

FOR MONEY OR LIBERTY? THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MILITARY DESERTION AND REBEL RECRUITMENT IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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SUMMARY

Military desertions have significantly shaped the dynamics of the Syrian conflict. While desertions have contributed to the emergence of an armed rebellion since early fall 2011, they have failed to critically weaken the Syrian regime's army. International actors need to better understand the drivers of desertion and loyalty in the Syrian military in order to devise effective policies to weaken the regime without strengthening radical rebel groups.

The Political Economy of Desertion and Rebel Recruitment

- Massive military insubordination has not led to the disintegration of the Syrian army. Desertions, which entail declining to show up for duty, became a mass phenomenon among rank-and-file soldiers and low-ranking officers in 2012. Defections, meanwhile, entail both leaving the military and officially joining the opposition, and they are far less common. But neither desertions nor defections have significantly weakened the military or its chain of command.
- The regime has worked to discourage desertions by bolstering control mechanisms, including the promotion of a sectarian narrative that fosters mutual mistrust in the military. While sectarianism has led to mistrust and impeded coordination among disaffected officers (and, to a greater degree, between soldiers and officers), it has not been a major driver of desertions. This explains, at least in part, the absence of mutinies and the prevalence of individual desertions.
- Simultaneous to the tightening of control in the army, the regime has tried to encourage loyalty by stepping up material incentives. Salaries for military personnel have increased multiple times, although they have still failed to keep up with inflation.
- Corruption in the military has become rampant. This has resulted in self-enrichment opportunities particularly for officers and, hence, an important economic incentive for loyalty. Yet, corruption has also provided opportunities

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for soldiers to run away, as they could buy vacation time or transfers to regions where desertion would be easier.

- Rebel recruitment is heavily influenced by economic factors. Economic necessities often push deserters into joining the rebellion on the side of radical, well-funded jihadist militias. Competition for economic resources has contributed to rebel fragmentation and hence an increasingly intractable conflict.

Policy Options for International Actors

Encourage desertion, not rebel recruitment. Beyond providing assistance to the armed rebellion, Western backers of the opposition should encourage defections, particularly among the crucial group of mid-ranking officers, by stepping up targeted financial assistance.

Provide economic alternatives to joining armed groups. Improving the economic conditions of the large Syrian refugee communities in neighboring countries may work toward a resolution of not only the refugee crisis but also the Syrian civil war, in the medium term. The provision of economic alternatives to joining armed groups will encourage deserters to refrain from fighting. If desertion remains an attractive option, but fighting does not, both those loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and rebels might be pressured to accept a negotiated solution.

INTRODUCTION

Military desertions have contributed to Syria's descent from a peaceful uprising to a full-scale civil war. The regime resorted to executing soldiers who shirked orders to crack down on demonstrations as early as April 2011.¹

But desertion differs from defection. The latter entails both leaving the military and officially joining the opposition. From summer 2011, the defection of rank-and-file soldiers and low- and mid-ranking officers helped the opposition establish defense units that fueled localized insurgencies against state repression. Their military expertise improved

the fighting capacities of such small militias. By June 2012, they also took the initiative in establishing the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the opposition's military wing that promised to lead the early stages of the insurgency.

It was estimated that up to 100,000 soldiers had deserted the Syrian military as of July 2014, not including the number of recruits who failed to report for military service when first called up.² In three short years, desertions and combat casualties reduced the number of active military personnel from 295,000 in the spring of 2011 to 120,000 in the spring of 2014.³ Manpower shortages in the regime's military have been so significant that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad announced an amnesty for deserters on July 25, 2015, in an apparent bid to encourage them to resume their service.⁴ But despite numerous predictions to the contrary, the Syrian military has not yet collapsed.

Our interviews with approximately 90 former military personnel in 2014 and 2015 provided insights into the drivers and material incentives of desertion and loyalty in the Syrian armed forces. Confirming reports that most deserters are Arab Sunnis, only one of the deserters we interviewed was Druze; all except one Kurdish deserter described themselves as ethnically Arab.⁵ Most of them deserted between late 2011 and early 2013.⁶

Understanding the political economy of desertion in the Syrian crisis is essential for designing effective policies to weaken the regime's military without strengthening radical jihadist militias.

