



Jeffrey White  
Andrew J. Tabler  
Aaron Y. Zelin

# SYRIA'S MILITARY OPPOSITION

HOW EFFECTIVE,  
UNITED, OR  
EXTREMIST?





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Cover photo: A member of the Free Syrian Army stands guard at a checkpoint after clashes with pro-government forces in Salqin city in Idlib, October 2012. REUTERS/Asmaa Waguih

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# **UPDATE U.S. Military Action in Response to the August 21 Chemical Weapons Attack**

*Jeffrey White*

WASHINGTON MAY BE approaching a decision to take direct military action against the Syrian regime for its increasingly certain role in the August 21 chemical weapons strike in the Damascus area. Any such action should be planned with an eye toward achieving several limited but important military objectives: namely, showing resolve in holding the regime accountable for use of chemical weapons, warning the regime that further use will lead to potentially escalating strikes, and reducing the regime's ability to conduct CW attacks.

These objectives are well within the capabilities of U.S. and allied forces and could be achieved with limited, low-risk (though not “no risk”) actions. They do not require an overwhelming attack on the entire regime structure and its forces, though provision for follow-on strikes and regime retaliation would be necessary. At the same time, any planned military action must be strong enough to achieve these goals, since ineffectual strikes would only encourage the regime, dishearten its opponents, and hamper Washington's ability to conduct further actions if necessary.

## **Deliberations and Preparations**

Since the August 21 attack, the Obama administration has been holding intense deliberations to determine what happened and who was responsible. In addition, other governments and observers have weighed in with analysis of the available evidence

According to Doctors Without Borders—an NGO with medical personnel at facilities that received many of the casualties --several hundred people were killed in an attack, in which the nature and sudden onset of the effects point to the use of neurotoxins. On September 2, the French government released a nine-page declassified version of its intelligence synthesis, which stated that its modeling of the impact of the attack was consistent with reports that 1,500 died. While evidence

continues to be gathered, it appears increasingly clear that the regime or elements within it ordered the attack, and that regime forces carried it out.

Chemical weapons have always been tightly controlled in Syria, including during the war. There have been no reports or indications that the regime has lost control of them or that the rebels have acquired a significant CW capability. In addition, the August 21 attack coincided with conventional regime military operations against the areas struck. All of these areas were home to large Sunni populations and major rebel activity. Indeed, the regime has experienced increasing military difficulties in the Damascus region: it has been unable to clear rebel forces from the area and is facing offensive pressure there. Furthermore, news reports suggest that U.S. and other intelligence services have intercepts of telephone conversations by Syrian, Hezbollah, and Iranian officials discussing the regime's decision to use chemical weapons. Thus, while rebel responsibility cannot be completely ruled out, that possibility is “vanishingly small,” as British foreign secretary William Hague put it.

## **Political and Military Goals**

Any strike against Syria should have significant goals, but they do not have to be all-encompassing (e.g., regime change). A “punitive” strike could be limited in scope while still having important effects on the situation.

As mentioned above, the political goals of such a strike could include holding the regime accountable for the CW attack and bolstering deterrence against future CW use. A strike might also weaken the resolve of regime supporters, encourage fissures within the regime, and bolster the armed and political opposition.

Military goals could include reducing the regime's ability to conduct future CW attacks, signaling to

its forces that they are directly at risk if they use such weapons, and establishing boundaries for the regime's use of force against civilians. In addition, a strike could weaken key regime units (especially in the Damascus area), increase defections, and improve the military position of rebel forces around the capital. An expanded target list could include surface-to-surface missile units and air force units/facilities with a CW mission or capability.

A punitive attack does not mean a weak or token attack. It should be a punishing strike mounted with enough strength to inflict serious damage on the targets. It should also be conducted in a highly visible manner to ensure that its impact is seen, heard, and felt by the regime and the opposition. Specific targets should include the Damascus-area headquarters, barracks, and support facilities of the 4th and Republican Guard Armored Divisions (two units heavily involved in the bombardment of civilian areas), as well as any field artillery units associated with the CW attack. Allied forces should also strike higher-level military and intelligence headquarters and command-and-control facilities associated with military operations around the capital. This means putting enough weapons on the targets to ensure high levels of destruction.

### Risks and Concerns

There is no military action without risk, and a punitive strike on Syrian regime forces would carry some. Weapons could hit unintended targets, perhaps killing civilians. Some targets could be insufficiently damaged or missed entirely, necessitating restrike. The regime could strike back in unexpected ways against U.S. and allied interests, or it could resort to further CW attacks inside Syria. Any manned aircraft operating over Syria

could be downed or suffer mechanical failure, resulting in aircrew casualties or prisoners. And Russia could decide to increase its military assistance to the regime, including provision of sophisticated S-300 surface-to-air missile batteries or other systems.

Although these risks cannot be eliminated, they can be managed—they are not sufficient reasons to avoid taking action. They must also be balanced against the consequences of not acting, such as destroying U.S. credibility and giving the regime a green light to conduct more CW attacks.

### Conclusion

There are many potential options for direct military action in Syria, ranging from token strikes with small numbers of weapons to much broader operations such as attacks on leadership targets or the imposition of no-fly and no-drive zones. In addition, the United States could respond indirectly by providing truly significant military assistance to the rebels. All of these options have potential benefits and risks, yet some options seem more likely, given the Obama administration's aversion to using military power in Syria and the difficulty of forging allied consensus on goals and methods. A punishing strike linked to CW use seems to balance potential benefits and risks.

In any case, one thing is clear: given the regime's near-certain culpability for the August 21 CW attack, the United States should strike it, and strike it hard. This does not entail regime removal or a massive operation to "fix" Syria; allied action can be limited in scale. But it should still be strong, with telling effects. It should also hold the promise of potentially stronger strikes if the regime uses, or even threatens to use, chemical weapons again.



# **SYRIA'S MILITARY OPPOSITION**

*How Effective, United, or Extremist?*



# Introduction: Posing the Question

*Patrick Clawson*

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WHETHER OR HOW to aid the Syrian military opposition has been much debated in Washington policy circles. This study brings to the debate information about the character of that military opposition: its effectiveness on the ground, the role played by jihadist Salafists, and its relationship to the political opposition.

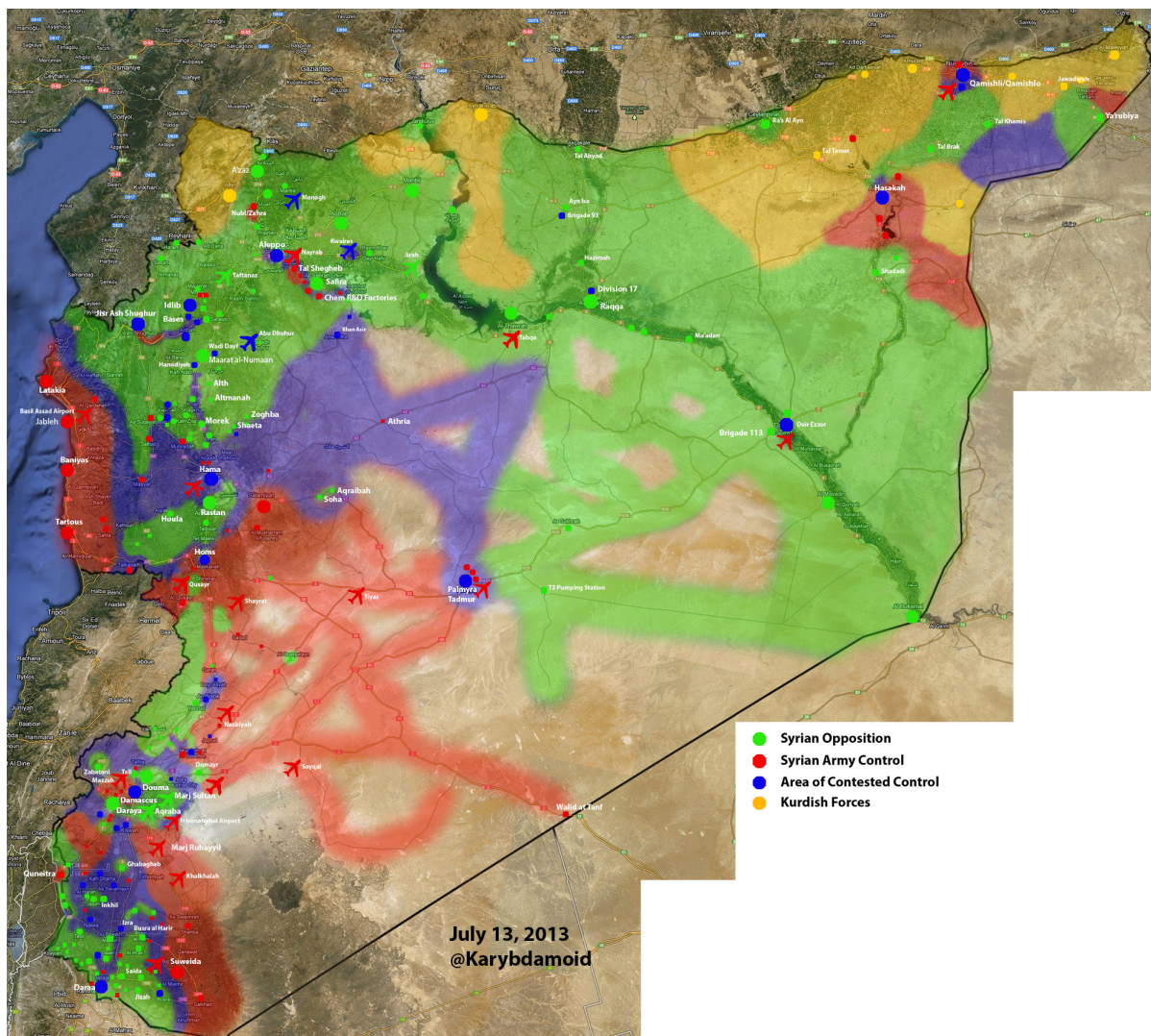
Jeffrey White explores the ebbs and flows of the war. Rather than a stalemate, the war has seen periods when the rebels were advancing rapidly, as well as times when the regime regrouped and took the offensive. That pattern is likely to persist. White analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the military opposition, with one clear lesson: the rebels are held back by much more than a shortage of heavy weapons; they suffer as well from inadequate logistics, weak command structures, deep ideological divisions, and disconnection from the political opposition.

Aaron Y. Zelin profiles the two main Salafist groups, Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front) and Ahrar al-Sham (the Syrian Free Men). He attributes their rise relative to other groups not only to more generous foreign support, but also to greater coordination

on a national scale and more effective governance in areas they control. That said, experience with jihadists elsewhere—perhaps most clearly in Yemen—indicates that however efficient and incorrupt they may be, their intolerance, social restrictions, and cruel punishments will, in the long run, alienate many Syrians who simply want to return to a normal life.

