

From the rubble: A transformed Syrian military looks to regenerate

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After eight years of civil war the Syrian military is a shadow of what it was, but victory on the battlefield with Russian and Iranian help could ultimately allow a modest process of regeneration. *Tim Ripley reports*

In May Syrian government forces began a major and ongoing offensive against the last opposition enclave around the northwestern city of Idlib.

The country has been convulsed by civil war since the spring of 2011, with the military spending much of the conflict trying to retake land held by opposition groups, mostly seized in the early months of the fighting. Having come close to collapse in the war's early years, the Syrian armed forces have undergone a major transformation. The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) was able to rebuild itself and then go back on the offensive, with assistance from Russia, Iran, and Lebanon's Hizbullah.



Syrian armed forces enter the town of Kafr Nabuda, about 40 km north of Hama in western Syria, on 11 May. Having come close to collapse near the start of Syria's civil war, the SAA has rebuilt itself and gone back on the offensive. (George Ourfalian/AFP/Getty Images)

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Attention is now turning to what role the Syrian armed forces will have in the new Middle East: an assessment made difficult by the ongoing conflict, which leaves researchers reliant on open-source information, including social and news media imagery and commercial satellite imagery.

Soviet reliance

Before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 the Syrian armed forces consisted of about 300,000 military personnel, making them one of the largest militaries in the region. They also had about 3,500 main battle tanks (MBTs), 2,500 artillery pieces, 250 battlefield helicopters, 500 combat jets, and 30 warships and patrol craft.

The armed forces' structure, doctrine, and equipment were strongly influenced by Syria's long alliance with the Soviet Union. Damascus turned to Moscow in the 1960s and 1970s when it fought two major wars against Israel across the Golan Heights in Syria's southwest.

As arms, advisors, and cash flowed from Moscow the Syrian military rebuilt itself along Soviet lines. SAA divisions were clones of their Soviet counterparts and Syrian air power was organised along Soviet lines, with separate air and air defence forces. In addition, like their Soviet mentors, the Syrian military had a core of about 40,000 professional officers, while rank and file soldiers were conscripted for two years.

When the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the 1980s Moscow's alliance with Syria went into abeyance, with the last Russian military personnel leaving in 1992. The former Soviet Mediterranean naval base at Tartus was effectively abandoned, although the newly formed Russian Federation did not let the treaties governing its use lapse.

Without access to lines of credit from Moscow, the Syrian military was unable to buy new hardware from Russia during the 1990s and early 2000s. Despite regular reports of arms deals covering new aircraft and air defence systems from Russia, China, and elsewhere, no significant quantities of new military hardware were purchased in this period.

This meant that just before the civil war in 2011 the Syrian military still fielded predominately Soviet equipment from the 1970s and 1980s. Although its equipment holdings looked impressive on paper, the ending of Soviet military assistance 20 years before had adversely affected maintenance, overhaul, and training efforts. Large numbers of aircraft, helicopters, armoured vehicles, air defence systems, and warships were laid up for want of spare parts and maintenance.

By 2011 the army had shrunk to less than 200,000 personnel, with more than 80% of them being conscripts.

Civil war

Demonstrations broke out across Syria in the spring and summer of 2011, with protestors demanding democratic reforms and an end to the rule of President Bashar al Assad. Troops were

sent onto the streets to put down the demonstrations, but the SAA suffered mass desertions of conscripts refusing to fire on their countrymen.

Bolstered by thousands of army deserters, the protestors seized control of several cities and major towns, as well as large sections of Damascus. To contain the growing insurrection the government turned to elite units of professional soldiers, including the Republican Guard, the 4th Armoured Division, and the Airborne Forces. The tactics of government forces were to surround the rebel enclaves and hit them with massive artillery barrages that left huge areas in ruins. The opposition forces largely stood their ground, although tens of thousands died and millions of refugees fled abroad.

By 2014 the Syrian government and its beleaguered army was starting to crumble. To consolidate its hold on the major cities and the coastal region, government troops had pulled back from much of eastern Syria, allowing the Islamic State to establish the heartland of its Caliphate. An alliance of rebel groups then swept into Idlib in 2015 despite the presence of Hizbullah fighters and Iranian advisors.

[Continued in full version...]

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