SOLDIER DESERTIONS AND OFFICER DEFECTIONS IN SYRIA

Most of the deserters we interviewed, similar to former service members announcing their decision to leave the military on social media, used the term *inshiqaaq* to describe their choice. Yet translating this term as "defection" misrepresents the actual meaning conveyed. As one of our respondents remarked:

“My first attempt was actually not a defection, I just left during home leave. The word *inshiqaq* does not really describe this—I left the army. This created problems for me and my family. I faced many problems, especially with my mother and my brothers. They asked me to go back to the army because of that.”⁷

As this story highlights, desertion means leaving the military without permission, prior to the authorized end date of one’s military service. Defection implies a political cause associated with the action of walking away from one’s military unit.

We use the term “defection” in two specific contexts. The first case is when we assume that military service not only was a job but also involved a deeper commitment to the political regime, such as is the case with high-ranking officers. Second, military personnel defect when they not only leave military service but also turn against the regime and fight for the opposition.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, politically motivated defections have occurred mainly among officers. Between June 2011 and March 2013, at least 70 high-ranking officers in the military and security services announced their defection, primarily through social media.⁸ Roughly half of these high-ranking officers were of the rank of *aqid* (colonel), and many had held staff positions with the military and security services’ infrastructure and logistics branches. Because most of these officers were not involved in combat activities, these defections had a limited impact on the army’s and security forces’ internal cohesion and fighting capacities.

Among these 70 military defectors, approximately 30 were high-profile officers. Prominent examples include Brigadier General Mohamed Yahya Bitar, who joined the FSA on April 1, 2012⁹; Brigadier General Abdulmajid al-Ashtar, who was a former commander in the Central Military Region and defected on July 7, 2012¹⁰; and Major General Adnan Nawras Salou, who became an important figure in the opposition.¹¹

A limited number of defections have drawn attention for no other reason than their symbolic nature. One such symbolic blow to the regime’s military and security establishment

was the defection in early July 2011, along with 23 military officers, of Manaf Tlass, a general in the regime’s elite Republican Guard and son of the former minister of defense Mustafa Tlass.¹² On June 20, 2012, a MiG-21 fighter pilot, Hassan Hamada, flew his plane to Jordan to apply for political asylum¹³; on August 4, 2012, aviator Muhammed Ahmed Faris—the first Syrian in space—publicly denounced the Assad regime and emigrated to Turkey¹⁴; and October 10, 2012, saw the defection of the first female Alawi officer, Colonel Zubaida al-Meeki.¹⁵

These defections led many observers to expect the rapid fall of Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Former prime minister Riad Hijab, who left Syria in August 2012, fueled such expectations and was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying: “Based on my experience and my position, the regime is falling apart morally, materially, economically.” He added that “its military is rusting, and it only controls 30 percent of Syria’s territory.”¹⁶ Yet, despite the weakening of regime forces and the strengthening of the armed uprising, the Assad regime has remained resilient and has successfully reorganized its coercive capacities.

With the cohesion of its regular armed forces under threat, the regime has increasingly relied on large-scale counterinsurgency tactics such as shelling or aerial bombardment, as well as on irregular *shabiha* (pro-regime militias) and the Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah.¹⁷ This has transformed the conflict into a full-fledged civil war between disparate rebel groups and a regime whose military cooperates with irregular, pro-regime forces. At the same time, attempts have been made to bolster the cohesion of the regime’s military by stepping up control mechanisms and increasing incentives for loyalty.

This two-pronged process of the militarization of the opposition and the “militia-ization” of the loyalist forces means that although the Assad regime may be too weak to win the war and regain control over all Syrian territory, it remains too strong to lose it. Military insubordination has not led to the fall of the regime, but the number and timing of mass desertions has had a huge impact on the nature of the conflict and the lives of officers, soldiers, and their families.

Sectarianism and Mistrust

Deserters come from all walks of life in terms of personal income, education, and social background, but most are Sunni Arabs. On the surface, this supports portrayals of the conflict as largely driven by sectarian dynamics. Yet, this is a simplistic reading. Sectarian tensions are a consequence of the conflict and in no small part a result of the sectarian discourse adopted by the regime. In the military, the spread of a sectarian narrative has contributed to the spread of mistrust in units and has thus constituted an obstacle standing in the way of desertion.

Although most deserters are Sunnis, sectarian identity is not the primary cause of desertion. This is clear in two trends witnessed among deserters.

