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The Syrian Civil War – Evolution of the Syrian Army's Way of War

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During the years of the Syrian civil war (2011-) the Syrian army changed its modus operandi in the Strategic, operational, and tactical level. The change accord because the previous operational concept failed, and the army forces were unable to carry major offensive operations. This paper will examine the reasons for the changes, how they were implemented and how they affect the rebuilding of the Syrian army in the near future.

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The Syrian Civil War – Evolution of the Syrian Army's Way of War

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The views expressed above are those of the author and do not represent those of the IDF Ground Forces, the R.D.C

Department, or the Israel Defense Forces.

Professor Eyal Zisser's 2018 article on the Syrian Civil War begins with the following words: "In March 2011 a revolution erupted in Syria. It began as a limited local non-violent protest in the rural and peripheral areas of the country, and within a few months escalated into a bloody civil war that quickly became sectarian, and worse

yet – religious, a holy war (Jihad). The civil war attracted foreign intervention that transformed Syria into a regional

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and international arena of conflict, with the rival sides being used by the global and regional powers as pieces on the chess-board of their conflicts." [i]

Most descriptions and analyses of the war divide it chronologically into several main phases. Some discuss it according to its geographic separation into the main arenas where the actual battles occurred (east Syria vs west Syria, north vs south). To provide a wide view of the war this article will therefore describe the war according to these two parameters.

The Intra-Syrian War (April 2011 – Summer 2013)

During this period the Syrian Regime army attempted to reconquer the cities in which the rebellion broke-out, employing the forces locally available in their permanent pre-rebellion garrisons and using pre-rebellion combat doctrines.

Syria's pre-rebellion strategic planning envisioned two threat scenarios:

- A war with Israel requiring it to focus its forces in southern Syria
- A two-front war with Israel in the south and the US forces attacking from Iraq in the east.

To tackle the first scenario about half of the Syrian army was permanently garrisoned in southern Syria and would be reinforced with forces garrisoned elsewhere across the country. To tackle the second scenario the Syrians planned to focus their defense on the four main cities of Syria, the prime centers of population, economy and political power that are considered to be the 'centers of gravity' of the state – Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo – along with the border with Israel. This plan meant giving-up the mostly unpopulated desert of eastern Syria without a major fight. [ii]

The permanent deployment of the Syrian army was as follows: [iii]

1. Southern Syria: 1st Corps, 4th Corps, majority of Republican Guard units, majority of 4th Division and supporting forces.
2. Central Syria: Around Hama and Homs – most of 3rd Corps.
3. Eastern Syria: 17th Division and supporting units.
4. Northern Syria: 14th Special Forces Division, reduced 15th Special Forces Division, 76th Armored Brigade, 41st and 46th Special Forces Regiments.

As the rebellion escalated and proliferated to multiple fronts the Syrian regime adapted the logic of the two-front war plan to contend with it – concentrate on the major cities and the travel-routes connecting them. All else was initially ignored.[iv]

Army units sent to reconquer the cities, while beginning to suffer from mass desertions of Sunni-Arab personnel of all ranks, included maneuver units and special forces. The former were chosen according to their proximity to these cities and the latter because they were regarded as loyal to the regime. The operations emphasized quick maneuvers along the major streets to dominate focal points, without attempting to conduct methodical clearing operations or to destroy rebel forces. The attacking forces received only a minimum of artillery or air support.

In early 2012 the Syrian regime forces adopted a new concept of operations which can be summarized under the slogan: Clear and Hold. Regime forces conducted pincer maneuvers to surround rebel-held regions, then employed massed artillery and air strikes to destroy the built-up areas and enemy forces. After lengthy fire preparation, tanks, infantry (riding armored vehicles to their objectives then dismounting to fight) and special forces conducted methodical clearing operations through the built-up areas. On completion of the clearing phase chosen units were deployed throughout to hold the ground, dominate the population and prevent the rebels from returning to reclaim them.

Regime forces were organized in combined arms battlegroups: tanks, mechanized infantry, artillery, combat-engineers and logistics. Though successful in Homs, the Regime army did not have enough personnel to conduct multiple simultaneous operations across the entire country.[v] Furthermore, such operations inflicted no fewer casualties to Regime forces than to the rebels. In this context one must again mention the mass desertions that reduced the Syrian army's personnel to less than half its prewar figures.

The pre-rebellion Syrian army was organized in organic permanent divisions. As the Civil War progressed it adopted more flexible division-equivalent task organized headquarters, shifting subordinate units between them. These commanded not only official Syrian army units but also militias established in populations loyal to the regime (such as the Shabakhya). Initially the militias were especially prevalent in the Homs and Ladaqiya regions, the concentrations of the Alawite communities. Missions began being allotted based on the political and professional trust of the Regime in various commanders and various units. This new pattern would continue throughout the war.