Andrew Tabler details the foreign pressure on the Syrian opposition to create a unified political structure that controls the fighters on the ground. While perhaps desirable, such unified civilian control is incompatible with the deeply divided character of Syrian society. Experience has shown that local military fighting groups will cooperate with each other to a considerable extent, no matter how upset foreign donors may become at seeing some of their aid used by groups they dislike.

The concluding section offers advice for a cautious middle way: aiding the opposition with arms and political support, while promoting a diplomatic resolution, preventing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from freely using his most lethal weapons, and protecting civilians from indiscriminate slaughter.



**MAP 1** Areas of Control.

# 1 The Military Opposition on the Ground

*Jeffrey White*

THE MILITARY OPPOSITION in Syria is an emergent force. It has evolved greatly over the course of the rebellion and will evolve further as Syria's internal war continues. From little more than isolated bands of poorly armed defectors and amateurs—the butchers, the bakers, the candlestick makers—the armed rebels<sup>1</sup> have become a force capable of seizing and holding territory across a substantial portion of Syria, challenging the very existence of the regime.

The regime started with great advantages, however, and after stumbling, it has adapted to the rebel challenge. Whether the regime or the rebels prevail will depend on which can continue to adapt most quickly and effectively.

## The Broad Course of the War

As the war has grown in scope and intensity and the regime has found effective means of fighting back, the challenges to the rebels have become greater. To succeed, they must contend with the regime's advantages in firepower (air, artillery, and armor), seize its major strong points, respond to its offensive operations, and adapt to its new "way of war." Although the rebels have fought with great determination, it is no longer enough to seize isolated regime positions or bring down the occasional aircraft. They need to be able to plan and execute larger and more complex operations, both offensive and defensive, to amass forces and heavy weapons to stop regime offensives and take major strong points, acquire additional heavy weapons<sup>2</sup> in quantity, and keep their forces in supply.

**The first year.** In the earliest phase of the war, roughly from March to summer 2011, regime forces conducted virtually uncontested military and security operations against essentially unarmed demonstrators. Armed resistance began in summer 2011 and became a serious challenge by January 2012. Early in the rebellion, the regime began escalating the use of force against civilians and eventually

armed rebels by steadily introducing heavy combat systems (armor and artillery) into the fighting. In early 2012 it conducted major multi-brigade combat operations to clear rebels from centers of resistance in Homs city and the Damascus countryside (Rif Damascus).

After the regime's winter offensive in early 2012, the rebels emerged as a still more formidable military challenge. Rebel offensives in the spring and summer of 2012 extended their control over large areas of northern Syria (Idlib, Aleppo, and Raqqqa provinces) and Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria. Even areas close to Damascus either fell under rebel control<sup>3</sup> or became "disputed"<sup>4</sup> territory. Although the regime responded with combat aircraft<sup>5</sup> and surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs),<sup>6</sup> by the winter of 2012-2013 rebel forces were in control of large parts of Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqqa, and Deir Ezzor provinces and portions of Homs province. They were fighting inside central Damascus and entrenched in the Damascus countryside, had taken parts of Quneitra, Daraa, and Hasaka provinces, and were disputing areas of Hama province with regime forces. The rebels fought even in Latakia province, part of the Alawite heartland, and controlled part of it in the north. Only Suwaydda and Tartus were solidly under regime control.

Several factors drove rebel success during this period. One was an increase in combat power, including an expansion in numbers of personnel and combat units, the acquisition through capture or import of significant quantities of arms and ammunition, and the acquisition, primarily through capture from regime forces, of heavy weapons. Another was the development of mobile units using civilian vehicles mounted with heavy weapons. Organizationally, the rebels evolved from mostly independent and local "territorial" forces to larger, more capable "composite" formations comprising multiple battalions, to ideologically based



“fighting coalitions” of broad geographical scope. They began conducting named “operations,” combining territorial and composite units and often involving fighting coalitions, to achieve specific objectives, such as the seizure of regime airfields and military facilities.

Although the rebels suffered setbacks, these trends, along with the experience they acquired during the fighting, allowed them to make territorial gains, seize regime facilities, and inflict significant damage on regime forces. Meanwhile, regime regular forces became less capable, especially on the offensive, and in response the regime began to raise and train irregular and auxiliary forces, organizing them into the National Defense Forces.<sup>7</sup>

By the spring of 2012, fighting had spread throughout most of Syria. Rather than being firmly under the control of one side or the other, broad areas of the country were disputed ground, with neither side having a clear advantage. Fighting had become more complex and intense, with increasing casualties to both sides and growing loss of heavy equipment by regime forces. (See table 1.)

**Spring and summer 2013.** From roughly spring 2012 to spring 2013, the armed rebellion could be

likened to rising water. The resistance increased its area of control across a broad extent of Syria, sometimes quickly, sometimes more slowly, depending on the relative strength of rebel and regime forces in a particular area. Regime forces<sup>8</sup> in a number of provinces<sup>9</sup> maintained islands of government control in a sea of rebels.

But in the spring of 2013, the regime began to force back the tide, and the question became “Is the rebellion receding?” The war was clearly in transition, largely in favor of the regime. It had survived the perilous period of November–December 2012, when its prospects looked poor and the rebels were on its doorstep in Damascus, and had appeared to right itself. Returning to offensive operations on a significant scale, it had won a major battle for the city of al-Qusayr in Homs province and smaller but important battles in the Homs countryside, Rif Damascus, Idlib province, and Daraa province.

The regime’s offensive reawakening featured three key elements:

- increased and more effective use of its air force and artillery units as they gained experience;
- creation of reliable irregulars and their introduction into the fighting to support or replace regular forces in defensive and offensive operations;
- introduction on a significant scale of allied forces in a direct combat role, including Hezbollah combat units, Iraqi volunteers, and possibly Iranians.

The regime benefited from the unswerving support of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah for diplomatic cover, arms, ammunition, and advisors, and, in the case of Hezbollah, direct armed intervention. Without this assistance the regime’s downward trajectory very likely would have continued and perhaps even steepened. Instead, by May 2013, the regime was applying “al-Qusayr rules”<sup>10</sup> (see sidebar) to regain lost territory and inflict losses on rebel units.

**Current military situation.** The following features broadly characterize the current military situation:

**TABLE 1 Areas of control and in dispute, July 2013.**

PROVINCE	STATUS
TARTUS	REGIME CONTROL
LATAKIA	PRIMARILY REGIME CONTROL
IDLIB	LARGE AREAS UNDER REBEL CONTROL
ALEPPO	LARGE AREAS UNDER REBEL CONTROL
RAQQA	LARGE AREAS UNDER REBEL CONTROL
HASAKA	DISPUTED AMONG REBELS, REGIME, KURDS
DEIR AL-ZOUR	LARGE AREAS UNDER REBEL CONTROL
HAMA	DISPUTED
HOMS	DISPUTED
RIF DAMASCUS	DISPUTED
DAMASCUS	PREDOMINANT REGIME CONTROL
DERAA	DISPUTED
QUNEITRA	DISPUTED
AL-SUWAYDA	REGIME CONTROL

### Qusayr Rules

- ▶ Combine regular, irregular, and allied units to achieve a reliable and effective fighting force.
- ▶ Isolate objective areas to prevent rebel reinforcement, resupply, and escape.
- ▶ Bombard objective areas with all available means to weaken defenses and increase the plight of any civilians trapped there.
- ▶ When an objective area includes rebel outposts and other outlying forces, drive them inward to compress the defenders.
- ▶ Conduct repeated assaults to seize key terrain, inflict casualties, and force defenders to exhaust their supplies.
- ▶ Exploit the regime's advantages in firepower and its ability to coordinate and sustain operations.

- increasingly sectarian nature of the forces themselves, with Shiites and Alawites pitted against Sunnis;
- increasing, and increasingly important, foreign involvement on both sides;
- increasing use by both sides of heavy weapons, such as tanks and field artillery;<sup>11</sup>
- the regime's continuing use of air, artillery, and missile forces to strike both military and civilian rebel targets;
- ability of both sides to sustain relatively high levels of combat;<sup>12</sup>
- rising combat casualties on both sides.<sup>13</sup>

The war has been largely a local or sub-provincial affair, with operations chiefly conducted within specific areas of provinces for local or limited objectives rather than across provinces for national or broad objectives. Rebel "operations" are limited in geographical scope,

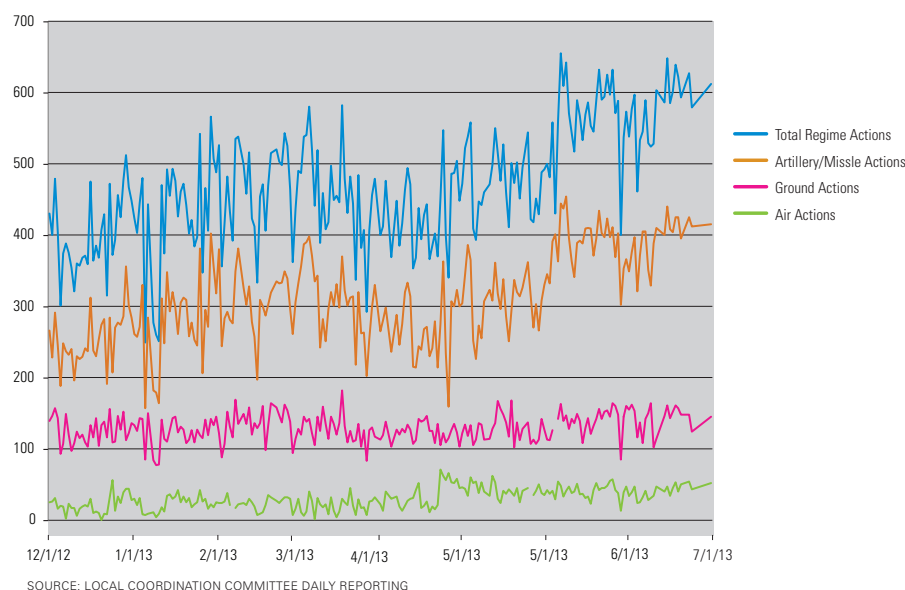
employing composite and territorial units drawn from the local area or nearby.

Events of the late spring and early summer of 2013 suggest that the largely localized nature of the fighting may be changing. The regime's battle for al-Qusayr appears to be part of a larger campaign to secure Homs province. After deploying both its own forces and allies from outside the area to conduct it, the regime seized Talkalakh and renewed its efforts to clear Homs city with some success. A series of offensives in the Damascus area and Daraa province suggests a broader plan is in the works, with the grand objective of securing Damascus and its southern and northern approaches, and a route to the Alawite coastal stronghold.

The rebel response to al-Qusayr was also broader than normal. Rebels in eastern Hama province launched the so-called "One Body" operation to halt the advance of regime forces and prevent their use in Homs province. Units from Aleppo and Raqqqa provinces moved in to al-Qusayr to reinforce the rebels fighting there. In August, in northern Latakia, the Islamist coalition brought in units from elsewhere in northern Syria. Nevertheless, the rebels do not appear to have any grand strategy for the war. They lack an agreed-upon plan that prioritizes and coordinates operations and resources. The disarray at the top of their political and military structures will make it very difficult for them to develop such a strategy. Neither the nominal regional commands of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) nor the fighting coalitions appear to be coordinating operations on a national basis. They have a shared goal—the end of the regime—but not much more.

