



### SPOT REPORT:

## “Enlist!”: Insights into the Syrian regime’s military recruitment and propaganda strategy

On 26<sup>th</sup> July Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made a startling admission that the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) is suffering manpower shortages. This report provides an overview of recent attempts by the regime to meet these shortages in personnel. The most recent regime military propaganda campaign, with the slogan: “Enlist!,” was launched 3 June. In the last seven weeks, recruitment posters and billboards were distributed across regime-held areas, particularly inside Damascus, while announcements ran on radio and videos were broadcast on social media and state television. The campaign is a re-vamping of earlier recruitment efforts, such as the “Call to Arms” campaign launched earlier this year. This campaign, however, is notable for the depth and breadth of its messaging, which specifically addresses the multiple challenges that the Syrian military currently faces.

**GRUMBLING SOLDIERS AND A DIVIDED PUBLIC.** The SAA is facing challenging times: it faces manpower shortages, internal discontent, and a rising crisis of public confidence. Defections and the loss of a draft-eligible population early in the war, as well as further attrition over the past two years, have lowered the military’s manpower to less than half of what it was in 2011. In a vicious cycle, the regime’s strategy to deal with this problem – namely, making military service virtually indefinite – has led to the perception among servicemen and the public that serving in the armed forces amounts to a death sentence. This feeds a continuing problem of draft evasion. Meanwhile, soldiers who remain in the ranks have in recent months begun to publicly express on social network platforms frustration over extended service in the military, poor living conditions, mistreatment, and neglect (see inset).

### “Three pieces of bread, an egg, and a musty potato”

The food rations allotted to soldiers in the SAA have repeatedly been criticised on pro-regime social media pages. The following photos recently surfaced on pro-regime social media, allegedly comparing daily SAA food rations (on the left) with those provided to Hezbollah fighters (on the right). One individual commented, “And the regime wonders why so many defect from its ranks!”



*Alleged daily SAA food rations*



*Alleged Hezbollah food rations*

“I need someone to fill in for me!”  
How frustrated soldiers respond to regime propaganda

In addition to grievances about poor treatment, a number of conscripts in the SAA are beginning to complain about the length of their service in the armed forces. Owing to attrition and the regime’s inability to deploy troops it thinks it cannot trust – principally Sunni soldiers and officers – the Syrian military is extending the length of compulsory military service, such that an individual who began his service in 2010 or 2011 may now have been serving for four to five consecutive years instead of the ordinary eighteen-month tour. A similar phenomenon is affecting soldiers called in from the reserve corps, as following military service, all men ages 18-40 are legally required to remain on reserve duty.

This has led to the rise of social media movements calling for the discharge of long-enlisted soldiers. The most vocal calls surround the 102<sup>nd</sup> and 103<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiments, as well as the 104<sup>th</sup> mechanised brigades. Social media movements include:

1. [“People! We want to be discharged”](#)
2. [“We want the 102<sup>nd</sup> infantry regiment of the SAA to be discharged”](#)
3. [“It’s my right to be discharged”](#)

Participants in these groups vary in the extent to which they are critical of the regime and its institutions: some use profanity to refer to the regime and the SAA (though not President Bashar al-Assad), while others are ultra-patriotic, posting pictures of the Assad dynasty. All, however, have in common the wish that the public step up to its responsibilities and help shoulder the national burden of military service. Thus, group members and visitors post sentimental images showcasing the suffering of soldiers and re-post images from regime recruitment propaganda campaigns.



*Patriotic propaganda*



*Emotional appeals*

These groups sometimes serve as a forum for discussion of regime propaganda itself. Overall, users leaving comments on the subject are sceptical that campaigns like “Enlist!” and “A Call to Arms” will work. They tend to say that the public will continue to “sit in cafés” and evade the draft because everyone is well aware that no one comes back from military service alive.