By autumn 2012 the initial successes of the Regime faded as the need to employ more and more forces to hold reclaimed territory reduced the ability to concentrate enough forces for

clearing operations in other areas. Meanwhile the gradually growing rebel forces counter-attacked or infiltrated into cities and towns and conquered or took control (depending on the presence of Regime holding forces or lack thereof) of entire regions, cities, towns and major portions of the four critical cities, Damascus, Homs, Hamma and Aleppo. The regime responded by trying to defend everywhere and to counterattack to retake all lost ground almost everywhere. This caused it to dilute its forces even further – thus, for example, in 2012 the Republican Guard units (the most loyal and professional units of the Syrian army) were concentrated in Damascus with a portion in Aleppo; during 2013 more and more Republican Guard units were sent to Aleppo and some also to Deir al-Zor in eastern Syria; by 2014 the Republican Guard was spread even more: brigades and independent battalions in Damascus, Aleppo, Deir al-Zor, and Ladaqiya. [vi]

A Civil War Assisted by Foreigners (Summer 2013 – 2018)

Two decisions had transformed the civil protest into a general civil war: the use of the army to suppress the protests in Dar'a and the attempt by rebel politicians to form an organized national opposition as an alternative to the Assad regime (in fact rebel factions were many and the organization never represented more than a minority of them). These decisions also created the conditions for foreign intervention with different foreign powers supporting different sides in the conflict.

Initially foreign intervention was limited to diplomacy, funding and supply of weapons. However, as the pressure mounted through 2012, and a trend of gradual defeat loomed, the Assad Regime began to request direct military involvement from its allies Iran and Iran's semi-independent Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. Meanwhile the Rebels requested assistance from the Sunni-Arab Gulf States, the West, Turkey or al-Qaeda (depending on the Rebel faction in question). By summer 2013 the civil war was no longer an internal Syrian affair, but a regional conflict, and was gradually becoming a global affair as non-regional powers intervened diplomatically or with the supply of funds and weapons. Iranian proxy militias and Iranian forces were actively fighting with the Syrian Regime. Border clashes occurred with the Turkish military as it supported the rebels near the border.

In 2014 transfer of Regime forces from Eastern Syria enabled the Islamic State (declaring its independence from al-Qaeda and announcing the reestablishment of the Moslem Caliphate) to stake a claim to this area and begin conquering it – fighting the minimal Regime forces there and also the disorganized and disunited rebel forces. The eruption of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and its horrific massacres of rival groups and non-Sunni populations hastened the

direct military intervention of more foreign powers into the war, especially the non-regional powers – the USA (2014) and Russia (2015).

In 2014 the US, which had been providing support for the Syrian Rebels, initially only non-lethal but gradually adding some weapons, escalated supplies of weaponry to 'acceptable' rebel factions and initiated training programs – which ultimately failed. [vii]

In late 2015 Russia too, which had till then provided diplomatic support, vetoing anti-Assad UN resolutions, and weapons, concluded that it must escalate its involvement both in quantity of weapons, training programs for the Regime army, and in actual physical involvement by embedding advisors in Regime units and employing small Russian forces to participate directly in combat.

From summer 2013 to summer 2015 the weapons and capabilities of the rebels improved considerably as they began to receive funding and advanced weapons from the Arab Gulf states and the USA. New anti-tank missiles proved useful in countering the Regime's advantage in armored vehicles – these missiles being more advanced than the models pilfered from Regime army stores. In 2013 the rebels recorded 107 anti-tank missile attacks, 288 in 2014, 547 in 2015, 667 in 2016. However, from 2017 the frequency of anti-tank missile attacks dropped. This was caused by the weakening of the Rebel factions amenable to the West vice the strengthening of Jihadist factions and the successful resurgence of Assad's forces – proving to the Western supporters that the war could not be won without sending their own military forces to Syria. The West, therefore, gradually withdrew its support and supply of weapons to the rebels. [viii]

During the same period the Rebels also began to use drones, initially for intelligence collection and then for dropping munitions on Regime forces. The Islamic State lead the way in quantity and quality of use, but the others followed. Iranian and Hezbollah forces also employed drones for surveillance and attack and gradually the Syrian Regime forces too adopted Russian and Iranian surveillance drones to assist in directing air and artillery fire, but not to conduct strikes themselves. [ix]

The period 2013 – 2018 can be sub-divided chronologically: from 2013 to 2015 period covering the gradual defeat of the Assad Regime and 2016 to 2018 seeing the reversal of this trend and the gradual defeat of the rebels, but it is more useful to divide the fighting throughout this period geographically – dividing the war into two separate campaigns: one in eastern Syria and one in western Syria and covering each one chronologically. It is, however, impossible to completely separate the operations in each area from the other because of reciprocal effects between them.

