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**Short sticks and Rotting Carrots:**  
**Changing Coup-Proofing Structures**  
**in Post-Civil War Syria**

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## Short Sticks & Rotting Carrots



Damascus during day of the Baath Party Coup – 8<sup>th</sup> March 1963  
(SyrianHistory.com Archives)

*Under totalitarian conditions, knowledge of the labyrinth of transmission belts  
[of the state] equals supreme power – Hannah Arendt, The Origins of  
Totalitarianism*

**Chapter 1**

Following the loss of Egypt as its primary ally in 1979, Syria went through a drastic build-up of its armed forces. By 1983, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) had swelled to nearly 500,000 active duty personnel from 50,000 at the onset of the 1967 Israeli conflict, constituting one of the largest military forces in the region (Kurt:2016, pp.116). However, what may have appeared to external observers as a powerful regional military force, it was in fact an institution plagued with rampant paternalism, criminal business networks and various competing praetorian factions. While some would view this as simply another ‘unavoidable’ characteristic of a third world state, many of these factors were in fact created by the regime in power to insulate itself from potential military intrusion into the existing political status quo. With its weak civil society, low regime legitimacy, and rich history of past military putsches, Syria has always been prone to an elevated, theoretical risk of a coup d’état (Belkin & Schofer:2003, pp.595; Gasserbner & al.:2016, pp.302). It has since been proven that through various controls by the military command, no internal or domestic force would have the means nor the incentive to replace the regime, even during times of great political crisis (Luttwak:1969, pp.16). While this strategy of balancing civil-military relations has enabled the regime to survive for almost 47 years now, Holger Albrecht argues that this trend will be limited only to the medium term. His research demonstrates that despite previous claims, mechanisms that keep unpopular regimes alive eventually are pulled into a downwards spiral and become what he calls ‘lame ducks’ (Albrecht:2014,

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pp.665). The model holds that while a new regime initially faces the danger of a repeated coup d'état following taking power, the risk is considerably lowered over time as control eventually is cemented, only to render itself susceptible once again in the later years, as can be pictured using a U-shape curve. For example, in order to reduce the elevated risk of an additional military conspiracy against his 1970 ascension to power, Hafez al-Assad sought to insulate his position through the establishment of various elite praetorian bodyguards. While this measure maintained the fixed mechanisms to assure his grip on power and security of his regime over time, the current civil war nevertheless demonstrated that many units were steered away from their original defensive positions, rendering the regime deeply exposed to other potential conspirators and other factions seeking to gain the upper hand. While many forms of measures regarding political insulation still exist, this dissertation serves to answer just that: to determine to what extent coup proofing structures within Syria's military have been transformed and modified from their previous intended framework.

### *Theoretical framework of security*

The debate within academic circles regarding international security has always been intricate. While both traditional *realists* and scholars of *critical security* remain fixed in their polarity, much of the multidimensional modern realities around the world have contradicted their original train of thought. This is often due to a misunderstanding because as scholars of the Middle East, both sides of the spectrum have a limited scope in respect to their historical, cultural and geo-political circumstances which are based on the European experience of societal development, which consequently leads to over-simplification and abstract assumptions. Although *realist* theory and *critical security* studies claim to have since adopted a sense of this multidimensionality, in many cases they consequently lose focus of some the most necessary elements of societal needs:

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that of governance in the pure apolitical sense of the word. As the American journalist Walter Lippman stated, there is “no greater necessity for men who live in communities than they be governed, self-governed if possible, well governed if they are fortunate, but in any event, governed” (Lippman:1963, pp.24). Based on this approach, this dissertation will not attempt to undermine either side of the spectrum. In fact, many traditional *realist* theories prove that it is necessary to accommodate the role of “hard” security within Syria’s highly complex socio-economic dynamics. On the other hand, *critical security studies* will be providing similar supporting counter arguments to adapt to the former’s contribution to the unique circumstances bound to the region in question. This dual approach is without doubt best defined in what is commonly known as *sub-altern realism* or *third world security*, which are both essentially aimed at incorporating the role of the ‘third world’ within mainstream academic discourse. Such an approach, whose origins spawn from the *post-colonial* school of thought, will constitute the overall theoretical foundation of this dissertation.

The concept of *post-colonial* thought within security studies was initially conceived in the 1950s and 1960s, which was a time where the *realist* narrative dominated the field of international relations. However, rather than providing a revolutionary or even, an alternative all-encompassing theory, most of the ideas were primarily aimed at “widening” the orthodox framework of traditional cold war *realism*. This was mainly achieved by providing insights into the limitations of European analytical processes, especially when taking into account the ideas of stable societal governance based on maintaining a balance of power between the right and left. While this remained as a precursor to the eventual rise of alternative and more ‘radical’ school of thought - most notably the *Copenhagen School - post-colonialism*’s sphere of understanding has stayed clear from following in these footsteps. In fact, *post-colonialism* rejects the deepening concept of *critical security studies* for the simple reason

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that many of these perceptions of security remain very much focused on and subjected to Western sensitivities. Such theoretical outlines and their structural tools will prove immensely important to truly understand the multi-dimensional aspects of this dissertation. In fact, it is only by taking a closer look at the *post-colonial* security concerns, that one may actually comprehend the evolution and emergence of modern-day government and institutions within developing states following decolonization.

### *Fragmented Sovereignty*

While post-colonialist theories span into many aspects of governance, one of the principal points of focus relates to the topic of the Westphalian state. Cold-war era *post-colonial* thought however recognizes that in the context of the third-world, there are not always actors, but more political entities that various native and external political forces find themselves fighting over. One major aspect that can be observed following the process of decolonization was the binding of territorial (non) polarity to native social cultures and interests through (self) imposed requisite institutions and principals. In other words, the formation of artificial states by other major western powers essentially destabilized the local dynamics by pitting various political forces against one another, resulting in what Diane Davis calls ‘fragmented sovereignty’ (Davis:2010, pp.6). Given the context of decolonialization and the birth of many such nations, disagreements within these newly formed states were not only deeply polarizing, but proved intensely intertwined with the wider regional and geo-political discourse. For these reasons (and many more), the *post-colonial* theory holds that every regional subsystem was faced with its own set of issues, including their various unique sense of (in)securities, despite retaining the semblance and structure of a modern European nation (Kelly:2007, pp.200). As a consequence, these states within those regions tend to be mutually interdependent, hence sharing many forms of identifiable and common

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characteristics (religion, language, etc), which in effect provides us with a certain vantage points through which many regional security concerns can be identified through. This framework is best reflected in what many scholars to as regionalism, which in this particular case would be best viewed through the Arab lens, where Middle Eastern states can be understood in relation to one another (Belgin & al.:2004, pp.30). The notion of Arab identity, among others, indicates that each state within the Middle East inevitably face a potential political or military intrusion by the other since ultimately, their own political goals often overlap with the established political and physical geographical boundaries. This would also indicate that in the event of a regionally confined conflict (military or political), it would not exclude the systemic security and political alignment from having links and/or support from external powers, even geographically distant ones (Ayoob:1998, pp.6). Mohamad Ayoob contends that such dynamics are essentially the underlying elements that establishes the third world's role within the grander schemes of international relations, often providing external powers with an opportunistic window through which to channel larger geopolitical goals hence intensifying the epicentre of internal conflict at play (Peoples & Vanghans-williams:2004, pp.48)<sup>1</sup>. 7

Nevertheless, given the result of such a fragmented sense of perceived sovereignty, the replacement of Westphalian ideas in states within this region often require the selective recruitment of particular political forces to establish functioning institutional governance and to bypass these security quandaries mentioned above. However, without having the luxury of a gradual and functioning institutional governance following de-colonialization, these premature political bodies would be heavily exposed to players, especially domestic forces that spawned outside the confines of the newly established

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<sup>1</sup> Mohamad Ayoob holds that such dynamics are essentially what form the third world's role within the grander schemes of international relations, often providing external powers with an opportunistic window through which to channel larger conflicts, hence intensifying the epicenter of internal conflict at play (Peoples & Vanghans-williams:2004, pp.48)

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political playing field. As a result, these state structures are left inherently weak, exposing additional power vacuums as their struggling institutions find themselves inadequate and deprived from their loosely defined definitional monopoly (Kimmerling: 2007, pp.49). However destabilizing this may appear, I will argue below that many of these same forces ultimately provide the essential elements needed for the formation of effective institutional governance.

### *War makes states*

The primary elements that lead to the consolidation of the idea of modern nation states, as was the case in early modern Europe, is without doubt the result of the societal preparations needed to fight a war. A very good example is the French Republic and its modern institutional structures that were formed primarily as a product of the national mobilization needed to counter the threat of foreign aggression (mostly from Germany), with various internal socio-economic struggles serving as a mere political sideshow to justify the former. Given the various struggles facing the newly formed states in the Middle East following the process of decolonization, be it socio-economic, sectarian or religious issues, Israel would ultimately become the central security concern through which many Arab states developed and consolidated their form of governance. The Zionist state, was seen as a “foreign immigrant, violently establishing settlements in the region with the backing of imperialist forces” which embodied a perfect unifying common factor in the post-colonialist struggle of the Middle East (Lockmann:2009). Although Israel represented an active and real security threat, the Arab world lacked a cohesive societal character or leader that could spearhead any potential fight, hence leaving a scenario that pitted various political forces against one another in a struggle to establish a single national definitional monopoly. Taking the example of pitched battles between royal reactionaries and revolutionary communards in late 19<sup>th</sup>



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century France, the Arab world would experience similar internal feuds, primarily between traditional feudal Islamists (ex. the Muslim Brotherhood) and modern secular socialists (ex. the Baath party). For both opposing camps, territorial inviolability and state preservation became imperative in their quest to most effectively consolidate power, which was often done through the normal channels of democratic process until certain factions found a more timely and effective way of attaining their goals.

As Huntington reminds us, economic development goes hand in hand with political stability, which is a point that would appear particularly relevant for third world states given their aforementioned predicaments (Huntington:1968, pp.6). However, even in the most fortunate of circumstances, many institutions within third world states simply did not have the capacity and effectiveness to manage sudden capital or economic growth – as well as social mobilization that many experienced following the departure of the former colonial powers (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams:2014, pp.65; Ziadeh:2013, pp.30; Huntington: 1968, pp.85). Under such these conditions, many nations become “hard states”, who unlike “soft states”, use punishment and coercion – instead of persuasion and compliance - to achieve economic and political goals (Lu & al.:2013, pp.240). This rationale clings to the theory that without a hard approach, inevitable political turmoil would ultimately follow economic stagnation, both of which would end up essentially threatening the survival of the state itself or its ability to apply proper governance (Peoples & Vanghan-Williams: 2014, pp.65). This also meant that frequent armed conflict, popular repression and the political insulation of the ruling class from potential competitors become the principle driver for national cohesion and hence served as the foundation for the consolidation of various Arab state (Kraus & al.: 1997, pp.131). Only after these mechanisms have been properly implemented and the institutions that support them are firmly in place will the functioning of “soft”

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governance, such as economic manipulation, be rendered useful in maintaining established forms of authority.

As Mohamed Ayoob argues, security and insecurity in such a context is therefore defined by the vulnerabilities that may threaten to weaken state structures in any possible form. Such threats come from every imaginable angle, initially ranging from symbolically abstract threats to outright external aggression, as long as they are interpreted in having a detrimental effect on the established structures (Kraus & al.:1997, pp. 130; Huth & Russet:1993, 66). The model that ultimately states that the gap created in such a context –by the state’s lack of functionality - would need to be filled with ‘hard security’ to strike down any, even if only perceived, destabilizing factors. In such a framework, the state therefore serves both as the “referent object of security and the means of security provision”, meaning that it assumes both the role of the subject as well as the actor (Peoples & Vanghan-Williams:2014, pp.66). By analysing such a state-centric approach we discover that Ayoob’s concept of *subaltern-realism*, which arguably does not differ much from *realism* itself, maintains a simple goal of broadening the approach of state security within the constraints and issues of the region in question, as demonstrated in the theoretical section discussed. This of course also takes into account the complexity of the transnational security governance within the *post-colonial* theoretical framework. There is little question that the threat of destabilization is a common concern for any nation whether we are speaking of a superpower or second tier states, however, these worries do not take such a paramount priority as in third world countries, especially when we are looking at the evolution of Syria throughout the cold war.

*Civil-Military relations in Syria*

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While western audiences observed the attempted Spring revolutions unfold in 2011, the unpredictable outcome across the region left many confused and shocked - especially among academic circles. From an apparent smooth democratic transition in Tunisia to a full fledged civil war in Syria, the varied respective consequences nonetheless opened an academic vacuum, providing the grounds for new concepts and theories as well as the revival of former ones. One such topic was civil-military relations and the role of armed forces within politics, which had seemingly lost its salience since the cold war. Scholars such as Michael Makara (2013), James T. Quinlivan (1999) and Hicham Bou Nassif (2015) provided crucial input in the resurgence of this topic given their previous work exposing the centrality of military institutions in the future trajectory of Arab countries during the 2011 revolutions. As we can still see in the region, military institutions retain almost unchecked power throughout many prominent Middle Eastern states. This transformation came about relatively swiftly in comparison with the more stagnant years of the 1980s and 1990s, and especially in when comparing it with the golden age of military coup d'état that marked much of the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, given the current positions of Arab militaries within the regional political dynamic, the relevance of such a topic has returned to the forefront of much analysis.

The prominence of a central political body and the intertwining of the Syrian military within national politics originates from the very same circumstances explored in the theoretical overview of state formation. However, some background is necessary to understand their rise to relevance over other contending political forces. Firstly, it must be understood that their influence dates back to the years of the French colonial mandate (1923-1946), where the public expenditures needed to implement a western understanding of security and administrative procedures, as embodied through the armed forces, was prioritized and maintained following independence (McHugo:2014, pp.111). Such privileges naturally also provided a platform through which certain societal

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forces could elevate their own socio-economic standings (Seurat:1988, pp.194). With large segments of the population staking out a position within the overall corporate interests of the military, it allowed for the further rapid solidification of its institutional rigidity, through both increased capacity and broader social influence. Given the aforementioned conditions plaguing these nations following decolonization, these various economic and social issues provided the ideal preconditions in which the military was thrust into action and essentially intervened in local politics. Perlmutter states that such political intrusion that can eventually lead to the rise of what he calls a 'praetorian military regime', which usually requires several generalized conditions. These include the lack of social cohesion within a failing state, crisis within the democratic process, weak [civilian] institutions lacking legitimacy and a fragmented social class, all of which were characteristics of Syria's political climate following independence (Perlmutter:1977, pp.92&98). Such an intrusion by the military into politics was therefore easily justified as the military was not only seen to promote social-economic reform and national integration, but was perceived as the main driver to introduce the middle-class notion of efficiency, honesty and national loyalty when needed most (Huntington: 1968, pp.203).

As the future political character of Syria was unfolding, other potential political movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, simply did not possess the competence, organizational structure and human resources needed to mobilize (Corm:2012, pp.213). At least not as effectively as the newly expanding class of modern, progressive class of doctors, lawyers and engineers; many of whom would find their best career prospective in the military<sup>2</sup> (Ziadeh:2013, pp.16). Nor could the civilian intellectual and bureaucratic class compete with the resources and cohesiveness the military possessed as a

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<sup>2</sup> State employment increased dramatically during the 1950s and 1960s, especially due the development of huge bureaucracies, which in many post-colonial states, were a sign of a strong state (Owen:2000, pp. 27&41).

