

Senior Sunni Defections in Syria

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](#), [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](#)

Jul 5, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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.



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](#)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

The reported defection of a senior Sunni commander and friend of Assad, if true, would be a blow to the regime and an opportunity for Washington.

Reports that Brig. Gen. Manaf Tlass, a Sunni commander in Syria's elite 105th Brigade, has defected to Turkey could be a sign that Sunnis are beginning to break with the regime years after being co-opted by President Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafiz. Pro-regime websites have published articles critical of Tlass and his extended family, indicating a serious split. The son of former defense minister Mustafa Tlass, Manaf would be the most senior combat unit commander to have abandoned the regime, and his action highlights the mounting strains on the Syrian army.

The 105th Brigade is a component of the Republican Guard Division, considered to be among the units most loyal to the regime. Tlass's forces have been heavily involved in violent actions against the armed and unarmed opposition in the Damascus area since the revolt began, though his effective degree of command over the unit is unclear.

Although Alawites, a heterodox Shiite offshoot, dominate the regime by controlling key military and security posts, they also rely on Sunnis such as Tlass to command or co-command various units, even elite divisions. The reason is simple: Alawites represent only about 10-12 percent of the population and cannot command the Sunni-majority rank-and-file alone. Accordingly, Alawites in Sunni-led divisions keep a watchful eye on the commander, both to stave off military coups and ensure that units follow regime orders.

Tlass and other officers like him are important because they have good knowledge of how the Syrian military and

security services are wired -- who reports to whom, formally and informally. Although they are not part of the regime's inner circle, they are close to it. Therefore, any defections among their ranks would be key indicators that support for the Assads is waning, and that further splits could be on the way soon. Other Sunni officers would see that flight is possible, especially those commanding border units. For its part, the regime would see its suspicions of Sunnis in the ranks confirmed, especially following a number of reported brigade-size defections over the past two weeks. Defections could also be an intelligence windfall, providing insider information on both the military and political situations.

The regime will have to work hard to contain the dangerous effects of Tlass's action. It will no doubt investigate how such a defection could have occurred and who else was involved or knew about it (reports already indicate that his house has been searched and its contents hauled away). Suspicion will likely extend to all of the brigade's senior officers, the division command, and other units with Sunni officers. Such a witch hunt could have a serious impact on the cohesion and performance of units key to the regime's survival. For these and other reasons, Tlass's defection will shake the brigade, the division, and units beyond.

Reports also indicate that Mustafa Tlass and Manaf's brother, Firas (a prominent pro-regime businessman), have left Syria as well. They may be in Paris, where the "Friends of the Syrian People" (i.e., the group representing the United States and other countries seeking a strategy to end the Assad regime) will meet on Friday. In addition, the defection news comes on the heels of a chaotic and rancorous Syrian opposition meeting in Cairo, where a number of transition documents were agreed but delegates failed to form a unified body to represent them. It will be interesting to see whether any of the Tlass family surface in Paris tomorrow.

Going forward, Washington should consult closely with Sunni figures who choose to leave the regime, as they can play a key role in bringing Assad's rule to an end. Sunnis such as Tlass could also serve as important figures in a post-Assad transitional government, able to keep the peace while elections are held for a new democratic Syria. Although Tlass and those like him may have blood on their hands, the opposition, which represents the Sunni majority, would likely support them rather than any Alawite candidates Assad puts forward to participate in the "transitional government" outlined by Kofi Annan's plan.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics. Jeffrey White, a former senior defense intelligence officer, is a defense fellow at the Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,

Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)