War in the East

By 2014 the territory previously known as Syria included three political entities trying to defeat each other: the Assad Regime, the Islamic State and an amorphous collection of militias (sometimes fighting each other) collectively called the Syrian Rebels. The principle generator of the change in the political and military fields was the Islamic State. It conquered most of eastern Syria easily against only sporadic weak resistance of Regime and rebel forces because these were concentrated in western Syria. Subsequently, the arrival of Islamic State forces in western Syria created the impression that Assad's time was up, however, it actually created the conditions for Assad's ultimate victory.

The Islamic State's operational art and tactics dazed its rivals. Islamic State forces emphasized fast movements in multiple columns to surprise and overwhelm the enemy with concentric attacks and protect themselves from enemy aerial superiority. [x] When they encountered an organized determined enemy they failed – thus at Deir al-Zor, the 104th Paratrooper Brigade of the Syrian Republican Guard, 137th Mechanized Brigade and units from 17th Infantry Division, successfully defended the city and its environs for three years against all Islamic State attacks. [xi]

In 2014 the US began to directly attack the Islamic State forces in eastern Syria and in Iraq, also providing aerial strike support to Kurdish militias in Syria who were being attacked by the Islamic State and barely holding out. Islamic State difficulties in eastern Syria impacted its abilities to free forces to fight in western Syria, where too it was attacking both Rebel factions and Regime forces.

Unlike the failure of US support and training programs for Rebel factions in western Syria, the US support and training programs for the Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria succeeded in creating a viable force that ultimately, with American fire support, defeated the Islamic State and even conquered its capital Rakka (October 2017), eliminating it as a major player in the war, though as a nuisance it continues to fight to today.

In July 2017, simultaneously with the gradually successful Kurdish offensive against the Islamic State, the Regime army conducted an equally successful offensive against the Islamic State in central-western and eastern Syria. The Regime employed Divisional Battle Groups such as the militia-based 'Tiger Force' commanded by Suhil al-Hassan, the 'Desert Hawks' brigade and the 30th Republican Guard division. The offensive began with a pincer attack surrounding Islamic State forces in Hama and Homs districts, followed by an offensive towards Deir al-Zor. The offensive was conducted simultaneously on multiple axes (M-20, Route 42, and Route 4), conquering towns, villages and the countryside. [xii]

In each phase Regime forces maneuvered to achieve

numerical superiority over the enemy and were supported by Russian air strikes.[xiii] The Regime offensive reasserted its presence in central eastern Syria, its control over a section of the Syria-Iraq border and broke the siege of Deir al-Zor in September 2017, while the Islamic State was simultaneously fighting a losing battle against the Kurds further north. [xiv]

War in the West

The first employment of non-Syrian forces in the Civil War occurred with the entry of Hezbollah units into combat around the city of al-Qusayr in 2013. The battle for al-Qusayr was commanded by a Hezbollah commander who, in addition to a brigade's worth of Hezbollah troops, received armored, mechanized, artillery and air units of the Regime army under his command – creating a division sized taskforce. [xv]

From summer 2013 to autumn 2015 fighting raged through all western Syria from the north to the south:

- In the north-west the Regime lost most of Idlib province to the 'Victory Army', a coalition of rebel militias lead by Jabhat al-Nusra (the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda). The loss of Idlib increased pressure on Regime forces fighting to retake eastern Aleppo from the rebels.
- In the center-west Islamic State forces captured major suburbs of Damascus such as the al-Yarmoukh Palestinian Refugee Camp and the al-Suweyda district. They also conquered northern Homs, the environs of al-Rustan and parts of Hamma district.
- In the south-west the rebels gradually captured most of the Syrian Golan and parts of Dara. Repeated rebel attempts to enlarge their holdings were defeated only at great cost to Regime forces.[xvi] Regime counterattacks were defeated in turn.