First, and most importantly, not all Sunnis have left the Syrian military, and collective action by Sunni soldiers against Alawi officers has rarely, if ever, occurred. For instance, one deserter reported that after he communicated his plans with fifteen fellow soldiers, all of whom were Sunnis, only one of them joined him. The others cited security concerns and the expectation of being discharged shortly as reasons to stay in the army.¹⁸ Such experiences have been the rule, rather than the exception, and sectarian identities have not served as the basis for collective desertions.

Second, roughly half of our respondents chose to desert and leave the country rather than fight against the regime. This hardly paints a picture of deeply held grievances with the Alawi regime as a driving force for desertions. Many service members had grievances with the regime's military response to what began as peaceful demonstrations. But for the former service members who left their units, sectarian and religious identities played only a partial role in motivating their insubordination.

Many deserters were keen to emphasize that they did not feel any sectarian animosity before the uprising. At the outset of the 2011 uprising, the composition of the rank and file reflected the religious diversity of Syrian society even though minorities—in particular Alawis—were heavily overrepresented in the officer corps. Some elite military and security

units—such as the Republican Guard or the Fourth Armored Division—drew nearly 80 percent of their officers from the Alawi sect.¹⁹ Only the recruitment of commissioned and noncommissioned officers has been on a voluntary basis. By contrast, rank-and-file soldiers are largely conscripted, and they constitute the vast majority of military personnel.

While the Syrian military had always been stacked with Alawis, in particular among the officer corps, our respondents described the military as a professional force in which religion did not play a significant role. Almost all of our respondents reported that Alawis maintained collegial relations with members of all sects, regularly interacting with non-Alawis at military colleges, in the barracks, and in social settings. When asked to judge the statement “in March 2011, other members of my unit were close personal friends,” 74 percent of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Eighty-nine percent of the same respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “in general, it is important that members of a unit share the same religious beliefs.”

But as the war has progressed so too has sectarianism. Sunni respondents stressed that the presence of Alawi soldiers and officers impacted their own ability to communicate their grievances about the regime to fellow soldiers. In particular, a great degree of mistrust developed between Sunnis and Alawis, with Sunnis viewing their co-religionists as more trustworthy. One deserter reported: “Most of the people in my unit were Sunnis. You know what that means. You can trust them somehow; they were all with the revolution.”²⁰ As political scientist Hicham Bou Nassif reported, identity-driven grievances have been particularly pronounced among Sunni officers.²¹

Yet although there was more trust among co-religionists, this did not rule out all instances of trust and respect across sects. One Sunni deserter was particularly outspoken in downplaying sectarianism:

“I even trusted a very close Alawi friend. He is pro-regime, but I still trust him. And they all also trusted me. We discussed political issues a lot. But we trusted each other, so nothing happened. We talked

twice even after my desertion. I heard that his brother had been killed in Damascus, so I called to say that I am sorry for his loss. He was very sad because I had not communicated with him after the desertion.”²²

Indeed, both our questionnaires and open-ended conversations revealed that even after the outbreak of the conflict, mistrust was more pronounced between supervisors and subordinates as compared to between sects. When asked to respond to the statement “in March 2011, I trusted my immediate superior in my military unit,” almost 80 percent of our respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. The increasing prevalence of the sectarian narrative constituted a further obstacle to desertion from the military.

Conscripts and Volunteers

Both before and since the war broke out, military service has been unpopular and draft dodging a relatively widespread phenomenon among conscripts. In the early phases of the conflict, the Syrian regime was concerned with ensuring the continuous flow of new conscripts. In an effort to bolster conscription, compulsory military service was reduced from twenty-one to eighteen months in March 2011.²³ In November 2011, Assad issued a legislative decree granting amnesty to draft dodgers, provided they report to a recruitment center within sixty days.²⁴ There have been other recruitment efforts as well. One of our interviewees, for example, was caught by military intelligence and sent to serve his mandatory period in late 2011 after having successfully avoided military service for a number of years.²⁵

Volunteering for military service, however, has tended to reflect greater commitment to the army as an institution, and eventually its political cause. For volunteers, joining the army also entailed a number of professional perks ranging from access to special military housing, preferential loans, military pensions, and informal benefits derived from illicit activities. Volunteers thus bought into a system that promised them a modicum of economic security and social prestige. When asked to respond to the statement “when deciding whether to stay in or leave my unit, I was worried about not being able

to financially support my family,” only half of the conscripted soldiers among our respondents agreed or strongly agreed. In contrast, 82 percent of volunteers agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement. This suggests that volunteers relied on income generated through military service to a much greater extent than did conscripts.