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corporate entity. As Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer can confirm in such a situation, “without strong independent trade unions, political parties and voluntary associations, there will be very little standing in the way of [military dominance over politics]” (Belkin & al.: 2003, pp.605). But most importantly, no other political force could simply match the ability to actively implement governance through what is known as the monopoly of violence, establishing the armed forces as the ultimate political determinate through its ability of executing coup d'états when dissatisfied with the status quo (Seurat:1988, pp.24). An authoritative regime may place many restrictions or limitations it deems necessary by curtailing civilian political participation, but it cannot limit the power of violent enforcement that the military can impose. Just like in any praetorian state, the military could consequently easily establish itself as the ‘guardian’ of the state, meaning that it could remain supra-constitutional and execute what it deemed to be ‘corrective measures’ through direct intervention (Hamzawy:2015). After all, according to John M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne (2011), a coup is “an illegal and overt attempt by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive” (Powell & al.:2011, pp.252). Taking that strict definition, there are very few limits beset on the military in such situations meaning that careful forms of manipulation through sticks and carrots would be needed for it to remain tamed.

From the 1947 overthrow of Shukri al-Quwwatli, Syria was subject to an extended series of successful, less successful and other intended putsches leading up to the final 1970 ascension of a young Air Force officer by the name of Hafez al-Assad (Cleveland & al.: 2009, pp.324). Unlike Egypt’s Nasser, there had been no central figure in Syria that could successfully gather the support of the entire armed forces and create the economic incentives needed to quell any possible agitations from the military class - which was seen as inadequate. Not only was Syria’s military institution, through which to funnel these funds, not developed enough (at the time) to produce the desired effect - but such

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incentives proved too little too late to stand against the widespread revolutionary fever supporting various of leftist factions among its ranks<sup>3</sup>. It should come to no surprise that the first measure taken to curtail political activism within the armed forces was through the 1972 charter of the “National Front of Progressive Forces”, which restricted all political affiliations within military academies, with the lone exception of the Baath Party (Seurat:1988, pp. 217). A host of other measures were gradually put into place to limit either counterbalancing forces and to undermine overt and covert military intrusion into politics. Ranging from eventual financial motivators to paramilitary bodyguards, Syria eventually came to be what many scholars considered to be a completely coup-proof state.

### **The research**

It goes without question that these coup-proofing measures in Syria have been moderately covered and debated among academic circles, especially after their roles were discovered to have had such a drastic impact in determining the political trajectories of the Arab Spring. These arguments however, have remained relatively limited, both in terms of timespan and in scope of comprehensiveness. Since 2011, with the exception of a few analyses and reports detailing the emergence of new paramilitary units, there has been no concrete research done on the potential development, modification or even the weakening of Syria’s coup proofing measures. This is particularly interesting given the shift in the country’s regional geo-political standing after the death of Hafez in 2000 and especially the drastic actions that were taken by the Syrian security apparatus throughout the current civil war. The same can be said regarding the impact of gradual (mostly economic) reforms introduced by Bashar al-Assad that essentially took a toll on the military’s rigid pre-war

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<sup>3</sup> Although not very large, the Syrian Communist Party was extremely popular among the ranks of the Syrian armed forces during the 1950s (Cleveland:2009, pp.325).

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corporate and doctrinal structures. This dissertation will therefore attempt to serve to answer these questions by deciphering the following primary hypothesis:

Primary Hypothesis: Syria's various levels of coup-proofing measures and structures have been drastically weakened in recent years as a consequence of various political crisis<sup>4</sup>.

### *Grand Methodology*

Coup-proofing measures were never part of a fixed grand plan, but rather related to a series of reactions and opportunist measures aimed at quelling potential challenging forces while at the same time solidifying the regime's political position. For these reasons, no universal form of methodology exists in the academic world regarding this topic, especially given some of its transcending factors. However, a certain theoretical approach must be taken to properly identify the very concerns which coup proofing aims to address. As a result, this dissertation will attempt to focus on the core interests of the armed forces<sup>5</sup>, whose primary concern according to Michael Makara, has always been institutional survival. Given the nature of the military, such apprehension is reflected in the fear of a functional rival that may both threaten its institutional interests and lead to its possible replacement (Makara:2013, pp.337). As a result, Makara argues that the best way to assure the support for a regime is to decrease the cost and stakes of any possible defection on the part of the military by binding the incumbent's survival to that of their own institution (Makara:2013, pp.340). One theory involves a "rally-around the flag strategy"

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<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that this dissertation will be exclusively looking at a Putsch, which unlike a revolution, or a *pronunciamiento*, is a form of coup d'état mostly executed by the military during times of crisis (Luttwak:1969, pp.10).

<sup>5</sup> Reference to armed forces will vary on the section and context, which will range from national security apparatus as a whole to individual brigade size units.

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that is often deployed by highlighting both the fear of external and internal threats (whether perceived or real), an easy task nonetheless given the transnational dynamics throughout the Middle East. While the regime has often used the anxiety of external fears to accentuate the perception of an internal one, this rationale is exactly what initially drives the very mechanism of all coup-proofing structures (Desch:1999, pp.14). As a whole, the practice of immunization of the military from within is to limit its potential diverging political aspiration - the strategy weighs heavily in cultivating and manipulating its institutional interests (Quinlivan:1999, pp.135).

Nevertheless, due to the nature of this dissertation, Edward Luttak's 1968 practical guidebook on the execution of coup d'état will provide us with the backdrop in which we will carry out our analysis. As a result, the research will be divided into the two following sectional variables: (1) the "push" factor that triggers military officers to execute a putsch, and (2) the "pull" factor that make the structural conditions possible for a successful coup d'état to occur (Zimmermann: 1983, pp.246). Powell's study (2013) for instance, confirms that those two approaches remain paramount to coup-proofing. For example, "soft" measures aimed at undermining the triggering factors - such as establishing socio-economic forms of paternalism - decreases the likelihood of a coup by 43%. While there are measures serving to address the push factor on the one hand - such as through the diminishment of military capabilities - this decreases the chances of a coup by a staggering 76% (Powell:2013, pp.1033). Although these two variables are not mutually exclusive, it must be remembered that a putsch does not happen because of reduced structural obstacles alone. Instead, a triggering cause must always be present before the feasibility of a coup can be considered. For such reasons, this dissertation will explore the soft approach of coup-proofing before engaging into the topic of "hard" structures.



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As Richard Owen argues effectively, the difference between authoritarianism and totalitarianism is that the former's institutions are simply not grounded sufficiently to implement societal change by bureaucratic means alone. For such reasons, Owen responds by reasoning that "carrots and sticks" are often used to minimize potential political opposition both within and outside the armed forces (Owen:2000, pp.30). To properly and comprehensively decipher various forms of manipulation effectively, this dissertation will primarily be analysing the following four points as argued in James T. Quinlivan's analysis of establishing coup-proofing structures. These include: (1) the exploitation of (social) loyalties and (2) the importance of money and financial stability –which will be in the first section of this research concerning triggering factors; (3) the establishing of parallel military structures and (4) manipulation of levels in military expertise – which constitute the second part regarding countering the attack phase of a coup. These however will also be reinforced through the points made by Perlmutter in establishing corporatism, which include secularity, skill, social mobility or ideology/clientship. Although important in their own regards, these will retain only a contributing role as they remain secondary factors in relation to the notion of institutional survivability (Perlmutter:1977, pp.36-37). The same will be done with the numerous external and outlying factors that were not mentioned, but will be obvious as they still retain an influential factor within the processes of countering coup-d'états. However, the wide categorical array of structural coup-proofing practices, absence of crucial information and/or time limitations needed to gather this information presents numerous problems for this dissertation. As a result, we will have to remain attentively selective to which of the four coup-proofing measures as advanced by Quinlivan apply, if we wish to remain clear and yet realistically comprehensive.

### **(1) Selecting the triggering variable**

### *Sectarian coup-proofing*

The first coup of a sectarian nature took place in 1966 against the Aflaqists<sup>6</sup> government by a group of Alawite officers belonging to a radical Baathist branch, which demonstrated that pure political party affiliation would no longer suffice in restricting military involvement within political circles (Seurat:1988, pp.219). Given the complex social makeup and zero-sum political dynamics in Syria, regime protection and coercion-wielding have always been highly restrictive, which explains the widespread practice of outsourcing political authority to more selective segments of society (Honke & al.:2012, pp. 389). The process of *Kulturkampf*, or political domination asserted during one's time in the military, has often served as a form of filtering out (or in) the selection process of future elites based on established and acquired patronage (Kimmerling:2007, pp. 49). One of the first scholars to decipher this procedure in Syria was Hanna Batatu (1981), who first brought to light the social power structures that ruled over the top institutions, particularly within the military. The advancement of minorities needed in the Mandate's "divide and rule policy" propelled previously dissected segments of the population such as the Druze, Christians, Kurdish, and Alawites to positions of power, which was until then largely confined within the newly established modern military institutions and civil bureaucracy (McHugo:2014, pp.111). Despite the universalist and diverse ranks of these institutions, many maintained their communitarian affiliations, allowing for the culmination of power under Hafez al-Assad and his Alawite constituents through gradual purges within the military ranks (Cleveland & al.:2009, pp.324)<sup>7</sup>. Such forms of consolidation proved extremely

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<sup>6</sup> This term refers to the civilian Baath leader and founder, Michel Aflaq, who led a faction opposed to the military branch of the same party led by Saleh al-Jadid who would later be deposed by his subordinate, Hafez al-Assad.

<sup>7</sup> Quinlivan additionally states that even with the ratio of 18.4 per 1,000 people, the Alawites (fit for duty) still constitute a significantly large potential force for peacetime security provision.

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advantageous, as the linear composition meant that it did not require any form of highly sophisticated political institution to remain intact (Huntington:1968, pp.9). This form of coup-proofing not only limited the risk of a putsch through the diminished number of potential contenders, but simultaneously established the very institutional structures through which to funnel additional coup-proofing layers.

Although constituting a massively important aspect of Syria's coup-proofing measures, large gaps in information regarding its elements make it a challenging topic to thoroughly analyse. Not only are records concerning the hierarchic social structures of the conventional armed forces not available to the public, but even the precise number of intelligence agencies is a topic that is still being debated among experts to this very day (Rathmell: 1996). Given such restrictions on the most basic elements of structural compositions, one can imagine the difficulty in identifying various persons within the military, yet alone determining social networks, especially when seemingly junior officers hold de facto power over senior commanders (Holliday:2013b, pp.7; al-Hendi:2011). Nevertheless, as can be seen in Batatu's work, this concept fails to explain other forms of loyalty that essentially break rank with the sectarian explanation. For instance, Mustafa Tlas, a Sunni, who served as the Minister of Defence from 1974 to 2005, refused to abandon Hafez al-Assad in the most pressing of circumstances, going as far as supervising the controversial power transfer to his son, Bashar al-Assad (Kurt:2016, 123). Although this instance can be related to private relations with Hafez himself, such analysis is simply impossible to evaluate without extensive private interviews with top Syrian officials, a slightly unrealistic task given current circumstances. As a result,

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Given this, Quinlivan argues that a small minority is perfectly able to police an entire country (Quinlivan:1999, pp.136).

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coup-proofing measures based on social and sectarian affiliation will retain only a contributing and reflective role in this dissertation, when made relevant.

Nevertheless, since social networks remain so integral to Syria's coup-proofing structures, this dissertation will attempt to reflect its dynamics through the analysis of other aspects that hold a similar impact on military institutions. One can argue that Batatu's work, which formed the revolutionary 'stepping stones' for the idea regarding consolidation of power based on tribal ethnic affiliation, can now be considered outdated. This is because it ignores other key institutional, structural and financial consideration that take arguably a similarly important role in retaining military loyalty. For instance, in a research conducted by Dorothy Ohl, Albrecht and Kelvin Koehler, the study showed that sectarian affiliations aside, other material aspects proved to be a crucial factor in determining the rate of desertion from the armed forces at the onset of the civil war (Ohl & al.:2015). This is probably because, when analysing Syria's characteristics of a deep state, its networks of personal sectarian loyalties can often be closely correlated to that of various financial and commercial interests. Such factors can also explain the many occurrences that would prove unexplainable if viewed solely from a sectarian framework. This is one of the main reasons why economic measures will prove useful at not only reflecting sectarian variations, but also provide a more comprehensive study on the impact and relation between soft and hard aspects of coup-proofing.

### *Financing loyalty*

Following the lucky escape from an attempted coup by his own brother Rifat al-Assad in 1984, Hafez further realized that personal and sectarian loyalties were clearly not sufficient in diminishing coup risk, meaning that additional layers of securitization were needed (Kurt:2016, pp.117). Given the regime's obvious material prioritization towards the military over civilian needs

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– even in times of economic hardship – monetary incentives for various individual officers from all ranks were also utilized to form what is known as “guided pluralism” (Brumberg:2011, pp.56). Money has always been an important motivating factor in any military institution - going as far as advocating policy deemed to be detrimental to national security to being able to advance the personal financial interest of those whose loyalties were needed. As Albrecht can confirm, officers under praetorian regimes have often forwarded misleading warnings to deter the top leadership from diverting funds away from their military (Albrecht:1015, pp.662). Despite its lack of domestic resources to pay for such hefty expenses, Syria retains the characteristics of a rentier state given its practice of granting various special privileges to nearly all ranks of its officer class. Senior commanders for instance are given either or both special business privileges in forms of legitimate commerce, or amnesty for their illegal commercial ventures within and outside Syria (Quinlivan:1999, pp.157)<sup>8</sup>. Despite the natural advancement of corruption and illegal trafficking at the expense of conventional economic growth, they simultaneously serve as cheap alternatives in comparison to the enormous petrodollars that were utilized by Saudi Arabia or Saddam’s Iraq to bring about the same insulating effects.

The regime knew fully well that sectarian ties alone could not garnish sufficient loyalty among the lower ranking officer class, as this would alienate the substantial number from its manpower that consists primarily of Sunnis. Besides, it should be remembered that the majority of past coup-d’états in Syria were executed by young, low to medium ranking officer, who unlike top executives, could easily avoid detection if contemplating a conspiracy. Nevertheless, with many coming from underprivileged backgrounds, special housing projects such as Mezzeh 86 in northeast Damascus, have had enormous successes in developing and maintaining not only solidarity among low ranking

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<sup>8</sup> The same is done regarding religious institutions and various social programs, especially those of a Sunni character, that may have an impact on political stability.

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officers from all sects, but also created a form of loyalty to the regime that has provided these amenities (Kellier:2012; Khaddour:2015; Hashem: 2012). One could see how this, among other material motivators, essentially created a fascist style “phalange” form of organizational indoctrination, especially within the lower strata of Syria’s population (Michaud & al.:1982, pp.30). This practice is truly characteristic of Middle Eastern institutions where when facing social fragmentation or potential strife, the idea of *Kulturkampf* is built more through material platforms rather than pure institutional indoctrination as seen in western militaries. This explains the relatively small level of defection of lower ranking Sunni officers at the onset of the revolution (Ohl & al.:2014, pp.37). As Makara points out, when establishing the structures of the Syrian military, Hafez Al-Assad essentially “increased the cost of defection by making the army’s most basic corporate interest depend on the maintenance of the status quo” (Makara:2013, pp.349). Given the necessity of economic variables in the determination of a coup d’état onset, this factor will deserve a much closer analysis.