By the end of 2014 Regime regular forces were down to 125,000 active personnel from the original 250,000 to 325,000 serving on the eve of the civil war. The dearth of personnel, caused by mass desertion, defection, draft-dodging as well as mass casualties, compelled the Regime to mobilize reservists (many of whom also did not report for duty or defected) and rely more and more on private militias raised by private citizens who supported the Regime – mostly from the religious minorities who feared Sunni rule, and the forces provided by Iran and Hezbollah. By the end of 2014 the ratio of army personnel to militia personnel was approximately 1:1.[xvii]

The personnel issue impacted the organization of forces for battle, so that, for example, in the battle for Hamma in early 2014 was conducted by an ad-hoc task-force combining units of the Alawite National Defense Forces militia, an Iranian

funded Shiite militia from Iraq, an Iranian Revolutionary Guards unit, the 106th Syrian Republican Guard Brigade, remnant units of tanks, mechanized infantry, artillery and engineers taken from a variety of Regime formations, Syrian combat aircraft allocated for the battle and Iranian RPV units. In July 2014 the 11th Armored Division took over the defensive battle around Hamma. In August units from the 4th Armored Division were sent to Hamma to conduct a counterattack. In October the 'Tiger Force' militia, which was also commanding units allocated to it from the 11th Armored Division and others, lead the attack to conquer the town of Murak.

In the long battle for Hamma the Regime forces conducted a complex operation that included:

- Isolating the city with army and militia units;
- A heavy preparatory bombardment;
- An armored and mechanized assault to capture the edge of the city's built-up area;
- Followed by a methodical fire-intensive combined-arms attack to conquer and clear the city portion by portion.

The emphasis was still on the maneuver portion of the battle and the goal was destruction of the rebel forces rather than negotiating their surrender or chasing them away.

The introduction of Russian commanders and units into the war in September 2015 brought a significant change to the capabilities of Regime's forces:

- Russian domination of the planning and command of operations significantly improved tactical and administrative conduct.
- Dramatic improvement in the ability to locate rebel forces and positions.
- Dramatic increase of the Regime's firepower by deploying Russian combat aircraft to Syria.

The Russians rushed to learn the situation on the ground and to integrate themselves into the massively disrupted Regime military structure. Two issues they chose not to change:

- First, the employment of flexibly composed divisional taskforces based on commanders and units known for their loyalty to the regime and known for their ability to achieve their tactical and operational objectives in the battlefield
- Second, focusing operations in western Syria around its vital core. Rather they increased the focus of these operations with an emphasis on concentration of

forces in sequential offensives rather than the previous tendency to disperse forces to fight everywhere simultaneously.

The Russian takeover of planning and command of operations brought a significant change in strategy and operational method: rather than the previous concept of surrounding an area, conquering it, clearing it methodically and then holding it; the Russians changed the object of the operations: surrender of the enemy verses his destruction, to be achieved mainly by a continuous bombardment that would gradually break the defenders' spirit rather than by maneuver. Simultaneously to the constant bombardment, Regime forces raided the rebel positions or captured key terrain. The aim of these maneuver-operations was to increase pressure on the local population and erode the ability of the opposition forces to resist. This new method of operations was usually conducted in the following manner:

- The area of operations was carved into smaller geographical sectors;
- Each sector was attacked in turn, enabling a larger concentration of force. The Regime army attacked and conquered only towns and villages that it needed to create an effective encirclement of the main objective.
- During the attacks and after the entire area of operations was surrounded and bombarded for days.
- Following days or weeks of bombardment and a gradually tightening siege the Regime offered terms of surrender that included transporting unrepentant rebels to the rebel-held Idlib province so they could join their compatriots there and allowing repentant rebels to reintegrate as loyal citizens – their 'misdeeds' forgiven.

This method drastically reduced Regime casualties. Its one drawback was the survival of many rebels 'to fight another day' – but apparently the Russians assessed that a dozen small successful battles followed by one big one would be cheaper than a dozen medium-sized battles. Events were to prove them correct.

An example of this new method can be seen in the battle for East Ghouta – a major suburb of Damascus. East Ghouta was besieged from 2012 to February 2018 and all attempts to conquer it by the previous method had failed. In February 2018 Regime forces attacked according to the new method. The area was divided into sectors to be treated separately one-by-one. From February till the end of April Syrian artillery pounded the more densely populated western sector with short pauses. Every day 300 to 500 shells and bombs were fired into the built-up area, on some days 900 and on one specific day 1,660 artillery shells and 1,250 aerial bombs. Syrian ground forces conducted 'nibbling' attacks to tighten the siege and gradually cut different sectors off

from each other. Each 'island' was then attacked separately till the rebels within surrendered. [xviii]

By mid-2018 the Regime and its allies had completed the reconquest or surrender of virtually all western Syria. After a period of recuperation and reorganization the Regime now focused on the last rebel-held province – Idlib. The campaign to retake Idlib included a political-military complication – the presence of Turkish troops monitoring a ceasefire agreed upon by them and Russia while the Regime forces were busy elsewhere.

