when Hafez al Assad lay sick and his brother tried to make a move for power. Hafez categorically left day to day affairs in the hands of an all-Sunni cast, with Mustafa Tlass, Abdallah Al Ahmar, Hikmat Shihabi, Abd al Rauf al Kasm and Zuhayr Mashariqah. And prominent Alawis at the time, such as Ali Hayder, Ibrahim Safi and Ali Douba, decided not to take sides with Rifaat al Assad, despite his offers of shared power.

Syria's counter-insurgency lessons

As we saw the Syrian Army battle its way to victory in key towns such as Qusayr and Yabroud in 2014, along with this year's major strategic victories in Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus, it is once again important to look at how and where the Syrian Army honed its fighting skills.

The Syrian Army along with its military and civilian intelligence have mastered the art of dividing its opponents (insurgents) unlike any other Army. Syria dominated Lebanon for decades not through brute force but cunning real politics and with an understanding of geography and history. Take into account three important 2014 battles of Qusayr, Yabroud and Maloula.

All three held their strategic and symbolic values. Two were the supply route towards Lebanon and the Mediterranean as well as being great vantage points, while the other was the most important Christian town for Arabs along with Bethlehem. In Maloula, the local residents joined in the fighting on the side of the Syrian Army against the rebels. This meant clearing the area of foreign insurgents.

This was a tactic straight out of the Syrian Army's days of operating in Lebanon, where they cleared areas with the tacit approval of local people, whether they were Christian, Sunni or Shi'a. In Qusayr, despite the presence of Hezbollah, it was the Syrian Army that did the bulk of the fighting. Hezbollah were only there to protect the Shi'a villages on the Lebanese side, and then they crossed into Syria where there were Shi'a civilians. This again demonstrated how the Syrian Army units are always embedding locals into their operations. But the roots of these modern battles lay in the Syrian Army's performance in Lebanon in the 1980s.

Lessons from Lebanon: fighting the Israelis

Israel's main political objective for going into Lebanon was to crush the PLO. In that it succeeded, with overwhelming odds and with ease. However its second objective - to remove the Syrian military presence in the Bekaa Valley and reduce its influence in Lebanon - was its greatest and only failure since its inception in 1948.

The Israeli plan for Lebanon to combat Syria called for the seizing of Lebanese territory up to and including Beirut, which would be taken in a coordinated operation with the Phalange forces; an advance beyond the Beirut-Damascus highway, which would cut off Beirut from the main Syrian forces; and the expulsion of Syrian units from the Bekaa valley. One would expect such a plan to entail deep penetrations, landings north of Beirut and the Beirut-Damascus highway, and other tactical maneuvers of the type espoused in IDF doctrine.

The careful study of key strategic battles that then took place between the Israelis and the Syrians will help us understand the Syrian Army's performance over the past years in the current war.

In 1982 the Syrian presence in Lebanon had diminished from three divisions in 1976 to one division and one mixed brigade which amounted to 30,000 men. The 1st Armoured Division in the Bekaa, commanded by Rifaat al Assad (the brother of Syrian President Hafez al Assad), was deployed in defensive positions in depth. Both Syrian formations and doctrine followed the Soviet model, and defensive doctrine called for combined-arms operations, combat teams whose structure was fixed in advance, and a defence based on massive firepower.

To provide that firepower, the Syrians depended on air defence in depth from various SAM sites reinforced by anti-aircraft guns, and a ground defence characterized by a profusion of anti-tank weapons and units. The defence would depend on intensive fortifications and the exploitation of natural obstacles to a depth of 20-30 kilometres. The 85th Brigade was deployed in the Beirut area in the role of an armed presence, with the additional task of guaranteeing the security of the Beirut-Damascus highway.

In addition to the main armies of Syria and Israel, Lebanese militias would become involved in the fighting. The Israelis expected the Christian Lebanese Forces, some 10,000 strong, to fight as allies against the PLO. As war approached, the opponents consisted of some seven divisions and two independent brigades of the IDF, 60,000-78,000 strong, arrayed against 15,000 PLO fighters, one Syrian armoured division, and one Syrian brigade. The outcome of the main battle at the end of the war depended on how well the Syrians and Israelis would manage their allies in the form of irregular forces.

The main battles of 10 June, 1982 were fought in the Eastern Sector, between the IDF and the Syrian 1st Armoured Division. On the ground, Syrian resistance had been stiff. The Syrians defended a series of strong points along the winding roads. Each strong point conducted a separate, integrated defence with obstacles, mines, tanks, and commandos using Sappers and RPG's; at times, such as in the defence of the crossroads near Lake Qaraoun, the defence was supported by artillery and by Gazelle helicopters using HOT missiles.

At dawn, Syrian commandos attacked. APC's and tanks were hit and caught fire. Men were killed trying to rescue the

wounded from burning vehicles. Finally, Brigadier Menachem Einan ordered a cessation of rescue attempts and the column retreated in reverse gear. Around 2300 hours, this force approached *Ein Zhalta*, some eight kilometers from the Beirut-Damascus highway but more than twenty by road. Unknown to the Israelis, the area around Ein Zhalta was defended by a brigade-strength Syrian force consisting of a few dozen tanks and commando units. After passing through the villages, the Israelis started descending a steep slope with tanks in the lead when the Syrians opened fire with tanks from the opposite ridge and RPG's and Sappers from the surrounding *wadis*.

