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Top Syrian General Defects to Turkey

By Jason Ditz

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General Manaf Tlas, one of the top leaders of Syria's Republican Guard and a childhood friend of President Bashar Assad, has [defected](#) to Turkey. It is the 16th general to have defected from the regime, and by far the biggest loss.

Gen. Tlas' loss is not only a huge one militarily, but symbolically as he is one of the top ranking Sunnis in the military and from a hugely important Sunni family that includes several other top military leaders past and present.

That includes Tlas' father, Mustafa Tlas, who was Syria's Army Chief of Staff for years and held the position of Defense Minister from 1972 through 2004. Apparently fearing retaliation for the defection, Mustafa is [said](#) to have gone into hiding in Paris, France.

The loss of Tlas reflects a growing sectarian divide in Syrian society, with tensions between the majority Sunnis and the ruling Alawite having driven wedges between friendships across society, all the way to the top with Assad and Tlas.

Whether Tlas is simply leaving the scene or plans to join the rebels remains to be seen. Many other defecting generals have joined the Free Syrian Army, but the group is increasingly divided.