

Significant Regime Defection in Syria

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tableer\)](/experts/andrew-j-tableer)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tableer\)](/experts/andrew-j-tableer)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



Brief Analysis

Members of the Syrian opposition are correct in describing Alawite army general Ali Habib Mahmoud's "defection" to Turkey over the past few days as a "blow to the morale" of the Assad regime. He is the most prominent military official to leave Syria since the July 2012 departure of Brig. Gen. Manaf Tlass, who came from a prominent family and was at one point close to Bashar al-Assad.

Habib became army chief of staff in 2004 and defense minister in 2009. He was the first Alawite to serve in the latter post since Hafiz al-Assad relinquished it in 1972, after which it was reserved for figurehead Sunnis. He is well respected among Syrians for resigning in August 2011, when the regime ramped up its murderous attempt to shoot the people into submission on the eve of Ramadan; this came shortly before President Obama declared that Assad must "step aside." Although Habib officially resigned for "health reasons," it was widely rumored at the time that he differed with the Assad family's approach to the uprising.

Habib has not been part of the regime's core for some time, though he remains sanctioned by the United States and EU for having served as defense minister ([see Policy Watch 2122 and its accompanying chart \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/all-the-tyrants-men-chipping-away-at-the-assad-regimes-core\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/all-the-tyrants-men-chipping-away-at-the-assad-regimes-core) for more on the regime's structure). At least thus far, he seems unlikely to formally join the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). Nevertheless, his departure represents an opportunity to organize other military defectors into a coherent force that is more representative of Syria's diverse sectarian makeup than the SOC. He is also likely to be a good source of information not only on the Assad regime, but also on potential Alawite fissures over the Assad family's approach.

Going forward, efforts to crack the regime will need to begin from the edges before shaking the Alawite-dominated center -- that is, the Western sanctions net should be widened to target more Sunni and minority businessmen who benefit from and enable the regime. By announcing such designations immediately after a U.S. strike, Washington and its allies would send a strong message that whoever huddles around Assad will be isolated from the international community.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria)

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