The Israeli attacks on Syrian positions in the Bekaa brought Syrian reaction in the west. There, Syrian forces had remained in Beirut and out of the fighting, but now the 85th Brigade began to deploy tank and commando teams south and east of Beirut, around *Khalde* and the hills south of Beirut and along the *Shemlan* ridge area.

In June 1982 the Israeli Air Force had jammed and destroyed the Syrian radar and bombed the surface-to-air missiles (SAM) sites in the Bekaa Valley. However despite the overwhelming odds, the Syrian Army fought bravely. The Israeli charge from the south was checked with ferocity when the IDF came into contact with Syrian positions. The IDF reported heavy obstacles inch for inch. An IDF armoured column was halted in a fierce tank battle in the village of *Sultan Yacoub*. This prevented the Israelis from taking the vitally strategic Beirut-Damascus highway that cut across the Bekaa Valley. The IDF were also halted towards the southern approach to Beirut at *Khalde*. The Syrian Army backed different groups to obstruct the Israeli advance east of Beirut. *Al Saiqa* fighters and other Shia-Sunni groups backed by regular units from the Syrian Army fought the IDF to a standstill in 1983. The Israelis retreated to the Litani River and from then on wanted to avoid the Syrians at all cost.

These battles have been forgotten in western military literature. But for Syrians today and their General Staff officers they formed the basis to prepare for the next war with Israel through the use of irregular forces. Hence the performance of the Syrians during the current war was a culmination of the study of 1980s battles which joined irregulars and the main Syrian

Army. Syria never suffered from lack of courage or the will to fight on. Even though they knew they could not stand up to IAF in 1982 they flew near-suicide missions with great valour and skill.

The American appraisal of Syrian troops summarized that the Syrians had returned to Beirut after the withdrawal of the Israelis, but had been no more able to establish order there than were the Americans and Israelis before them. In fact, however, it may be that Syrian power in Lebanon will be the one thing which prevents any radical change to Lebanon's form of government. For despite Syrian support for Iran in its conflict with Iraq, Syria had no interest in seeing a Shiite Islamic government in Lebanon but preferred to maintain some form of the status quo. The Americans saw Syria as the only party with whom they could deal concerning Lebanon and that situation was better served than having factional anarchy, for the Israelis as well as for the Lebanese.

The Syrian Army as a non-conventional force: the best in the region?

The Israeli assessment of the Syrian Army's control of Lebanon was similar to that of the Americans. The Israelis came to the early conclusion that they had nothing to gain in destabilizing Syria under Assad (in the 1980s); it would bring a Sunni Islamic government to power. It would only prolong a war in which there would be no zero sum option but rather one in which both sides lost relative ground and ability to operate. After being outdone in Lebanon by Syrian forces and its proxies, the Israelis then saw the wisdom of letting Syria have hegemony to maintain the status quo of the Golan Heights. This doctrine was further entrenched after the 2006 war in Lebanon.

In the aftermath of the 33 day war in 2006, Syria sent commandos and artillery units to the border and the IDF raised its level of alertness to the maximum in ten years and doubled its deployment on Mount Hermon. Syria had also doubled its commando units in 2007 and started preparing for urban guerrilla warfare training. One of the 12 divisions of the Syrian army was made up of 10,000 elite commandos and the same unit doubled its number of rockets.

The Israeli view was that though the Syrian forces achieved surprising advances against the Israelis in the Golan in 1973 and resisted the Israeli advance in 1982, their power had subsequently been corrupted preventing them from mounting any sort of fighting force. However their helicopters would prove to have significant proficiency and their commando units have thrown back all that has been waged at them. The remarkable success gained by Hezbollah in 2006 confirmed the transition of Syrian forces from a conventional fighting force to asymmetric warfare and irregular forces, which were aimed at compensating for the conventional superiority of the IDF and its vulnerability to irregular warfare techniques.

The Israeli strategic expert Ephraim Inbar has remarked, on '*the recent strategic acumen of the Syrian military*' saying that since, "Israel has absolute superiority in several fields in warfare, so Syria is investing in fields where it can have an edge. It has invested in recent years in anti-aircraft weapons, rockets missiles and bunkers. The war in Lebanon proved to the Syrians that they were right to do so."

The grudging respect the Israelis have had for the Syrian armed forces trumps all other armies in the region with respect to threats to Israel. The Israelis not only saw the irregular forces that Syria could unleash but also the negative consequence of removing the Syrian state and army. When Silvan Shalom, the Israeli Foreign Minister in 2004, suggested to Ariel Sharon that they destabilize Syria, Sharon replied by saying "No way" as that would mean either an extremist Sunni government in Syria, or an unstable democracy, both of which were a threat to Israel.