All in all, through symbolic material incentives, this strategy is essentially aimed at funnelling the intended illusion that the military remains part of the small fraction of the population that still enjoys political participation (Luttwak:1969, pp.24). Therefore, as confirmed, the greatest fear of the armed forces in many respects includes the introduction or arrival of a feasible rival that may rob it of these various forms of privileges. In what Durkheim calls “mechanical solidarity”, this forms a critical part of establishing a linear sense of corporate identity within the military without the need of developing highly developed forms of institutional indoctrination (Huntington:1968, pp.9). Given the widespread reaches of economic coup-proofing over those of sectarian affiliation, this factor proves to be of greater importance in solidifying institutional solidarity. While business, financial statements and other commercial records would be extraordinarily difficult to secure today, many

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business practices are still documented given their blatantly overt manner on how they conduct their affairs. So even if this information does not provide us with specific numbers or statistics, assumptions can be reliably made, as unlike social relation, business dynamics entirely rely on rational decisions and reactions. For such reasons, economic coup-proofing will constitute the core of first section of the dissertation's research concerning the changes to coup-proofing measures aimed at curtailing triggering causes.

Secondary hypothesis 1: Syria's economic coup-proofing structures have experienced destabilizing fluctuations as a result of recent crises.

### **(2) Selecting the variable of coup-proofing structures**

#### *Strategic utilization of paramilitaries*

Economic coup-proofing measures often include the furnishing of sophisticated military equipment in hope of symbolically displaying that the interests of the armed forces are being met. The paradox lies however, that while this is aimed at lowering the level of coup risk, it correspondingly elevates the same as the military stands a higher chance of success due to its heightened military capabilities and hardware (Powell:2012, pp.1018). As Peter Feaver famously points out: "the need to have protection by the military may bring with it the need to have protection from the military" (Feaver:1996, pp. 151-152). As a result, proper coup-proofing structures require additional operational and other military obstacles that aim to discourage a potential putsch. These range from outright physically insulating the political centre of power from the military altogether as is the case in Saudi Arabia, or to simply recruiting a select few to essentially serve as bodyguards. One of Quinlivan principal talking points concerning the survival of the Syrian regime was the key roles these

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military units have played in assuring the regime's survival, whose purpose were not only to defeat a potential conspirator militarily, but also to prevent coup mechanism from operating against its intended target (Quinlivan:1999, pp.141). Even if many Alawite officers had grown frustrated with Hafez, the reasons Rifat al-Assad's coup attempt failed was primarily due to such coup-proofing elements, which not only limited his options in securing necessary allies but also physically blocked his path preventing him from marching into central Damascus. The event clearly demonstrated how such mechanism were meant to automatically function, especially given the fact that Hafez was suffering from a heart attack during the entire ordeal. As this event clearly displayed, such coup-proofing structure required the formation of elite military units who were physically located near regime's central epicentre to defend key institutional and governmental hubs from potential factional betrayal<sup>9</sup>. While their reliability was further elevated through selective recruitment and elevated technical operational capabilities, additional layers were added through the formation of what Quinlivan calls 'cohort rivalry' (Powell: 2012a, pp.40). This last point refers to the creation of additional parallel units that are essentially geared at counter-weighting one another. In fact, we must remember that the unit utilized by Rifat, the now disbanded Defence Company (*Saraya al-Difa*), was essentially the regime's principal coup-proofing unit, only, as we saw, to be countered by its parallel equivalent, the Special Forces Brigades (*Liwa al-Quwat al-Khasa*) and the Republican Guards (*al-Haras al-Jamhuri*) to name a few. Although these may seem like a source of instability, such competition almost always takes a back seat in coup situations, as without the regime, these units would likely lose all aforementioned privileges and positions (Makara:2013, pp.242). After all, such a claim is even supported by Morris

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<sup>9</sup> Various measures were undertaken to impede politically unreliable units. These included the selective diminishment of military capabilities to bring about operational delays, going as far as limiting fuel to limit potential depth of operation (Quinlivan:1999, pp.149&156).



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Janowitz who states that the development of such paramilitaries comes hand in hand with increased political stability (Janowitz:1977, pp.9).

Unlike economic and social factors, that require countless forms of analysis to fully comprehend, the study of parallel militaries will prove to be rather straightforward. Although this might have been true during the pre-civil war years, current operational activity by these praetorian units have been difficult to mask from public knowledge thanks to modern social media<sup>10</sup>. As a result, while Syria's pre-civil war doctrinal order of battle has been extensively covered, today's coverage has given even amateur military analysts all the necessary tools to examine modern conflicts in real time. Besides, as Rathmell indicates, their current overt activity on the ground indicate that it is entirely possible to study the subject using western archives and press sources alone (Rathmell:1996). Given the highly intense and detailed coverage of the current civil war using archives provided by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) or even online blogs, deciphering the whereabouts, missions, structural standing of social networks and equipment of these coup-proofing units will be relatively easier to cover. Of course, one could argue that these structures are bound to change given the dynamics of mobile warfare. However, it can be said that the current civil war is gradually nearing its end or at least coming to a standstill, especially given the fact that the regime has now captured most relevant economic power centres and no longer possess the necessary manpower to further expand. Nevertheless, this subject as a case study alone will mostly suffice in determining the changes in structural coup-proofing structures<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> This units have also served as crack units, which have been deployed in support of the regime's most important, thus public, counter-insurgency (COIN) operations.

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Secondary hypothesis 2: The mobilization of parallel military units has left vulnerable gaps within the regime's coup-proofing structures.

### *Military expertness*

The linearity within the purpose of a coup-proofed military essentially encourages an elevated level of expertise within the personnel. First and foremost, the various advances have also reinforced the institutionalized character of the armed forces as they provide an incentive for its potential members to become career officers and form what Quinlivan calls a “warrior” clan (Quinlivan:1999, pp.155). The first major wave of professionalism was first noted in the 1960s and 1970s when the Syrian military made significant efforts to emulate Soviet military doctrine through acquired training and acquisition of equipment. Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth Pollack perhaps provide the best overview of Soviet military influence on the SAA, claiming that operational factors and cultural realities were ill suited for Soviet-style offensive doctrine as these methods were applied to guarantee the protection of the regime itself rather than to produce results on the battlefield<sup>12</sup> (Eisenstadt & al.:2001, pp.571). For these reasons, many of the fighting units were popularly deemed as essentially crack units, distorting the true conventional fighting ability of the country's military. Nonetheless, this concept follows the notion that the orientation of expertise was essentially manipulated to both discourage and more effectively establish the parameters to counter a coup. To this end, the conspirators would be required to secure a greater level of cooperation to overcome specialized coup-proofing units, forcing them to recruit more troops of questionable loyalty to the plot, thus increasing their risk of detection by the regime (Quinlivan:1999, pp.153). Although a key component of the structural

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<sup>12</sup>Quinlivan indicates that all these measures taken to establish a coup-proof system severely impedes in the overall effectiveness of the military as an all-encompassing cohesive national fighting force.

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coup-proofing, this aspect remains too hypothetical and operationally oriented to properly be assessed on its own merit. Therefore, the manipulation of military expertness will remain solely as a contributing factor to the second variable regarding structural coup-proofing.

### *A note on intelligence units and militias*

While parallel military units serve to prevent any form of physical threat, parallel intelligence (*al-Mukhabarat*) agencies have proven to be a critical element both in the execution and countering of a coup d'état. Their surveillance role originating from the *deuxième bureau* of the French mandate, gave it a dominant position in overseeing political activity both within civilian institutions and the military (Rathmell:1996). Although the subject of great fascination to many scholars, documentation regarding these agencies remain very limited, even with extensive use of the U.S. Freedom of Information Act. Therefore, given their secretive role and unknown doctrinal structure, these units will not be directly included in the core part of our analysis concerning structural coup-proofing. Either way, intelligence services can do little once a coup is underway, as it is too late for them to oppose based only on the 'information' side (Luttwak:1968, pp.101). However, rather than being entirely excluded, they will either take a secondary reflective role or will consider other options through their numerous paramilitary affiliations. In fact, not only do many of conventional coup-proofing units retain their own intelligence agencies, but many intelligence agencies maintain their very own paramilitary/militia units. Units such as the independent "Tiger Forces" (*Qawat al-Nimr*) or the Military Intelligence (*Shu'abat al-Mukharabat al-Askariya*) affiliated "Desert Falcons" (*Fawj Maghawir al-Badiya*), have always been used for key counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, meaning that their actions have been relatively well documented throughout the civil war (al-Tamimi:2016). However, these aspects will retain a contributing factor as information

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concerning the branch as whole remains blurry at best. Either way, such units are mostly deployed along far away front-line positions, rendering them useless under coup conditions due to such geographical restrictions. The same will be applied to various pro-government militias, whose composition is not always clear. However, it is important to remember that the role and impact of militias cannot be underestimated, especially given the tendency of the severe erosional impact on state authority (Hughes:2016, pp.198). The study however will not hesitate to incorporate both militias and intelligence agencies when applicable.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Are military institution's economic interests nearing the edge?**

Countless scholars have repeatedly stressed the importance of institutional interest on the primary determinant of the military's behaviour and especially to its reaction in a time of crisis. As Daniel Steinmann (2012) and Nassif (2015) argue, what ultimately led various Arab militaries to either side between the regime or protestors at the onset of the 2011 demonstrations, was whether their institution would survive or whether they would outright benefit from regime change. In the context of Syria, the institutional survival of the armed forces took an unprecedented centre stage due to coup-proofing measures taken by Hafez al-Assad. The entire notion of regime survival - which was mostly accentuated by social factors in the form of sectarian solidarity which has ceased to be a real problem considering significant recent military gains by the SAA. This has meant that other aspects of corporate safety nets have become prioritized, most notably, economic and financial advancements. This form of corporate interest has a tendency of requiring sustained economic growth and while this may have been ignored during the urgency of the civil war, it has since come back into the debate as a legitimate concern. From commercial reforms aimed at curtailing various established criminal practices following Bashar's ascension to power, to the current crisis facing Syria's long term public expenditure and economic recovery, the financial interest of the military has

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experienced a great deal of ups and downs as will be explained in this chapter. The question lies however, in whether its extent has surpassed the tolerance of the security apparatus, prompting it to at least consider a political intervention to secure future trajectories.

Despite the topic of economics being a highly complex and abstract one, one rule advanced by Becker (1968) remains imperative to properly analyse its contribution within coup-d'états, in that militaries will behave rationally to maximize their own financial welfare. It comes to no surprise that one of the most important prescriptions made by Huntington (1991) when engaged in state building lies in the necessity of giving the military “toys”. These materialistic incentives not only serve to solidify state security from external aggressors or enforce the established rule of law, but also help to insulate the established government from potential military intrusion into politics by demonstrating that their corporate interests are best served through the maintenance of the status quo, as repeatedly stated in the introduction (Powell:2013, pp.1031). For example, one major reason as to why 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured division (al-Firqat al-Awal wa al-Thathalith) surprisingly decided to block Rifat's coup attempt lies in the fact that they were well looked after under Hafez's rule both financially and materially. Although they did not enjoy the same level of privileges as that of the Defence Company or the Republican Guard, they were certainly far better provided for than the conventional counterparts stationed on the conventional front lines (Cordesman:1993, pp. 268). This episode however took place during a time where financial coup-proofing structures in Syria were still in their infancy. This means our analysis will begin by taking a look at traditional sources of revenues, which in this case concerns government defence spending based on public economic sectors. Only after this chapter will we attempt to analyse the more covert and semi-official financial coup-proofing structures that were established after 1984, when Hafez became increasingly paranoid of his vulnerability to a putsch.

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### *Note on International aid*

One economic factor that plays a potentially key role in the determination of a coup d'état, as advanced by Gassebner & al. (2016, pp. 296), are international investors and especially the dependence on foreign aid. It must be pointed that although international aid constitutes a considerable sum of capital flow into Syria, these do not originate from domestically intrusive financial bodies such as the IMF or World Bank, mostly because of the country's centralized command economy. Syria does however receive hefty bilateral military assistance from other countries deemed to be partially marginalized or ostracized by the international community, most notably Iran and Russia. Iran's credit flow to Syria however remains purely strategic, with little regard to the swelling of an already staggering debt estimated of over 100 percent of Syria's GDP. Either way, as far as Iran and Russia are concerned, so long as the Syrian military can maintain its current combat abilities and friendly relations with its benefactors, there are no signs that indicates this financial support will be subject to any slowdown any time soon (Gobat:2016, pp.17; Butter: 2015). For reasons of clarity, this factor will be left out from this chapter's analysis on economic coup-proofing, and it will be kept to the side line, as it will prove relevant to future transcending factors that will be analysed in chapter 3. Lastly, although humanitarian aid does constitute a large part of capital flow into the country, its apolitical nature would prove too removed to be considered into our study on economic instigators of coup d'états. Besides, although some form of extortion of humanitarian aid flow is most probably taking place to finance various paramilitary groups, such practice does not extend to the levels needed to sustain the entire military institution. Therefore, humanitarian aid will not be included in this study despite its relevance to the country's current economic dynamics.

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### *Basic coup-proofing: public defence budget*

Huntington's concept of granting of "toys" to the military is particularly relevant in Syria, where the budget for the armed forces (6.4% of GDP) is roughly over three times higher than world's average (2% of GDP). To clarify these disproportions in relation to other public institutions, Syria similarly spends only half (2.4% of GDP) as much as the world's average on overall education (4.18% of GDP) (Syria – Military Spending: n. d.). Although this was largely justified up until its 1973 war with Israel, the maintenance of such military spending has since been focused primarily to provide an additional coup-proofing layer. These have come in the form of either establishing expensive material counterweights and to serve as a symbolic motivational driver for both the military's institution and its members. Now that the regime's military situation has begun to stabilize, such financial incentives has once again resumed its primary relevancy for the armed forces, especially now that the question survivability is no longer an issue. Since economic performance holds such a tight correlation with the ability to provide the military with "toys", Huntington contends that any economic decline will serve as a crucial determinant in the onset of a coup d'état (Huntington: 1991, pp.13). Therefore, in order to determine the potential reaction of Syria's military institutions to future budgetary allocation, we are required to comparatively analyse past and future economic performance and its direct potential impact on the military.

Syria's economy consists primarily of three principal sectors. Although agriculture and the service sector make up the majority of the country's gross national income, gas and oil production (25 (%) percent) will prove much easier to track and analyse given that it is a single commodity based on fixed global prices. The profitable incentive of oil sales also serves as an attractive investment opportunity over other more competitive sectors, while also providing the regime with funds that require little financial extraction from the population itself (Lu & Thies: 2013, pp. 241). It should come to no surprise that



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the Republican Guards of instance, among others, receive a direct share from the Der ez-Zor oil field revenues (Syria's Praetorian Guards: 2000). In fact, the oil boom has often allowed states to give various entities, greater material stakes with their established regime (Hinnesbusch: 2014, pp. 15). Unfortunately for them and as the rest of the armed forces, the situation as well as the prospective performance of the oil sector in Syria appears unfavourable. The overproduction of crude oil worldwide (including OPEC members) combined with the onslaught of alternative cheaper shale gas exploration (especially in the United States), the focus on renewable energy and global consumer conservatism has kept oil prices at inflation adjusted historic lows. These factors have had a significant impact of oil revenue for the entire region, including Syria's traditional allies who provide significant military funding.