Volunteers were also upwardly mobile. While their fathers typically had completed only primary school and often worked as farmers or shopkeepers, these volunteers would have at least finished secondary school. Indeed, 25 of the 29 volunteers among our respondents had attained a significantly higher educational level than their fathers; in contrast, only fifteen out of 32 conscripts reported the same pattern. The deteriorating economic conditions in the years before the 2011 uprising made voluntary military service even more financially attractive for the educated but unemployed. Neo-liberal reforms throughout the 2000s, and urban population growth caused by severe droughts and slashed agricultural production after 2006, changed the economic mobility landscape in Syria.²⁶ About half of the volunteers we interviewed had joined the armed forces as low-ranking warrant officers or lieutenants amid poor macroeconomic circumstances in 2006–2010.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DESERTION IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Economic incentives were increasingly important in recruiting military personnel prior to the Syrian uprising. Perhaps not surprisingly, during the civil war, Assad’s military leadership has maintained and to a degree enhanced such economic incentives in an effort to retain soldiers and officers.

The regime has increased the salaries of military and security personnel three times since the war began. On March 24, 2011, presidential decree number 40 of 2011 ordered a one-time 1,500-Syrian-pound monthly raise for public employees (about \$32 at the time), a 30 percent salary increase for all civilian and military public employees earning less than 10,000 Syrian pounds per month, and a 20 percent increase for those earning more than 10,000 pounds.²⁷ This was

followed by another round of salary increases issued on June 22, 2013. Decree number 38 of 2013 ordered a 40 percent increase on the first 10,000 pounds earned and a 20 percent increase on the second 10,000 pounds earned for soldiers and civil servants. Decree number 39 of 2013, issued on the same day, increased the pensions of military personnel.²⁸

Recently, on January 18, 2015, all public and nonpublic employees were awarded a one-time payment of 4,000 Syrian pounds to be added to their salaries the next month by presidential decree number 7 of 2015.²⁹ But with food inflation estimated as high as 169 percent in some months,³⁰ among other factors, such increases have barely offset the decline in service members' real incomes.

The deserters we spoke to, moreover, almost universally emphasized moral and ethical grievances for their decisions to leave the military. For those who witnessed, and sometimes participated in, the fierce repression of the Syrian population, the loss of an already meager salary was not an ultimate barrier to desertion.

As for high-ranking officers, they stood to lose more when leaving the army. For such individuals, defection meant foregoing significant economic opportunities. One high-ranking officer, for example, pointed out that defection would cost him a good salary, multiple cars, and a beautiful farm.³¹ Officer perks may have been particularly lucrative in the air force. One colonel claimed to have received a monthly salary of 40,000 Syrian pounds and a fifteen-day vacation in France, in addition to the prestige and workplace satisfaction associated with being a pilot.³²

There are other incentives, such as a bounty system including salary increases and cash payments for revealing information on potential deserters and anyone dealing with a "terrorist."³³ Indeed, about 15 percent of our respondents reported being offered a cash bonus to stay in the army prior to their desertion. A senior warrant officer with over twenty years of service described how the regime offered him money to lead a group that would allow him to steal from the people, as he phrased it.³⁴ One Sunni general who defected from the regime went through a harrowing experience when regime forces

reportedly arrested and tortured his son. A high-ranking official in air force intelligence intervened to release him, and the general was offered financial compensation for his son's suffering in an apparent attempt to buy his loyalty.³⁵

In addition to official incentives, the uprising ushered in lucrative but also illicit opportunities, especially for commanding officers. Soldiers, for instance, bribed their superiors to avoid being selected to go on patrols. As one conscript explained, all soldiers were scared of leaving the barracks during such missions—especially at night—because they were not sure where they were going, what they would be doing there, and who they would be confronting.³⁶ Money also changed hands for soldiers to be stationed in particular areas. One deserter told the following story:

"I called my cousin . . . who was with the Free Syrian Army, and he told me to go to Hama because they could help me there. I bribed my officer with 50,000 [Syrian pounds] so that he would let me go to Hama instead of Daraa. Normally you can't be deployed in any place close to your hometown because this would make it too easy to defect. You can easily get information and help from your family."³⁷

Bribes were also decisive for determining vacation time, which had been restricted because of the regime's concerns that it would facilitate desertions. One Special Forces officer, for instance, paid his commander to extend his medical leave after an injury, buying him time to plan his defection.³⁸ Another conscript narrated his own experience:

"Less than a year into the revolution, military intelligence caught me and sent me to do military service in the Special Forces in Damascus. I did about six months of exercises there. Then I bribed an officer to give me a vacation of five days. I spent these days with my family. During this vacation I managed to desert with the help of some friends and contacts."³⁹

Corruption in the military was rampant. Military personnel could be bribed to support the armed uprising, and those

service members who had been convicted for doing so would sometimes get a chance to pay for their own freedom. One former officer, for example, recounted how he had used his position at a military airport fuel depot close to Damascus to sell fuel to rebels in Hama Province. He defected from the military only after his activities were discovered and he was arrested.⁴⁰

Reports suggest that corrupt military officers also sold weapons to rebel groups. One member of the Suqour al-Sham rebel group active in Jabal al-Zawiya, for example, told a reporter in June 2012 that the rebels had received about 40 percent of their weapons and ammunition through deals with the regime. “These officers sell to us not because they love the revolution, but because they love money,”⁴¹ he explained. Another officer, who was a clandestine supporter of the uprising in Palmyra, recounted his experience escaping from a regime prison after his activities were discovered:

“After four days of interrogations, they put me into a cell for forty-five days. There was an officer from the security branch who came to my cell door. . . . He whispered into my ears that the officers in this branch would let me go for money. Otherwise I would be forgotten in jail. So if I wanted to get out of jail I should pay. I was afraid, and I thought that it was a trap. Because they hadn’t succeeded in getting any information from me by torture, they would try another way. So I said no. I didn’t do anything, I didn’t have any connection with the Free Syrian Army, so I would not pay. After two or three days I lost hope. So I tried to talk to the guy again When he came back, I told him that I would accept his offer. He wanted 100,000 [Syrian pounds]. I accepted. He told me that he would bring a small paper and pencil. . . . I took the paper and wrote the number of a friend. He was an officer as well. The guy first did not accept to call an officer, but I told him that I trusted this man. So the security guy called my friend, and my friend paid. It cost me 250,000 [Syrian pounds] in the end, but I was free again.”⁴²

One *naqib* (captain) in Turkey summarized: “Those who didn’t defect until now get benefits from the regime. They can take fuel for example and sell it. They make a lot of profits. They also profit because they are very powerful, and people respect them.”⁴³

Because high-level officers have much to lose economically, defections have been relatively rare among this group. Of those who defected, some left after being promised financial gains elsewhere, even though these offers did not bear much fruit. One colonel who deserted to Jordan initially received two salary payments originating from Saudi Arabia, but he did not receive any more payments afterward, making his desertion extremely costly.⁴⁴ Another colonel stated that he received a salary of 475 Jordanian dinars (about \$670) per month when he initially arrived, but this soon dropped to 150 dinars (\$210) for a six-month period or more.⁴⁵ Yet another colonel told a similar story. He said that from 2011 to 2012, other Arab governments were encouraging officers to defect. But defectors would receive \$600 and then face extreme hardships. He felt that officers in Syria wanted to leave but soon saw how other defectors lived abroad and realized it would be better for them to stay put.⁴⁶

The effects of the war economy on the Syrian military have been mixed. The limited rewards for rank-and-file soldiers have not prevented desertions because those soldiers had limited salaries, financial incentives, and illicit opportunities to benefit from amid the uprising. In contrast, officers have had much more to gain economically from their military positions, and hence more to lose should they defect from the Assad regime.

FLEE OR FLIGHT? DESERTERS AND THE ECONOMICS OF REBEL RECRUITMENT

Although many service members left the military for nonideological reasons, our interviews revealed that roughly half of respondents left military service to fight with the opposition. Yet, even some of these former soldiers did so at least in part out of economic necessity, rather than a political motivation to fight. While most did not desert based on economic

reasoning, many were hit hard by economic realities once they left their posts. Both defecting soldiers and officers took material factors into account when presented with the critical choice: whether to fight against the Assad regime or flee the country.