**The challenge posed by regime forces.** In the summer of 2013, regime forces posed a serious and rising challenge to the rebels, due to the regime's continuing firepower advantage, its ability to raise, train, and employ irregular forces in conjunction with regular units, the entry into the war of significant allied forces (Hezbollah and Iraqis, in particular), and its ability to deploy forces and coordinate firepower. (See figure 1.)

These advantages and capabilities have restored the regime's offensive capability at the operational level, leading to successful operations in the spring and early summer of 2013:



**FIG. 1** Regime use of firepower.

- raising of the siege of the Hamadiyah and Wadi Dyaf strong points near Maarrat al-Numan in Idlib province in April;
- storming of Otabyah in Rif Damascus province in April, which helped secure the approaches to Damascus International Airport and reportedly cut rebel supply lines from eastern Damascus to Jordan;
- storming of Kherbet Ghazalah in Daraa province in May, which opened regime communications to Daraa city and the Jordanian border;
- al-Qusayr campaign in Homs province, which reduced rebel strongholds in southern Homs province and helped secure the northern approaches to Damascus and the line of communication (LOC) north from Damascus to the coast and Aleppo, beginning in April, and extending through the summer.

The development and implementation of this approach say something about the changing nature of the war. They show the continuing evolution of regime forces toward increased reliance on irregular and allied forces; they show regime forces have regained the ability to act at the operational level<sup>14</sup> and reclaimed an

offensive capability; and they pressure the rebel forces and their supporters to come up with the means and methods to meet the regime challenge.

The use of chemical weapons (CW) by the regime, though drawing enormous media coverage and diplomatic activity, has not been an important military factor in the war. The regime's use of CW has been on a small scale and of only marginal military utility, if any. It is unclear how the use, as documented, fits into regime strategy, given the high political risk involved, at least initially. With the regime forces currently resurgent in some areas, the probability that the regime will use CW in any militarily significant way has probably declined, although new rebel successes in areas the regime deems critical could change that.

Nevertheless, the rebels and civilian populations in areas under opposition control are vulnerable to CW and rightly concerned about the regime's potential use of it in the future. The regime has the stocks of lethal agents and the means and methods of delivering them anywhere in Syria, with little the rebels can do about it. The so-called Obama CW redline was tested and failed, with no effective action taken, probably signaling to the regime that CW use at some level can be considered a realistic military option.



Although the rebels have suffered setbacks on the ground this spring and continue to be plagued by major organizational and logistical weaknesses, they still represent a significant military force and a threat to the regime. In the spring of 2012, they rebounded from the regime's operational successes and took the war to its heart. While some are writing them off now, it is too early for that. For the regime, the road from Damascus to Aleppo is a long one, and it is farther still to Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Rebel successes in Latakia and the taking of Mengh airfield in northern Aleppo province in early August 2013 indicate that the rebels can still challenge regime forces in some places and under some conditions.

### The Nature of Rebel Forces

The kaleidoscopic nature of the rebel forces makes generalizing about their quality and capabilities very difficult and puts a premium on detailed information about specific units. Combat formations vary widely in numbers, organization, weaponry, and effectiveness. Some appear disciplined, well-armed, responsive to their commanders, and tactically competent. Others appear much less so, especially in terms of armament and tactical skill. The rebels come from all strata of Syrian society: wealthy and poor, urban and rural, secular and religious, tribal and urbanized, educated and uneducated, former military and civilian. Many units are local in origin, raised by local people for the defense of a town or village. Some are centered on defectors. Many are religious, though not necessarily radically religious, in orientation. While some Kurdish elements fight alongside them in Aleppo<sup>15</sup> and some Kurds and perhaps Christians are in rebel formations, the rebels are overwhelmingly a Sunni Arab army.<sup>16</sup>

Rebel units are distributed across a broad ideological spectrum, with secular units at one pole and Salafi jihadists at the other, and most falling between the two. Over time the units have tended to become more Islamic, certainly in religious language, visual symbols, prayer, and general orientation. The differentiation between Islamic units with a purely national or Syrian agenda and those with a global jihadist mission is major.

**Order of battle.** Rebel forces fall into the category of irregular or guerilla forces.<sup>17</sup> They do not constitute an organized army operating under central command, with a standardized order of battle, uniforms, weapons, logistics, training, or doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Personnel are volunteers who come to the war with a wide variety of backgrounds, motivations, and military skills. Much of their training is “on the job,” although some units have their own programs to teach basic military skills. Formation commanders also reflect a variety of backgrounds. Some are former Syrian military personnel who defected from the regime. Others are civilians who have taken on the military role and learned their job by doing it. Still others—some, reportedly, with Islamic formations and some associated with the FSA—have been appointed by the leadership of the organizations with which their formations are affiliated. The war provides a kind of natural selection process for combat leaders: ineffective ones are killed off, removed from command, or otherwise sidelined. Rebel commanders appear to have a high casualty rate because of their direct involvement in close combat and deliberate targeting by regime forces.

The precise order of battle<sup>19</sup> of the rebel forces is unclear. Combat units are subject to a number of processes that make it difficult to determine their numbers, organization, areas of operation, and ideological alignment. Among these processes are the formation of new units, merging of existing units, aggregation of units into larger formations, and the fluid alignment of units within larger, ideology-based “fighting coalitions,”<sup>20</sup> such as the Syrian Islamic Front and the Farouq Brigades. These processes are ongoing, and they make the rebels’ order of battle highly dynamic. Altogether, several hundred or more combat formations of all sizes, types, and ideologies seem to exist.<sup>21</sup>

Equally difficult is estimating the number of rebel fighters—a traditional problem in the analysis of irregular forces. Besides being indeterminate in number, rebel combat formations are not of a standard size. Units appear to vary widely from a handful to hundreds of fighters, or, in the case of the larger composite brigades,

perhaps a few thousand. In total, active fighters probably number in the tens of thousands, with their numbers rising and falling with gains and losses from combat, recruitment, and the formation of new units.

Rebel units generally identify themselves as either *katiba* or *liwa*—corresponding roughly to battalions and brigades—and sometimes as divisions. But because the units lack uniformity, these terms cannot be taken literally. More meaningfully, rebel units appear to be of two broad organizational types.<sup>22</sup> “Composite brigades,” made up of disparate or separate *katiba* and/or *liwa*, are larger formations with greater capability that operate over broader areas<sup>23</sup> and generally share a similar ideological orientation. The “territorial battalion” is essentially a local and independent unit, primarily concerned with operations in its own area.

**Command and control.** The command and control (C2) of rebel forces is amorphous. Nominal structures, such as the Supreme Military Council (SMC) and its five geographical fronts,<sup>24</sup> do not appear to exercise real command<sup>25</sup> over forces on the ground—that is, while they may have some role in coordinating operations across or within provinces,<sup>26</sup> they seem not to direct the operations of the territorial and composite formations doing the actual fighting. Other structures involved in coordinating rebel operations include the military committees of various provinces and cities within provinces, the ideologically based fighting coalitions, such as the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), and the Farouq Battalions, and the larger territorial brigades, such as the Tawhid Brigade and Liwa al-Islam.

Other structures involved in coordinating rebel operations include the military committees of various provinces and cities within provinces, the ideologically based fighting coalitions such as the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), and Farouq Brigades, the larger territorial brigades such as the Tawhid Brigade and Liwa al-Islam, and ad hoc command or coordination centers, such as those operating in Rif Damascus, Daraa, and Aleppo. Figure 2 compares the geographic scope and formality of these structures. It does not show relative effectiveness.

Rebel actions have tended to expand over time, involving the participation of multiple units in specific operations; but the control of them seems largely ad hoc. Operations and logistics are negotiated rather than directed and are characterized more by cooperation among units than by a formal command structure. They involve complex and dynamic cooperation on the ground among units across the ideological spectrum of the rebel forces. This is not to say real command does not exist anywhere within rebel forces. Islamic units are said to have well-developed command structures, with subordinate elements executing the orders of unit commanders.<sup>27</sup> Figure 3 illustrates the complexity of the relationships among rebel command structures.<sup>28</sup>

**Rebel weapons.** Syria's armed rebels can no longer be said to be “lightly armed.” Many rebel units now have heavy weapons, including heavy machine guns and anti-aircraft guns, mortars, recoilless rifles (RCLs), and artillery rocket launchers. Some have tanks and Boyevaya Mashina Pekhoty (BMP) infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs), some have antitank guided missiles (ATGM), and medium field artillery pieces. At least a few have shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS). They have acquired these weapons primarily by capture from regime stocks and are employing them with increasing effect against regime forces.

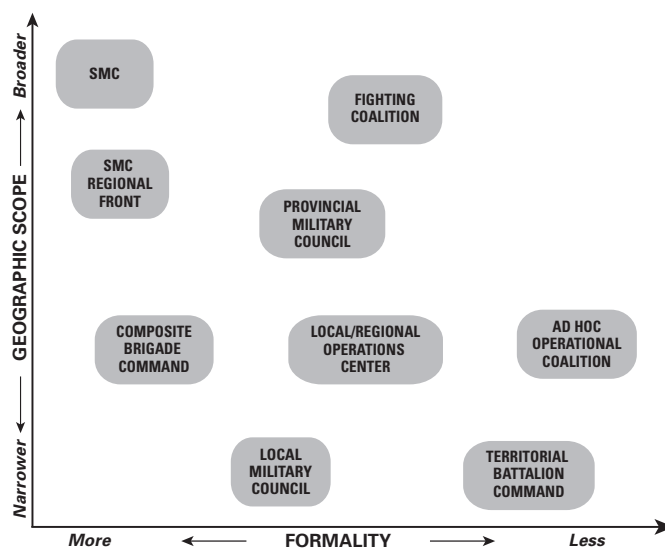
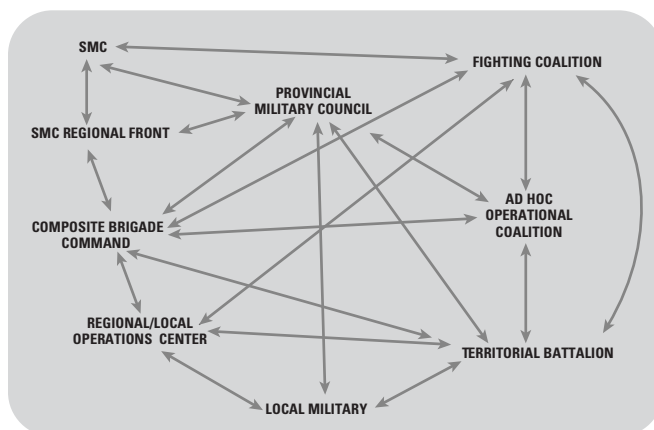


FIG. 2 Syrian rebel command structures.