**An opinion on military service:**

*“If the SAA soldier was given enough food to eat, and not left in the cold, and if he knew that his family would be treated fairly in case he passes away, you probably wouldn’t see any more youth hanging out in the cafés or universities, or leaving the country. If the period for the conscription were clearly specified or if the soldiers knew that they were not going to be left neglected, then no one would have escaped and avoided conscription. The problem is not about having enough soldiers. The problem is that we have poor planning and bad management and command, and yet they [the state/the commandment of the army] can’t admit that we are fighting against professionals and not mercenaries.”*

- A contributor to no. 2 of the Facebook pages listed above


**THE ARMY’S NATIONAL MISSION.** In this environment, the Syrian regime has found it critical to rectify public perceptions of the army and boost recruitment to the SAA. The regime does enjoy military support from males who serve in neighbourhood militias, generally referred to as the National Defence Forces (NDF). However, it still needs manpower for the SAA, which is the only force it can redeploy at will to any part of the country. In this respect, SAA strategists are caught in a rut: although recruits are needed at the national level, members of the public are increasingly expressing a preference for serving in their home provinces, a shift observable on pro-regime social media, where commenters continually complain about the regime’s “neglect” of their home regions and state their reluctance to serve in far-off cities, commenting, “let the people of Aleppo defend themselves!”. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable among Alawites.<sup>1</sup>

The regime’s approach to this problem has been two-fold. On the one hand, it has continued to press for recruitment into the armed forces through a combination of raids, checkpoint ID checks, and propaganda. On the other hand, it has responded to popular pressure and is now giving conscripts’ home provinces; there are also reports of such militias being formed in Homs.<sup>2</sup> It is highly possible that these units, while they are ostensibly regional, are being formed with the intent that they also be deployed in other locations in the event of acute military need. This is already current practice with the NDF neighbourhood militias, for example. Were such deployments to take place, commanders might face insubordination from recruits who see their service as strictly defensive and localised.<sup>3</sup>

#### **MESSAGING STRATEGIES: AN OVERVIEW.**

The recent regime propaganda campaigns are a comprehensive attempt to address the challenges above. One of its key themes is broadening the room for identification with the “Syrian Arab Army soldier” by weaving all members of Syrian society into the narrative of the propaganda campaign. In particular, the regime’s recent messaging is notable for its appeal to religious minorities, in a clear nod both to the regime’s narrative that it is the protector of minorities, and to the regional recruitment strategy that is highly likely to rely on a minority support base. The campaign is also innovative and noteworthy for its appeal to online activists, parents, and women. Finally, the campaign has demonstrated a new tactic in the regime’s communications strategy, including the use of guilt as a recruitment tool as an alternative to narratives of “victory over terrorists” and “sacrifice” that were previously prominent in regime propaganda.

**A ROLE FOR THE DRUZE.** The “Enlist!” campaign can be understood in part as a regime attempt to cement its image as the protector of minorities. The poster below depicts what appears to be a Druze woman – she is wearing a traditional white dress – holding a gun alongside a male soldier. The poster



“ENLIST!” AND “CALL TO ARMS” DELIBERATELY WEAVE INTO THEIR NARRATIVES ALL MEMBERS OF SYRIAN SOCIETY – WOMEN, FAMILIES, MINORITIES, AND ONLINE ACTIVISTS – IN ORDER TO BROADEN THE ROOM FOR IDENTIFICATION WITH THE “SYRIAN ARAB ARMY SOLDIER” AND STRESS SYRIANS’ COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY TO SERVE.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the strongest regionalist language observed to date by ARK’s research group has been on pro-regime social media pages based out of Tartous and Latakia, where users decry the fact that the government sends soldiers from Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartous, and Jabla – cities with sizable Alawite minority populations – to fight in Aleppo, Palmyra, Daraa, Damascus, Idlib, and Dayr al-Zawr.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the “Coastal Shield” brigades, see Aymenn al-Tamimi, “The Coastal Shield Brigade: A New Pro-Assad Militia,” Syria Comment, 23 July 2015. [Web](#).