Additionally, the fact that many of the oil fields have fallen into militant extremists control demonstrates that financial gains that the Republican Guards or any other praetorian unit may have had previously held, now hold little value, if any at all. Secondly, one should also note that from its 386,000 barrels per day (b/d) production estimated in 2010, even if considering black market production, oil and gas GDP has fallen a full 98 percent down to its lowest level of nearly 40,000 b/d in 2014 (Gobat & al.: 2016, pp. 10). Therefore, it is easily assumed that these factors have only served to undermine the state's past attempts at insulating its power from military units through gifts in forms of once profitable oil shares. Although it can be said that recent military defeats of anti-government militants along oil-rich territory might indicate a possible turnaround, the large majority of oil production is bound to come under Kurdish dominated forces such as the People's Protection Units (YPG). The upcoming geo-strategic deadlock between the two sides indicate that Syrian government forces are in no position of recapturing the Deir-ez-Zor oil fields, which is where

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most of security apparatus's oil share are held<sup>13</sup>. Even if the SAA remains close (as of July 2017) at recapturing the oil fields around Palmyra and south of ar-Raqqa – which accounts for almost half of the country's reserves - extended infrastructural damage would prove too severe for it to realistically resume pre-civil war production rate anytime soon (Butter: 2015, pp.20). The negative impact on Syria's oil sector has also extended to the international market. Even if full production were to resume, Syria's main buyer of oil - the European Union (EU) - would no longer be open for business given the ongoing established sanctions. A serious demand for Syria's oil could neither be sustained from its big allies as Russia and Iran - who already hold 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> place in shares of world petroleum production respectively - are keen to continue their competitive export rates to earn much needed income for their own regimes (CIA:2015). As a consequence, even in the eventuality that infrastructural capabilities were fully restored the demand would be restricted to small fraction of immediate regional actors, which would prove financially insufficient given future trends. For example, we can notice a corresponding relationship between Iraqi and Syria oil production, with the latter peaking only when the former undergoes certain crisis (Raphaeli: 2016). The fact that Iraq is slowly resuming petroleum production following the withdrawal of the Islamic State (IS) from northern Iraq, we can only expect further reduction in demand for Syrian oil. Although oil revenue only constitutes a relatively small fraction of the country's overall economy, wartime infrastructural damage, the shortage of raw material and lack of any real foreign demand for its export as mentioned above - with the addition of large population loss – indicates a similarly negative growth pattern should be expected for both the agricultural and service sectors. Either way, given these dour economic perspectives, it is hard to believe that the regime will be able to maintain public revenues as the primary source of

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<sup>13</sup> Although these shares are suspected to have been reallocated elsewhere, no information appears to be available to confirm this.

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funding for its military, yet alone keeping it satisfied in the same way it has been accustomed to prior to 2011.

These problems are most almost certain to persist especially once budget allocations are gradually diverted towards social services needed to consolidate the regime's rule of law once the current fighting quiets and social infrastructural demands will be on the rise. These measures will not be temporary either. In an IMF report prepared by Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, they forecast that even if Syria's rebuilding period hypothetically began in 2018, comparative estimates of past regional economic recovery indicate that the country would require almost 20 years to reach its pre-war real GDP (Gobat et. Al.:2016, pp.2016). Even at a generous growth rate of 4.5 percent, this is a tall order, even for more economically developed countries. Under such a scenario, military institutions are already fully aware that relying on state revenues alone is unrealistic and in order to maintain their financial status, they may need to look at other possible sources of funding. Nonetheless, although statistics and even semi-reliable data on market-based commercial enterprise remain unavailable, it is safe to assume that overall other businesses have experienced a severe decline as a result of deteriorating fuel production and shortage of basic goods and raw materials. Furthermore, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon after 29 years of occupation also signals the end of 'legitimate' cross-border business ventures that were often fashioned to the advantage of Syrian enterprises (Butter: 2015). Nevertheless, a closer look will be necessary to observe these practices, as they also provided a core pillar of the regime's economic coup-proofing mechanism.

One of the biggest drawbacks of maintaining parallel coup-proofing military institutions are the exceptionally prohibitive cost of maintaining them under a silos structure, especially when comparing them to the regular armed

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forces. In addition to the painstaking efforts of sustaining high universal military spending, the additional obligations necessary to demonstrate that individual interests are being met have always required additional measures<sup>14</sup> (Michaud & al.: 1982, pp. 29). As a result, funding such structures often require additional sources of revenue that preferably remain outside of the State's official "check book" in order to maximize both flexibility and effectiveness. No wonder Edward Luttwak states that although independent economic variables repeatedly act as background factors pushing the instigation of a coup, financial players themselves often take a direct part in the implementation of one (Luttwak:1969, pp.36). This is often the case when a country retains a predominant industrial entity that may directly fund a military putsch, relieving it from the painstaking efforts of consolidating political approval afterwards<sup>15</sup>. Unlike Saudi Arabia's ARAMCO or the South Korea's Samsung Group, Syria's does not possess any of similar large financial entity that could push or even back a political transition if its business interests were considered to be in jeopardy. It's security apparatus does however maintain a blurry yet extensive financial network with the legitimate private, semi-official and black-market economies, earning the title nonetheless of a rentier state. As a result, Syria's military as an institution can be considered as a true representative of the country's principal commercial interests outside that of the public sector, thus making it a double dealing player in the instigation phase of a coup d'état. A more detailed background explanation is necessary to clearly conceptualize its close relations to politics and economic coup-proofing measures.

In the 1980s, Hafez made large concessions to various social forces following the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in an effort to further solidify his

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<sup>14</sup> Much of the official data on military spending does not count certain weapons programs nor mention politically sensitive budgetary allocation that were partially funded by other allied countries on concessional terms (Syria – Military Spending: n. d.)

<sup>15</sup> No wonder Galetovic & Sanhueza (2000, pp.194) state that people tend to obey a new ruler when the short run economic performance of the country appears unfavourable.

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power. These were primarily directed at the Sunni-dominated small-merchant class within Syria's large cities, whose socio-economic standing would prove crucial in maintaining future political stability. In an effort to nourish their commercial interest, Hafez imposed tight import restrictions on many consumer and luxury goods that were deemed detrimentally competitive to small Syrian businesses. The regime sought to fulfil its financial obligation to the military as well and satisfy the large void for demand of such goods through the distribution of special import licenses, which therefore, meant significant profits for whomever held them<sup>16</sup> (Corm:2012, pp.207&258-9; Sadowsky:1985). The occupation of Lebanon further deepened these commercial interests and even expanded the pool of benefactors, especially within key military units who were directly responsible in overseeing any form of cross-border activity. One would assume that such deployment would be strategically allocated at benefiting only key praetorian units as well as the wide array of various intelligence agencies, deemed crucial in countering a coup<sup>17</sup>. While this is true, it must be remembered that conventional troops such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Division also played a significant role in the occupation of Lebanon, meaning that these benefits extended across many divisions of the armed forces (Syrian Arab Army: n. d.). These growing commercial practices became almost universal throughout occupying forces beginning in January 1990, martial law in Lebanon no longer applied to those committing economic crimes, which included smuggling, currency speculation and hoarding of scarce resources (Human Rights Watch:1990). This means that economic benefits spanning from shady business practice in Lebanon remained relatively indiscriminate throughout the security apparatus, regardless either of unit and even rank (Rathmell:1996; Human Rights Watch:1990). The extent of these businesses tied to the security

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<sup>16</sup> The average salary for a senior officer during the 1990s was approximately SL 8,000 (\$150) a month, a very modest sum for Syrian standards and especially for the given rank (Zisser:2001, pp.120).

<sup>17</sup> In fact, the head of Military intelligence, General Ghazi Kana'an, was considered to maintain ultimate authority in Syrian occupied Lebanon (Human Rights Watch:1990).

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apparatus should be reflected in the numerous assassinations and terror attacks directly perpetrated by Syria's intelligence services against Lebanon's Internal Security Forces Direct Directorate (*al-Mudiriya al-Aama li-Qiwa al-Amn al-Dakhil*) in charge of foiling such activities (Hughes:2014, pp.530). Nevertheless, the practice of establishing universal commercial interest throughout the armed forces in direct relation to the top leadership is what Nassif coins as the "fostering [of] shared aversions technique". By establishing a shared "threat perception [to their positions in Syria] with the political elite, [the military] is more likely to identify with the regime and to defend it as their own" (Nassif: 2015, pp.256-257). Therefore, while the occupation of Lebanon advanced the regime's regional strategic ambitions, its practice of turning a blind eye to shady business practices by troops stationed there also served as additional coup-proofing measures as it undermined potential military opposition against its rule.

Nevertheless, although Mubarak's Egypt followed similar strategy of granting the military large commercial monopolies to retain their loyalty, these interests remained legitimate as they went hand in hand with the gradual economic liberalization and privatization of state industry during the 1980s (Harding:2016). To put this into comparison, a 2006 report on market freedom concluded that Syria held the 145<sup>th</sup> place out of 157, mostly as a result of poor access to finance, contract enforcement and property registering, all of which insulates the aforementioned semi-official economy<sup>18</sup> (Michaud & al.: 1982, pp.30). As a result, although economic coup-proofing measures remains widespread throughout the Arab world, Syria's regime quickly lost control of these practice due to their illicit nature. Although reforms were introduced in 2002 (Decree n° 336), 2004 (Decree n°61) and 2005 (Legislative decree n° 41)

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<sup>18</sup> Of the few firms operating in pre-civil war Syria, 80 percent of them – in comparison to the 37 % regional average - reported of the necessity of "gifts" to officials to "get things done". This demonstrates the indirect mean through which the financial privileges are managed (Syria – informal payments to public officials (% of firms)).

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to counter illicit economic practices, these were formulated in a way that aimed at restricting the involvement of a select few rather than outright prohibiting anyone (especially the military) from taking part in it<sup>19</sup> (Adly:2005, pp.3; Jehl:1997). Given Syria's long history of constantly solidifying the loyalty of the military class over that of civil servants, it is safe to assume that the latter would retain such privileges over other civilian players. Besides, many of the commercial interests that once held legitimate licenses simply went underground as Syria's security apparatus remained heavily imbedded in Lebanon's trading activities (New York Times: 2005).

Now that we have a general idea of the military's private business interests, it is time to explore and explain how changing statistics may have alternated these practices. However, there are important elements and information that do not exist (circa 2011-2017) as the Syrian Ministry of Economy and Trade (*Wazara al-Aiktisada wa al-Tejara*) has seldom provided the public with accurate data. In order to paint a more precise picture, rather than relying solely on general speculations, we will be interpreting import and export trends from Lebanon into Syria. This will prove especially useful to us given Lebanon's centrality to illicit businesses overseen by the security apparatus for the reasons mentioned above. The rational further follows that despite their semi-official nature, many of the import restrictions imposed by Assad concerned non-criminal consumer and luxury goods. Therefore, what might have been officially considered as contraband in Syria was just another legal commodity in Lebanon, hence being (mostly) recorded in official Lebanese records. For such reasons, official statistics provided by the Lebanese Ministry of Economy and Trade will be utilized as the primary source of data.

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<sup>19</sup> The importance of Lebanon in this semi-official economy are reflected in a slight dent in incoming goods into Syria during the same time period as the trade reforms were implemented. The steady growth of exports from Turkey during the same period on the other hand, remain uninterrupted.

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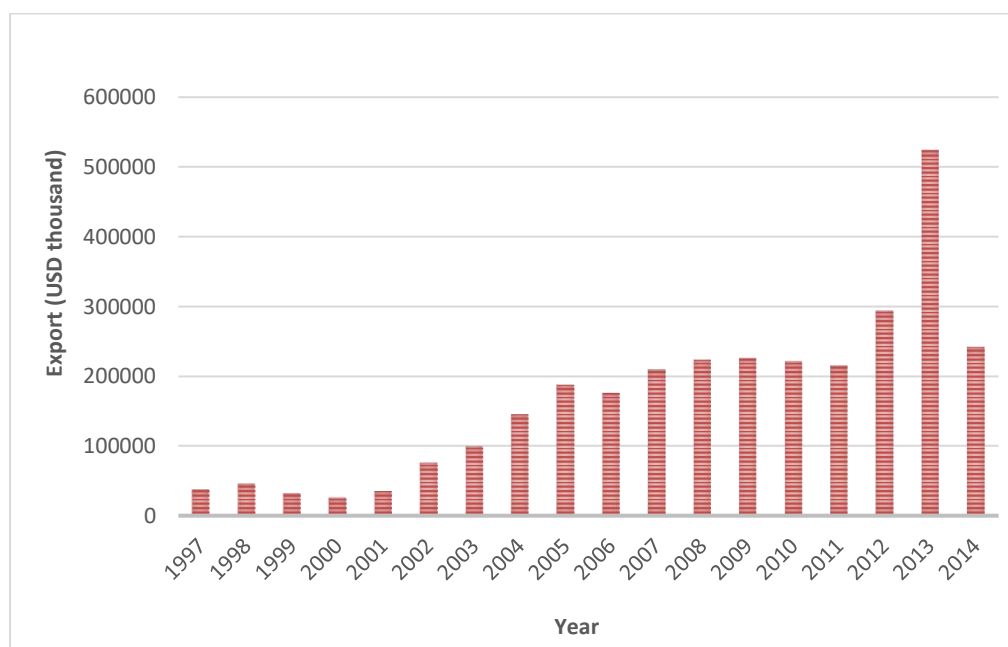
One of the first observations that can be made is that Syria continues to suffer from a serious trade deficit, with imports from Lebanon vastly outweighing its exports. While Syria holds 7.4% of Lebanon's total export, it only constitutes a mere 0.62% of total Lebanese imports, which demonstrates the potential profits made given the heightened demand as a result of the deficit (WITS: n. d.). This comparatively low numbers given the geographical proximities of the two countries also provides us with an affirmation of the widespread underground nature of Syrian-Lebanese trade. Nevertheless, as can be seen on Chart 1., we observe a steady rise in trade beginning to take shape following the ascension of Bashar to the presidency and his economic reforms. Although this mutually coincides with the flourishing of certain private ventures within Syria as a result of greater capital flow - especially under Assad's brother in law, Rami Makhoul, this factor was only made possible under the direct involvement or at least supervision of these militarily dominated semi-official ventures. It was only after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005 that Syria began to experience a slowdown in trade, probably due to the fact that these same military units were no longer enjoying direct supervision over these cross-border commercial routes. Another interpretation would indicate that exports to Syria actually remained constant throughout the whole-time frame (1994-2011), however a large amount of trade went unaccounted for by the Lebanese Ministry of Economy and Trade since all customs work were directly controlled by occupying Syrian troops up until 2005. Nonetheless, these statistics only validate the claim that the entities that have financially dominated cross-border activities have since remained at the very least partially involved. However, the empirical evidence suggests that a slowdown in such practices has most definitely undermined the economic coup-proofing purposes that they were initially created for in the first place. Although the confirmation of such a claim would prove very difficult without access to Syrian state archives - if they even exist - the theory fits well into Syria's historical trend when it comes to its coup-proofing practices. Despite being theoretically consistent, other factors



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and comparative cases must be considered to accurately paint a full scenario, especially given the complexity of analysing politically driven cross-border economic factors.

