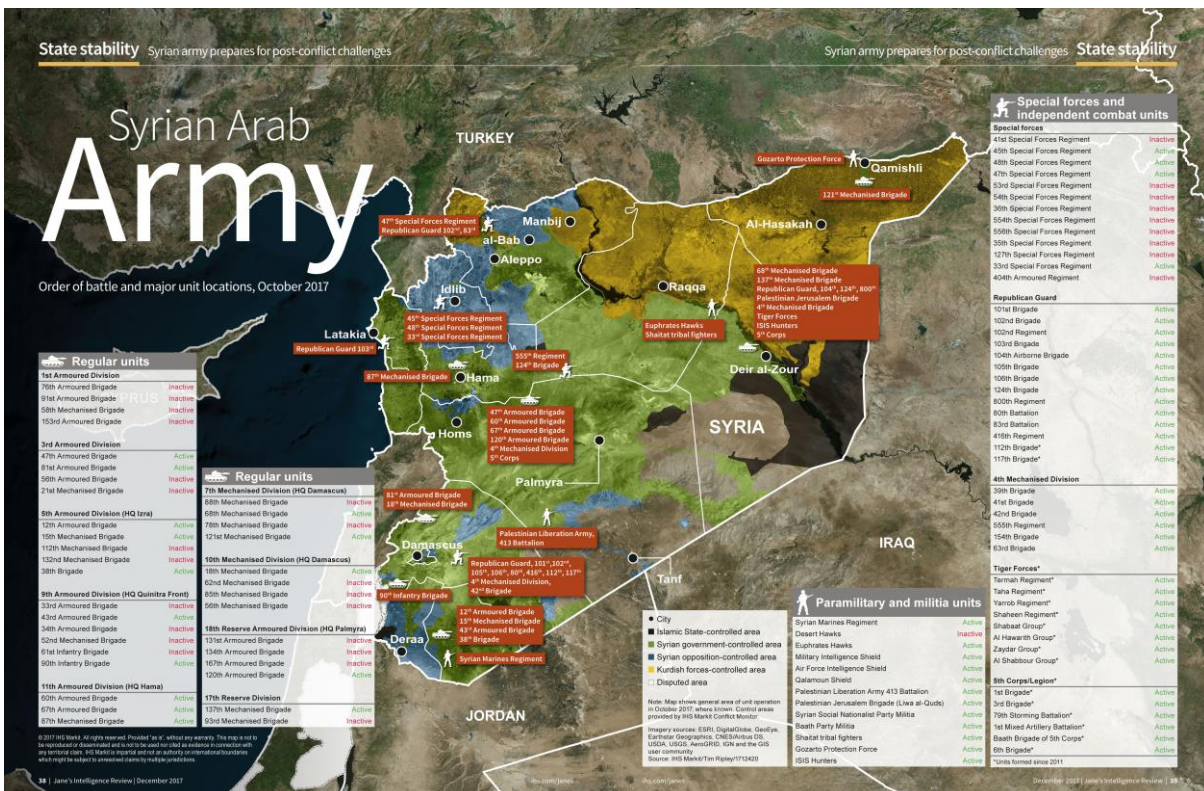


Syrian army prepares for post-conflict challenges

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Syria's six-year-old civil war is nearing its endgame. *Tim Ripley* assesses the current capabilities, structure, and organisation of the Damascus government's army and how it will adapt to the post-civil-war environment



Order of battle and major unit locations, October 2017 (Tim Ripley/IHS Markit)

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Since the end of 2016, the Syrian army has scored two major battlefield successes: capturing the rebel-held enclave in eastern Aleppo in December 2016 and lifting the Islamic State's siege of the city of Deir al-Zour in September 2017. These victories have helped change the dynamics of the Syrian civil war. President Bashar al-Assad's government has now restored its control over more than 70% of Syrian territory, including the country's four major cities – Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, and Homs. The Islamic State's fighters have been pushed out of central and eastern Syria, and the remaining rebel groups are penned into small enclaves in Deraa and Idlib, as well as to the east of Damascus. Kurdish fighters continue to control a swath of territory along the Turkish border; however, Kurdish political leaders have indicated they could reach a political accommodation with Damascus based on a federal arrangement.



A joint SAA-Hizbullah assault team flying the flags of their respective forces as battlefield recognition aids during the infantry assault to lift the siege of Deir al-Zour airport on 9 September 2017. Shia militias have fought alongside SAA troops in several major engagements, including along the Syria-Jordan border in early 2017 and in Deir al-Zour in September 2017. (Tim Ripley/Al-Masdar News)

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In this context, the position and capabilities of the SAA will be pivotal to ensuring the continued survival of the government in a post-conflict environment. Six years of fighting has transformed the SAA. After almost collapsing in 2013–15 because of desertions and battlefield setbacks, the army has been radically overhauled and now contains several battle-hardened combat units.