**FIG. 3 Syrian rebel command relationships.**

Heavy weapons in rebel possession and use include

- *armored fighting vehicles:* T-55, T-62, and T-72 tanks and BMP IFVs;
- *artillery or indirect fire weapons:* 122 mm, 130 mm, and 152 mm field artillery pieces; 82mm, 120mm, and 160 mm mortars; 107 mm, 122 mm, and a wide variety of do-it-yourself (DIY) artillery rockets;
- *antiaircraft weapons:* 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm heavy machine guns; 23 mm (ZU-23 and ZSU-23/4 “Shilka”) and 57 mm antiaircraft guns; MANPADS (SA-7/16/24, and Chinese FN-6); and
- *antitank weapons:* including the AT-3 Sagger (Malyutka), AT-4 Fagot, AT-5 Spandrel (Konkurs), Metis-M, Milan, AT-14 (Kornet), and the Chinese HJ-8 antitank guided missiles (ATGM); RPG-7, RPG-22, RPG29, and M-79 rocket-propelled grenades; and SPG-9, B-10, and M-60 recoilless rifles (RCL).

The number of each type of weapon in rebel hands is impossible to tell, but they appear frequently in videos of rebel forces in action.<sup>29</sup>

Just as important, many videos show rebels capturing ammunition for tanks, artillery pieces, mortars, and antiaircraft guns. Capture of both weapons and ammunition allows their integration into combat units to support rebel operations. A perhaps

typical rebel combat unit now will have, in addition to light weapons, a truck-mounted “Dushka” or a ZU-23, which provides substantial firepower against regime infantry as well as a limited antiaircraft capability. Individual mortars, and sometimes “batteries” of two to four mortars, are now seen with rebel units, which are also increasingly employing 122mm Grad rockets captured from regime stocks as a stand-off weapon against regime facilities. Where available, these weapons provide the ability to engage regime forces with potentially greater lethality and at greater distances.

In January 2013, the rebels obtained substantial quantities of antitank weapons, reportedly from as far as Croatia. In the hands of rebel units of all ideological stripes, these Yugoslav-designed M79 rocket launchers and M60 recoilless rifles have been used to good effect and have spread across most of Syria. Their unique ammunition types make resupply important for their sustained use in combat.

Finally, the rebels now have a significant do-it-yourself capability to produce arms.<sup>30</sup> This cottage industry produces a wide range of weapons and some munitions, including 120mm mortars, artillery rockets, and improvised weapons mounts. These weapons vary greatly in accuracy and lethality and therefore in military utility, but they do add to the rebels’ firepower, especially in terms of indirect fire. They are probably most effective in a harassment and interdiction (H&I) role.

The acquisition of heavy weapons is a response to the regime’s continuing reliance on its own heavy weapons and airpower and on the regime’s use of defended localities to assert presence and control in the provinces. Their increasing use by the rebels has correlated to their successes, but other factors have also been involved, likely including the continued growth in their combat formations, greater cooperation among units, and, in the case of siege actions, their ability to sustain operations over weeks.

Furthermore, heavy weapons have not yet put the rebels on an equal footing with the regime’s firepower capabilities. The rebels still have difficulty seizing heavily defended positions that are supported with airpower and/or artillery, and defending positions that

are under determined regime assault. Their failure so far to realize the full potential of the heavy weapons they have can be attributed to weaknesses in organization and command, ammunition quantities and distribution, concentration of weapons and firepower, and intelligence and targeting.

**Rebel logistics.** The supply of rebel forces is a major determinant in the course of individual battles and operations. Lacking an overall logistics system, the rebels are dependent on multiple sources for weapons and ammunition. External sources of arms and ammunition as well as money to buy them reportedly include Gulf Arab states and individuals, Libyan sympathizers, the black market, and, perhaps, Western states. Arms and ammunition reportedly enter Syria from Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Varying quantities and types are also captured frequently during battle, with some large caches taken in the course of fighting. The rebels' success in the manufacture and modification of DIY weapons has added to their firepower, especially with respect to artillery rockets and mortars.

Rebel dependence on the favor of outside benefactors or the fortunes of the battlefield to obtain weapons has led to the uneven distribution of arms and ammunition among rebel units and to periodic shortages that, while apparently less severe than in earlier periods of the war, still occur.<sup>31</sup> In at least some cases, units have more men than weapons, and ammunition shortages have apparently caused the rebels to withdraw from combat. These issues have adversely affected the rebels' ability to conduct sustained combat operations, and the intensification of fighting in Syria this spring and summer has likely further aggravated the weaknesses of this "system," producing more shortages and disruption of rebel offensive and defensive operations.

**Rebel Combat Qualities.** Great variation in the combat qualities of rebel forces contributes to their uneven performance.<sup>32</sup> Some units, mostly the Islamic militants, appear to have courage, motivation, aggressiveness, cohesion, discipline, and a degree of military skill; they have given the rebels an edge in combat and played a key role in the seizure of regime facilities.<sup>33</sup> Other units

are apparently less capable. Across most types of combat seen in Syria, the Islamic militants seem more effective (see table 2).

Generally, rebel units appear to be more effective in defensive actions, where they can operate with the advantages of cover and concealment, know the terrain, and are often defending their own towns and villages.<sup>34</sup> They are less effective on the attack, which requires greater military skills (e.g., weapons skill and tactical proficiency), and the exposure of personnel to hostile fire to close with and destroy enemy forces.<sup>35</sup> This relative offensive weakness has created situations, such as those occurring during the prolonged battle for airfields, where regime heavy weapons and airstrikes have helped hold off rebel assaults for weeks.<sup>36</sup>

**Rebel strategy.** The absence of a unified political opposition and an effective central military command have prevented the rebels from articulating and implementing a coherent military strategy for the prosecution of the war.<sup>37</sup> This has left the conduct of the war to the disparate armed opposition organizations inside the country. This in turn has prevented the rebels from allocating forces and resources according to a rational national plan for operations involving where to fight, when to fight, and what forces to use. As with rebel forces themselves, the rebel approach to the war has been self-organizing and emergent.<sup>38</sup> In the face of the centrally directed regime response, this is a problem.

In a sense, the rebels attempted to "swarm" the regime from the spring of 2012 to roughly the spring of 2013, attacking it in many places with a host of loosely connected units and making some progress in seizing territory and regime positions. This many-headed rebellion caused the regime military difficulties, and its spread throughout most of Syria has forced the regime to fight in multiple places and to allocate its own military resources widely. The absence of a centralized command structure makes it difficult for the regime to effectively target and disrupt rebel command and control. The loss or disruption of any particular rebel unit or even group of units does not broadly affect the course of the war.

Nevertheless, the limits of this approach became apparent. It proved very difficult, although not



**TABLE 2 Rebel combat effectiveness in Syria.**

COMBAT TYPE	EXAMPLES	RISK TO INITIATOR	ISLAMIST EFFECTIVENESS	FSA EFFECTIVENESS
INDIRECT FIRE	ROCKETS, MORTARS, ARTILLERY	LOW	LOW TO MEDIUM	LOW TO MEDIUM
DIRECT FIRE	SMALL ARMS, ANTITANK WEAPONS, SNIPING, AMBUSH	MEDIUM	MEDIUM TO HIGH	LOW TO MEDIUM
CLOSE COMBAT	DIRECT ASSAULTS, URBAN FIGHTING	HIGH	MEDIUM TO HIGH	LOW TO HIGH
REMOTE COMBAT	MINES, BOOBY TRAPS, IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES	LOW	HIGH	MEDIUM

impossible, for the rebels to take well-defended regime positions. Lack of overall command and an effective logistics system inhibited the rebels' ability to mass forces and firepower and to sustain combat. There has been no strategic response to regime operations in Homs province or around Damascus. Movement of rebel forces to these areas in response to regime offensives has been more a matter of "riding to the sound of the guns" than a decision and execution by high-level command and responsive subordinates.

The regime, operating with its own strategy, has been able to allocate its resources to defend key positions and areas and to push the rebels back in other areas. Lacking a coherent strategy and the command structures to implement it, the rebels are having trouble meeting the regime's challenge. There seems to be little prospect for the kind of unity necessary for a real military strategy to emerge; if anything, rebel divisions inside Syria are getting worse.

**Rebel operational capabilities.** By the spring of 2013, rebel capabilities had evolved to a point where the rebels could undertake something like real operations, not just fight local battles.<sup>39</sup> As indicated in table 3, they met with both success and failure.

These operations testify to the rebels' growing ability to combine multiple formations for a single action, raising but not guaranteeing their prospects for success. They are generally successful where they can concentrate forces and weapons, keep them in supply, achieve and maintain effective coordination, and prevent regime reinforcement and resupply. They fail when these factors are not achieved or break down.

Regardless of the level of success in taking or defending territory, these operations have imposed attrition on regime forces, especially in terms of armored vehicles and personnel. They oblige the regime to commit more forces to battle and to intensify its own actions.

**TABLE 3 Examples of rebel "operations."**

NAME	TIMEFRAME	AREA	OUTCOME
ALEPPO PROVINCE OFFENSIVE	JULY–AUG 2012	ALEPPO PROVINCE	PARTIAL SUCCESS
TAFTANAZ AIRFIELD	JAN 2013	IDLIB	SUCCESS
AL BUNYAN AL MARSOOS	WINTER 2013	IDLIB	FAILURE
OPERATION RETRIBUTION	MAY 2013	IDLIB	SUCCESS
DEFENSE OF KHERBET GHAZALAH	MAY 2013	DERAA	FAILURE
DEFENSE OF ATAIBAH	APRIL 2013	RIF DAMASCUS	FAILURE
ONE BODY BATTLE	MAY–JUNE 2013	EASTERN HAMA	PARTIAL SUCCESS
DEFENSE OF AL-QUSAYR	APRIL–JUNE 2013	SOUTH. HOMS PROVINCE	FAILURE
FURQAN "CRITERION" BATTLE	MAY 2013	RIF DAMASCUS	ONGOING
LIBERATION OF THE COAST	AUGUST 2013	LATAKIA	ONGOING

**Rebel Tactics.** Improved rebel operational capabilities are supported by improved tactics. Offensively, the rebels lay siege to major regime facilities (airfields, headquarters and barracks areas, military schools, and air defense sites), isolating and bombarding them, and eventually assaulting them. These tactics have proved effective on occasion but are painfully slow, sometimes allowing the regime time to break the siege or reinforce the beleaguered units.<sup>40</sup> The rebels' frequent direct assaults on regime checkpoints and small positions are less of a challenge and are often successful. They impose steady attrition on regime forces and serve as a source of arms and ammunition of all types.

The acquisition and integration of heavy weapons into rebel forces facilitate these actions. The rebels use tanks, field artillery, and antiaircraft guns in a direct-fire role in the sieges and are increasingly employing indirect fire with rockets, mortars, and field artillery pieces in these operations. Indirect-fire weapons allow the rebels to strike inside regime positions with less risk to themselves. As videos posted on the internet indicate, at least some of their indirect-fire elements are capable of placing accurate fire on regime positions. Captured armored vehicles are usually employed individually or in small numbers in an infantry support role to reduce regime strong points and in a limited way to counter regime armor. Some armored vehicle crews seem proficient in using their vehicles and keeping them in service.

