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Syrian Studies Through the Lens of Strategic Studies

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Introduction

In March 2011, the Middle East was irrevocably altered by the Arab Spring, a series of uprisings that held the promise for a reconfiguration of power dynamics and new social contracts. Syria was among the nations caught in the whirlwind of change. What began as peaceful protests quickly became a drawn-out conflict that ignited profound human suffering. It was during this period of upheaval that I embarked on my Ph.D. program and a dissertation topic that would be both academically enriching and personally resonant. As I watched the events unfold in my homeland and across neighboring countries, my attention was drawn to the varied responses of the military forces during the Arab Spring. While questions about military loyalty have long been a staple of Strategic Studies, they took on new urgency and specificity in the context of the Arab Spring. Scholars and analysts frequently examined the role of militaries in upholding or challenging authoritarian regimes in countries experiencing uprisings. However, the divergent paths taken by the militaries in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria raised unique and pressing questions. Why, despite similar cultures, organizational structures, and histories, did the militaries in Tunisia and Egypt choose to defect from their ruling regimes, while in Syria, they did not? This question became the

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cornerstone of my doctoral research and my interest in a comparative analysis of military conduct during the Arab Spring.

Whereas the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries reached watershed moments where they aligned with the citizenry and supported the removal of their President, the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF) maintained their allegiance to the Assad regime. The SAF allegiance to the regime plunged the nation deeper into warfare. This stark contrast not only highlights the specific context of Syria but also contributes to broader discussions on military loyalty and its effects in moments of political upheaval. What factors contributed to such divergent paths? What insights can this offer regarding the socio-political tapestry of Syria? Moreover, how does this reshape our comprehension of military loyalty and its decisive role in either quelling or fueling revolutions? By situating these questions within the broader discourse on the roles of militaries during uprisings, my research sought to illuminate both the enduring and novel aspects of these inquiries within the unique context of the Arab Spring.

The evolution of the Syrian crisis, marked by complex international entanglements and domestic fragmentation, has profoundly impacted my methodological approach and theoretical perspective toward Strategic Studies. The ongoing conflict has severely restricted access to fieldwork, cultural texts, and a dependable body of research data, necessitating innovative methodological adaptations and a critical reconsideration of once-accepted theoretical models to understand militaries. As a result, I found it necessary to turn to interdisciplinary frameworks to overcome these challenges. Migration studies, cultural studies, and peace and conflict studies provided alternative lenses through which I could examine the persistent influence of the Arab Spring on military institutions and behaviors. These fields offered valuable insights into how socio-political upheavals influence identity, state cohesion, and the dynamics of power, all critical elements in

understanding military actions and allegiances in such a fraught context.

However, addressing this challenge was far from straightforward, particularly given the secretive nature of military operations and the institutional opacity that has shrouded the Syrian regime for over four decades. I had to engage with and take seriously how secrecy impacted my research, as it raised significant questions about how to draw reliable conclusions about military power and violence when the inner workings of state power are deliberately obscured. This secrecy not only complicated data collection but also required a critical examination of how state narratives are constructed and the ways in which military power is exercised behind closed doors. By integrating these considerations, my research contributed to broader discussions on how scholars can navigate and interrogate state secrecy in the study of military institutions and their roles in conflict. In the remainder of this essay, I outline how the uprising shaped my research, how I was able to conduct research in a context of limited access, and what specific contributions I was able to make given the constraints I faced as a Syrian researcher.

My doctoral research was structured around an interest in the role that the SAF played in response to the Syrian uprising. The revolution's immediate aftermath highlighted several key factors about militaries that would prove pivotal to my investigation. One central factor that emerged was the divergent roles that militaries played as either supporters of the regime or allies of protestors. Another factor highlighted the critical importance of the military's role in post-conflict reconstruction and stability. A third related to military behavior under different authoritarian regimes during moments of stability. The nature of regime-army relations during periods of political stability provided insight into whether the military might defect or remain loyal during times of unrest. These three factors helped me understand the contrast between different military positions, such as Egypt's military, which navigated a complex path

culminating in regime change, and the SAF, which demonstrated unwavering loyalty to the Assad government. I sought to try and understand this stark dichotomy through an in-depth exploration of the military as an institution, including its internal sectarian divides and their influence on loyalty and decision-making processes. The Syrian military's relative unity and allegiance became a focal point for understanding the distinct outcomes in these nations.