For former military personnel, joining the rebellion meant that they were provided basic necessities. While not all rebel groups could consistently pay salaries to their fighters, an informal civil war economy has emerged in opposition areas that has allowed rebel groups to organize the flow of substantial resources. Rebels have financed their activities through their control of oil fields, small-scale refineries, and grain production and distribution; the levying of fees at border crossings or on highways; and occasional kidnappings.⁴⁷ They have collected duties of 20,000 Syrian pounds (about \$106) on every truck crossing the border with Turkey at Bab al-Salam in Aleppo, for instance, and a market near Manbij, east of Aleppo city, has served as a major trading place for crude oil among rebel groups. Indeed, economic incentives have led to infighting among rebel groups that has centered on the control of economically valuable resources.⁴⁸

The rebel economy has been fueled largely by the international community because of its decision to maintain channels of economic support for anti-Assad rebel groups instead of intervening directly. While Western funding for armed groups associated with the Free Syrian Army has been quite limited, funding from Gulf countries has flourished and been channeled to rebel groups emphasizing a religious Sunni identity, including brigades associated with the Nusra Front, an offshoot of al-Qaeda.⁴⁹ Gulf economic support has included both private donations and direct government payments. Saudi Arabia was the first country to pledge support to the armed uprising at the meeting of the Friends of Syria in Tunis on February 24, 2012. At the Friends of Syria meeting held in Istanbul on April 1, 2012, Saudi Arabia and Qatar promised additional support to pay the salaries of opposition fighters.⁵⁰

The civil war economy in Syria has meant that rebel groups can guarantee access to basic necessities and even provide occasional spoils for their fighters. Some of the wealthier rebel groups have indeed been able to provide modest pay.⁵¹ One low-ranking officer who served for more than one year in a

unit under the Free Syrian Army umbrella explained that at the time, FSA recruits earned a salary of \$50 per month.⁵² This was a reasonable amount of money for deserters who had just given up their jobs and income.

The prospect of regular access to basic goods as well as occasional financial compensation was attractive for many young Syrians, including military deserters. Many of our interviewees in Turkey, for example, had plans to either escape to Europe or return to Syria to fight once their financial resources had dried up. Although only one respondent reported returning to Syria to fight after arriving in Turkey, many others admitted they had considered joining the anti-Assad rebellion for financial reasons as a last resort.⁵³ Indeed, the well-being of deserters' families has heavily influenced their decisions, as relayed by one low-ranking officer who was associated with the Free Syrian Army for more than one year before being injured.⁵⁴ While we do not have any evidence that former military personnel were coerced into joining rebel groups, sheer economic necessity led a number of deserters to join.

At the same time, many who did fight against the Assad regime became disillusioned with their experience in the armed rebellion, citing widespread corruption in rebel groups.⁵⁵ One former conscript, who fought with the FSA for five months, left citing the lack of ammunition, corrupt practices of his commander, and late salary payments. In the end, he implied that only commanders benefited from the FSA.⁵⁶ A high-ranking officer speculated that the FSA had denied him and his son command positions in order to block experienced military personnel from exposing corruption in the FSA.⁵⁷ A former pilot who defected estimated that at least 20 percent of FSA units were corrupt and worked solely for the commander's own interests.⁵⁸

In sum, the reports from our interviewees have indicated that joining the rebel forces was financially lucrative for deserters. Opportunities for self-enrichment have been present not only in the regular Syrian army but also among the militias established to fight that army.

CONCLUSION

Loyalty and desertion in the Syrian conflict have followed clear patterns.

First, the bulk of desertions has been from the rank and file and was motivated by an unwillingness to fight rather than by ideological or identity-based opposition to the regime. Politically motivated defections, by contrast, have remained comparatively rare.

Second, rampant corruption in the regime's army has helped deepen this pattern. While the higher ranks increasingly profited from opportunities for illicit gains, rank-and-file soldiers used bribery to circumvent control mechanisms in the military. Corruption therefore had a paradoxical effect on the Syrian army's internal cohesion, in that it contributed to both loyalty and desertion.

Third, deserters have generally found themselves in difficult economic circumstances after leaving the military. This has not only limited the attractiveness of desertion but also made joining the rebellion a virtual necessity for many deserters. Given the financial edge of radical jihadist rebel groups over their moderate counterparts, economic factors have thus contributed to strengthening radical groups in the anti-Assad camp.

The dynamic of desertion and loyalty in the Syrian civil war suggests that Western backers of the anti-Assad opposition can simultaneously weaken the cohesion of the military and limit the appeal of radical rebel groups by addressing the economic plight of those who have already made the decision to leave. Addressing the refugee crisis in Syria's neighboring countries not only is a humanitarian concern but also should be seen as part of a larger strategy to influence the course of the Syrian crisis.

NOTES

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