Upon the death of Hafez al Assad, Vice President `Abd-al Halim Khaddam, serving as temporary acting president, promulgated two decrees, announcing the appointment of Bashar al-Assad, the late president's son, as the general commander of the Syrian Army in addition to his being promoted to the rank of Fariq, the most senior rank in the army, which his father had held. Several hours later, Bashar received members of the senior officers' corps, headed by Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass and Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Ali Aslan. They had come to offer their condolences on the death of his father, and to pledge their loyalty and complete support. Had the Syrian Armed Forces been a sectarian unit, you might have expected

the Sunni Tlass to provoke trouble. However it was precisely the two main Sunnis in the regime i.e. Khaddam and Tlass, who oversaw the smooth transition to Bashar al-Assad.

Conclusion

"If a Lebanese woman gets pregnant they say the Syrians did it, if a bird falls out from the sky over Beirut it is said to have been attacked by the Syrian eagle" (saying from Mustafa Tlass' *The Mirror of My Life*, 1991).

Of course the eagle and the lion have come to symbolize the Levant for the last four decades in the shape of the Syrian state built by Hafez al Assad, and the one being kept alive by his son Bashar.

What has furnished the Syrian Army and the State with a motive to resist all that has been thrown at it in the last six years? For this the answer lies in the formidable network built by Hafez's army in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq, the very same network we have seen at play in Iraq post 2003 and in Lebanon post 1976. It is worth lingering over Henry Kissinger's famous words, '*you can't make war in the Middle East without Egypt and you can't make peace without Syria.*'

As commentators continue to struggle to become experts on Syria and its regime, few have bothered to look at the performance of the Syrians in Lebanon post 1976. It was a great relief to the Americans and the Israelis that the Syrian Army sanctioned by the Arab League marched into Lebanon in 1976 on behalf of the Christian community there to fight the Palestinians who had earlier destabilized Jordan and were perceived to be doing the same in Lebanon.

It was the Syrian Army that along with Israel had a tacit agreement that anything north of the Litani River belonged to the Syrian sphere of influence and the rest to Israel. So we move on to the 80s and 90s and Syria becomes the guarantor of peace not just in Lebanon but also the greater region.

Next we see how the Syrian Army and intelligence skilfully played off one group against the other in Lebanon to bring about their mastery over the country and then replayed the same in Iraq post 2003. In Iraq, Syria's Army and intelligence

successfully outwitted the coalition forces and indeed Iran in backing both the Sunni insurgents who came to fight from the North and East of Syria. At the same time, the Syrians maintained excellent relations with the Shi'a Sadr brigades of Southern Iraq.

This was the same Syrian Army that throughout the 1970s and 1980s kept a precarious balance between the different Lebanese Christian families of Chamoun, Gemayael and Frangieh. It was the same Syrian Army that actually ideologically supported the Amal party of the Shia'as, and not Hezbollah. The greatest Christian general of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, who was the quintessential anti-Syrian of the 1990s, became the Syrians' biggest ally post 2005. So the dexterity displayed at deflecting all allegations of assassinations and being the root cause for all problems in Lebanon and Iraq have served the Syrian Army well in the on-going conflict in Syria. When Aoun bothered the Syrians, they simply backed other Christian warlords in Mount Lebanon and thus fragmented the Lebanese Christians, and as a result came out on top.

In analysing all this, we can begin to understand the Syrian Army's policy of 'neither vanquished, nor all-conquering.' As we saw the drift of the Syrian rebels in the current war into splinter groups of hundreds of factions, and even saw other reports of how the Syrian Army paid al Nusra for the flow of oil, these are lessons all too familiar for those who have watched the Machiavellian politics of the Syrian Army at work. The chess game played out in the Levant, first termed the 'Syrian Belt' by Seymour Hersh, is one whose actors primarily include the Syrian security forces. From Mount Lebanon to Damascus, there is a history of Syrian state and army engaged in real politics on the ground. Hafez bequeathed this military legacy to his son and his wily commander.

Alan George in his book on Syria under the al Assads concludes that although the hopes of reform invested in the young President Assad were probably exaggerated, "he might yet succeed in launching a program of limited political reform if the west, through support for an aggressive Israel and swaggering threats against Syria, does not perpetuate the conditions that allowed the most anti-democratic wing of the Syrian regime to prevail over the pro-democracy activists."

With the onslaught of the 2011 war in Syria, Bashar al Assad never had time to continue what he started in 2000 i.e. the gradual reform of a system that many western experts witnessed up close between 2000 and 2010. The Syrian Army has evolved into a unified non-sectarian army over the last four decades. As most observers point to the undoubted prowess of Hezbollah in the battlefield, it is worth noting as I argue here, that Syria's army has been fighting the Israelis and other actors long before Hezbollah came into being. All the major battles in Lebanon were fought before 1985 and the coming of Hezbollah.

The Syrian Army remains a formidable force as witnessed by its greatest foe: the IDF. It has evolved as an institution to outlast sectarian fault lines and negative foreign influences. But it is almost as if, since this conflict began, outsiders have wanted to portray this as a sectarian army from the minute the first shot was fired. One of the best Syrian experts (Nikolas Van Dam, author of *The Struggle for Power in Syria*) has himself acknowledged that foreigners are always eager to look at the divisive issues and highlight them, rather than look at the Syrians themselves.