Navigating a Shifting Research Landscape

The ongoing conflict and ensuing instability in Syria severely limited my ability to obtain direct sources and official military documents. In a state where the military is shrouded in secrecy, as is typical in authoritarian regimes, firsthand information about its inner workings and relationship with the regime and society was scarce and tightly controlled. This obstruction compelled me to rely more on secondary sources such as think tank analyses, reports from international observers, and scholarly works. However, this reliance on secondary sources introduced certain limitations related to the translation and interpretation of materials in Arabic and English. The nuances of language and the potential biases in secondary analyses presented challenges in fully capturing the complexities of the Syrian military's role after the uprising. Additionally, the inherent limitations of secondary sources, which are often filtered through external perspectives, meant that some aspects of the military's operations and its relationship with the regime remained obscured. Despite these challenges, the secondary sources provided crucial insights that supplemented the available data and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the military's function within the broader context of the Syrian conflict.

The revolution underscored the importance of a comparative analysis to discern why military reactions to

uprisings varied. The research adopted a qualitative, comparative case study approach, focusing on Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria between December 2010 and December 2011, utilizing a "most similar" case study design. This method aims to elucidate differences in military behavior across similar contexts. As the Syrian conflict escalated, traditional fieldwork within the country became untenable. I pivoted to remote interviews with experts and Syrian military defectors and employed open-source intelligence to bolster my research. However, reaching key defectors was fraught with challenges. Defectors were either in hiding, had joined other factions, or were unwilling to expose their military past to their new communities. Moreover, their accounts often carried an inherent bias; their defection coincided with the deteriorating Syrian situation rather than stemming from longstanding opposition to the regime. Engaging with former military officers who defected from the Assad regime provided some insight, though it became clear that their predictions of the regime's fall were speculative and not grounded in the realities observed during the conflict. This speculative nature of their testimony reinforces the importance of relying on secondary sources for the current analysis, which focus on what has happened rather than what might happen (Jabbour, 2022, p. 89).

The shifting landscape of military engagement necessitated flexibility in my research questions. My principal focus became the military's actions during mass social protests rather than the causes or outcomes of the revolutions themselves. This shift was essential to maintaining a historical rather than speculative framework, ensuring that the research remained rooted in analyzing actual events and decisions. The intent was to dissect the moment of choice for the military—whether to support the authoritarian government or the people—without delving into the speculative nature of post-revolution regimes. Focusing on quantifiable actions was complicated by the complexity of the Syrian conflict and potential international influences (Jabbour, 2022, p. 105) and the tendency of many

interlocutors to engage in speculation. This approach has allowed my research to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the military's pivotal role during the Arab Spring. Specific findings from this research include the Syrian military's unwavering loyalty to the Assad regime and its impact on the trajectory of the conflict, contrasting with the behaviors observed in Tunisia and Egypt, where military defections played a significant role in regime change (Jabbour, 2022, p. 91).

The profound impact of fluctuating socio-political dynamics on scholarly work, particularly regarding field research, access to cultural texts, and the availability of diverse research resources, manifested in several interrelated challenges. Conducting research within authoritarian regimes presents inherent difficulties due to the secretive nature of these governments. This is especially true when the research focuses on sensitive areas like military matters. The Syrian conflict introduced substantial political instability, directly impeding the conduct of fieldwork. The unpredictable nature of political developments, alongside governmental restrictions, posed significant challenges for planning and ensuring research reliably. The volatile landscape marked by civil unrest further complicated scholarly pursuits and necessitated methodological adaptations. Impositions such as travel bans and declarations of emergency severely constrained research endeavors, particularly for scholars like me who are Syrian and interested in the military's role. Access to military personnel or facilities became increasingly difficult, often requiring clearances that were seldom granted during times of instability. Contacts within the military, who might have provided valuable insights, frequently became unreachable or reticent due to heightened security measures or the precariousness of their positions in the unfolding conflict.

