

Russia's Favorite Syrian Warlord **World**

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Russia's military has chosen its favorites among the Syrian Army forces that are leading Russian support to Vladimir Putin's dream of building a stronger than ever political and military presence in the Middle East. Some of the best informed analysts of the Syrian situation believe Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan [ctr in photo] has won over even Putin and is considered a possible successor to the top job, should anything happen to Bashar al-Assad.

BY SAM DAGHER, REPORTER IN THE MIDDLE EAST, [THE ATLANTIC](#) MARCH 5, 2018

BEIRUT—Early on the morning of February 18, Syrian regime forces gathered on a field on the edge of eastern Ghouta, a rebel-held region near Damascus. The sky had just cleared after a weekend of torrential rain that had grounded Russian and Syrian regime warplanes conducting airstrikes on the area. Soon, a stout, bearded man began to speak. Many of the men gathered held up their cellphones to film him as he delivered a [message](#) to the rebels in eastern Ghouta: They would “see hell’s flames” if they mounted any resistance to his forces. “You will find no one to help you and if you cry for help, you will be succored with water as hot as melting metal,” Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan warned them. “At your service my master the Tiger!” shouted one of the men in the crowd, using the intimidating *nom de guerre* he has acquired over the years. “If you’re not with God then you’re with the devil. Be on the side of God so that God will be with you,” Hassan said. Through Syria’s civil war, Hassan, a member of the minority Alawite sect like Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, has become something of a celebrity. In the lead-up to Russia’s intervention in the Syrian war in the fall of 2015, Hassan was believed to have been fatally injured in battle. But he re-emerged, transformed into a regime hero with a growing fan base and legions of admirers on social media. (Some speculated that the real Tiger was dead and that this man was an imposter drafted by the regime to boost morale after the major defeats it suffered before Russia came to the [rescue](#).) Unlike the more staid Assad, the flamboyant 48-year-old Hassan has often [boasted](#) of his efforts to exterminate regime enemies. This has endeared him to loyalists—and, it seems, to Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia. As he delivered his sermon of fire and fury that day on the edge of Ghouta, next to him stood four mysterious-looking soldiers dressed in full combat gear and masks. They appeared to be part of a personal security detail provided by the Russians. True to Hassan’s words, Syrian government forces and their Russian backers unleashed hell on eastern Ghouta shortly after he spoke. Spokespeople for the Russian military in Syria disseminated a stream of [messages](#) via official social media accounts identifying Hassan, commander of the so-called “Tiger Forces,” as the leader of the land troops closing in on the area. The messages said that Russia was backing Hassan and his men with airstrikes and Russian-supplied T-90 tanks, BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launchers (considered to be among the deadliest in the world) and Tochka ballistic missiles. “We will provide the necessary air support to the forces of Brigadier General Suheil al-Hassan … We have real confidence in their ability to accomplish the mission,” Alexander Ivanov, the spokesman for Russian forces headquartered at the Hmeimim airbase in western Syrian, wrote on

the base's official [Facebook page](#). Later, a pro-Syrian regime website also reported that several Russian army officers were on the ground [working](#) with Hassan in a command center in eastern Ghouta. [⋮] [http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/ ... d/146397/?oref=d-mostread](http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/...d/146397/?oref=d-mostread)