

Syria: “Defection” and Regime Change

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The departure of Brigadier General Manaf Tlass from Syria continues to make headlines around the world. But amidst the fanfare, the question of whether this latest development has lasting significance is not at all clear. There are several points to consider:

First, gaining the “defection” of important members of the Sunni community and senior commanders of the Syrian Army has been a central goal of the external opposition and their foreign backers since the onset of protests in 2011. This is the Assad-must-go-no-matter-what crowd, and splitting key pro-regime communities (major cities, secular Sunnis, business elite, government officials, armed forces and minority groups) has been their only strategy to provoke regime change, outside of foreign military assistance.

Second, the regime-changers have gone to great lengths to actively promote “cracks” in these communities. This includes widespread misinformation campaigns as [outlined by Stratfor](#) last December, and through carefully calibrated unconventional warfare tactics as [explained in this article](#). A slew of current and former regime officials/confidantes have been approached by external parties this past year to – if necessary – *manufacture* these fissures. One former senior government official who is known to be dissatisfied with Assad’s performance has told me personally that he was offered a specific large sum of money by the US Congress – brokered by a third nation – just to show up at a critical “Friends of Syria” opposition meeting. Gaining key defections from Syria has become that important.

Third, Brigadier General Tlass is, frankly, not that important from either a military or political perspective.

Since the news of his departure broke a few days ago, Tlass has stayed quiet. It is unlikely that he has “defected” – that would suggest he is joining the opposition, and it is doubtful that any but the most opportunistic of them would embrace a figure so closely associated with the Assad history in Syria.

But here’s a tidbit that hasn’t made the rounds yet in this well-hyped story: until very recently, Tlass was telling members of Bashar al-Assad’s inner circle that he wanted the post of Minister of Defense.

“He believed he could help push forth a reform agenda, as he had envisioned with his old friend Bassel (al-Assad),” says an acquaintance of Tlass’.

A well-informed source close to the Syrian government tells me that Tlass had tested those waters last Spring before Assad announced a new cabinet in April 2011, from which he was excluded. In the early months of unrest in Syria, he had attempted to stem the crisis by

mediating between the government and its opponents in various towns and cities, but had by most accounts not succeeded. Part of the problem appears to be that the Assad establishment did not put its weight behind his efforts after they faltered, choosing to pursue another strategy altogether. By August, as armed clashes and crackdowns escalated, Tlass was effectively sidelined by a regime that refused to entrust in his vision and was mistrustful of his family's opposition credentials. He then simply stopped working, cut-off many of his ties with close friends and reigned in his legendary social life.

How does one just not go to work one day? A source explains that "Tlass' military uniform was only 10% of his life anyway. The rest of his time was spent on running around, his social life, some business dealings. He was a privileged son of an important regime figure - that was his life and he had a sense of entitlement as did many others like him."

But still Tlass apparently did not count himself out - he tried again for the top defense post in the lead-up to the last cabinet reshuffle, and was passed over a second time when Assad announced the new line-up on June 23.

The headlines this week that claim the "defection" of a major Syrian Army commander and a member of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle lack a great deal of the nuance unique to Manaf Tlass' case.

Tlass' father, a longtime close friend and confidante of Hafez al-Assad, was Syria's Defense Minister between 1972 and 2002, finally relinquishing his post two years after Bashar al-Assad was named president. The details of whether he was politely ejected by the incoming "younger generation" or resigned after having ensured the transfer of power to Hafez's son remain unclear, but reports suggest that there is some truth to both.

Tlass' family are from Rastan, in the Province of Homs, a major hub for opposition activity and armed clashes this past year. Tlass and his father have been pretty much the only hold-outs in a family that has long since abandoned the regime. His widowed, Paris-based sister Nahed Tlass who was married to Akram Ojeh, a wealthy Saudi arms dealer 35-years her senior, and their brother Firas who runs the family business from the UAE, have been harshly critical of Assad for some time.

More notable yet is his [first cousin defected Lieutenant Abdul Razak Tlass](#), frontman for the notorious Saudi-backed Farouq Battalion operating in Homs, which has been accused by local opposition groups of targeting their members and pro-regime civilians for extrajudicial killings, and for deliberately provoking attacks by Syrian security forces.

The media stories on Manaf Tlass focus heavily on his very senior ranking in the Syrian armed forces and his closeness to the president. While the latter is true - Tlass is a close friend of the Assads - he is not a member of the president's innermost political/military circle and his social interests were always much closer to Assad's now-deceased brother Bassel, once heir-apparent to their father, Hafez.

Tlass' military value within the Syrian Army is even more dubious. Contrary to media reports, he has not been a member of the Presidential Guards for more than two years and last served with a regular brigade. Tlass apparently felt snubbed by the president for not being promoted to Major General from his current status as Brigadier General, but importantly, is viewed within the army as a token regime appointment rather than a commander capable of leading his forces.

Is Tlass' departure significant? Certainly, it has been useful for some perception-creating headlines. But he was neither a pivotal figure within the Syrian Army nor the political establishment. His importance was rather in relation to his father's standing within the elder Assad's coterie, and as a member of a leading Sunni family long associated with the regime.

The fact is, after almost a year of inactivity and relative isolation, Manaf was in political no-man's land in Syria. Scorned by people in Rastan for his continued allegiance to Assad, and marginalized by the regime in both the political and military spheres, Tlass had nothing to gain or lose by sitting tight.

"I don't blame him. He had to make a choice," says a Syrian who knows Tlass. "Nobody stopped him from leaving and nobody worked on him to stay," says another, who knows the elder Tlass well.

So he went to France. End of story. But that won't stop the spin.

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