

# The Influence of Allies on the Chain of Command of the Syrian Army and Armed Forces

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*Since 2011, the general structure of the Syrian Army and Armed Forces has been influenced by the allies of the ruling political regime to varying degrees and at all levels.*

Similar to other militaries around the world, the Syrian Army and Armed Forces (SAAF) have a hierarchical chain of command in which orders flow from the top down and reporting flows from the bottom up. Predictably, the Syrian military has been greatly affected by the ongoing conflict since 2011. Two factors stand out. First has been the need to maintain nonstop combat operations and absorb the accompanying losses of personnel and equipment. Second, combat units have been [redeployed](#) across the national territory in ways that differed from the SAAF's normal deployment patterns.

Additionally, the SAAF has come under the influence of the external allies who intervened to support the ruling political order. This has considerably affected the command structure of the SAAF, with varying degrees and levels when comparing Russian with Iranian influence. While the Russians invested in the official military as an institution, the Iranians built structures outside of the military, and then sought to integrate them in the SAAF. These developments were directly reflected in the SAAF chain of command and the flow of orders, both within its formal structures and within

informal military networks. This was demonstrated through the Russian-sponsored establishment of new structures, such as the Fourth and Fifth Army Corps, and the restructuring of other units, such as the First Division. This is in addition to the integration of opposition fighters - both as groups and as individuals - in the army. This contributed to undermining central control over the SAAF's General Command.

## **Assad within the Chain of Command**

One constant that has not changed is that Bashar al-Assad remains commander-in-chief of the SAAF, as by law, this position is held by the President of the Republic. It anchors the SAAF chain of command and heads it. As president and commander-in-chief, Assad is directly connected to the Minister of Defense, the Head of the National Security Bureau, and the Minister of Interior. Only he may ratify the appointment and promotion of SAAF large unit commanders, and also of directors, chiefs, and senior officers in the security services. Assad does so through decrees and resolutions issued exclusively by him.

Command appointments function in two ways. First, in the form of carrying out routine promotions, appointments, and transfers in accordance with the formal chain of command, and in consultation with the National Security Bureau and the intelligence services, each according to its competence.

The second way command appointments function lies in balancing relations with regime allies. Indeed, the chain of command itself may be subjected to balancing as needed. This happened, for example, when battles on the outskirts of Idlib stopped in fulfillment of a Russian wish and against that of the SAAF after the [Russian-Turkish agreement](#) in March 2020. Another example is the management of so-called "reconciliation" operations that allowed opposition fighters to lay down their arms under Russian auspices in Dara'a city in the south of Syria. This moreover resulted in the establishment of the [Eighth Brigade](#) from former opposition factions and its integration in the Fifth Corps, again under Russian sponsorship. Iranian influence was similarly demonstrated, through the [changing of the commander of the 17th battalion](#) at Iran's request. Taken together, these developments highlight the SAAF General Command's lack of full and effective control over some of its units.

## **The Extent of Foreign Influence**

Notably, external influence, especially the Russian, has extended to [the position of the Chief of the General Staff](#), which has been vacant since the beginning of 2018. This is a remarkable lapse, since the General Staff supervises and commands all combat and non-combat units, and is unprecedented since the establishment of the SAAF in 1946. The absence of a Chief-of-Staff raises questions about the countrywide management of military operations during the war. Sources indicate that the Russian operations room located at the General Staff headquarters in Damascus

took over duties of the Chief-of-Staff in relation to combat operations. Their Iranian counterparts may have acted similarly in some cases too.

The vacancy of the Chief-of-Staff's post both represents a major defect in the SAAF central chain of command that undermines its routine functioning, and demonstrates the impact on it of regime allies and the extent of their influence. In this context, Russia's influence is the most extensive: [Russian military advisors](#) are embedded in all military units starting from the division level down to battalions. Iran, conversely, initially invested in military structures outside the SAAF, before reassessing and establishing so-called local defense militias. It subsequently [obtained an official decree](#) from the SAAF command recognizing the [local defense militias](#) as part of the army's structure, although supervised directly by Iranian officers. Iran additionally maintains good relations with commanders and officers in certain SAAF units, with whom it sometimes shares commercial and other interests.

## Conclusions

So although Assad still formally controls the SAAF's chain of command, his central control can be, and indeed has been, broken. He seeks to reduce the influence of his allies as much as possible and to suggest, if not actually exercise, absolute centralized control - of the kind he enjoyed prior to the Russian and Iranian interventions - by periodically appointing SAAF commanders. Through these periodic appointments, he attempts to mitigate the impact of informal networks within the SAAF. These networks are either Iranian - or Russian sponsored, or built among unit officers or between the officers and the local community. Appointments by Assad have varying patterns. On the one hand, commanders of the intelligence services enjoy relative stability in their positions, as their [service is periodically extended](#) due to the nature of their work and the difficulty in reassigning these positions to other officers. On the other hand, appointments and promotions still take place in an unprofessional manner as they are governed by mostly [sectarian loyalties](#) above all else.

Assad walks a tightrope, compelled at one and the same time to balance complex relations with external allies and also with his subordinates. A notable instance of the latter was his request to the Iranian leadership to withdraw the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria, General Jawad Ghafari, who some SAAF commanders [accused](#) of intervening excessively in military redeployments in Aleppo and Damascus.

Yet, despite the need to balance these contending pressures, the chain of command of the SAAF and of other paramilitary and security forces remains anchored ultimately by Assad. His multiple connections to and intersections with the chain of command leave him directly responsible for the actions (including use of chemical and other internationally banned weapons) and numerous human rights violations

committed by the forces under his overall authority as president of the republic and commander-in-chief since 2011.

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