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What The Tlass Defection Means to Assad

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Thursday came news that General Manaf Tlass, a senior commander of Syria's elite Republican Guard -- the troops most directly responsible for defending the embattled Bashar Assad regime -- had defected to Turkey. While the operational impact his departure on his particular unit may be inconsequential, the impact on the popular uprising could be significant.

Tlass was a regime insider, a member of the ruling Baath party's Central Committee and a childhood friend of the Syrian dictator. His father Mustafa Tlass was for more than three decades the Minister of Defense to Bashar's father, and his businessman brother Firas was close to and profited from ties to the Assads.

In short, the Tlass clan represents the Sunni Muslim establishment that has served and benefitted from the minoritarian, nominally Shiite Alawite regime.

Comprising just 11% of the population, Alawites like Assad rely on the loyalty of Sunni Muslim officers and conscripts to remain in power. Key units stacked with Alawites have been behind some of the most egregious massacres of the uprising. But since the uprising began, Sunni troops - whether out of fear or dedication - have also participated in great numbers in the suppression the revolt.

As the atrocities against Syria's mostly Sunni civilians have mounted, however, the pace of defections appears to be accelerating. In addition to Tlass -- whose father and brother were purportedly abroad at the time of his departure -- some 84 soldiers, including a general and 14 officers, crossed into Turkey last week. And just a week earlier, a Syrian pilot who had likewise managed to smuggle his family out of the country decamped to Jordan with his MIG-21 fighter jet.

Some 2,000 Syrian soldiers are now said to be in Turkey and countless others have

abandoned their units to join the Free Syrian Army fighting the regime. These soldiers, aided by a more consistent source of weapons and ammunition reportedly provided by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, appear to be improving FSA effectiveness of the ground. Meanwhile, as casualty rates among the Syrian military spike, conscription rates have plummeted.

Tlass himself does not appear to be a particularly sympathetic character. In addition to being a long-time associate of the authoritarian regime, during the past 15 months, he -- as co-commander of the 105th Brigade of the Republican Guard -- has been implicated in the bloodshed. According to Human Rights Watch, the brigade was routinely ordered to "shoot at protestors."

But even if he's not the kind of figurehead Washington can optimally support, Tlass can serve a useful purpose. Tlass appears to have residual appeal with some Sunni Muslims, and it is possible his departure could embolden fellow Sunni soldiers and even prompt a mass exodus from Assad's military.

While this kind of fissure may ultimately be necessary to bring down the Assad regime, it is not without downsides. Should Sunnis leave the military and join the opposition wholesale, for example, it could reinforce the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict. Such a trend could, after Assad's departure, trigger reprisals against the Alawites and other communities -- like Christians -- perceived to have been supporting the regime.

But few other good options remain. After nearly 15 months of killing, Bashar Assad is not willingly going to participate in a process of surrendering power, and with Russia obstructing meaningful international action and little international appetite for military action, it increasingly seems that regime removal will have to be affected by the Syrians themselves.

For Washington and the Syrian opposition, then, the key in the coming weeks will be to leverage Tlass' defection to foment a decisive fissure in the military. While Tlass may not hold the key to Syria's future, if properly handled, he could help close a gruesome chapter of Syria's past.

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