Defensively, the rebels have proven skillful and determined fighters in some cases at the tactical level. They have shown the capability to organize effective defenses, including mines and booby traps, effective use of snipers and antitank weapons, the flexibility to respond to regime moves on the ground, and the ability to exploit favorable terrain. The use of heavy weapons helps the rebels resist regime offensive operations while costing the regime personnel and equipment. Instead of opposing troops armed with only light weapons, attacking regime forces potentially face an array of antiarmor weapons, including sophisticated antitank guided missiles. Efforts to retake rebel-held areas in the Damascus suburbs and in Daraa province in the spring

and summer, for example, while somewhat successful, appear to have led to significant regime losses of tanks and BMPs. Rebel defeats are often blamed on shortages, or the absence, of antiaircraft and antitank weapons and/or the ammunition for them.

Much of the fighting is essentially positional rather than maneuver warfare, with slow advances and ground changing hands multiple times (see figure 4); neither the rebels nor the regime forces engage much in blitzkrieg. Much of this is due to the predominantly urban combat, which is by nature slow (and costly), and part due to the growing use of field fortifications to protect troops from heavy weapons fire in both offensive and defensive operations.<sup>41</sup> Earthmoving equipment is now used routinely to quickly erect trenches, berms, and shelters (see figure 4).<sup>42</sup>

The regime enjoys an advantage, although not a great one, in this kind of warfare, as it can employ more and better heavy weapons—tanks, artillery, aircraft, missiles—than the rebels, and has an established engineering capability.

### Attrition of Combat Forces

Both rebel and regime forces are taking serious casualties in the fighting. Based on daily figures provided by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR),<sup>43</sup> the rebels had about 52 and the regime regular forces<sup>44</sup> about 32 killed in action (KIA) per day during March–July 2013. Perhaps four times<sup>45</sup> that number in wounded can be added for both sides, suggesting a daily overall casualty rate of 260 for the rebels and 160 for the regime regulars. The regime is also losing a growing number of members of the National Defense Forces, as well as taking losses among allied forces fighting in Syria.<sup>46</sup> Both sides are losing leaders and commanders in the fighting, the rebels perhaps more so SOHR has provided summary data for military KIA from the beginning of the war until late June 2013 that include the following:<sup>47</sup>

- 13,539 rebel combatants;
- 2,518 unidentified and non-Syrian rebel fighters (most of whom are non-Syrians);

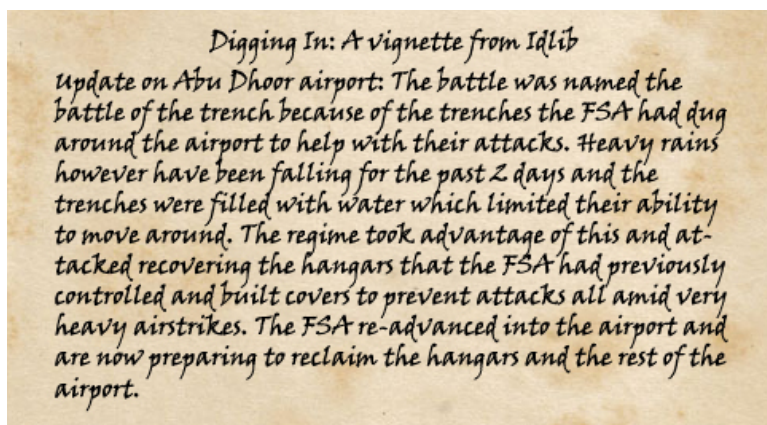


FIG. 4 Digging in: A vignette from Idlib.

- 2,015 defected soldiers and officers;
- 25,407 regular soldiers;
- 17,311 combatants from the popular defense committees, national defense forces, *shabbiha* irregular fighters, and pro-regime informers;
- 169 fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah.

Applying the four to one ratio of wounded to killed gives a total of over 90,000 rebel combatants and over 213,000 regime personnel killed and wounded during the course of the war. Furthermore, SOHR has estimated the actual number of military casualties was double those that could be documented.<sup>48</sup> SOHR also estimates the rebels hold some 2,500 regime personnel captive.<sup>49</sup> These are significant personnel casualties, even given the return of some of the wounded to duty. They testify to the seriousness of the fighting and the ability of both sides to inflict and sustain losses.

Equipment losses, especially for the regime, have also been significant, but they do not appear to have seriously affected the regime's ability to operate. They are summarized below.

First, the regime has lost a number of combat aircraft to rebel antiaircraft systems, with the rebels claiming to have downed some 120 combat aircraft and helicopters since December 2012, including Mig-21s, Mig-23 Floggers, Su-22 Fitters, and Mi-8/17 Hip armed utility helicopters. Many of these claims cannot be confirmed; however, they are distilled from multiple individual reports from various rebel and

opposition organizations. Actual losses of regime combat aircraft to antiaircraft systems appear to have been small, although the systems have been more effective against helicopters, especially the Mi-8/17 Hip.

The regime has also lost both combat aircraft and helicopters on the ground to rebel shelling and assaults on airfields. The seizure of Taftanaz airfield in Idlib province took at least twenty-two Hips and one Mi-25 Hind attack helicopter out of the regime's inventory, and more Hips were destroyed during the extended siege of Mengh airfield in northern Aleppo province. The battles for these two airfields probably accounted for 25 to 30 percent of the regime's pre-war Hip helicopter fleet. In addition, rebel operations in the north have basically eliminated the L-39 Albatross armed trainer from the regime's active inventory. The rebels have seized one L-39 base, al-Jarrah in Aleppo province, and they have Kweres, also in Aleppo, under close siege. This aircraft was once one of the principal types used by the regime for ground attack missions. Combat aircraft destroyed on the ground include Mig-23 Floggers at Abu Duhur airfield in Idlib province and Mig-21 Fishbeds at al-Qusayr/Dabaa airfield in Homs province. Overall, rebel attacks on airfields have been much more successful than antiaircraft systems in reducing the regime's air force.

The rebels have also inflicted substantial damage on the regime's fleet of armored fighting vehicles (see table 4). Particularly heavy hit have been the T-72 main battle tank and the BMP infantry combat vehicle,

two of the ground force's main operating systems; and significant numbers of older model T-62 and T-55 tanks. Some self-propelled field artillery pieces and ZSU-23/4 *Shilka* mobile anti-aircraft systems have been destroyed, damaged, or captured. While rebel claims are almost certainly exaggerated and should be partially discounted,<sup>50</sup> videos posted on the internet of the destruction of main battle tanks and IFVs indicate steady—even daily—loss of these key regime combat systems.<sup>51</sup>

The net effect of the regime's vehicle losses is mitigated by the very large numbers of armored vehicles in its inventory. Prior to the war, the regime was estimated to have some 1,600 T-72s, some 1,000 T-62s, 2,250 T-54/55s, and 2,450 BMPs.<sup>52</sup> Some proportion of damaged vehicles are likely repaired by maintenance units. The regime is also losing tank crews, but no real data on this is available, and the loss of an armored vehicle cannot be directly equated to the loss of a crew. Nevertheless the destruction and damage of armored vehicles by the rebels demonstrates that the rebels can be effective with the antitank systems they have and would benefit from having more.

Importantly, the rebels appear to have inflicted only small losses on the regime's very large and effective artillery force. Comprising approximately 2,500 field artillery pieces,<sup>53</sup> 500 multiple rocket launchers,<sup>54</sup> and 1,000 mortars,<sup>55</sup> this force is one of the regime's major military assets and is very much intact. To it must be added some 2,000 anti-aircraft artillery weapons,<sup>56</sup>

which are used for both direct and indirect fire against ground targets. Rebel artillery assets, while improving in numbers and capability, are no match for the regime's artillery, which is, indeed, "the queen of the battle" in Syria.

**Civic action and governance.** Rebel success in taking control of territory has compelled them to deal with issues of governance. As with the conduct of military operations, the rebel response to this demand has been highly varied, ranging from governance by emergent civilian authorities, to administration by military dominated local structures, to imposition of sharia law backed up by military force in areas under the control of radical Islamist elements. Key to success in establishing governance has been control of resources and infrastructure integral to everyday life: food supplies, water, and fuel. Control of these assets provides leverage and a clear edge in the battle to win hearts and minds. The Islamists, with their combination of discipline, ideology, organization, and firepower, have had perhaps more success here.<sup>57</sup>

Rebels of all stripes have encountered difficulties in winning and keeping the hearts and minds of the people that have come under their control. The great difficulties in providing effective local governance and assuring basic needs are met in the face of the disruptions of normal systems and continuing regime attacks on civilian areas and basic infrastructure have meant that there will be complaints and dissatisfaction with local officials, whether elected or imposed. This is aggravated by well-founded perceptions of corruption, ineffectiveness, rivalries, and ideological favoritism in the distribution of goods and services. Winning and keeping the hearts and minds of local populations is an ongoing challenge for the rebels.

## Rebel Strengths and Weaknesses

Summing up, the rebels have both strengths and weaknesses. This is hardly surprising, given their emergence from virtually nothing and the pressures they have been under since the rebellion began. They are the embodiment of a self-organizing social phenomenon (see Figure 5).<sup>58</sup>

**TABLE 4 Claimed regime armor losses, 3/13–5/13.**

MONTH	TANK*	BMP**	# (DST, DMG, CAP)
MARCH	74	15	89
APRIL	73	8	81
MAY	110	27	137
JUNE	134	19	153
JULY	143	8	151
TOTAL	534	77	611

\* Tank types include T-72, T-62, and T-55. T-72s are the specific type most claimed.

\*\*BMPs are sometimes identified as tanks in rebel reporting.

Sources: LCC, SOHR, SNN, YouTube Syria, Syrian opposition FB sites.



**Rebel strengths.** The strengths that the rebels enjoy include, first, their sheer numbers in terms of personnel, which are surely in the tens of thousands of fighters, and their hundreds of formations. They seem to be able to replace losses, drawing on the large Sunni manpower pool, and new units still appear frequently. The size of the rebel forces reduces the effects of attrition in individual battles. Nevertheless, as indicated above, their losses of personnel, including commanders, appear significant, so their ability to sustain this attrition is an open question.

At least some rebel formations are highly motivated. Rebel units that fought at al-Qusayr demonstrated courage under fire. Those from elsewhere in the country that joined the battle knew what they were getting into and went anyway. Many rebel units accept casualties as either necessary for the success of the rebellion or as sacrifices in the service of God.<sup>59</sup> While many have shown the high combat spirit crucial to success in fighting, however, some have not. Units in which motivation is lacking have tended to avoid assaults that would lead to casualties among the attacking forces, relying instead on siege and indirect

fire to weaken regime garrisons until they fall relatively easily. The favorable balance of motivation relative to regime *regular* forces has been to the rebels' advantage from the beginning of the conflict, but this may be eroding as the regime increases its reliance on Alawite/Shiite irregular and allied forces.

