



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

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## Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces

By *Lucas Winter*

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### Suheil al-Hassan and the Syrian Army's Tiger Forces

Lucas Winter

#### Introduction

This paper looks at the genesis, evolution and growth of the Syrian Army's "Tiger Forces" and their leader Suheil al-Hassan. The paper shows how Hassan has played an important role since conflict began in 2011. It attributes his transformation from special forces commander to leader of military campaigns to an ability to harness the Syrian Army's full infantry, artillery and airpower better than any other loyalist field commander. Given the Syrian Army's manpower shortages, rampant corruption and rivalry-laden bureaucracy, this is no small feat. Al-Hassan has become a key symbol in the Syrian loyalist camp, able to project more combined arms power than anyone else in Syria. His success on the battlefield comes less from tactical or strategic insights than from his ability to thrive within the loyalist camp's opaque and rivalry-laden bureaucracy. For this he has become a symbol to regime supporters, proof that the war can be won by working within the system.

#### Suheil al-Hassan and the "Tiger Forces"



**Suheil al-Hassan (September 2014)**

The Syrian Arab Army's (SyAA) answer to Erwin Rommel is a man named Suheil al-Hassan. Nicknamed "The Tiger" (al-Nimr), al-Hassan has emerged as the SyAA's best-known commander in the current Syrian War. Since 2012 he and his "Tiger Forces" have achieved a string of battlefield victories. His carefully cultivated media image has provided a boost to the Syrian military's battered morale. Key to al-Hassan's effectiveness as a commander is his ability to effectively combine SyAA infantry, artillery and airpower.<sup>[i]</sup> He has been willing to use all firepower available, making real the loyalist forces slogan "Assad or we will burn down the country." In a military faced with manpower shortages and plagued by intrigues, corruption and administrative confusion, this is no small feat.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Suheil al-Hassan was born in 1970 in Lattakia Province, the stronghold of Syria's Alawite community. After graduating from military college as an air defense officer he was assigned to the Air Force Intelligence Directorate (SyAFI), one of Syria's two intelligence agencies falling under the military chain of command. Since the times of Hafez Assad the SyAFI had been atop the pyramid of power in Syria, ensuring that the military and the regime remained on the same page.

Testimonies describe al-Hassan as severe and ideologically committed, obsessed with physical fitness and the warrior ethos.<sup>[iii]</sup> A fan of poetic language, he described himself as "a man with a heart of stone and a clear mind, calm like the ocean." Al-Hassan was eventually put in charge of Special Operations Command in SyAFI. This made him responsible for the training and tactical deployment of elite commando teams specialized in raids and urban combat.

When nationwide protests began in March 2011 regime hardliners sought to involve the SyAA directly in quelling the revolt. Al-Hassan was based in the Mezzeh Airbase, on the outskirts of Damascus. His forces embedded with regular army units to ensure that soldiers complied with orders to shoot.<sup>[iv]</sup> According to a defector's testimony, al-Hassan's men shot and killed SyAA soldiers whose loyalties were in doubt. In April 2011 al-Hassan led a contingent of SyAFI forces to a military barracks on the outskirts of Saïda, a town in Daraa Province. From there they spearheaded a massacre of civilians who intended on marching toward the besieged city of Daraa. According to the defector's account: "When the troops returned that

evening, they brought 120 bodies of killed protesters back to the base, as well as 160 detainees.”<sup>[v]</sup>

Al-Hassan was transferred to the Hama Military Airport at some point in 2011. Hama city had witnessed Syria’s largest protests in 2011. Its countryside was a combustible mosaic of Sunni and minority-community villages. The province was in the center of “vital Syria,” and securing full control over it was an early priority for the Syrian government. Al-Hassan oversaw the province’s main SyAFI detention center and helped lead a crackdown that produced a constant influx of detainees into the SyAFI prison.

In the second half of 2012 the Syrian Air Force began dropping “barrel bombs” on rebel positions. The bombs were essentially a mix of explosives, fuel and metal scraps packed into a large metal container, such as an empty oil barrel. They were dropped from helicopters above rebel-held territory and were highly inaccurate. Most were produced in a factory on the outskirts of Hama and deployed from the nearby airbase. Barrel bombs laid the foundations for al-Hassan’s transformation from SyAFI commander to leader of military campaigns.<sup>[vi]</sup>

By the end of 2012 al-Hassan had extended his control over most military assets in the province, including aircraft in the Hama Airbase and armor and heavy weapons from local brigades of the SyAA’s 11th Division and the elite 4th Division, based in Mezzeh. His infantry included commando units, militia members and SyAA infantry troops. He was feared and respected, considered a regime insider with access to the president.

