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RESHUFFLINGS WITHIN SYRIAN SECURITY SYSTEM IN 2019: DETERMING POLITICAL MOTIVES AND OBJECTIVES

Abstract: *This study is aimed at firstly scrutinizing the reshufflings within Syrian security system in the first half of 2019, secondly to understand the internal and external motives and objectives of new appointments in security and intelligence departments. There are two research questions: 1. What were the key factors behind the decision of the Syrian authorities to conduct reshufflings within Syrian security system? 2. What were the main internal and external actors involving in the configuration processes within Syrian security elite? In the second half of 2019 Syrian authorities were lacking loyal and credible security system which was heavily eroded facing grave threats posed by external and internal state and non-state actors during the Syrian crisis. Analyzing the reshufflings within Syrian security system, discussing the real objectives of the changes, and given all the perspectives and thoughts of subject matter experts we draw our own perspective on the subject and make conclusions.*

Keywords: *Syrian security system, Syrian Air Force Intelligence, National Security Bureau, Fifth Corps, Alawites*

Introduction

The reshufflings within the Syrian security system in the first half of 2019 were the most large-scale since July 2012, when the headquarters of National Security Bureau was exploded by a suicide bomber and a number of high-ranking officers and heads of various security agencies were killed, and including Bashar Al-Assad's brother-in-law, then deputy chief of staff of Syrian Armed Forces Asef Shaukat, Minister of Defense Dawooud Rajiha and the adviser of Vice President Hasan Al-Turkmani (MacFarquhar 2012). This subject was observed and examined by researchers representing Near East Institute of Russian Federation Vladimir Akhmedov (Ahmedov 2019) and Yuri Sheglov (Scheglov 2019, Scheglov 2019). This research topic was examined by subject matter experts such as Alexander Decina and Katherine Nazemi from The Washington Post (Decina and Nazemi 2019). Authors, discussing the main motives of reshuffling in security system, are underlining that while Syrian authorities were trying to reestablish their sovereignty over the territories then under control of opposition groups, were facing grave threats posed by internal tense relations between different actors in security system caused by unhealthy competition among them and this badly challenged

authority's efforts made for reunification of the state. The struggle for local supremacy in some regions among state security actors morphed into violent and fierce clashes (Rajab 2019).

Different views of Subject Matter Experts

Referring to the topic Vladimir Akhmedov mentions that a number of Arabic publications and social networks spread news about large-scale transformations in Syrian security system. Syrian official sources did not confirm or deny this information. According to particular information sources all the changes were about key figures who worked for the Syrian Security System. The head of National Security Beauru Ali Mamlouk was resigned and appointed to Vice-President of Syria on National Security affairs. Ali Mamlouk was replaced by Muhammad Dib Zeytoun, who previously headed Counterintelligence Department of Syrian Armed Forces. The head of Syrian Air Force Intelligence general Jamil Al-Hassan also resigned and immediately retired. Hassan Jaudat Ismail replaced him in that position. Hussam Luka, the former head of the political security department at the Syrian Interior Ministry, became a new head of the Syrian Armed Forces Counterintelligence Department, who has been replaced by another general Nasser Ali. Major General Nasser Deeb has been declared as a new Chief of Criminal Investigation at the Syrian Interior Ministry replacing Safwan Issa (Ahmedov 2019).

The dismissal of the Head of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence Jamil Al-Hassan is of great interest to the observers. His tenure was extended for a year not a long time ago. This move was most probably connected to the failure of negotiations with the Israeli side through the Russian mediation in late June 2019. According to Syrian opposition sources, the Russian side challenged Jamil Al-Hassan suggesting him to choose between two alternatives, either he should accept all the Israeli demands regarding Iranian foothold in Syria thus continuing to hold his office one more year, or simply resign (al-Nahhas, Mamlouk 2019). The same sources insisted, that Russians were supporting the Israeli proposals according to which the Fifth Corps must be incorporated into Syrian Armed Forces, as well as special operations were to be carried out in order to withdraw Iranian militias and logistical capabilities. Jamil Al-Hassan not only rejected the Russian-Israeli suggestions, but also carried out a series of punitive actions against the population of Quneitra and Daraa regions trying to make them treat the Iranian military brotherly and accept them as allies (Ahmedov 2019). According to Vladimir Akhmedov, with the resignation of Jamil Al-Hassan, large-scale reshufflings launched in the top leadership of the Syrian security system and these shakes were implemented on the initiative of Russia and with the approval of Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad. The resignation of major general Ali Mamlouk, head of National Security Bureau, was

the turning event in the midst of ongoing cleansing process taking place in the highest echelons of the Syrian security system (Ahmedov 2019). Official Moscow initiated changes in highest cycles of four major intelligence agencies of Syria in the first half of 2019. The list of officials subject to resignation was drafted by the Russian militaries and reported to the President Bashar Al-Assad at the end of June 2019. The latter was immediately followed by a close meeting with the participation of the Russians, a number of Syrian security high-ranking officers and heads of crucial security services were also present, including Ali Mamlouk. Russia was facing serious challenges when neutralizing Iranian supporters from Syrian security system. They were badly lacking of qualified, experienced and most importantly loyal officers who were well suited to new posts. Vladimir Akhmedov mentions that Russian sponsored changes were temporary and partial since Hussam Luka, Nasser Al-Ali and Hassan Ismail, who replaced ousted officers, could have never held senior position in Syrian security system without Moscow's backing. However, it is worth mentioning that almost three years after his appointment Hussam Luka as representative of Syria attended a summit of intelligence chiefs of Arab States held in Cairo in 2021 November 23 (Hanafi 2021). In our opinion this comes to prove that the latter's appointment was not temporary and he was enjoying full support of the Syrian political elite.