Also to the rebels' advantage has been the geographical scope of the war, which, with combat happening at some level in twelve of fourteen provinces, has forced the regime to spread forces across the country and commit air and missile force resources to support them. While the regime has concentrated forces for the defense of the Damascus region and some other key areas of the country, it has been loath to give up on any area completely.<sup>60</sup> This has given the rebels the opportunity for some significant successes.

Finally, as was discussed above, the rebels are increasingly heavily armed, although still at a serious disadvantage to regime forces. Moreover, the rebels are mobile, able to move forces operationally within provinces and, as of recently, strategically across provinces, as illustrated in the al-Qusayr battle in the spring and the offensive in Latakia in August.

These strengths are important and offer the hope that, with assistance, the rebels can meet the challenge posed by reenergized regime forces.

**Rebel weaknesses.** The rebel forces also possess significant weaknesses. They have no unifying ideology beyond unseating the regime and are riven with ideological fault lines. In this sense they are somewhat like the French resistance in World War II, which was united in the goal of driving the Germans out but divided by ideology and differing visions of postwar France; the rebels, however, are without a De Gaulle and a Churchill to hammer them into cooperation. Their division produces competition—even violent competition—among units on the ground inside Syria for resources, influence, and territory, is worsening.

Furthermore, the political leadership of the opposition is close to nonexistent. It has no coherent plan or program for the rebellion, no prioritized set of goals, no strategy for achieving them, no agreed-upon end-game. No effective linkage exists between what passes

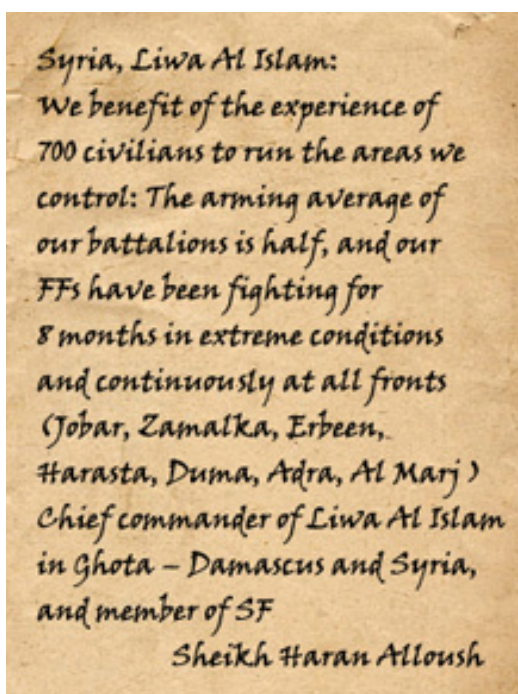


FIG. 5 A rebel commander's view.

for political leadership and the highest level military structure of the rebellion, the Supreme Military Council, which itself is not in command of the forces operating within Syria, although it has some influence over FSA/SMC-associated units and could gain more over time if it became the main funnel for external arms to the rebels.<sup>61</sup>

The disconnect between high-level political and military structures contributes to, if it is not responsible for, the weak coordination among rebel units inside Syria. Although coordination has improved over time, and, as indicated above, some effective coordinating structures operate in various provinces, the war is largely a local or regional one for the rebels. This reduces their military potential and weakens their ability to meet the rising challenge of regime forces in the following ways:

- They have difficulty massing sufficient forces and heavy weapons to take major regime installations even where isolated and in exposed positions.
- Weak command structures make it difficult for them to control forces in battle. On occasion, rebel units supposedly fighting as part of a local coalition have failed to show up for the battle, have acted independently, or have simply left the battlefield, disrupting operations or causing them to fail.
- Their units suffer from an inadequate logistics capability. Access to weapons and ammunition is determined not according to military needs and priorities, but by a combination of client-patron relationships, success on the battlefield, access to external networks, and internal production capabilities for DIY weapons. While some territorial and combined units are reasonably well served by these means, others are not; failed offensive and defensive operations can result.
- Their forces remain at a significant firepower disadvantage relative to regime forces, despite their numbers and increasing inventory of heavy weapons. Rebel antiaircraft capabilities, despite earlier promise, have not grown to the point where they

can seriously affect the regime's ability to conduct sustained air operations. The rebels have only a minimal capability of disrupting regime SSM operations. Even on the ground, where the gap is significantly smaller, the regime can deploy much greater firepower when it chooses to do so. Its tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and, especially, its very large and capable artillery forces give it a significant advantage on any of Syria's battlefields.

These are serious weaknesses that were less evident and less significant when regime forces were on the decline. With the regime's capabilities on the rise, boosted by its allies, the weaknesses are being exposed and becoming critical for the fate of the rebellion. The whole appears less than the sum of the parts.

In warfare, in words attributed to Napoleon, "the moral may be to the physical as three to one"; but in this war the "physical" is becoming more important, and a just cause and claims to the moral high ground may not be enough to prevail.

## Notes

1. The term "rebels" is used here for the armed opposition in favor of other terms. It covers the ideological spectrum involved in the rebellion and war against the regime and includes foreign fighters while avoiding the misleading "Free Syrian Army" and the partisan and tendentious "freedom fighters."
2. Heavy weapons in the Syrian rebel context include tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and field artillery pieces, mortars, heavy antiaircraft machine guns, shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles, and antitank weapons.
3. The concept of "control" in the Syrian war context is an imprecise one. Control in Syria really means domination—that is, having the strongest forces in a given area, being able to operate relatively freely, and exercising a substantial measure of governance or influence on governance. It does not mean that no enemy forces are present or that the area is completely free of enemy influence.
4. Disputed or contested territory refers to areas where both the regime and the rebels are fighting for control as defined above. One side or the other may have the upper hand, but the other continues active opposition. It does not mean a stalemate.

5. Beginning in July 2012.
6. In December 2012.
7. Also referred to as the National Defense Army and the *Jaish al-Shabi*. For a good description of the National Defense Forces and their role in the regime's conduct of the war see, Anne Bernard, "Enlisting Damascus Residents to Answer Assad's Call," New York Times, July 20, 2013, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/world/middleeast/enlisting-damascus-residents-to-answer-assads-call.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.
8. In this context, regime forces include the regular forces (Army, Air Force, Navy, Air Defense Force), the intelligence and police services, and irregular forces (*shabbiha*, popular committees, local militias, and so forth) of the National Defense Army. They do not include Hezbollah forces and Iraqi elements allied to the regime.
9. Examples are Idlib, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor.
10. See Jeffrey White, "The Qusayr Rules: The Syrian Regime's Changing Way of War," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2082, May 31, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-qusayr-rules-the-syrian-regimes-changing-way-of-war>.
11. The regime's capacity for this is greater than that of the rebels.
12. Based on reporting from the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), a daily average of 129 clashes took place between rebel and regime forces from December 2012 until the end of July 2013. But this number was trending upward with an average of 143 reported in July. See: Local Coordination Committees (LCC) *Syria Today* daily reports at <http://www.lccsyria.org/en/>.
13. This is a measure of the intensification of the fighting. See page 12 for a discussion of the casualties among armed combatants in the war.
14. The operational level of war is the level between strategy and tactics. It involves the use of maneuver and battle to achieve strategic goals in a theater or sub-theater of war. Operations implement strategy.
15. Anuj Chopra, "Kurdish front bolsters Syrian rebels," *AFP*, Apr 22, 2013, at <http://www.google.com/hosted-news/afp/article/ALEqM5jndBvytfbh9PpjmkHFVIZ-rdGO-cg?docId=CNG.4fbaa2abe8dff192ffbabe9b35522c0b.611>.
16. For a portrait of the Syrian rebels in the summer of 2012 see, David Enders, "Weeks spent with Syrian rebels reveal a force of Sunni Muslim civilians," McClatchy, June 25, 2012, at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/06/25/153728/weeks-spent-with-syrian-rebels.html#.Ue0t3Y2sh8E>.
17. Irregular forces have been defined as "armed individuals or groups who are not members of the regular armed forces, police, or other internal security forces"; see U.S. Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, November 8, 2010, as amended through June 15, 2013, p. 146, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf).
18. Some Islamic elements, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, do have centralized command structures.
19. That is, "the identification, strength, command structure, and disposition of the personnel, units, and equipment of any military force"; see U.S. Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, November 8, 2010, as amended through June 15, 2013, p. 210, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf).
20. A useful term found in Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution," *Financial Times Magazine*, May 17, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de.html#axzz2ZhS0SHNc>.
21. In a speech to the Aspen Institute on July 20, the deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency reportedly stated that 1,200 opposition factions exist in Syria. Although it is not clear if he was referring only to armed elements, the figure suggests the very large size of the opposition in terms of numbers of groups. Terry Atlas, "U.S. Military Intelligence Warned No Quick Fall for Assad," *Bloomberg*, July 21, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-07-21/u-s-military-intelligence-warned-no-quick-fall-for-assad.html>.
22. For a discussion of this see Elizabeth O'Bagy, *The Free Syrian Army*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, p. 15, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The-Free-Syrian-Army-24MAR.pdf>. O'Bagy uses the terms "localized battalions" and "franchise brigades." This author prefers territorial battalions and composite brigades.
23. For example the Tawhid and Liwa al-Islam brigades. Tawhid has been active in northern, and possibly eastern, Syria, and Liwa al-Islam operates in southern Syria and the Damascus area.
24. These are the Northern Front, the Eastern Front, the