Al-Hassan’s first mission as military commander was to flush rebels out of areas near Arba’in Mountain (Jabal Arba’in), a rebel bastion in Idlib Province. His commando forces gained notoriety after laying a deadly ambush to take over a village by posing as rebels. His forces advanced methodically, relying on extensive barrel bombing and artillery shelling. When rebels sought refuge in Ariha, a large town of around 70,000 residents near the provincial capital of Idlib, his forces did their best to pulverize the city, raining down as many as twenty barrel bombs and more than 200 rockets in a single day. Estimates were that the shelling destroyed 60-70 percent of the town’s buildings.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Al-Hassan’s ability to harness Syria’s combined arms capabilities was no easy task: the Syrian military was fraying at the edges after decades of corruption and nepotism. Its infantry had been decimated by defections and desertions and was being replaced by venal, unruly militias. Aside from some elite units, incompetence permeated its ranks. Fiefdoms within the SyAA sought to undermine one another, and loyalist warlords regularly challenged SyAA authority.

In 2013 al-Hassan was called on to reopen a military highway used for supply lines in a desert area between Hama and Aleppo. Rebels had cut off the highway at several points and were beginning to encircle vital military facilities in Aleppo, including an airbase (Nayrab) and military production factories vital to the SyAA’s war effort. Rebels controlled much of eastern Aleppo and MAJ GEN Mohammed Khaddour, a high-ranking Republican Guard officer in charge of security in Aleppo, seemed unable to lead a counteroffensive.<sup>[viii]</sup>

Al-Hassan re-established the Hama-Aleppo supply line by replicating the “scorched earth” strategy he used in Idlib. His convoy of armor and artillery slowly worked its way north up the highway. His commando units showed no mercy for rebel sympathizers.<sup>[ix]</sup> Rebel fighters were eventually pushed back to Safira, a large town on the outskirts of Aleppo. In an official statement of why they eventually withdrew from Safira, rebel groups described the following scene:

The mujahideen were able to control the road for a long time. The mujahideen attacked a

military convoy commanded by Suheil al-Hassan before and after Khanasir. Due to the intensity of the fire, aerial attacks and rockets the mujahideen were forced to retreat toward Abu Darikha village... the coalition of Assad militias followed a scorched earth policy... they used barrel bombs, various rockets and mortar fire, tanks, and artillery of all types, until they forced the mujahideen to retreat to Safira, where they prepared the city with trenches and sandbags. Civilians were evacuated to safety and for 27 days in a row the city was bombarded, with the regime using barrel bombs to erase the city from the map, creating major destruction. During the 27 days around 450 barrel bombs were dropped, and around 700 mortars and rockets landed in the city daily. The entrance to the city was also targeted with Kornet guided missiles, which cut supply lines...[x]

In early 2014 al-Hassan was named military commander of Aleppo Province, after which he began raining down barrel bombs on the rebel-held eastern parts of the city. To the rebels he was a butcher. To government supporters he was a hero, particularly after his forces broke the yearlong siege of Aleppo's Central Prison in May 2014. A Syrian TV report showing al-Hassan with the scraggly prison defenders went viral online.[xi] Veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk published a story about him in *The Independent*, calling him “Bashar al-Assad’s favorite soldier” and “a man you wouldn’t want to cross.”[xii]

Al-Hassan’s men - the “Tiger Forces” - became a media item. The term was used vaguely, referring to either his commando forces, all men directly under his command, or all who fought in his campaigns. One media report estimated their numbers at 1,000; another guessed 15,000, while a third put the figure at 80,000.[xiii] The key to his success remained his ability to get more out of the SyAA than any other commander. As an opposition media report noted: “In his offensives, al-Hassan uses all the available artillery forces in areas where he is fighting. He has airbases in Lattakia, Homs and Hama at his service for battle. Three helicopters and a MiG fighter jet circle together at all times from morning until evening in his battlefield spaces.”[xiv]

In the fall of 2014 rebels launched an offensive in Hama and began pushing toward the military airport and surrounding areas. Al-Hassan took the lead in the government’s counterattack and with his usual tactics was able to push rebels back.[xv] Rebel resistance was stiffer than before, partly due to a large influx of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM).

ATGMs played a key role in handing al-Hassan his first major defeat. In 2015 rebels launched an offensive in and around the Arba’in Mountain, in the same general area where al-Hassan had first made his reputation as a brigade-level commander two years earlier. Rebel groups in the area were for once coordinating with one another. The opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimated their numbers at over 10,000.[xvi] They were plentifully armed with ATGMs (including U.S.-manufactured TOW missiles), had the sympathy of local civilians, and held strategic high ground.