**Chart 1. Lebanese exports to Syria 1997-2014 (in USD thousands)**  
(WITS: n. d.)



Although great profits were supposedly made in trades from Lebanon, we cannot ignore some of the changing economic circumstances within Syria that took place during the same time, as cross border trade alone cannot support the funding of the entire of a military institution. It must be assumed that due to several aforementioned economic reforms effecting imports, many members of the military experienced a reduction in personal financial gain while many more were outright pushed aside from the practice itself, prompting them to resort to more basic forms of financial extortion from emerging private businesses in Syria. Such occurrence took a natural course as the increase of capital flow following Bashar's reforms signified the beginning of a slow shift away from

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largely semi-criminal networks of smuggling towards a barely functional market economy (Raphaeli: 2006). This modification signified a change in economic actors, with the creeping presence of private businesses adding viable competitors to the state-regulated trades that were essentially monopolized by coup-proofing units (Butter: 2016, pp.8). The introduction of these new competitors can be seen as the beginning of the end of the military's commercial exploits as their primary means of finance – and their *raison d'être* – these were greatly reduced in the same manner as Ottoman Janissaries became mere physical market-place regulators by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A similar future would especially hold true if the regime continues to develop and support these emerging commercial forces. This signifies that in addition to the erosion of commercial exploits in Lebanon, internal economic coup-proofing layers are essentially beginning to similarly follow suit. Many of these effects from emerging economic developments on economic coup-proofing measures can be particularly noted during the Arab Spring, especially in Egypt where military loyalty to the regime was primarily established through similar commercial interests. For example, Hosni Mubarak's son and perspective heir, Gamal Mubarak, chose to build political influence through the emerging civilian business class located outside those dominated by the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF). As a rational actor facing such prospective, the EAF's choice to jump ship and abandon Mubarak in 2011 perfectly depicts the natural reaction of prioritizing its long-term commercial interests of the institution<sup>20</sup> (Anderson:2011; Goldstone:2011, pp.13). As a similarly rational actor therefore, the SAA has no reason to react any differently if such a trend persists.

We cannot overstate the emergence of alternative businesses because, as mentioned above, the current civil war has deprived them of most of the necessary capital and raw material needed for them to remain incentivized and loyal. However, we similarly cannot ignore some of the adaptive yet disruptive

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<sup>20</sup> Although Syria's economic liberalization has not been as extended as this.

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measures undertaken by the regime during the course of the civil war that have similarly impede the military's few remaining illicit business interests. This particularly concerns the regime's practice of offering black-market opportunities as a form of financial incentive to bolster its manpower with economically deprived recruits (Kellier:2012). This however has mostly been confined to filling the ranks of various pro-government militias rather than praetorian components, as the latter necessitates specific qualities of reliability in order to maintain its effectiveness as coup-proofing units. As a result, the intrusion of militias within these markets not only serves as a blatant intrusion and violation of the military's commercial institutional interests, but also contributes to the erosion of its character as the main security provider, hence exacerbating existing social tensions (Hughes:2014, pp.198). This will remain to be the case, especially due to the fact that various militias are increasingly being funded by newly emerging civilian business empires, creating a double threat since the military's security provision role and hence their necessity to the regime is additionally undermined. The introduction of such actors, which goes hand in hand with the creation of markets can be dangerous in maintaining stability as it "provides opportunity for mobility to undercut lineage and [established] rights of privileges and creates inequalities of wealth that may not match existing [or past] patterns of income distribution" (Chaudhry:1994, pp.4). Given these factors, members of the security apparatus would seem to be rightfully frustrated with the various emerging forces affecting their institution's commercial interests. When the very institutional affiliation is threatened by such change in business dynamics, these are concerns that can only be countered using the threat of intervention into politics.

### *Sectional conclusion*

Powell's study led to the findings that a change in military funding provides very little correlation with the onsets of coup d'états (Powell:2013,

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pp.1029). Although this might prove true in accordance to his worldwide quantitative analysis, this chapter depicted how this fact can be significantly misleading given Syria's complex established layers of various sources of military funding. Our sectional findings are neither aligned to those of Gassebner and Al. either, whose contradicting claims state that military interventions take place mostly due to short-term national economic shocks (Gassebner and al.:2016, pp.298). Our study has instead provided an argument that lies between the two. Firstly, long-term economic downward trajectory would essentially attract a reprisal by the military institutions, but not necessarily through the outright violent intervention into the political establishment as exemplified in a putsch. The study regarding potential reduction in conventional military spending indicated that the impending economic factors tend to occur not as a result of the regime's policy - albeit many times outside of their control. After all, military institutions recognize that when regime policies have a negative impact and cause economic stagnation, this phenomenon is often the result of their own demand for a larger share from the national budget. Although neither remains a singular instigator for a coup, a potential crisis arises when the public budget reduction negatively impacts regular armed forces and allocation of funds is prioritized to praetorian elements of the military (Powell:2012, pp.1024). Secondly, we must remember that coup-proofing measures in the form of semi-official and illicit enterprises have a tendency to spiral out of control, especially in times of crisis and economic change. Although the granting of deployments and supervisory positions that control or stay close to the flow of capital also serve as a form of insurance policy in the face of diminishing defence budgeting, they do not always have the intended effect (Owen:2000, pp.39). While these aforementioned points would probably not prompt a coup d'état on their own, it is the "cosying up" to these creeping commercial ventures outside the military's realm of influence by the regime that might just prove enough for the onset of one. As Nassif can confirm, "military [institutions] resort to coup-proofing to avoid being toppled

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[economically] by competitors” (Nassif:2015, pp.251). What elevates this risk in the case of Syria is that these elements do not only have detrimental economic impact on the military’s institution, but rather act as a symbolic public humiliation. Although the situation has not yet gone this far, current trends point towards its potential eventuality, especially if the private sector receives additional boosts through the introduction of international financial bodies such as the IMF or the World Bank. Nevertheless, this form of escalation is the reason why all scholars put the almost all-encompassing aspect of “grievance” as the primary instigator of a military coup d’état. It must be remembered that Syria’s civil-war has severely impeded the development of both native civil societies as well as civilian institutions and thus commercial and property rights. As a result, military commanders should take advantage of this period of relative stability – following the civil-war crisis – as this may provide a possible window of opportunity to take the preventative measure of solidifying their grasp on economic interests, before other potential commercial competitors enforce them on their own terms (Gassebner:2016, pp.294&302). After all, the core principal interest of the military is longevity and survival and since financial and economic prosperity goes hand in hand with it, and an intervention may prove necessary in order to guarantee the status quo. Since any military institution tend to act rationally, there remains strong economic incentive to secure the top political offices by representative of the various military factions, especially praetorian elites which [used to] find themselves at the receiving end of past economic coup-proofing measures.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Has structural coup-proofing become overstretched?**

As groups of disgruntled officers joined the elite Defence Company placing posters throughout Damascus with wishful thinking that Rifat al-Assad was on the ascent, some observers were confident that a successful coup was inevitable. The combined political, social and economic circumstance provided an ideal setting favouring a military putsch and was to present a case study that would test the regime's presumably bullet proof coup-preventing structures. Quinlivan states that although the shifting loyalties and financial incentives played their part in countering Rifat's failed coup, it was the established military structures that ultimately succeeded in physically countering it. What is interesting however, is that although most of the deterring factors came from key coup-proofing praetorian units as intended, interesting enough, conventional forces also played a significant role in complementing the task, most notably the conventional 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division (Holliday:2013, pp.9). After all, they were the same units that Hafez al-Assad's coup-proofing structures were meant to counter in the first place, revealing their depth in sophistication and potential impact. Nonetheless, there seems to have been little chance that Rifat could have had been successful had these conventional units, among others, not blocked the path of his numerically

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and technologically superior Defence Company<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, the event demonstrated just how important the strategic allocation of counterweighing military units in the “immediate vicinity of the regime’s critical geographical points” proved to be in physically protecting it from a violent overthrow (Quinlivan:2013, pp.141). While these structures were reinforced following the 1984 coup attempt, an increased level of unintentional reshuffling took place in response to the current civil war. After all, many scholars often promote the idea that most coups are implemented during times of national crisis that require important structural remodelling to address the shifting political threats.

### *Sectional methodology & Framework*

When executing a coup-d’état, the first and most important objective usually requires securing symbolic and practical targets of political power, including governmental buildings, various media outlets and of course, top political decision makers themselves (De Bruin:2017, pp.4). As a result, an important factor of coup-proofing structures includes the strategic deployment of praetorian units in defence of these strategic points and individuals. For these reasons, this section will decipher three points of interests as debated by Powell (2012). These will initially include, (I) the analysis of change in strategic deployment in relation to a coup target; second (II) will involve the deciphering of their combat effective troops - which will include the formulation of a ratio between the number of conventional units to paramilitary ones; and third (III), a separate analysis of various outliers, such as (III a.) technological factors, (III b.) battlefield expertise and (III c.) organizational cohesion. The last 3 sub-points however will not be assessed systematically within the context of the first and second points as their tactical nature would only result in assumptions based

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<sup>21</sup> The theory that Rifat was simply asserting his position to succeed Hafez upon his possible death rather than outright deposing him remains a valid point of view but lies outside the scope of this dissertation.

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on hypothetical scenarios. Fortunately, there are a number of tactical elements that ultimately underscore predetermined factors. One such example would highlight the selectivity of coup targets, whose centralized nature in relation to current security situations indicate that they all remain within the fortified centre of Damascus proper. However, not everything is as straightforward, meaning that other restrictions and appropriate generalizations will need further explanation and analysis.

One such condition concerns framework. To properly perform our analysis on structural coup-proofing, we will have to run an independently study on these points without considering our previous findings on economic coup-proofing measures. Since chapter 2 argues that large segments of conventional troops - especially praetorian military units - have increasingly become dissatisfied with the status quo, such assumption would result in two possible scenarios. Either they actively join the putsch, or they adopt a ‘wait and see’ *attentiste* approach in hopes of receiving a “hefty return” or other incentives for their non-intrusion. Not only would this assumption no longer necessitate a study on existing structural coup-proofing, but such a scenario would prove to be easily debunked in reality. After all, chapter 2’s analysis on economic coup-proofing measures remained a selective study, which excluded other highly critical factors as previously described in the introduction. As a result, this section of our research will take on more conservative approach to attain a more balanced framework in order to carry out our analysis. Therefore, our comparative study will look exclusively at military coup-proofing based on current structural mechanisms using past political behaviour alone, regardless of the conclusions made in chapter 2. Additionally, it must be remembered as well that this section is solely focused on determining a change in coup-proofing structures and not to assess whether a successful coup is tactically feasible or not.



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Another important note relates to the various forms of the military units that make up the security apparatus, as various complexities in their tasks and compositions<sup>22</sup> would similarly lead to off topic tactical scenario-building. Therefore, before engaging into the topic of structural counterbalancing, a certain level of additional ground rules needs to be established and other constraints must be applied to better refine as well as formulate the research. Only then will we be able to perform a clearheaded comparative analysis between pre-war coup-proofing military structures and its current state.

### *Note on exclusion*

For the sake of simplicity, when analysing military units - which given the geographical constraints, will be analysed at the divisional (*Firqa*) level as suggested by Luttwak (1968, pp.63) -, these will exclude combat support affiliates such as artillery brigades (Luttwak:1968, pp.63). The rationale follows that out of all utilizable artillery pieces, the clear majority hold largely a front-line operational purpose, aimed more at large conventional military operations (Holliday:2013, pp.4). Their sluggish yet destructive nature would prove burdensome and even counterproductive in executing an effective coup d'état or countercoup operation, which ideally requires small yet well-coordinated timely manoeuvres. Either way, a large majority of the SAA's artillery arsenal remains in fixed defensive positions directed at countering an Israeli invasion from beyond its borders (Bennet:2001)<sup>23</sup>. This aspect is in fact a direct reflection of some of the coup-proofing structures imposed by Hafez. For such reason, these units will be excluded from this sectional study. Furthermore, we must consider the environment surrounding the coup target as they are situated within

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<sup>22</sup> Certain mechanisms are also manipulated in order to provide the illusion of violent escalations, prompting many officers to disengage under the fear of placing soldiers in harm's way (Geddes:1999).

<sup>23</sup> Despite Syria's apparent large reliance on armored units, a substantial proportion (1,200) of its tanks consists of old T-54 Soviet battle tanks in hull down defensive positions along the country's southwestern border (Bennet:2001).

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a deeply populated inland urban centre. Therefore, the same exclusion will be assumed regarding Syria's Air Force and Navy, Coastal defence Brigades and other non-ground armies. Although such units usually possess small contingent of ground forces, their size and/or distance away from the regime's centre of control neutralizes their potential impact in the eventuality of a coup. Although Air Forces have played historical roles in (mostly logistically) facilitating coup d'états, the heavy presence of surface to Air (SAM) arsenal<sup>24</sup>, controlled by key coup-proofing units around the vicinity of the capital, severely diminishes their relevance and potential impact. Lastly, the same will be considered regarding Syria's extensive arsenal of SCUD missiles and other WMDs, as these are primarily intended as a counter-balance to Israeli nuclear capabilities and providing conventional airfield denial rather than maintaining any operational relevancy in the eventuality of a coup d'état (Bennet:2001, pp.4).

### *Pre-war doctrinal order of battle*

Syria's pre-civil war doctrinal order of battle is surely a defensive one, but maintain two differentiating purposes in targeting allocations whether aimed at countering external or internal threats. Conventional and politically questionable military units have always maintained a front-line role, positioned to theoretically defend against an Israeli invasion from either the Golan Heights or through flanking manoeuvres via Lebanon or Jordan<sup>25</sup>. Key coup-proofing units on the other hand have been regarded as a last line of defence to assure the regime's security, but have also been primarily geared at countering politically sensitive internal threats. During the 1973 war, rather than engaging in a combined arms assault along its adopted Soviet military doctrine and equipment, the Republican Guard and Defence Company, holding the military's

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<sup>24</sup> The regime has extensively developed this to counter the eventual air superiority abilities of the Israeli Air Force.

<sup>25</sup> The rigid emplacement of such equipment proves to be a highly ineffective tactic given its original purpose in serving the Soviet's mobile offensive doctrine.

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most advanced equipment, were purposely kept behind under the notion of supporting any potential breakthrough. Realistically however, Hafez never had any offensive ambition for them in the first place, as an Israeli counter-attack against the regime political leadership in Damascus itself, was seen as a much greater threat than attempting to salvage a few kilometres in the Golan area (Quinlivan:1999, pp.147). Nevertheless, although various units have come and gone, this form of doctrinal order of battle has retained its positioning right up to 2011, with each one of them remaining positioned and geared to fulfil their own specialized task.