Despite my Syrian origins, conducting research within my homeland proved impossible. This underscored the personal risks of studying sensitive political issues such as militaries in times of political unrest. The government's clampdown on

information made accessing crucial government and military documents an arduous task. These documents were either classified or heavily secured and reflected the regime's efforts to stifle dissent and maintain control. The challenges I encountered in attempting to gather data highlight the broader difficulties faced by researchers working within authoritarian contexts, where access to reliable information is severely restricted, and the unpredictable socio-political environment continually shifts the landscape of scholarly inquiry.

The Syrian government employed stringent censorship and propaganda in its efforts to control the narrative surrounding the military's actions. This suppression of information was not a new tactic but became more pervasive as the conflict escalated. Pre-revolution censorship in Syria had already established a culture of fear and control, and the revolution saw these efforts expand dramatically. The regime tightly controlled the flow of information to ensure that only state-sanctioned narratives reached the public and the international community. This included censoring media, monitoring communications, and suppressing any criticism of the military or government. The opposition, in response, also utilized propaganda to sway public opinion and garner international support, often framing their struggle in starkly heroic terms while demonizing the regime. Both sides' use of propaganda necessitated a critical examination of sources to discern biases and extract facts from politicized rhetoric (Jabbour, 2022, p. 131). The perceptions of the Syrian military varied widely, shaped significantly by political allegiances. Those loyal to the regime viewed the military as a savior, a bulwark against chaos, whereas detractors saw it as an instrument of oppression and violence. These polarized perspectives posed significant challenges to maintaining objectivity and neutrality in my research. Addressing these conflicting narratives, especially the stark contrasts between local and international viewpoints, underscored the complex and multifaceted nature of my topic.

My research required innovative approaches to overcome these and other hurdles that restricted access. As traditional military archives and primary data sources were inaccessible, I shifted focus to alternative methods such as engaging with military defectors and exploring digital platforms where Syrian cultural and military narratives unfolded. The dispersion of both people and information, triggered by the revolution, required researchers like me to interact with sources remotely or through diaspora networks. This shift was not just a methodological adaptation but a necessary response to the realities of conducting research under such restrictive conditions.

My research methods had to remain flexible, incorporating remote interviews when travel or security concerns precluded fieldwork. I contemplated surveys but deemed them inadequate due to the superficial nature of responses and the reluctance of participants to engage with sensitive topics online. The only viable option was to rely on secondary data and virtual ethnography. With primary sources compromised, my research leaned heavily on secondary data analysis, scrutinizing international news reports, leaks, third-party investigations, and publications by Non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Virtual ethnography became an invaluable tool, allowing me to observe online forums, social media, and other digital spaces where discussions of the military's role were active and revealing in ways that traditional methods could not achieve (Jabbour, 2022, p. 117). My research path necessitated forgoing several grant and Fulbright opportunities. Access to such funding required adherence to specific methodologies that were not possible, such as travelling to research sites. While this limited my access to these valuable resources, I was also pushed to innovate methodologically and frame my contribution around the limitations I faced. This honest reflection on the research conditions highlights why traditional methods were impossible and how virtual

ethnography provided unique insights into the Syrian conflict that other approaches might have missed.

Research Contributions

The shifting research landscape described above also necessitated that I make significant theoretical adjustments. The intricate developments of the Arab Spring and the divergent roles of the military in different states required the reevaluation of existing theoretical frameworks from which to study the role of militaries. My research initially employed an institutionalist approach to elucidate military behavior suggesting that certain aspects of a military's structure, when intersected with societal factors, could predict whether military leaders would support the regime or defect during civil unrest. My shift to virtual ethnography introduced new complexities in conducting institutional research. On the one hand, this allowed for the observation of institutional behaviors and narratives in digital spaces where military discourse was active. On the other hand, it required careful consideration of how these online interactions represented or differed from on-the-ground realities (Jabbour, 2022, p. 107). Virtual ethnography, therefore, became an essential tool in my research that enabled the study of military institutions in a context where traditional methods were not feasible.