Key objectives of the Changes

This reshufflings coincided with a very complex and hard period of Syrian history, which according to a number of experts, was characterized by a certain deadlock in the political settlement of the Syrian crisis and growing controversies among its main movers and shakers (Scheglov 2019). Syrian authorities were guided by different considerations when carrying out reorganizations of the security system. Traditionally, at the beginning of each year various changes take place in the army leadership and security services of Syria. Usually, such changes are implemented by the authorities who try to reshape the centers of power according to domestic or foreign policy directives and priorities. Most of the time, the term of service of high-ranking officers were extended taking into account the situation in the country. For instance, during the last ten years, Bashar Al-Assad extended the term of office of Jamil Al-Hassan and Muhammad Dib Zaytoun. As for Hassan Ismail, his appointment may seem like a common promotion as he has been Jamil Al-Hassan's deputy for a long time. The appointment of Hussam Luka had the same nature, who served as deputy head of the Syrian Armed Forces Counterintelligence Department before being appointed the head of Political Security Department at the Syrian Ministry of Interior.

Despite the traditional nature of regular shakes in the army and security apparatus, which were largely based on loyalty to authorities, with the discussed changes President Bashar Al-Assad was sending political messages to internal and external powers involved in the Syrian conflict.

These appointments somehow shuffled also the religious structure of the top leadership of the Syrian Security apparatus. The nomination of Circassian Hussam Luka as the head of the most powerful Military Counterintelligence Department came to assert the above-mentioned claim. Naser Ali, the head of the political security department at the Ministry of Interior of Syria, was of a Sunni originated from Aleppo province. However, the most influential security system such as Air Force Intelligence Department remained under control of Alawites. General Nasser Deeb originating from Al-Assads' family village Qardaha, left the post of the deputy head of Political Security Department and became a new head of Criminal Security Department at the Ministry of Interior of Syria (Scheglovina 2019). We should not rule out that by undertaking realignments the Syrian authorities were aimed at keeping their iron grip on the army and special security services since their control over army was very fragile as a result of Russo-Iranian rivalry over power in Syrian security system. As already mentioned fierce clashes were orchestrated among various security departments and their respective armed units over the zones of influence. Iranian involvement in these processes was turning the competition even tenser. Iran has strengthened elite Fourth Armored Division at Maher Al-Assad's command providing them with combat service support of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hizballah (Abdullah 2021). At the end of 2017 the Russians were very keen on containing various armed groups associated with different areas of responsibilities and for that reason they embarked on formation of a more combat effective force such as the Fifth Corps which not only included previous opposition armed groups but also pro-government militias. Despite the fact that the Fifth Corps was under the command of the Syrian Ministry of Defense, the servicemen of that special unit were receiving their salaries from the Russian command, who also was considered to be the combat support agency for them (Decina and Nazemi 2019):

Analyzing the nature of the reshufflings in Syrian security system Russian researcher Yuri Sheglovina concludes, that the most of these changes, especially promotions, referred those officials who were more interoperable with the Russian Intelligence Command in Syria. According to Sheglovina, the appointment of a new head of the Air Force Intelligence and the dismissal of the former chief is a matter out of Russia's interests. He insists, that Jamil Al-Hassan was dismissed not because of his disobedience to the Russian claims to fulfill the Israeli demands but rather as a common health reasons. Moreover, the commanding elite of the Air Force Intelligence always had community based structure. Both Jamil Al-Hassan and

Hassan Ismail were representing Alawite community and originated from Tartus province and considered to be members of inner cycle of Bashar Al-Assad. This meant that anticipating any real change in the actions of that security service was baseless and the new appointments in that institution should not be discussed in the scope of Russian political-military interests in Syria (Scheglovina 2019).

The Arab Weekly characterizes changes as cosmetic, mentioning that one Baathist officer replaced another Baathist and obviously both of them were Assadists. The author of the report then highlights, that Bashar Al-Assad embarking on this process revealed his political will to his close cycle and making obvious for the opposition he was stronger than ever before. He also tried to prove that he was still the most powerful player in Syria and once powerful heads of security system could be replaced with other officials, who were considered more loyal to the President Bashar Al-Assad (AW stuff 2019).

Conclusion

Analyzing the reshufflings within Syrian security system, and discussing the main internal and external motives as well as the real objectives of the changes, and given all the perspectives and thoughts of subject matter experts we may draw the following conclusions.

It was obvious, that new shifts within Syrian security system were triggered taking into consideration some internal and external factors. Inner Syrian motives of these changes were formed having as grand objective strengthening state authority of the President Bashar Al-Assad and guaranteeing its credibility. The state authorities most probably were making considerations regarding on the eve of new presidential elections in 2021 to have more credible and geopolitically resilient security system which had been facing internal and external challenges since its very existence of the Syrian Arab Republic. With launching and implementing transformations Syrian authorities pitched themselves as lesser evil, thus once more time making clear that there are no alternatives to their Baathist authority in Syria. External factors of reshufflings were due to meeting political-military interests of the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the ground in Syria. A number of researchers thought that changes were definitely agreed with Russian side and aimed at implementing generation change within state security apparatus, and new appointees were the ones who were interoperable in cooperating with Russians. If we only debate reasons of the resignation of General Jamil al-Hassan, the head of the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, it was connected with the latter's position on the Iranian presence in Syria, we most probably assume that his resignation met the demands of the Russian side to dismiss him. Considering this resignation in this way, we may conclude that the Syrian elite was implementing these changes with the logic of

limiting Iranian influence in the country and contrary to that increasing the Russian footholds. Syrian authorities were betting for both options depending on the geopolitical situation around Syria with very often changing approaches of external players and operative-tactical situation on the ground inside Syria.

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