### *Categorization*

Syria's armed forces retain a complex form of organization despite its quite homogeneous conventional composition along pre-war Soviet style doctrinal order of battle. As Belkin and Schofer (2003) indicate however, an important aspect in analysing structural military coup-proofing weighs heavily on the ratio of conventional units to paramilitary ones in the same concept found in the 'military balance', developed by the *International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS)*. Therefore, a similar form of categorization will be needed to properly single out coup-proofing units from the rest. To make such distinction, individual units will be labelled as either *coup-proofers* - which will be distinguished in the colour red - or potential *coup-plotters* - branded in the colour green. The former will be based on several unique factors. This will include: (1) whether they hold an independent chain of command lying outside that of the Ministry of defence (such as a paramilitary); (2) whether their doctrinal/structural deployment can be considered different from of the conventional armed forces; and finally, (3) by looking at past histories in relation to regime loyalty. The last factor will be based on whether they have actively taken part in past counter-coup operations or suppressed popular rebellions on behalf of the regime. Therefore, while the Republican Guard's

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doctrinal formation as a form of personal bodyguard to the regime is obvious (factor (2)), the Special Forces Brigades will be similarly labelled as *coup-proofers* for their role played in suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood uprising (factor (3)) (Michaud:1982, pp.29; Batatu:1999, pp.234). Additionally, the brave act of defiance by the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in its decision to join Ali Haydar's blocking of Rifat's superior coup forces (factor (3)), should also be a good indication of where these unit's loyalty may lie in the eventuality of a future coup attempt (Moubayed:2006, pp.55). Units such as the Struggles Company (*Saraya al-Sira*), whom despite having no history action or display of loyalty, will be regarded as *coup-proofers* simply because their garrison, located at the Mezzeh military Airport, are placed in such proximity (4 kilometres) to the Presidential Palace on mount Qasioum (factor (1)). This is particularly interesting especially when compared to already proven coup-proofing units such as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, whose garrison are comparatively located a full 30 kilometres outside of Damascus itself <sup>26</sup>.

**Table 1. Unit categorization with *coup-proofers* labelled in red & potential *coup-plotters* labelled in green.**

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Assumption</u>
Republican Guard	Geographical proximity to regime epicenter / active participation in coup-proofing activities
Struggles Company	Geographical proximity to regime epicenter
4th Armored Division	Geographical Proximity to regime epicenter / Active participation in suppression of popular uprising

<sup>26</sup> 30 kilometers was chosen in consideration of Luttwak's suggested time-span needed to consolidate a putsch, which lies within 12-24 hours (Luttwak:1968, pp.62).

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Special Forces Command	Independent Special Forces Regiment	Geographical proximity to regime epicenter / active participation in coup-proofing activities
	14 <sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division	Geographical proximity to regime epicenter / active participation in coup-proofing activities / Active participation in suppression of popular uprising
	15 <sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division	Fixed positions along external borders / partial participation in suppression of popular uprising <sup>27</sup>
1 <sup>st</sup> Corp	5 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division	Fixed positions along external borders
	7 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division	Fixed positions along external borders
	9 <sup>th</sup> Armored Division	Fixed positions along external borders
	Independent Infantry Brigades	Fixed positions along external borders
2 <sup>nd</sup> Corp	1 <sup>st</sup> Armored Division	Geographical proximity to regime epicenter / Active participation in suppression of popular uprising.
	10 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division	Fixed positions along external borders

<sup>27</sup> Although the assumption is mixed, it will be assumed that past experience in the suppression of popular uprisings will be considered more significant than strategic deployment. Besides, although the 15<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Brigade base is located in Jebal Druze, over 100 kilometers south from Damascus, such placement is comprehensible given the region's historical susceptibility to popular uprisings.

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3 <sup>rd</sup> Corp	3 <sup>rd</sup> Armored Division	Geographical proximity to regime epicenter / active participation in coup-proofing activities / Active participation in suppression of popular uprising.
	11 <sup>th</sup> Armored Division	Fixed positions along external borders
Reserve	17 <sup>th</sup> Armored Division	Fixed positions along external borders
	18 <sup>th</sup> Armored Division	Fixed positions along external borders
5 <sup>th</sup> Corp	Former militias with no history of regime loyalty	

Potential *coup-plotters* will be comparatively identified on the basis that they retain none of the characteristics of *coup-proofers* mentioned above. These units are generally conventional divisions which have historically been groomed at executing conventional operations against external enemies only, especially along the country's south-western border (Bennet:2001, pp.6). Again, these units have normally been moulded along rigid soviet-style order of battle which holds a large emphasis on highly mechanized mobile frontal assault (Eisenstadt & al.:2001, pp.556). This means that they clearly have no operational purpose in countering or executing coup d'état, whose operational nature almost always lies on low-intensity warfare as seen in Counter-Insurgency (COIN) operations (Holliday:2013, pp.11; Albrecht:2014, pp.662). One could say that such units serve only as a form of first line of defence against external invaders seeking to reach Damascus, which explains their past inflexibility on the battlefield and hierarchical chain of command based on predetermined strategic manoeuvres and drills (Eisenstadt & al.:2001, pp. 556). Nevertheless, not only do they remain geographically outside of the vicinity of

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the regime's epicentre in Damascus, but many have been confined to their barracks since 2011 for fear of potential mass desertion given their political unreliability. If any unit happens to fit into any of such category, which encompasses the majority of the conventional Syrian Arab Armed Forces, they will be automatically be labelled as potential *coup-plotters*.

### *Categorizing Auxiliary Forces*

One last note is required regarding the newly created units that have no documented relations to categorical indicators mentioned above due mostly to their recent formation outside pre-civil war doctrinal lines. This will mostly concern the 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corp (*al-Faylak al-Khamis*), which was formed in November 2016 as a response to the regime's lack of semi-reliable manpower. Although providing a large contingent of forces (approximately 10,000), this unit is primarily made up of civilian volunteers, former draft dodgers, army deserters, local vigilantes and members of smaller militias that were sought to be institutionalized into regular army structures<sup>28</sup> (al-Masri:2017). The potential problem for Assad in retaining full control over the 5<sup>th</sup> corps can be reflected however in the past attempt of merging the National Defence Force (NDF) (*Quwat ad-Difa al-Watani*) – considered the largest pro-government militia network - within regular army structures. Through its formation of the short-lived 4<sup>th</sup> Corp (*al-Faylak al-Raabi*), one can observe the clear prioritization of independent corporate interests overshadowing regime loyalty by the NDF, among other militias (al-Masri:2017). Although its failure is officially blamed on the non-cooperation of Russian and Iranian advisers tasked with constructing the unit, its fragmented bottom-up chain of command, undermined the unit's

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<sup>28</sup> This is particularly boosted by the promises of “sorting out of affairs” aimed at providing amnesty for previous draft dodgers, including various monetary incentives for current state employees serving in the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps (al-Tamimi:2016). Other campaign drives aimed at young men to join the corps have been extorted through televised prayers and leaflets stacked with government produced bread-bags (al-Masri:2017).

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cohesion as well as displayed a serious disassociation with the regime's own interests (Lund:2015). In fact, the majority of the NDF, among many local militias, often refuse to mobilize beyond their place of origin, which strongly undermines Assad's control over the unit itself, hence elevating the risk of their participation in a coup (Hughes:2016, pp.210). Nevertheless, whatever auxiliary unit, such a disconnect between the current military establishment and the individuals that make up the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps underscores the argument that both sides share only short-term mutual interests in combating the insurgency. Rather than acting out of pure loyalty to the regime, other incentives may also include the settling of scores or debts with the eventual winning side - securing their personal/militia's interests or simply advancing societal stability following years of destructive warfare. Nevertheless, the fact that many of these units have deliberately been funnelled towards combating more extremist insurgents and away from moderate rebel enclaves, should further indicate the regime's suspicion regarding the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps (al-Tamimi:2016). Unfortunately for the regime, the remaining militant pockets in the eastern suburbs of Damascus should indicate that the large segment of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corp's NDF members will remain within Damascus for the time being. Nevertheless, the added fact that the unit has been well trained and organized by Russian and Iranian military advisers should provide additional proof that any gratitude could lie outside the regime's inner circle. For such reason, the components of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corp will be categorized as potential *coup-plotter*.

Syria's composition of pro-government militias remains vast, with each differing slightly in terms of support and unit characteristics. Many of them in fact were formed as armed branches of opposition parties within Syria's ruling coalition, the National Progressive Front (NPF) (*al-Jaba al-Wataniyah at-Taqaddumiyah*), which although was restricted within the confines of the ruling Baath Party prior, have now enjoyed greater influence and autonomy since the



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onset of the civil war<sup>29</sup> (Veldkamp:2014). Although such militias would be automatically deemed potential *coup-plotters*, many remain deployed within their party's geographical stronghold and have limited capabilities to mobilize in support of a coup plot, at least during the initial 'attack' phase. However, as legitimate 'opposition' parties, many would retain considerable political influence during the consolatory phases of a coup d'états. These include the Aleppo based Jerusalem Brigade (*Liwa al-Quds*) (Lund: 2015), the northern Turk dominated Syrian Resistance (*al-Muqama as-Suriya*) (al-Tamimi:2013), and the Syrian Social Nationalist (*al-Hizb al-Suri al-Quwmi al-Ijtima*), which remain heavily controlled by Christian minority groups and mostly confined to Homs<sup>30</sup> (Veldkamp:2014). Therefore, as the only militias within a 30-kilometer radius of the capital city with the capabilities of influencing a coup, only the NDF under its Damascus Provincial Command; the Baath Battalion (*al-Qat'ib al-Ba'th*) – also known as the Baath Phalange –, and the Army of Loyalty (Jaysh al-Wafaa), will be considered as part of the study (Lund:2014; al-akhbar:2013).

### I. Change in strategic coup-proofing deployment

Having deciphered the pre-civil war strategic military doctrine and all current relevant actors within the Syrian Armed Forces, it is now time to begin our analysis on how that may have changed since the outbreak of the civil war. As can be seen in Map. 1, the strategic positioning of individual Divisions/Brigades mentioned above – excluding units that did not exist in 2011 - are distinctively deployed based on their respective doctrinal responsibilities distinguished by their colour in relation to the coup target, indicated using a yellow star. The heavy concentration of key *coup proofing* units, shown in red

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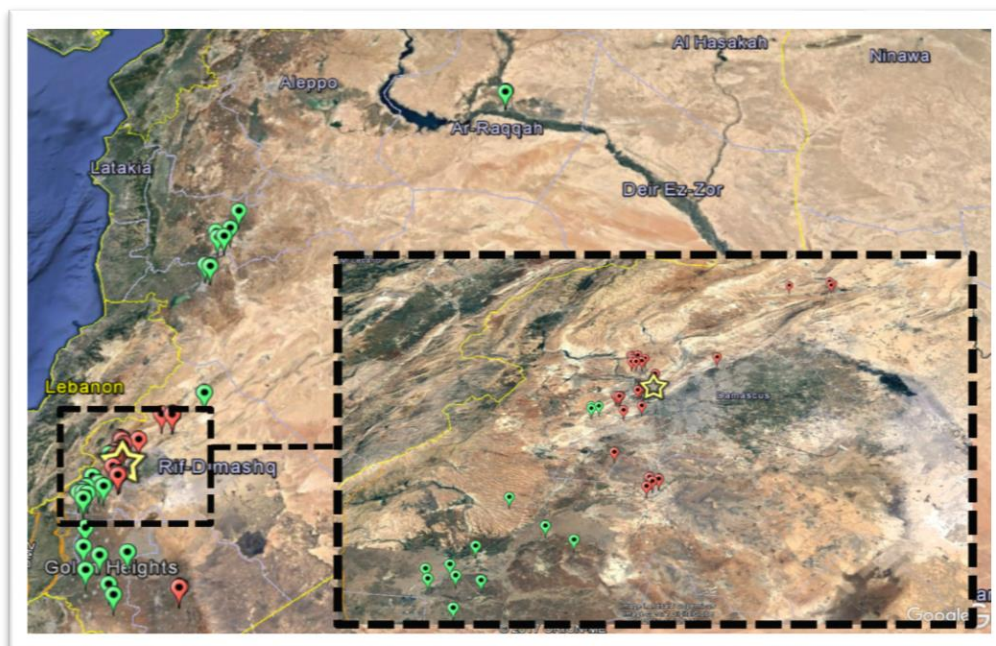
<sup>29</sup> Many are affiliated to previously banned political parties in Syria that were incorporated into the Baath dominated NPF coalition in the mid-2000s and in 2012 as part of Bashar al-Assad's partial reforms (Ziadeh:2013, pp.27&55) (SANA News:2012).

<sup>30</sup> Although all these groups maintain small contingencies in Damascus, they remain too small to be seriously incorporated within this study.

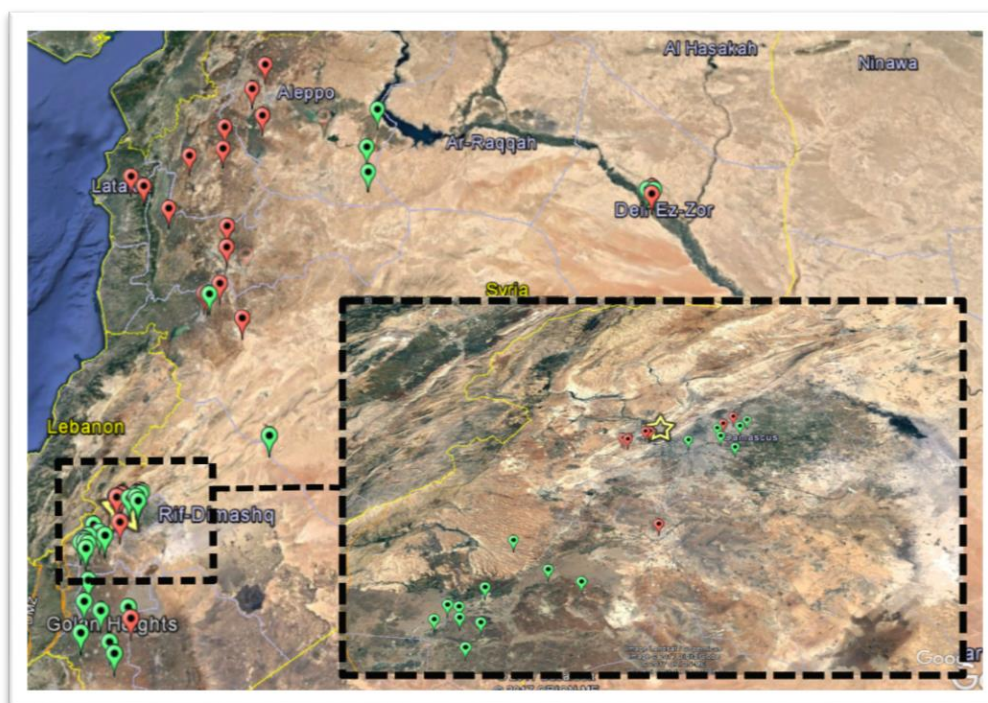
## Short Sticks & Rotting Carrots

- which includes the Republican Guard, most of the Independent Special Forces Brigades, the Struggles Company and 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, armoured divisions - are all situated within the vicinity of Damascus and therefore should be considered as a confirmation of their principal task in securing the regime. We can note also that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division are strategically stationed in the northern suburb of *Qutayfah* as well as the *Kiswah* military complex in the southern outskirts of Damascus, hence tactically protecting the capital from both potential approaches. *Potential coup-plotters* on the other hand, labelled in green, are distinctively positioned away from the government's epicentre and when deployed along the southwest border near Damascus, always face some form of geographic or military obstacle between themselves and the regime itself.