Turkish direct military involvement had begun in 2016 and escalated since: capturing bits of tactically important ground along the border, providing supporting fire to rebel forces near the border and providing weapons and training for rebel forces. In 2017 the Turks invaded Syrian territory outright, using both their own forces and a proxy Syrian Rebel militia. Their main objectives – drive the Syrian Kurds away from the Turkish border to prevent cooperation between them and Turkish Kurd rebels, stop the massive migration of Syrian civilians to Turkey by providing a safe-haven on the Syrian side of the border and prevent the total defeat of the Sunni Rebellion.

The Regime offensive into Idlib was conducted very slowly – the success of the previous battles had brought a large concentration of rebel forces there and these were supported by Turkey. Regime forces conducted a methodical attack – each one aimed at taking only a small area: methodical surveillance of the area to detect Rebel forces and positions, an air and artillery bombardment lasting days to reduce them, a combined-arms attack – usually in two prongs several kilometers apart to surround the chosen area, and then a methodical clearing of that area in a converging attack. The focus was along the eastern portion of Idlib – further from the Turkish border and through which ran the main highway connecting central Syria to Aleppo. Gradually, as small success followed small success, and despite a number of successful rebel counterattacks, the Regime forces advance increased its pace. To halt it in February 2020 the Turks escalated their presence and provided artillery support to the rebels and began to suffer a trickle of casualties themselves. Then, on 27th February, a single Regime airstrike killed 33 Turkish soldiers. Turkey responded with an all-out armed-RPV aerial offensive on the Regime forces and a major rebel counterattack assisted by Turkish artillery. However, after an initial shock that allowed the rebels to recapture a swathe of territory, Regime forces recovered, adapted to the new tactical situation and resumed their advance, taking again all the ground lost to the Rebel counterattack and more. On 5th March Turkey capitulated, withdrew its demand that the Regime forces withdraw to the previous ceasefire line and agreed to a new ceasefire on Russian terms. By then the Regime had taken 43% of Idlib province and opened the highway – a clear-cut victory.

Stabilization Operations (2018 –)

Apart from Idlib and a few small scattered areas where rebel presence is still prevalent, the Regime has begun work on rebuilding the shattered country – including the rebuilding of its army. Many former rebel leaders and their followers have been integrated into the local government bureaucracy and even into Regime military forces as regional commanders in charge of local peace, each in his region. Occasionally friction arises between former rivals and sometimes this leads to local firefights. The Regime responds by setting up an ad-hoc taskforce that 'floods' the troubled area with forces and conducts forced arbitration between the belligerents. What fighting continues along the Idlib front and here and there across Syria, especially in the former Islamic State areas in the east, have de-escalated to low intensity guerrilla and counter-guerrilla operations.

The rebuilding of the Syrian army has begun. However, this is fraught with political rivalries too: the Iranians are trying to increase their political say in Syria and are funding certain army commanders and units; the Russians have their favorites too. Assad is trying to regain independence from both but seems to prefer Russian tutelage to Iranian – especially as the Iranians are trying to embroil him in fighting with Israel. Israel was not directly involved in the civil war, but it has a major interest in its results and over the years has worked to further those interests with humanitarian aid to the Syrian population near its border, military actions and diplomatic agreements with Russia.

The Way Ahead

During the years of the civil war the Syrian army changed its modus operandi at the strategic, operational, and tactical level. The change occurred because the previous operational concept failed, and the army forces were unable to carry major offensive operations. The Russian military intervention brought a different approach to utilizing the Syrian military force. Attrition-based warfare proved the correct strategy for reconquering Syria. It also proved to be an operational concept that allows the Syrian army to overcome its enemies. The question is will it affect the future structure and military strategy of the Syrian army: The new Syrian army will need to face three separate threat scenarios:

- A renewal of the rebellion;
- A Turkish invasion;
- War with Israel.

Each scenario requires a slightly different force posture and capabilities though the latter two are similar. As it now stands it seems the Russians are leading the Syrian military revival so one can assume a future Syrian army similar in

structure and doctrine to the directions the Russian army is developing, adapted to the unique local circumstances – especially the need to conduct counter-insurgency operations on a day-to-day basis for the foreseeable future while simultaneously building the capability to fight a technologically superior regular warfare enemy. Thus,

it is plausible to think that the army will be made of two armies: one that can execute offensive operations to limited geographical objectives and another that will be able to only do defensive operations. Both armies will have sufficient fire power to attrite enemy forces while minimizing the damage the enemy could cause them.

The views expressed above are those of the author and do not represent those of the IDF Ground Forces, the R.D.C Department, or the Israel Defense Forces.

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