My adoption of virtual ethnographic methods allowed me to observe how military narratives were constructed and disseminated online and offered insights into the evolving role of the military that might not have been accessible through conventional fieldwork. However, the shift to this method also required acknowledging the limits of virtual ethnography in capturing the full scope of institutional dynamics, particularly in authoritarian regimes where much of the decision-making occurs behind closed doors (Jabbour, 2022, p. 108). Taking into consideration that the military is indeed the most important actor during times of uprisings, and that it lies at the intersection of

state-society relationships, my research makes two primary contributions that help us understand the role of the Syrian military during the conflict.

The first contribution lies in advancing the concept of the *efficient military*, as contrasted with Huntington's concept of a *professional military*. The term highlights the inherently dynamic nature of the military, especially within authoritarian regimes, and challenges the idea of an apolitical military. The distinction hinges on the circumstances and ways the military intervenes in politics. An efficient military includes variables related to the institution's evolution and organizational structure, which in turn influence its decision-making capabilities. An efficient military is depicted as an independent entity capable of self-preservation without reliance on the regime, and it can ensure stability following an uprising. Such an understanding sheds light on its potential to forsake its position of power by defecting from the regime. The efficient military is posited as both a political actor and a cohesive institution; it operates autonomously and possesses the means to govern the nation, stemming from its structure, composition, and experiences. Crucially, an efficient military is universally recognized as a political entity in all forms of government (Jabbour, 2022, 109).

A second contribution my research makes relates to the impact of coup-proofing strategies on the military. These strategies include the establishment of parallel institutions and economic enticements that are designed to safeguard autocrats against military coups by either marginalizing the military or integrating it into the regime's structure. Scholars such as Albrecht (2015), DeBruin (2014), McLauchlin (1998), and Nepstad (2013) have hypothesized that these mechanisms determine whether the armed forces will defect from a political leader during an uprising (Jabbour, 2022, p. 112). While these tactics failed to rein in the military in Egypt and Tunisia, they proved effective in Syria. My research situated the military's role amidst both internal and external pressures, providing a nuanced understanding of the Arab Spring's intricacies and the

pivotal role of the military. Furthermore, the research expanded into other disciplines like sociology to grasp the military's societal influence, and economics to investigate their interests and decision-making during the Arab Spring (Jabbour, 2022, p. 113). Thus, my research contributions address two important questions about the military's role during conflict: first, what role does the military play in preserving regime power during conflict? And second, what coup-proofing strategies ensure military royalty in moments of civil conflict and unrest?

The peace emerging from the conflict

What kind of peace is materializing from the turbulence of war given the military's pivotal role in both the conflict and the reconstruction efforts? This question directly engages with the role of the military and its influence on the emerging peace. The Syrian military, which has been deeply involved in the country's trajectory throughout the Arab Spring and the subsequent civil war, is now also a key player in shaping the peace process and the narratives that will dominate the post-conflict era. My doctoral research thus also asked how the military's decision-making processes during these pivotal times provides a framework for understanding how memory and history are being constructed by those in power. The concept of the efficient military is critical here. In post-war Syria, an efficient military could help foster a narrative of redemption and reconstruction. However, if the military oversteps into political domains, it might perpetuate a narrative of domination and control, complicating the peace process and affecting national memory (Jabbour, 2022, p. 109). As the Syrian military engages with peace negotiations and reconstruction, it influences which aspects of history are highlighted and which are obscured, thus playing a significant role in the politics of memory.

The peace that is emerging in Syria is not merely the absence of violence; it is an intricate mosaic shaped by the

various ambitions and interests of different actors in the Syrian political landscape. True peace cannot be imported or imposed but must be built on the foundations of Syria's own socio-political realities. Civil society, as a crucial part of this process, must also be engaged in these discussions, as it plays a vital role in shaping the socio-political environment in which peace is constructed. The study of the military as an institution is, therefore, not only about understanding its role in the conflict but also about its influence on the emerging peace and the memory politics that will shape Syria's post-conflict identity (Jabbour, 2022, p. 110). The role that the military plays vis-à-vis other areas of Syrian society will have a profound effect on how the conflict is narrated and remembered.