**Map 1. Structural positioning according to pre-war Syrian doctrinal order of battle (Holliday: February 2013; Bennet:2001).**



**Map 2. Approximate Structural positioning according to winter 2016-2017 order of battle (Holiday: March 2013; Lund:2014; al-akhbar:2013; Tabler: 2017).**



The regime of Bashar al-Assad went to great lengths of employing the same brutal crackdown as his father had which relied on a heavy emphasis of mobilizing only crucial units with proven trustworthiness. This concerned most of the *coup-proofing* units, which have all been deployed to key urban economic-hubs such as Hama, Homs or Aleppo. The lack of manpower in relation to the insurgency however has forced the regime to maintain a defensive clear and hold strategy, as the risk of overstretching itself through over-ambitious offensive manoeuvres – especially against targets of lesser importance - would run the risk of potential enemy breakthroughs in the rear<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Insurgents made considerable gains north of Homs in an early 2017 offensive after large segments of government troops previously stationed there began an eastward drive to retake Palmyra (Tabler:2017).

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(Tabler:2017). Only Republican Guard elements from the 4<sup>th</sup> division and the Struggles Company have remained in the capital either stationed within their barracks – solely as *coup-proofing* units on alert - or actively quelling pockets of insurgents in the north-eastern and southern neighbourhoods of *Qaboun* and *Ghouta* (as of May 2017). In addition to recent withdrawal of rebel forces from the western neighbourhood of *Qaboun*, we should expect one elite brigade from the 4<sup>th</sup> Division and two others from the Republic Guard to be redeployed along alternative frontlines, away from Damascus itself, most probably in support of the current campaign to relieve the siege of Der el-Zor to the east and recapturing the remaining oil fields not under control of the SDF (Tomson:2017). Given the geographical distance, even if frontline *coup-proofing* units did arrive in Damascus before the *coup-plotters* could have managed to consolidate power, the plot would have failed either way, meaning that their arrival would have no longer made a difference (Luttwak:1968, pp.62). Nevertheless, by assessing the deployment and redeployment of our *coup-proofing* units, we can identify a large outflow of these groups from Damascus, rendering the regime critically exposed to a potential conspiracy, especially compared to its pre-civil war protective deployment.

Now we turn our attention at potential *coup-plotters*, especially within the densely populated pocket(s) located southwest of the coup-targets. It is important to note that most of conventional divisions in that area have been confined to operations no further than 10 kilometres from their garrisons stationed along the border with Lebanon and the Golan Height (Holliday:2013b, pp.26). As can be observed in both Map. 1 and Map. 2, the 5<sup>th</sup> mechanized Division, 9<sup>th</sup> armoured, 11<sup>th</sup> armoured, 5<sup>th</sup> mechanized and 18<sup>th</sup> reserve infantry division have remained stationary within their barracks at the foothills of Mount Hermon and the northern Golan, approximately 15 to 20 kilometres southwest of Damascus. With the absence of over half (4:6) of the regime's original *coup-proofing* units, the potential *coup-plotters* alone constitute 5/8<sup>th</sup> of the units

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stationed within a 30-kilometer radius of Damascus. Nevertheless, given the current positioning of military units around Damascus, it is safe to assume that the regime remains exposed to a significant risk of being challenged during a coup d'état by conventional unit's positions along Damascus's southwest flank. However, this aspect remains only a fraction of the real operational and strategic factors involved. As a result, a closer analysis of capabilities and numbers will now be required while also considering potential auxiliaries to the equation to better assess our study.

### II. Quantitative change

When facing superior military technology, one can assume that having the advantage of greater numerical manpower can overcome the disparity. Not only would this allow the *coup-plotters* to rapidly take over key strategic points using overwhelming forces, but would allow them to overpower the few remaining elite *coup-proofing* units defending the coup target (Powell:2012, pp.1024). It is therefore important to provide quantitative analysis to the study, as numbers retained by each unit in the research have varied significantly since 2011, partly due to mobilization, as mentioned above, but mostly as a result of defections or combat casualties among the ranks<sup>32</sup>. While this highly debated topic remains outside the scope of this dissertation, a brief review is necessary in order to paint an accurate picture of military readiness and its potential impact. Estimates regarding the rate of defection (between 15-50 %) since at the onset of the civil war these figures vary wildly depending on sources. While some seemingly credible information sources such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) are often quoted, one should be reminded that they

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<sup>32</sup> Although casualties can be counted, these are mostly attributed to front-line units that have already been neutralized within our study because of their geographical distance to the coup target. Besides, strategic COIN operations are deliberately oriented at keeping casualty rates low to compensate for the lack of reliable soldiers (Holliday:2013, pp.23).

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have strong political incentives to demoralize regime support by massaging the data and providing inflated numbers. A report prepared by Joseph Holliday from the *Institute of the Study of War* regarding the state of the SAA perhaps proves most reliable due to its moderate and balanced assumptions. Although dating back to 2013, it can be assumed that a clear majority of army deserters had already taken place in the initial stages of the rebellion during the defensive clear and hold strategy – aimed at avoiding casualties – it has since stabilized the army’s reported manpower<sup>33</sup>. However, other various sources will require consideration, as the number of troop assigned to divisions located in the Damascus area have been subject to change due to frequent and new mobilization in support of on-going offensives.

**Chart 2. Change in conventional and paramilitary units (calculated at brigade level) stationed within 30-kilometer radius of central Damascus (Holiday: March 2013; Lund:2014; al-akhbar:2013; Tabler: 2017).**

		Pre-civil war estimates		Current estimates	
<b>Coup- Provers</b>	Republican Guard:	13,500	<b>Total: 61,500</b>	9,000	<b>Total: 20,650</b>
	4 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division:	12,500		9,500	
	Special Forces Brigades:	13,500		n/a	
	1 <sup>st</sup> Armoured Division:	11,000		100	
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Armoured Division:	11,000		1,650	

<sup>33</sup> Much of the rebellion has since sunk to similar if not graver human rights abuses than the regime, including torture, child soldiers and mass execution, in increasing acts of desperation. Therefore, we will assume that these have since robbed the opposition from its once high moral standpoint, thus decreasing the likelihood of defection since the presumed military standstill of 2013/2014 (al-Gharbi: 2013).

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<b>Potential-Coup Plotters</b>	10 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division:	13,000	<b>Total: 33,500</b>	n/a	<b>Total: 12,650</b>	
	9 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division:	11,000		2,750		
	7 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division	9,500		3,125		
	18 <sup>th</sup> Reserve Division:	n/a		1,275		
	NDF (rif- Damashq Command):	n/a		3,000 <sup>34</sup>		
	Baath Brigade <sup>35</sup> :	n/a		2,500		
<b>Ratio</b>	/		<b>31:17 = 2:1 (approx.)</b>	/		<b>41/25 = 4/3 (approx.)</b>

Nonetheless, with the absence of its most reliable battle-hardened troops, *coup-proofing* units are left with a 4:3 ratio of potential *coup-plotting* units. Although they maintain numerical superiority, this still indicates a momentous change from their pre-civil war manpower, which was standing at nearly double (2:1) that of potential *coup-plotters*. While both sides located at the outskirts of Damascus have experienced a reduction of over half (approx. 64 %) from their pre-war size, it is important to note that pre-civil war *coup-proofers* have retained the same unit composition. The *coup-plotter* study group on the other hand, have undergone a partial reshuffling, as well as experienced the addition of strategically placed militia units to their side, thus drastically

<sup>34</sup> No precise documented number exist regarding the NDF under the rif-Damashq Regional Command. To provide an estimate, its total force (55,000) will be divided by the number of Syrian governorates (14) while weighing it heavily towards front line locations.

<sup>35</sup> Although no documents exist regarding the strength of the Baath Brigade, the partial deployment into Damascus to man security checkpoints is enough to indicate that 1 Brigade (2,500) would have been sufficient to carry out such task.



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changing the dynamics of a coup scenario in the organizational and technical sense. As De Bruin points out, additional counter balancing measures have a tendency of drastically increasing the probability of a coup attempt and the fact that militias have been introduced to provide urban security within Damascus only underscores that theory (De Bruin:2017, pp.9). However, the practice of rotating troops in order to weaken potential cohesion is hardly alien to a regime fearing coup plots, as it acts as an obstacle impeding the coordination between *coup-plotter* (De Bruin:2017, pp.5). De Bruin points out that the more conspirators are included, the more likely a coup plot may fail because of increasingly difficulty in coordination. This point has a significant impact on multiple aspects of a country's military, especially when it attempts to undermine its effectiveness, regardless whether in times of conventional war or countering internal conspiracies.

### III. a. Cooperation and cohesion

In addition to providing structural limitations, coup-proofing measures are also reinforced by placing coordination challenges throughout armed forces (Powell:2012, pp.1017&1021). These not only refer to incorporated segments of one reliable unit into others, but also to establish mutually suspicious parallel institutions in order to require an aspiring plotter to undergo the dangerous task of hiring potential rivals that may divulge the secret of the conspiracy (Powell:2012, pp. 1023). This proved to be true in the pre-civil war Syrian military, where loyal elements were spread among other units to not only monitor, but to keep any potential defector along regime lines. While this has more or less continued to the conflict today, the lack of manpower signifies that this practice has been restricted to forces deployed along the front line alone, meaning that the regime no longer enjoys the guarantees of potential *coup-plotting* units that are confined to the barracks near Damascus. We must also remember that two of the counted potential *coup-plotter* units (the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>



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Division), who also constitute nearly half of the manpower within the study group, operate under the single command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corp. This means that it currently enjoys more autonomy than ever before within its own circle as the coup-proofing structures imposed by the regime to limit self-autonomy – this has been drastically weakened as a result of the civil war.

It is widely assumed that the larger the military, the lesser the probably of a successful coup attempt. After all, Luttwak states that theoretically speaking, the more sophisticated the organization, the greater is its efficiency – but also its vulnerability (Luttwak:1969, pp.64). The rationale behind this follows the notion that the ability of a military structure to carry out specified tasks are drastically reduced the larger it is, as sizeable organizations require more resources, which consequently becomes increasingly troublesome. Both these points are reflected in Powell's study, which shows that the top 10 most populated militaries only succeed in executing a coup only 11 percent of the time (Powell:2012, pp.1032). Although retaining a numerical majority as a group, *coup-proofers* remain confined to their own separate chain of command, directly linked to the executive himself, for the very reason imposed by Hafez to undermine any potential collaboration of a plots against him by these same units (Brooks:1998, pp.8). While this might seem advantageous, this also theoretically indicates that little cooperation would exist among them in countering a coup<sup>36</sup> (Welch:1976). Such coordination refers both to logistics as well as combat effectiveness, and based on the information provided above, a bloodless coup would be highly unlikely. Additionally, it is important to remember that each unit has been trained and equipped to fit very defined and narrow purposes, thus impeding their ability to forming a coherent, effective fighting unit. While *coup-proofers* remain highly diverse, from lightly armed

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<sup>36</sup> Syria's intelligence agencies serve as a good example of non-cooperation, where persons of interests are arrested by one agency, only to be re-arrested on the same charges by another upon release (al-Hendi:2011).

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mobile infantry units as found in the Special Forces to the 4<sup>th</sup> Division's primary emphasis on heavy armoured vehicles, *coup-plotters* retain very rigid and uniform military tactics built along the universal standard of Soviet strategic doctrine (Eisenstadt & al.: 2001, pp. 561). Following these fragmented doctrinal mechanisms, it could therefore be assumed that *coup-proofers* face the same level of obstacles regarding operational coordination as *coup-plotters*. We must however not forget the importance of intelligence units; whose principal role focuses not only on detecting the coup but also facilitating the response of *coup-proofing* units. Although the addition of these units would result in wild scenario building, this aspect has a severe potential at undermining the claim regarding cooperation among *coup-proofing* units.

Additionally, we must also consider the ability of intelligence units to sabotage the organizational efficiency of the *coup-plotters*. This last statement is what prompts many scholars of coup-d'état to stress the importance of cohesion, an important factor that cannot be glanced over. It has been indicated that a coup d'état only necessitates about 2 percent – approximately 1 brigade in Syria's case – of the armed forces to be successful, provided that the odds are right. While it could be assumed that desertion would fundamentally weaken the cohesion of a single military unit, this phenomenon essentially indicates that the unit in question has therefore been refined to retain only committed troops, hence paradoxically strengthening its effectiveness even more (Gaub:2014). This is true both for *coup-proofers* as well as *coup-plotters*, including newly formed militias, as many have remained or have theoretically become more closely aligned to the corporate interests of their unit rather than regime survival itself as mentioned above. Ultimately, such heightened cohesion remains imperative, above the ability to coordinate, yet only seconded to numerical superiority and thirdly, technological capabilities. Nonetheless, we can assume that both inter-unit cooperation and individual cohesion has been strengthened equally on both sides of the study group. This was done both as the result of the

weakening of the regime's pre-war coup-proofing structures as well as the inevitable fragmenting effects of civil war. Our sectional analysis however has yet to be concluded, as the relatively easy terrain surrounding Damascus, as Luttwak theoretically states, undermines the seemingly primary role that cooperation might play with a coup setting, prompting us to analyse additional operational factors (Lutwakk:1968, pp.59).

### III. b. Technological Change

Despite the absence of any single significant conventional military victory, many experts have praised the effectiveness and discipline of the Syrian Arab Army on the battlefield, earning even praise from some notable Israeli commanders. Rather than the perceived incompetence of technical personnel on the ground, their major setbacks were much more related to material hardware in what can be considered the age and obsolete equipment from the SAA's arsenal. These can mostly be blamed on the unavailability of spare parts and re-supply options available since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as the overall major slowdown in the Syrian economy, essentially accelerating the deterioration of its fighting capabilities<sup>37</sup> (Bennet:2001). These setbacks are quite significant as Syrian military doctrine was heavily modelled to the Soviet Union, through its heavy emphasis on large mechanized and armoured units and other equipment. Most of these assumptions can be confirmed using various satellite imagery published by the U.S. State Department, which shows that in many instances the deployment of roughly 30 tanks, despite claiming the presence of an entire armoured Brigade which usually accounts for up to 105 tanks according to normal Syrian military doctrine (Holliday:2013, pp. 14). This provides us with solid evidence that *coup-proofing* units, which had traditionally maintained the most advanced weapon systems have experienced

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<sup>37</sup> We must remember that although defense funding is prioritized in times of economic hardship, these are heavily weighted towards praetorian coup-proofing units.