<sup>3</sup> There are reports that one of the first Druze militias constituted in Sweida province in response to a regional call to arms collapsed when the militia’s commanders, while they had promised the fighters that they would only serve in a defensive capacity in their home province of Sweida, tried to deploy the men to neighbouring Daraa.



appeals to a sense of common purpose with the phrase “Our Army...Means All of Us.” The Druze community in southern Syria will play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of the conflict. As a result, the regime is keen to message that it is willing to provide the Druze the means, logistically and militarily, to protect their own communities. The theme of community self-defence is especially salient for the Druze community. On the one hand, members of the Druze community see themselves as under threat from Sunni extremists in nearby Daraa. On the other, regime leaders most likely understand that its approach in Sweida has started to face challenges as local unaffiliated self-defence groupings have begun to take form, likely arming themselves through weapons smuggled across the Jordanian border. For this reason and because of the critical location of Sweida province, it is in the regime’s interest that any form of popular militarisation in Sweida province remain under its control.



**A ROLE FOR CHRISTIANS.** The poster, below, labelled with the hashtag “A Call to Arms,” portrays a soldier defending Maaloula, a town with significance as one of the three remaining villages where Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, is spoken. In this image, the soldier, superimposed over recognisable religious symbols, relays the message that the Syrian Army is protecting not only Syria’s Christians, but also a village of great symbolic value to Christianity. This poster arguably mobilises fears that salafi-jihadi rebels intend to kill Christians and destroy Christian villages wherever they find them.



**SOLDIERS WITH BEARDS.** Officially, beards are prohibited within the Syrian military and early renditions of regime military propaganda portrayed soldiers as clean-shaven. On pro-regime social media, these posters were frequently ridiculed as being out of touch with the reality of privates and even senior military leaders who tend, in fact, to grow beards. In addition, observers in regime-held areas of Damascus report that beards have become increasingly common there, not as a sign of religiosity but rather as an expression of masculinity. Notably, recent propaganda efforts have therefore portrayed SAA soldiers with beards, most likely to address public criticism and to reflect this new reality. Several pictures above and below display this feature.

**WOMEN AND MASCULINITY.** The latest regime propaganda campaign has amplified the role of women in the military. Women are depicted fighting alongside male soldiers. This technique is not just meant to motivate women to join; it may also be meant to shame men into joining the SAA by drawing upon their sense of masculinity. Other recruitment videos, for example, conversely state that “the Syrian army needs men.”



**SUPPORTIVE WIVES AND MOTHERS.** The portrayal of women extends beyond the female soldier – underscoring the regime’s understanding of the influential role mothers and wives play in the decisions of potential recruits. Propaganda featuring female family members, such as those below, have two purposes. On the one hand, they try to change the attitudes of women who can obstruct men’s ability to join the armed services (this pressure can be indirect, as in discouraging a son or husband to enlist, or direct, as when mothers in coastal villages have blocked roads in order to keep recruiters out of their villages). On the other hand, they target conscripts by conveying the message that when a man serves in the military, he can expect his family to be proud of his sacrifices and accomplishments.



*Supportive wives and mothers: A digital copy of the poster*



*The poster in Damascus*



**FIGHT ON THE BATTLEFIELD, NOT ON YOUR COMPUTER.** The regime’s “Enlist” campaign has not neglected recruitment efforts targeted at its traditional power base, the military-aged male. However, the campaign is innovative in its direct targeting of individuals who follow the Syrian conflict on social media without participating militarily, the so-called “young men sitting in internet cafés” decried by the soldier in the inset on page two. The poster below targets social media users, asking: “You are watching – why wait! Enlist!”