Furthermore, this research into the military's influence on societal structures and economic interests underscores the multifaceted nature of peace. The military's economic roles and relationships with patronage networks have the power to shape the peace that emerges, potentially prioritizing stability and security over democratic freedoms. Future research in Syrian Studies must, therefore, shed light on several critical areas by exploring how military narratives and memorials contribute to national memory-making within Syria and in the diaspora; the role of the military in a peace process that addresses the needs and desires of diverse Syrian constituencies, including those displaced internally and abroad; and analyzing how the military's economic engagements during and after the conflict shape the reconstruction of Syrian society and its economy (Jabbour, 2022, p.16).

It is imperative that Syrian Studies continue to probe into the nuanced ways in which military actions, transformations, and even ideologies shape collective memory and the country's future. The task ahead is not only to observe and record but also to actively engage in the dialogues that will weave the fabric of Syria's post-conflict identity. Engaging with literature on illiberal or authoritarian peace could provide valuable insights into understanding the unique challenges Syria faces as it moves

toward a peaceful resolution. Distinguishing between the military as an institution and other vehicles of violence in Syria is also essential, as these distinctions will further clarify the military's unique role in the conflict and in shaping the future peace (Jabbour, 2022, p. 22). The military's role in Syria's future, both on and off the battlefield, will have a substantial impact on Syria's immediate political trajectory.

What is Next?

As we confront the unfolding socio-political landscape, Syrian Studies is met with burgeoning research questions. A pressing inquiry revolves around the nature of the peace we envision for Syria. Will Syrians be the architects of a stable and peaceful homeland? Or must we reconcile with the possibility that the emerging peace will be a mosaic shaped by various international and local actors, including militias, civil society, and the military, each harboring distinct visions for Syria's future? These visions may be so disparate that a common foundation for rebuilding seems elusive. There lies a formidable challenge ahead for the Syrian people should stability return soon. This challenge is not only about addressing the palpable aftermath of conflict for those in refugee camps but also for those who remained and had to forsake everything they once knew. The cost is profound; it transcends the loss of land or property and extends to the upbringing of two generations now termed as 'war generations.'

To bridge the gap between quantitative analysis and the rich, nuanced realities behind the numbers, my future research endeavors will focus on directly engaging with former Syrian military personnel who have either defected from the regime or completed their term of service. This approach, stemming from an extensive regression analysis of over forty historical defection cases, aims to bring to light the human experiences and decisions at the crux of military defections. The insights gained from these interviews are expected to not only corroborate the findings from

my quantitative analysis but also to enrich them, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and circumstances surrounding military defections. As this research progresses, it holds the promise of significantly enhancing our understanding of civil-military relations within authoritarian contexts, particularly in the Middle Eastern geopolitical framework.

Reconstruction in Syria raises intricate debates about governance, ownership, and inclusivity. A fundamental task is to define the role of the military in these reconstruction efforts. How can Syrians forge a military that is robust enough to ensure the country's stability and the safety of its citizens without veering into political dominance? Securing the nation and dismantling various militias is a critical first step toward stability and transitioning toward authentic democracy. Here, the concept of the efficient military becomes crucial. Can Syria cultivate a military that remains a stabilizing force without overstepping into political dominance? This is not just a question for Syria, but for any nation grappling with the legacies of conflict and authoritarian rule.

My essay has shown how the Syrian conflict steered my research and how I wrestled with fluctuating socio-political conditions and the enduring pursuit of comprehension amidst the dissonance of war. The essay reflects on the Syrian military's conduct and evolution throughout the conflict and how these reflect wider social and cultural changes. Delving into how the military intersects with peace negotiations and cultural processes provides insights into the lived realities of Syrians, both within the conflict's reach and beyond. It highlights the critical role of interdisciplinary approaches in dissecting the layered impacts of prolonged conflict on Syrian society and further afield. As Syrian Studies adapts to the current socio-political climate, it invites us to consider what insights from the Syrian case can shed light on the behaviors of militaries in revolutionary milieus at large. How can the concept of an efficient military be applied to other contexts where the military must balance between

maintaining order and avoiding political overreach? In our search for answers, we delve into the narratives that emerge from the ruins, outline the shape of a nascent peace, interrogate the cultural responses to perpetual exile, and confront the formidable task of rebuilding a nation marred by turmoil. The exploration of these questions not only deepens our understanding of Syria but also contributes to the broader discourse on military institutions and their roles in shaping the post-conflict future.

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