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significant shortages in Damascus, as the only functional equipment remained deployed on the battlefield. Presuming that the remaining 75 tanks were in disrepair, the same can be therefore assumed with most, if not all, of the *coup-plotter's* armoured vehicles. On the other hand, even if we were to assume that the remaining 75 tanks were actually in working condition and simply located back in Damascus to counter a possible coup-d'état, the *coup-plotter's* arsenal of out-dated Soviet tanks would be no match against the Republican Guard's latest sophisticated weaponry. Any further discussion along those lines however would eventually result on misleading assumption, meaning that a theoretical discussion is needed to determine more conclusive finding. We will therefore take Bohmelt and Pilster (2015)'s U curve regarding the relation of counterbalancing and coup attempt, which shows that the more military units are [materially] strengthened, the higher the likelihood of success for a coup. It must be assumed therefore that the regime, as a rational actor, would find acceptable in times of great political crisis (if not purposely), to reduce the technical capabilities of its coup-proofing units in accordance with the number of troops it sends to the front. After all, we must remember that Rifat's Defence Company was the only *coup-proofing* unit to enjoy ultimate technical supremacy above all others, and with such sense of invincibility, an attempted coup proved highly attractive (De Bruin:2017, pp.2,9&16). Nevertheless, despite a strong reduction in *coup-proofer's* technical superiority, it will be concluded that, at best, they have in fact maintained balanced proportions in relation to *coup-proofers*.

### III c. Expertness

The main argument provided to explain the inadequateness of the Syrian military rests heavily on the inability of field officer to break with predetermined manoeuvres, rendering officers completely unable to react independently to changing circumstances on the ground (Eisenstadt and al.:2001, pp.562). Despite certain cultural explanations, such practices can be

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directly related to coup-proofing structure, where the level of expertness of individual soldiers and commanders can be manipulated to impede their ability of staging an effective military coup<sup>38</sup>. The Syrian armed forces, however, did begin to encourage a certain level of independent action following the assumption of Ali Aslan as Chief of Staff in 1998, allowing military academies to acknowledge and build upon past mistakes. As aging cold war era traditional commanders were side-lined, a new generation of junior officers have been to distinguish themselves by being granted greater operational responsibility (Harissi:2014). We must remember however, that professionalization usually “enhances the autonomy of the military and, if politically unchecked, can increase its tendency to intervene in the affairs of the state” (Kamrava:2000, pp.69). Consequently, the combination of continued purges over the years as well as a system of promotion based on paternalism has only hindered the perceived advancement in the overall fighting capabilities of the armed forces. However, rather than completely ostracize capable commanders who simply lacked political credentials, it should be noted that many were simply downgraded to less relevant conventional units<sup>39</sup>. On the other hand, key *coup-proofing* units retains a substantial proportion of aging commanders – who have heavily invested in their relationship with the regime and eager to retain their position. Except for certain brigades who took active part in suppressing past popular uprising, many of these aging old guards with no combat experience. Even during the 1973 war, they simply served in reserve units positioned on the last line of defence along the regime’s doorstep in Damascus and never saw action. While their more capable peers have remained persistently occupied along the front line since 2011, *coup-proofing* segments in Damascus have been left under the command of either incapable aging officers or newer,

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<sup>38</sup> Assad never went as far as to forbid live fire exercise and prohibit any formation of a unit beyond the divisional level as Colonel Qaddafi did, in order to completely fragment and wain down its ability of maintaining a successful coup (Pollack:2002, pp.386)

<sup>39</sup> This would prove greatly beneficial in the recruitment process of a coup (Luttwak:1968, pp.73).

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inexperienced peers. Combining such assumption with the previous theory of technical superiority by *coup-proofers* over *coup-plotters*, this would support Powell's claim that on most occasions highly sophisticated units - formed specially to countering coups - were crushed by a technologically inferior opposing troops. In other words, the determination of attempting to model elite units to counter coup d'états, often comes at the expense of rendering their technical superiority obsolete (Powell:2012, pp.1025). Based on the evidence, we can assume that *coup-plotters* have retained an elevated level of expertise. These however, have been confined to frontline units, rendering the regime vulnerable as a result of reduced level of skill back in the regime's epicentre - especially in comparison to *coup-plotters*.

### *Sectional Conclusion*

Controlled structural change within given institutions usual require considerable time to modify, which is why many observers were so quick to predict the inevitable fall of the regime in 2011 (Belkin & al.:2003, pp.598). Without access to archival records however, it is difficult to assess however, whether the regime retained these coup proofing structures by chance or through carefully executed calculations. While coup proofing structures experienced extensive reshuffling, and remodelling under Hafez following his brother's attempted coup in 1984, Syria's current structure has been maintained under circumstances that might have theoretically pointed to the opposite assumption. As a result, rather than suffering a complete collapse, the number of troops, technological equipment, and their capabilities, an equilibrium in structural coup-proofing appears to have sustained itself in relation to the potential threat. It is difficult however to determine who exactly deserves the credit for such occurrence, as our study indicates both wartime circumstances and deliberate precautionary measures by the regime have equally had an influence. To be

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properly verified, this factor would demand its own study, and yet only the opening of Syrian archives would be able to confirm these findings.

This chapter has explored the military aspects of coup proofing, exploring the ways an essential bodyguard might be able to expect to react to a coup d'état unleashed by a selected number of units. As Quinlivan reminds us however, these coup proofing units do not have to be larger than any other potential *plotters*, nor does it require to possess the expected military technology to even defeat it. It simply must be large enough and deployed so that it may effectively counter and possibly delay a plot. Only after this is done can further measures be utilized to render the putsch politically obsolete (Quinlivan:1999, pp.141). While some gaps may appear to have been formed, Syria's coup proofing structures have remained in place and ready to counter any potential adversaries.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion**

There is little doubt that the expansion of civil governance has significantly lowered the risk of a coup, both in former as well as existing political authoritarian systems. While some have expanded their influence through a gradual expansion of bureaucratic procedures, others have taken the path of institutional consolidation. Syria has remained somewhere between the two, where an amalgam of bureaucratic nightmares combined with a highly structured institutional framework has enabled the regime to maintain the various coup-proofing systems depicted in this dissertation. As can be observed, such mechanisms as well as systems of governance are therefore mutually reinforced through various forms of coercion, inducement and laundering- key characteristic of both authoritarian and totalitarian regimes (Lu & al.:2013, pp.240). This dissertation has served to describe various examples of these practices through Syria's economic coup-proofing measures, which although had a remarkable success in lowering coup risk at first, proved to be only a temporary solution over time. While economic coup proofing initially did well in gaining the trust and interest from its patron-client relationship, the practice proved too static and commercially dysfunctional as many of these relationships were forced to adapt to inevitable, changing economic circumstances eventually eroding the intended purpose. Whether this occurred due to diminishing



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economic resources or shifting market dynamics, the current system has only underscored that bitter disagreements are bound to arise with and between the former benefactors of economic coup-proofing practices. While counterbalancing measures carefully aim to proportionally distribute desired resources to satisfy these relationships, going as far as encouraging competition between all concerned parties, the diminishing space within the playing field highlights the losers and winners. As a result, we can conclude that our secondary hypothesis (1) remains consistent, in that Syria's economic coup-proofing measures have experience deep fluctuations due to the recent crisis. Not only does this conclusion prove conceptually valid, but remains theoretically consistent with Bohmelt and Pilster (2015)'s U curve, in that the system's inflexibility eventually gave rise to a gradually elevated risk of a coup. Two other significant observations remain clear however as a consequence of these developments. The first refers to the aforementioned notion of *kulturkampf*, which has consequently been detrimentally undermined by the competitive nature of rising commercial interests, especially as current developments are bound to bring additional fragmentation. But more importantly, it must be noted that the links that initially tied the military institution as a whole to the survival of the regime no longer appears to be as valid. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that this section of the study remained restricted to a selective set of case studies and that a complete analysis of remaining facts has yet to be performed, especially given the trans-regional nature of trade and monetary flow. The additional information and data that is needed to have a clearer picture will require patience and it is with great hope that the restriction on this information that this dissertation was faced with will be lifted in the near future.

Despite economic coup-proofing's consistency from Bohmelt and Pilster's U-curve, one must be reminded that their model was primarily intended to refer to military coup proofing structures alone.

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However, our secondary research has indicated that the model is more difficult to sustain, particularly since the various scenarios provided different outcomes. On one hand, the pre-civil war coup-proofing structure seems to have remained consistent, through the development of parallel structures that successfully compensate for a weak civil institution to reduce the risk of a coup. On the other hand, it is difficult to track the development of what has happened during the current civil war, as although its mechanisms were structurally weakened, they seem to have in fact remained in place in accordance with the threat they were meant to counter. Therefore, since coup risk is systematically heightened through increased reinforcement of these structures during the pre-civil war years, we could say that our findings are partially correct. The paradox lies however, in that the forces linked to the eventual crisis (the civil war) that was theoretically meant to precipitate the occurrence of a coup d'état, have in fact stabilized it. Whether this was due to military necessity intended to fight the civil war or through a strategic balancing act imposed by the regime to deliberately reduce coup risk, we can neither confirm nor reject our secondary hypothesis (2)<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, the mobilization of parallel military units has in fact remained in accordance to the regime's coup proofing structures. Similar to the economic factors, additional qualitative analysis would prove hugely beneficial, especially given the fact that some conclusions had to be made through rational assumptions. It can be said however that despite the advances made by social media in covering modern-day warfare, a good deal of information seems to be unavailable, mostly as a result of Carl von Clausewitz's seemingly always relevant concept of 'the fog of war' (Clausewitz:1832, pp.101). After all, despite various sophisticated technologies aimed at minimizing operational friction, it appears that uncertainty will always haunt both organizers and observers of conflict. In this situation, one cannot be 100% accurate, and therefore it was for

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<sup>40</sup> Albrecht's study however does confirm that coup-proofing in autocracies are also geared at the containment of a coup cascade (Albrecht: 2014, pp.662). Although theoretically consisted, this would be difficult to empirically prove in Syria's context without the occurrence of one.

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this reason that this dissertation took a more moderate, if not conservative approach, in order to paint a balanced conclusion, even when numerous factors – including the results of chapter 2 - pointed towards the extreme. Nevertheless, we cannot overstress the importance of counter-coup measures and structures, especially when it concerns a regime that has ardently favoured regime survival over all other forms of societal prosperity, a rational assumption for any institution nonetheless.

Although the research for both variables were performed in mutual exclusion from one another, a final assumption would theoretically point to a balanced conclusion, in the same fashion that was made concerning the secondary hypothesis (2). However, we must remember that to make a final conclusive statement regarding our primary hypothesis, both secondary hypotheses (1) and (2) will have to be settled in relation to one another. With the first variable leaning heavily in accordance to its own secondary hypothesis (1) and the other taking an impartial one towards its own secondary hypothesis (2), I will conclude that a final supposition would be weighed slightly in favour of our primary hypothesis. Therefore, I conclude that our primary hypothesis remains partially consistent, in that Syria's various levels of coup-proofing measures and structures have been partially – rather than drastically – weakened in recent years as a consequence of various political crisis and on-going conflict.

### *Concluding remarks*

While this dissertation focused on Syria's coup-proofing measures and structures, it consequently also shed a light on the current elevated level of coup risks. However, does a coup have a chance at succeeding under these circumstances? While we look at what triggers the causes and look at the structural vulnerabilities - which have been covered in this research - a final determination would be incomplete without at least addressing the socio-

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political reaction. After all, Luttwak reminds us that public reaction to a coup d'état has the power to render the action meaningless (Luttwak:1969, pp.13). In 2013, al-Gharbi proposed a sophisticated statistical study that aimed at rebuking Western assumptions regarding popular sentiment in Syria, stating that it was almost entirely depended on verbal testimony by Syrian expatriates. Al-Gharbi states that not only was this a pool of intellectuals representing a miniscule portion of the entire population, but their reference to 'friends back home' often consisted of a very selective socio-economic minority (al-Gharbi: 2013: pp.59). Even at the onset of the Arab spring, al-Gharbi proved how the assumed "widespread" protests only represented 1% of the total population, something that has inevitably diminished over the course of the war (al-Gharbi:2013, pp.60). After all, one cannot overstate the political apathy of the masses, especially after bearing the brunt of a civil war and other political uncertainty. Given this climate, we can assume that most people would far prefer the stability under a dictatorial regime than the unpredictable path of a sudden democratic transition. While it cannot be denied that the regimes has committed atrocities including war crimes against its own population, even for non-apathetic Syrians, the workings of government provided by the regime, at least provide a stable structure through which to implement gradual reforms rather than risk outright revolution. In other words, whether people would support a coup d'état lies heavily on whether the incumbent can sustain a lasting political structure. This means that any eventual *coup-plotter* would need to spawn from within the regime's current circle to realistically appease both the masses and the establishment.

Despite the assumed mass apathy towards politics in general, we cannot underestimate the political vacuum that has gradually grown in the armed forces of recent years. For instance, many of the old guard and top leadership such as Ali Aslan or Mustafa Tlas, have now assumed ceremonial roles, and retain very limited engagement in day-to-day professional management of the army

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(Zisser:2001). On the other hand, even with the predominant Alawite presence within the military, it must be also remembered that Hafez's 1970 coup was carried out against Salah al-Jadid, his closest associate and fellow Alawite. The fact that Rifat al-Assad attempted to plot against his own brother should serve as a warning that even family ties should not be over-estimated. All these clues and historical evidence show that a coup not only remains possible but also convenient, especially since the regime's recent military successes and international insulation under Russia, indicate that Bashar's bandwagon role will no longer be needed. Either way, it is difficult to assume that coup proofing units would act in the same obedient way under the leadership of an inexperienced, western educated, 34-year-old doctor<sup>41</sup> - who was crowned overnight - than they did under his unyielding yet cunning father Hafez. Rather than looking into the implementation of the coup itself, the issue lies within the consolidation phase, as the new incumbent usually remains heavily exposed to a potential overthrow upon assuming power, unless a new elite coalition is formed (Albrecht:2014, pp.663). Although such a forecast would be very difficult to accurately forecast, it must be assumed that an incumbent would have to satisfy all political forces mentioned above. However, this now includes most notably the great Russian and Iranian "allies", whom to most Syrian elites owe a great debt due to their on-going support. Just like popular opinion however, both powers appear to remain largely indifferent towards the identity of the Syrian leader, so long as the country remains viable for them to carry and support their own political and economic ambitions. These however remain hypothetical scenarios that will be best judged by other scholars in the future.

Given the complexities of risks and interests, the subject of coup-proofing in Syria remains a topic that requires continuous analysis, so long as it

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<sup>41</sup> Bashar al-Assad was quietly studying ophthalmology at London's (school) before being rushed to Syria following the death of his brother and perspective heir, Basil al-Assad, to undergo an accelerated grooming process to become the next president.

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survives as a structural policy and that internal political dynamics remain active. As of July 2017, the Syrian government has regained the upper hand in the current military conflict and has since demonstrated that it is here to stay. These latest developments also signifies that it has entered a transitional era, between the desperate times of “bandwagoning” for survival to the current one where its pre-war factional political dynamics are reemerging as it consolidates its power over the area it controls. The fact that the civil war has forced the regime to act accordingly by implying protocol-cushioning measures, means that it is now making up for the 5 years lost. While a decisive military victory over insurgents remains a probability, it is safe to assume that current coup risks are far from diminishing any time soon, especially as projected growth indicate that SAA will eventually regain its title as one of the region’s most relevant actors. After all, one needs only one strong individual from the many military figures and/or units to plot against the regime given the numerous reasons described throughout this dissertation. As such, this dissertation remains incomplete as it only served to partially assess the [still opaque] coup-proofing mechanisms within the parameters of what are unique circumstances. But most importantly, this dissertation has attempted to bring to light and make aware the relevancy of modern-day coup d’état and also provide some founding principles and arguments for future scholarly work concerning future developments of Syria’s civil-military relations.

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