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Staring into the abyss

The evolution of the SAA during the early years of the civil war has been well-documented. Totalling approximately 200,000 troops before the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011, its strength fell to well under half of that number by 2013, as many conscripted soldiers deserted rather than participate in operations against protesters calling for the overthrow of the Assad government.



Syrian soldiers and pro-government militiamen operating a heavy machine gun mounted on the back of a pick-up truck in the recently retaken town of al-Qaryatayn on 26 October 2017. The Syrian government has restored its control over more than 70% of the country's territory. (Stringer/AFP/Getty Images)

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Despite these mass defections, the bulk of the SAA officer corps, the air force, and elite units comprising professional soldiers have remained loyal to the government. This core resilience can be explained by the way in which the SAA was structured and organised. The SAA was modelled on the Soviet Army not only because Moscow was Syria's main supplier of arms during the Cold War (1947–91), but also because of the interdependent political dynamic between the Syrian Baath Party and the SAA. This mirrored the relationship between the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Army.

Professional SAA officers were selected and promoted on the basis of loyalty to the Syrian Baath Party and the Assad family. At the same time, the Syrian officer corps – like its Soviet counterpart – formed the repository of technical expertise across the country's military, operating and maintaining all sophisticated equipment such as air defence radars and missiles, long-range artillery, naval vessels, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft.

Army units, except for the elite units of the Republican Guard, Airborne, and Special Forces, were effectively conscript-training organisations, processing more than 70,000 new recruits each year as part of Syria's two-year compulsory military service. Before the commencement of the civil war, more than 140,000 of the SAA's personnel were conscripts. Army bases provided training facilities for new recruits and a permanent home for officers and their families. The bases also contained all the units' equipment, ammunition, and repair facilities.

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Structure and organisation

Before 2011, it was difficult to access reliable information about the SAA because of the Damascus government's sensitivity to potential espionage, particularly by Israel. However, the civil war has provided analysts with considerable insight into the Syrian military. In a bid to maintain civilian and military morale, the Damascus-based media, backed by social media, have given extensive coverage to the battlefield exploits of army units, detailing unit designations, names of commanders, equipment, and their operational locations. Pro-government sources have also generated a wide array of video clips showing army units in action. This imagery enables the strength and equipment of units to be assessed and, in some cases, enables soldiers and vehicles to be counted. Command structures can be determined by examining imagery showing officers leading their troops or directing military operations. It is also possible to identify signature equipment specific to individual units, as well as unit insignia and other markings.

Using these techniques, it is possible to build a picture of the Syrian army in 2017. Extrapolating from its current order of battle, which indicates about 20 regular SAA brigades, approximately half a dozen Tiger Forces regiments, and 20 Republican Guard brigades/regiments, puts the front-line fighting strength of the army at approximately 45,000 personnel. This increases to 50,000 when including headquarters and administration personnel, as well as specialist missile, rocket, engineering, and bridging units. This figure excludes the air force and air defence force, which remain sizeable organisations despite also experiencing extensive desertions and the loss of key bases.



Troops of the Syrian Tiger Forces advancing across the Raqqa-Homs border on 19 August 2017. This advance formed the northern axis of the operation to lift the siege of Deir al-Zour. (Ivan Sidorenko/Tim Ripley/YouTube)

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The main ground combat unit of the Syrian military is often called a brigade or regiment and is between 500- and 1,000-strong. This is considerably smaller than a corresponding Western formation of that designation. For reasons of esprit de corps, these units retain their pre-civil-war titles as tank, infantry, mechanised, artillery, special forces, airborne, or Republican Guard brigades or regiments. However, their internal organisation is now very different from their pre-civil-war structure.

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Increasing capacity

Following improvements in capability, approximately a dozen Syrian army units are now trusted with close-assault operations to attack and seize terrain from the enemy. These are known as 'storming' or 'intrusion' units. This is a difficult and dangerous mission, requiring highly motivated and trained troops. The Syrian army is averse to casualties – so as to maintain morale and prevent the loss of skilled personnel – and it only commits to opposed-assault operations with troops backed by extensive fire and surveillance support. The most prominent Syrian assault formation is the Tiger Forces, which contains approximately half a dozen intrusion regiments. Its command staff members regularly feature in Syrian media video clips, co-ordinating artillery and air support, watching video feeds from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and observing military operations from helicopters. The Tiger Forces is presented as a disciplined, well-trained, and highly motivated organisation.

Only a few other Syrian units are comparable with the Tiger Forces in operational effectiveness, including the six brigades of the 4th Mechanised Division and a handful of other units of the Republican Guard. The majority of the remaining brigades are of mixed quality. Most appear to have less modern equipment – for example, T-55 main battle tanks instead of the more advanced T-72 or T-90, and towed artillery instead of self-propelled guns. These brigades also rarely operate far from their home garrisons.