By the time al-Hassan entered the battlefield, SyAA supply lines between Jisr al-Shughur and Idlib city had been cut off or made impractically dangerous by rebel ATGM teams. Al-Hassan and 800 of his fighters were unable to contain a rebel attack on their base in Jisr al-Shughur and retreated. Around one hundred and fifty loyalist fighters and officers remained in the town’s former hospital building, encircled by rebel fighters. Al-Hassan, famous for breaking the Aleppo Prison Siege, vowed to set them free. He was partially successful, opening up a corridor through which some of the men made it out. But many never made it out, and his image was battered.

Al-Hassan and his forces retreated south to a sprawling encampment in Jurin, at the edge of the Alawite heartland. As rebels inched forward, villages surrounding Jurin were evacuated, and tensions rose between the Alawite militias and the SyAA. Al-Hassan lost a handful of top commanders during the summer and fall of 2015 and he himself was lightly injured. When Russia intervened militarily in September, its immediate priority became pushing rebels away from Jurin.

In the weeks surrounding Russian intervention al-Hassan was neither seen nor heard from. When “The Tiger” finally re-emerged in public his stripes looked different: he had filled out, wore dark sunglasses, sported a neatly trimmed beard over a newly tan, smooth, round face, and exhibited uncharacteristic comfort in front of the cameras. His awkwardness seemed more rehearsed, and his quasi-poetic statements, always somewhat disjointed, took a turn to the bizarre. Some in the Syrian opposition claimed a paid actor was playing the dead Tiger’s role.[\[xvii\]](#)



**Suheil al-Hassan (April 2016)**

The new-look al-Hassan has quickly and successfully adapted to Syrian battlefield conditions following Russian intervention. In November 2015 he re-established his position as the SyAA’s top commander by breaking the three-year siege on the Kweiris Military Airbase in Aleppo Province.[\[xviii\]](#) According to the Syrian opposition website, *alsouria.net*, Russian military assets have given priority to al-Hassan out of an “eagerness to pander.”[\[xix\]](#) After being promoted to major general in December 2015 (he had allegedly refused a promotion before to “stay with his men”) he was awarded a medal of valor by Russian forces for his role in breaking the Kweiris siege. Forces under his control have allegedly been supplied with advanced Russian artillery.[\[xx\]](#) In March 2016 they were credited with helping retake Palmyra alongside a coalition of Iranian-backed infantry units, with extensive Russian aerial support.[\[xxi\]](#)

Al-Hassan has become a key symbol in the Syrian loyalist camp. He has been a vital asset to the SyAA’s war efforts, able to project more combined arms power than anyone else in Syria. His success on the battlefield comes less from tactical or strategic insights than from his ability to thrive within the loyalist camp’s opaque and rivalry-laden bureaucracy. For this he has become a symbol to regime supporters, proof that the war can be won by working within the system.

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## **End Notes**

[i] Al-Hassan has also worked effectively with Iranian and Russian forces and their surrogates.

[ii] For detailed and informed analysis of the dynamics between the Syrian regime and the SyAA, see Kheder Khaddour, “Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army’s Accidental Resilience.” *Carnegie Middle East Center Regional Insight*, 14 March 2016. Accessed 11 April 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/03/14/strength-in-weakness-syrian-army-s-accidental-resilience/iuz7>

[iii] According to testimony from a conscript, al-Hassan saw himself and his trainees as real-life action heroes and drew inspiration from movies. He was nicknamed “Sasuki” (behind his back) after the lead character in a Japanese anime cartoon broadcast in Syria. Nur al-Din al-Ismaïl. “Six Months with Suhail al-Hassan (Part 1).” *Orient News*, 9 August 2015 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016, [http://www.orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/89671/0/-----](http://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/89671/0/-----)

[iv] According to testimony from a sergeant who defected from the SyAA’s 59th Battalion, 5th Division: “There were about 100 soldiers in the front row. Fifteen to twenty meters behind us stood agents from Air Force Intelligence. When we received the orders to shoot at the protesters, some of the soldiers started shooting in the air while others were shooting directly at the protesters. A couple of soldiers dropped their guns, refusing to shoot. Suddenly, agents from Air Force Intelligence opened fire on those who dropped their weapons, killing at least three soldiers from Brigade 52.” See: “By All Means Necessary,” *Human Rights Watch*. December 2011. Accessed 11 April 2016. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1211webwcover\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1211webwcover_0.pdf)

[v] “By All Means Necessary.” Among the detainees was a boy named Hamza al-Khatib who was tortured and killed and became a symbol of the uprising.