- Western/Central Front, the Southern Front, and the Homs Front. See pages 21–22 for a discussion of this structure.
25. Command in this context means the ability of a commander to order subordinates to do something and to have them actually do it.
  26. See Elizabeth O'Bagy, *The Free Syrian Army*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, pp. 19–23, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The-Free-Syrian-Army-24MAR.pdf>.
  27. Interviews with two rebel commanders in Antakya, Turkey, February 2013.
  28. This diagram is a simplification of a complex reality that changes over time. Rebel units fall in and out of cooperative relationships, and are connected by a dense network of political, social, military, and economic relationships.
  29. For a good example of the types of weapons now in use in rebel units see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ae\\_SswiaZY&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ae_SswiaZY&feature=youtu.be).
  30. For a description of this see, C. J. Chivers, "Starved for Arms, Syria Rebels Make Their Own," *New York Times*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/13/world/middleeast/starved-for-arms-syria-rebels-make-their-own.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.
  31. See for example: "Assad-forces recaptured town of Al Harra & rebels retreat- because lack of ammunition" posted on Yalla Souriya, August 8, 2013, at <http://yallasouriya.wordpress.com/>
  32. Combat qualities include such attributes as military skill, cohesion, motivation, discipline, leadership, courage, aggressiveness, and morale. The more a unit exhibits these, the better it is likely to fight.
  33. See, for example, Andrew J. Tabler, Jeffrey White, and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Fallout from the Fall of Taftanaz," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2015, January 14, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fallout-from-the-fall-of-taftanaz>.
  34. Evident during the battle for al-Qusayr, where the rebels conducted a skilled and determined defense despite the regime's large advantage in numbers and firepower.
  35. This has been called "the battle for the last fifty yards." It is a measure of the effectiveness of combat forces.
  36. This is currently the case at many locations where the rebels are besieging regime forces, including Kweres, Tabqa, and Deir Ezzor airfields.
  37. Military strategy has been usefully defined as "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy." See B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, Washington: Praeger, 1965 (rev ed.), p. 335.
  38. Some broad political goals of the rebellion have been articulated but these have not been linked to military ends and means. For goals, see, for example, the December 19, 2012 joint statement of the SNC and SMC at <https://www.facebook.com/SRGS.Joint.Forces>, December 19, 2012. The stated goals included overthrow of the regime and its symbols, and dismantlement of the security apparatus, allowing the Syrian people to freely decide their future, form an interim government, and alleviate their suffering. Similarly the founding statement of the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) listed its goals as (1) overthrow the Assad regime in all its corners; (2) protect all citizens...as well as private and public property; (3) empower the Syrian people to determine the freedom and future of Syria; (4) uphold the sovereignty, unity, and independence of Syria; and (5) establish that Islamic law will serve as a reference. See "The Founding Statement of the Syrian Liberation Front" at <http://www.al-farok.com/archives/1049>.
  39. The U.S. military defines an operation as "a sequence of tactical actions with a common purpose or unifying theme"; see U.S. Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, November 8, 2010, as amended through June 15, 2013, p. 206, [http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf).
  40. For example, at Wadi Dayf and Hamadiyah.
  41. On occasion the rebels have been able to achieve rapid advances, as in northern Aleppo province in July 2012 and in northern Latakia province in early August 2013.
  42. For videos of rebels using earthmoving equipment to create increasingly elaborate trench systems, see the following (in Arabic) from May 13, 2012: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=UnZIQSo-Fgw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=UnZIQSo-Fgw) and [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=XiFFoAKHa1g#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=XiFFoAKHa1g#!).
  43. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/syriaohr>.
  44. This number does not include regime irregular and allied KIA. No consistent data are available on losses among these forces.
  45. "When only ground troops are studied, the ratio of WIA/KIA, which was 4.2/1 in WWII, has remained essentially the same for the past 200 years." See Clifford C. Cloonan,

- "Profiles in Combat Casualties," PowerPoint presentation accompanying lecture for Operational Medicine, [http://www.operationalmedicine.org/Powerpoint/Lectures/Cloonan/Profiles\\_in\\_Combat\\_Casualties.htm](http://www.operationalmedicine.org/Powerpoint/Lectures/Cloonan/Profiles_in_Combat_Casualties.htm).
46. SOHR data indicates that as of July 2013, NDF personnel are being killed at a rate of about one NDF fighter for every six regulars.. SEE Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) daily casualty reports at <https://www.facebook.com/syriaohr>.
  47. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Facebook, June 26, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/syriaohr>.
  48. Ibid.
  49. Ibid.
  50. The history of anti-tank warfare indicates that losses inflicted on enemy forces are often exaggerated, and that armored fighting vehicle (AFV) identification is often faulty. Some rebel claims are supported by videos confirming destruction of vehicles or that they were at least hit. Others show only a vehicle under fire or even simply what appears to be a burning vehicle. Nevertheless it is clear that the rebels are killing regime armor with some effectiveness.
  51. Rebel vehicle losses, mostly of civilian types such as trucks and SUVs, are relatively easily replaced by taking similar vehicles out of civilian use, although the heavy weapons mounted on them may not be.
  52. Anthony H. Cordesman and Aram Nerguizian, "The Arab-Israeli Military Balance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 29, 2010, pp. 12, 15, [http://csis.org/files/publication/100629\\_Arab-IsraeliMilBal.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100629_Arab-IsraeliMilBal.pdf).
  53. Ibid., p. 18.
  54. Ibid.
  55. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 2013, <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/military%20balance/issues/the-military-balance-2013-2003>, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://www.sipri.org>, as cited in "Syria—Army Equipment," GlobalSecurity.org, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/army-equipment.htm>.
  56. Ibid.
  57. Zeina Karam, "Rebel infighting in Syria undermining revolt," *AP*, July 15, 2013, at <http://news.yahoo.com/rebel-infighting-syria-undermining-revolt-194101806.html>. A journalist who travelled extensively in northern Syria stated that the first objective of Jabhat al-Nusra as it moved in to any area was to take over the grain silos. Interview with author.
  58. Self-organization has been defined as "the process where some form of global order or coordination arises out of the local interactions between the components of an initially disordered system. This process is not controlled by any Agent or subsystem inside or outside of the system ... [T]he organization is wholly decentralized over all of the components of the system... these systems are very robust and able to survive and self-repair substantial damage." Anas A. Ismail, "Self-organizing Models," *Swarm Robotics*, April 10, 2013, at <http://coswarm.wordpress.com/2013/04/10/self-organizing-models/>
  59. See, for example, Deir Press Network, "Deir Ezzor: A Report from Deir Ezzor Military Airport," YouTube video, May 20, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=ag2149RY2DA#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=ag2149RY2DA#!).
  60. Based on unit designators reported by opposition groups, elements of some 40 of the 70 combat brigades and artillery regiments of the Syrian regular army appear to be in the Damascus area (Damascus and Rif Damascus). This does not mean that all components of a brigade or regiment are present, but it does indicate where the regime is most concerned. For an in-depth analysis of the regime's use and deployment of its regular combat forces see, Joseph Holiday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War," Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, at <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime>.
  61. See Elizabeth O'Bagy, *The Free Syrian Army*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, p. 34, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The-Free-Syrian-Army-24MAR.pdf>.

## 2 Opposition Unity and Western Supply

*Andrew J. Tabler*

PERSONALITIES, IDEOLOGIES, and movements have divided the Syrian opposition since long before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. Syria, like neighboring Lebanon, is a mosaic of different religious sects and ethnicities that historically have not shared short- or long-term objectives. Unlike the Lebanese, however, Syrians have suffered under an extreme variety of centralized authoritarianism since the coming to power of the Baath Party in 1963 and the Assad family in 1970. Such domination fostered widespread psychological depression that has given way to individual grandiosity at opposition meetings and conferences over the past two years of the rebellion. Conditioned for decades by authoritarianism, Syrians are suspicious and wary of voluntarily falling under any single leader—even when they have an opportunity to choose that leader democratically and are faced with a conflict that has claimed over 100,000 lives among them in thirty months of systematic, regime-orchestrated slaughter.

Fortunately, such divisions have created exactly the kind of headless opposition that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime cannot decapitate. But they have also proved that the opposition's Achilles' heel is its difficulty in garnering support from an international community that sees a morass of factions that makes 1980s Lebanon look coherent. Such tendencies also do not bode well for a unified opposition in a post-Assad Syria.

### **The SNC and SOC**

The disunity among the opposition was evident in the trials and tribulations of the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella organization formed in September 2011 that brought together liberals, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, and Kurds. It was dominated by opposition exiles with close relations with regional states, most notably Turkey and Qatar, while representation from the opposition within Syria was piecemeal. A combination of personal and ideological differences led the SNC executive committee under

President Burhan Ghalioun to hold its political cards close to its chest, much to the annoyance of the membership. A number of SNC meetings, including some held on the sidelines of the Friends of the Syrian People conferences, largely failed to produce decisions, bodies, or plans capable of fostering a transition to a post-Assad Syria. Individuals from within and outside the SNC continued to pursue their own initiatives, further watering down the council's effectiveness.

As the revolution continued, groups within Syria bearing the brunt of the Assad regime's crackdown were increasingly angered by the SNC's inability to lobby Western countries for intervention or deliver any kind of assistance. Neither was the SNC organizationally present in Syrian border areas where refugees took shelter, which led the opposition within Syria to characterize it as an opposition of hotel lobbies and airport business lounges. One prominent SNC member even boasted to one of the authors of his status on the SkyTeam alliance, which, he said, was one of the world's highest.

The United States supported the SNC due to lobbying by Turkey and Qatar, which funded parts of the organization through contributions and relationships with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, one of its main factions. The council played a key role in Washington's diplomatic plan: convince United Nations Security Council members Russia and China, who have historically close relations with the Assad regime, to press Assad for a negotiated exit from Syria, akin to President Ali Abdullah Saleh's departure from Yemen. Upon this occurring, senior Assad regime military and political figures would lead a transition process in which the SNC—which hopefully would be coalescing in exile—would return to Syria and contest for power in free and fair elections.

The plan died in deadlock. Superficially, the issue was that Russia and China would not agree to an arrangement in which Assad's departure was explicit, whereas Washington and the West would not sign onto one that

gave Assad partial control and an opportunity to manipulate the process to remain in power. The deeper reason for failure, however, was that Security Council members had competing interests in Syria that could not be overcome. In the meantime, the Assad regime continued to use live fire against civilian protestors. As UN special envoy Kofi Annan's "Six-Point Plan" for Syria failed to broker a viable ceasefire and a withdrawal of regime forces from urban centers that would give the political process a chance, more and more Syrian oppositionists began picking up arms to defend themselves and take down Assad on their own.

As the armed movement grew exponentially in early 2012, the SNC remained deadlocked. Tensions between its executive committee and membership continued, even after council president Ghalioun handed power over to his successor, Abdel Basset Sida. Only when SNC member Riad Seif launched the Syrian National Initiative (SNI), which threatened to engulf the SNC in another umbrella organization, did the council finally launch its own initiative to include more members from inside Syria.

The SNC's November 2012 summit in Doha gave birth to the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC in U.S. government terminology; often referred to as the Syrian National Coalition elsewhere), 40 percent of whose seats belong to the SNC. Recognition of the SOC at the December 10, 2012, Friends of the Syrian People meeting in Marrakesh as the "legitimate representative of the Syrian People" was an important milestone in both the evolution of the civilian opposition and that of the anti-Assad international coalition. But the SOC remains an untested umbrella organization driven by Syrians now in exile, in combination with a group of unelected local council members and other local notables. The international community has committed behind the scenes to the SOC's being the only channel through which assistance to the domestic opposition will be channeled to groups inside the country, provided it functions properly.

While the SOC has been able to form a number of committees to deal with various aspects of governance and a post-Assad Syria, whether the new organization will be able to overcome the formidable divisions

within the Syrian opposition remains unclear. The divisions do not exist only among exiles and between exiles and those inside the country; unfortunately, domestic groups are riven with them. Historic divisions between urban and rural Syrians, rich and poor, religious and secular, sect and sect, have led to the proliferation of competing coordination committees, local councils, and revolutionary councils in every Syrian province, area, and district.<sup>1</sup> Politically prominent during the protest phase of the revolution (March–November 2011), these organizations are now primarily in charge of administering relief and maintaining piecemeal local governance structures.