During 2016, it became apparent to the Damascus government and its Russian allies that the Syrian army would need to be expanded if it was to launch more widespread offensive operations. Work began to establish a formation that became known as the 5th Corps (also referred to as the 5th Legion or 5th Attack Corps). Unlike the four pre-civil-war SAA corps, the 5th Corps is not assigned a particular geographic area of operations. Russian advisers established a network of training bases from late 2016 to prepare initial 5th Corps brigades and artillery units. To equip the new units, Russia supplied T-62 main battle tanks, BMP infantry fighting vehicles, M-30 122-mm howitzers, and Ural trucks during late 2016 and early 2017. These are all relatively user-friendly and low-maintenance items of equipment, indicating that the bulk of the Syrian army is not yet ready to absorb and operate more sophisticated hardware.



Screengrab of a YouTube video showing a Russian army advisory team firing an anti-tank guided missile during an operation to lift the siege of Deir al-Zour on 4 September 2017. Russia's military advice and material assistance will play a vital role in the post-war rebuilding of the Syrian army. (Tim Ripley/Ruptly TV/YouTube)

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Irregular support

To fill the gap left by the shortage of personnel in the regular SAA units, the Damascus government has established paramilitary militia forces. The largest pro-government militia unit is the regionally based National Defence Forces (NDF). Most rural, town, and city districts have their own dedicated NDF units taking the form of a light infantry force equipped with infantry weapons, armed pick-up trucks or 'technicals', and occasionally main battle tanks.

There are also several militia groups, including Palestinian groups, linked to pro-government political parties, such as the Syrian Baath Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party. A number of ethnic and religious militia groups have also been formed by Assyrian and Christian communities for the purpose of self-defence. These are equipped in a similar way to the NDF. The most prominent militia unit is the Liwaa Suqour Al-Sahra, or Desert Hawks, which was formed and funded by pro-government businessperson and retired SAA officer Muhammad Jabir using retired special forces soldiers. As Syrian troops advanced into the desert in the central and eastern regions in 2017, several groups of tribal fighters were also recruited.

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Shia allied forces

The involvement of Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi and Afghan Shia militia in the Syrian civil war is one of the most controversial aspects of the conflict. However, it is difficult to obtain and verify factual information about their role. Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah each have their own media organisations that have generated considerable coverage of their troops fighting in Syria.

Several allied Shia militias also have extensive online footprints. These materials provide interesting insights into their role in Syria that can be correlated with imagery from Syrian sources, open-source aircraft tracking, and commercial satellite imagery. There is a demonstrable hierarchy of Shia forces operating in Syria, with the Iranian advisory teams acting as a command-and-control organisation for most of the Shia militias.

Since 2015, the Iranian-led Shia forces have been grouped together in distinct operational areas of responsibility, rather than being controlled by a Syrian army divisional headquarters. From late 2015 to early 2017, this area of operation was to the south of Aleppo and involved the Shia militia fighting rebels from the Idlib pocket. In early 2017, the Shia forces were relocated to the desert of southern Syria, where they began a series of offensives – dubbed Dawn 1, Dawn 2, and Dawn 3 – aimed at first to clear US-backed rebels from the border with Jordan and then to drive the Islamic State's fighters from the Syria-Iraq border region.

There is a complex recruitment, deployment, and logistic operation in support of the Shia militia forces. Iranian, Russian, and Syrian aircraft shuttle militia fighters to and from airports in Syria in between periods of duty at the front. A forward base at the Safira military complex, near Aleppo, receives new militiamen – where they undergo training from Iranian instructors before being sent into action. Iranian advisers accompany them to the front and call in fire support from armed Iranian UAVs. Images of Shia militia groups on parade and in front-line positions indicate their strength to be approximately two hundred fighters each. Syrian army tank and artillery units have operated alongside Shia militia units during the Dawn series offensives. Hezbollah operates in a different way.

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Russian advisory mission

The Russian advisory and training mission with the Syrian army is the largest carried out since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia has made no effort to hide the fact that senior Russian military officers are working in Syria, advising the government army. Obituary details released to the Russian media of advisers who have been killed when visiting front-line zones indicate the involvement of very senior and experienced officers. In February, a major general was injured by an improvised explosive device near Tiyas. In September, Lieutenant-General Valery Asapov, the commander of the effort to train the 5th Corps, was killed in a suspected Islamic State UAV strike on a Syrian military position near a crossing point over the Euphrates River, south of Deir al-Zour.

Imagery available on open sources indicates that Russian advisers are present with every major Syrian brigade-sized unit engaged in significant offensive operations. Their role is to provide tactical advice to commanders and act as a conduit for Russian surveillance UAV imagery and as forward air controllers to direct Russian air support.

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On the web

End of siege exposes Deir al-Zour to complicated conflict
Islamic State faces imminent collapse in Raqqa

Author Tim Ripley is a defence journalist and author and a correspondent for *Jane's Defence Weekly*. His latest book, *Operation Aleppo: Russia's military intervention in Syria 2015–17*, is due to be published in December.

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