[vi] “Who’s Who: Suheil Al-Hassan.” *al-Souria Net*, 25 November 2015. Accessed 11 April 2016, [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Who/30197/Who\\_Who\\_Suheil\\_Al\\_Hassan](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Who/30197/Who_Who_Suheil_Al_Hassan)

[vii] Roy Gutman and Paul Raymond. “Battle for Strategic Syrian Town Shows Why War Has Displaced Millions.” *McClatchy*, 23 August 2013. Accessed 11 April 2016, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24758734.html>

[viii] When fighting broke out in 2011 Mohammed Khaddour commanded the Republican Guard’s 106th Brigade, based on the outskirts of Damascus. He had been transferred to Aleppo in November 2012, but in July 2013 Issam Zahreddine, the popular commander of the Republican Guard’s 2014th Brigade, replaced him. Both Khaddour and Zahreddine were eventually sent east, Zahreddine to hold military facilities in Deir Ezzour and Khaddour to command the SyAA’s Eastern District (Raqqa Deir Ezzour, and Hasakah Provinces). For more on Khaddour see: Nicholas A. Heras. “The Syrian Regime’s Answer to the Islamic

State: Major General Muhammad Khaddour.” *The Jamestown Foundation Militant Leadership Monitor* 6: Issue 11, November 2015. Accessed 11 April 2016, [www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=44841](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=44841).

[ix] Perhaps the best-documented case involves the town of al-Mazrah near Khanasir, where his forces rounded up the males of certain families, shot and killed them, and dumped their bodies into a village well.

[x] Said Jawdat, “FSA Factions Describe Their Withdrawal from Safira.” *All4Syria*, 5 November 2013 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/109299>

[xi] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGFFD3RXyyw> Accessed 11 April 2016.

[xii] Robert Fisk, “An Audience with ‘The Tiger’ – Bashar al-Assad’s Favourite Soldier.” *The Independent*, 8 June 2014. Accessed 11 April 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/an-audience-with-the-tiger-bashar-al-assad-s-favourite-soldier-9508736.html>

[xiii] 15,00 estimate from “Suheil al-Hassan: We Will Soon Be Taking Photos in Jisr al-Shughur.” *Al-Akhbar*, 18 May 2015 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/233305> ; 1,000 estimate from “Soldiers from the Regime’s ‘Tiger Forces’: Suheil al-Hassan Will Overthrow Bashar al-Assad and Become Syria’s President.” *Al-Quds*, 18 November 2014 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=252687>;

80,00 estimate from: “Will the Syrian Regime’s Most Prominent Commander, COL Suheil al-Hassan aka ‘The Tiger,’ Become a Competitor to al-Assad?” *France 24*, 9 December 2014 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016. <http://goo.gl/3M0v0e>

[xiv] “Opposition Media Praises the Achievements of an Air Force Intelligence Officer!” *Asia News*, 3 October 2013 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016. <http://www.asianewslb.com/?page=article&id=68438>

[xv] Al-Hassan’s forces have been reportedly involved in other battles not mentioned in this paper, most notably over the Shaer Gas Field in the Homs desert.

[xvi] “Continuous Attacks by Nusra Front and Islamist Factions South of Idlib and near Jisr al-Shughur,” *SOHR*, 23 April 2015 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016. <http://www.syriahr.com/?p=110659>

[xvii] See, for instance, “Was Suheil al-Hassan Killed?” *Orient News*, 25 February 2016 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016. [http://orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/104150/0/%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%82%D9%8F%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%9F](http://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/104150/0/%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%82%D9%8F%D8%AA%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%9F)

[xviii] When the siege of Kweiris was broken, the new-look al-Hassan appeared in a video echoing in style the footage following the Aleppo Prison siege, as if intentionally trying to replicate it. Accessed 11 April 2016: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1JSr6\\_yxb4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1JSr6_yxb4)

[xix] “Who’s Who: Suheil Al-Hassan.”

[xx] “Expected Military Operation around Raqqa as Moscow Provides Tiger Forces with Heavy Rockets.” *Al-Quds*, 5 February 2016 (Arabic). Accessed 11 April 2016 <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=477646>

[xxi] His coordination with Iran predates Russian intervention, having incorporated Hizbullah teams into his offensives and maintaining much influence in Jurin, an important base for Iran-sponsored Shi'i paramilitaries.

## About the Author



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