**GUILT.** While image-based products such as posters stress themes like service, accomplishment, and solidarity, audio-visual products produced for the “Call to Arms” campaign add an additional prompt – guilt. Videos feature voxpops with soldiers on the front line, giving them the opportunity to personally call on the public to enlist. In one propaganda [video](#), for example, two soldiers shame young men who have extended their university studies or paid bribes to escape military service:

*I'm 52 years old, and I'm fighting with the Syrian Arab Army. Here's what I would say about these people who are loitering nearby: if they had any sense of decency, they would join our fight to get our land back.*

*I want to ask the young guys my age: how are you are different from us? I'm here on the frontline, while they're hanging out in cafes and in the streets. But these homes, this land we are protecting – isn't it for all of us?*

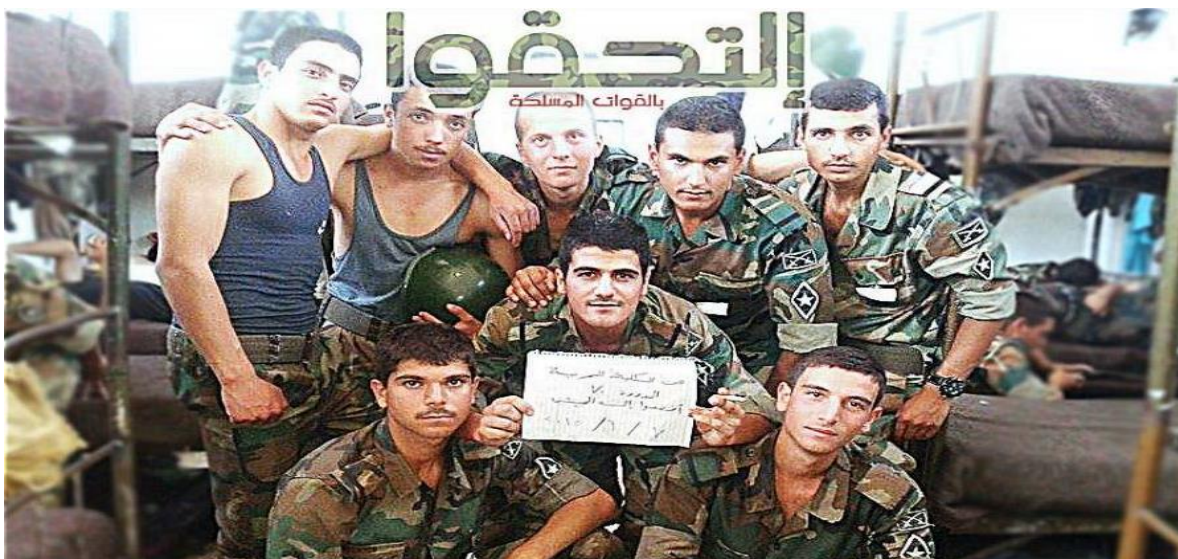


Still from a recruitment video featuring soldiers on the front line released on the “Call to Arms” campaign Facebook page on 14 June 2015.

**PART-SOLDIER, PART-CIVILIAN.** Other campaign images have shown individuals dressed half in civilian clothing and half in military uniform. Such images send two messages. On the one hand, they remind civilians of their obligations to their country: citizenship does not limit itself to economic and civic participation, but also to defend the country when under attack. On the other hand, the image reassures citizens that the states recognises their civilian status and the exceptional nature of present circumstances. When their tour of duty is complete, the poster implies, the state promises that soldiers will return to civilian life. This second message is particularly important for draft dodgers who evade service because they fear for their lives.



**YES, MILITARY TRAINING SECURES YOUR FUTURE.** Due to its acute need for manpower on the front lines, the SAA has been deploying conscripts with very little experience and training. It is notable in this regard that the “Enlist!” campaign includes a poster showing camaraderie among young men in military colleges. The image stresses the state’s intention to train conscripts, reassuring both military-age males and their parents. It also attempts to appeal to young men’s desire for brotherhood, a sense of mission, and military glory.



ARK will continue to analyse developments in relation to efforts to meet manpower shortages in the SAA, with a focus on the efficacy of recruitment and propaganda campaigns.