The difficult situation on the ground is not conducive to civilian control. To survive the regime's brutal repression, activists have gathered around Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions (or *katiba*) and brigades (*liwa*) active in areas under rebel control. Thus, Syrian opposition groups inside the country are now increasingly brackish—a mixture of civil and armed elements largely dependent on the tide of battle in local areas of Syria. In some areas, civilian structures predate the armed revolt; in others, they have been created by FSA units.

### The Supreme Military Council

The SOC officially contains no armed groups. Well known but not reported, however, is that the meeting in Doha to establish the SOC coincided with another, quiet meeting nearby of Military Council leaders. Following it, Saudi Arabia and Qatar negotiated how to channel military assistance to armed groups, which helped pave the way for the establishment of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) on December 7 in Antalya, Turkey. The selection by consensus among the 260 members in attendance of Gen. Salim Idris as chief of staff of the thirty-member council indicated the heavy Qatari and Saudi influence in taming armed groups. The SMC is a blend of two previous support networks for armed groups: a Saudi Arabian-backed division of Syria into five fronts (Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western/Central, and Homs) and a Qatari-backed, seventeen-member Provincial Military Council (also known as "Joint Command").

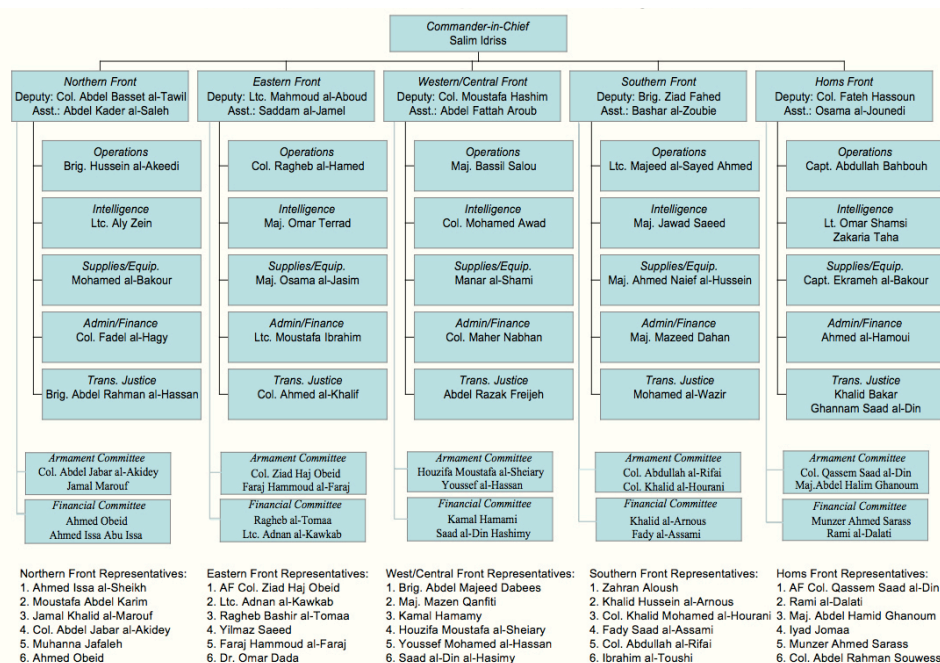


The SMC at first glance seems any foreign government's dream for the coherent, linear opposition structure needed to arm the opposition (see figure 6) because it is well organized and has a top-down structure which appears to be a chain of command. Each of the five fronts has a deputy (with an assistant), five departments (operations, intelligence, supplies and equipment, administration and finance, and transitional justice), and two committees (armaments and financial), as well as six front "representatives." The structure can accommodate lethal assistance channeled into Syria, as well as nonlethal assistance with civil affairs, such as transitional justice.

Politically, however, representation on the SMC is not limited to the more secular defectors from the Syrian military; also participating are representatives from the more nationalist-oriented Salafist *katibas* (or those connected with them) that sprang up throughout the country during 2012, funded by private donors from the Arab Gulf and North Africa. For example, the head of the SMC's Northern Front, Col. Abdel Baset al-Tawil, is head of the Idlib province-based Quthayif al-Haq Brigade; he has worked with Ahrar al-Sham and was subsequently viewed with suspicion by moderates

for his Salafist connections.<sup>2</sup> The front's finance committee is headed by Ahmed Obeid, who has ties to the Salafists, as well as Ahmed Issa Abu Issa, commander of the major nationalist Salafist organization Saqour al-Sham. This organization also heads the Syrian Liberation Front, which, while more moderate, advocates the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria. Most of the Northern Front's remaining members are primarily nationalist and more secular in orientation, however. Areas where Salafists have grown strong are also represented by Salafist figures and have seen a similar distribution within the SMC's leadership. The Eastern Front's assistant deputy, Saddam al-Jamel, is a Salafist who formed the Banner of Allahu Akbar Katiba.

Advocates for the SMC say the inclusion of Salafists in these areas was a political necessity, and an attempt by the SMC to co-opt and control Salafists among the Syrian armed opposition.<sup>3</sup> But their inclusion has also become a liability, particularly for Western governments concerned with the rapid growth of Salafists in opposition-controlled areas and their coordination with extremist jihadist movements, most notably Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).



**FIG. 6 Structure of the Supreme Military Council.**

Source: <http://ssgpolicyblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/smc-structure.jpg>



## Western Aid and the Salafists

Any Western aid provided to the SMC that ended up in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra not only would likely violate the antiterrorism laws of the countries providing it, but would lead to political blowback at home that could cut off aid to the opposition entirely or bring about an increase in regulations that would make extending assistance impossible in the future. That said, the reality is that some proportion of Western aid will almost certainly leak to Jabhat al-Nusra.

An important case of foreign-provided weapons offers a cautionary note. In December 2012, the Saudis covertly purchased weapons from Croatia and began funneling them into Syria through Jordan's northern border.<sup>4</sup> Presumably, one purpose was to bolster the more nationalist and secularist elements of the opposition in an effort to counteract the rise of radical Islamists (the Saudi regime is certainly devoutly Muslim, but al-Qaeda targets it, and Riyadh devotes much effort to combating al-Qaeda). It may also have been a trial run to see what would happen to the weapons once shipped. If it were, indeed, a trial run, the results were unlikely to spark much zeal to continue the program, especially in Washington, which likely signed off on the original plan. Eliot Higgins, who has been tracking the flow of weapons for his *Brown Moses* blog, was able to identify the Croatian weapons and confirm that they did end up reaching the more militant elements.<sup>5</sup>

Most worrisome from Washington's perspective is that the weapons also ended up in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>6</sup> In mid-March, JN released two statements that showed pictures of its people holding the Croatian weapons,<sup>7</sup> as shown in figure 7. The statements announced operations in January, February, and March, suggesting JN was able to acquire some of the weapon systems as early as a month after their distribution. Press accounts did not make clear whether the weapons were provided via SMC channels, although the reports referred to "nationalist and secular" battalions that were likely to be part of or in cooperation with the SMC.<sup>8</sup> In sum, this experience with the weapons from Croatia suggests that if the United States decides to provide heavy weaponry to non-Islamists or

moderates, it is distinctly possible not all of them will remain in the hands of the U.S.-backed fighters.

Nor is the Croatian weapon story the only troubling sign. A cursory look at the Southern Front members of the SMC—some of whom were reportedly involved in the provision of Croatian weapons—finds no ostensible Salafists, suggesting leakage of weapons to extremists could occur via non-Salafists as well.<sup>9</sup> This incident should cause policymakers to think a bit about the ability of the SMC—at least as currently constructed—to fulfill Washington's two goals of supporting Syria's armed opposition while simultaneously "aiming to isolate some of the more extremist elements of the opposition, such as al-Nusra and ISIS."<sup>10</sup>

## Cautious Middle Way

Given how much is unknown about the SMC and the Syrian opposition, Washington should render greater military assistance through the non-Salafist members within the SMC with whom it has worked since Secretary of State John Kerry announced the expansion of aid on March 5, 2013. Perhaps the best known of these recipients are Col. Abdul-Jabbar Akidi,<sup>11</sup> head of Aleppo province's Revolutionary Military Council, and Afif Souliman, head of the Idlib Revolutionary Military Council. According to off-the-record accounts from U.S. government officials, these individuals and their supply pipelines have proved very reliable in getting nonlethal and humanitarian assistance to Syria in coordination with the SOC's Assistance Coordination Unit, based



FIG. 7 JN fighters with Croatian weapons.

in Gaziantep.<sup>12</sup> U.S. government humanitarian, transition, and nonlethal support chains have the same kinds of end-user constraints concerning U.S.-provided supplies not ending up in the hands of U.S.-designated terrorist organizations like JN and ISIS. Expanding greater nonlethal and lethal support via this pipeline would support moderates within the SMC at the expense of Salafists and others who share Washington's goal of taking down the Assad regime but seek to set up an Islamic state opposed to U.S. long-term goals and interests in Syria and the Levant.

## Notes

1. A Syrian province (or *muhafaza*) is roughly equivalent to a U.S. state, an area (*mantiqa*) to a county, and a district (*nahiya*) to a township.
2. Elizabeth O'Bagy, "Selected Supreme Military Command Members," Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/press-media/graphsand-stat/whos-who-smc>.
3. Elizabeth O'Bagy, *The Free Syrian Army*, Middle East Security Report 9, Institute for the Study of War, March 2003, p. 29, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The-Free-Syrian-Army-24MAR.pdf>.
4. C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria with Croatian Arms," *New York Times*, February 25, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
5. Eliot Higgins, "Video Shows Non-FSA Jihadists Ahrar al-Sham Using Croatian Weapons," *Brown Moses*, March 1, 2013, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/video-shows-non-fsa-jihadists-ahrar-al.html>; Eliot Higgins, "More Videos of Croatian Weapons with Non-FSA Islamists, Salafists, and Jihadists," *Brown Moses*, March 15, 2013, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/more-videos-of-croatian-weapons-with.html>.
6. Eliot Higgins, "Evidence of Jabhat al-Nusra with Croatian Weapons," *Brown Moses*, March 23, 2013, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2013/03/evidence-of-jabhat-al-nusra-with.html>.
7. Jabhat al-Nusra, "Storming and Liberating Katibat al-Sahwah in Hom," *al-Manarah al-Bayda Media*, March 17, 2013; Jabhat al-Nusra, "Bombing the Barad Checkpoint in Busra al-Sham in Homs," *al-Manarah al-Bayda Media*, March 17, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/03/18/seven-new-statements-from-jabhat-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-4/>.
8. C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria with Croatian Arms," *New York Times*, February 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all>.
9. Opposition sources say the leakage was due to a supplied *katiba* not affiliated directly with the SMC.
10. On-the-record conference call by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syria, the White House, Office of the Press Secretary, via telephone, June 13, 2013.
11. Colonel Akidi resigned from the SMC on June 21, 2013, citing the pressure of his responsibility leading the Aleppo Military Council, as well as the "childish behavior of some leading members of the Supreme Military Council [and] their preoccupation with legacies [and] positions, and the decline of the SMC in the eyes of the majority of the rebels." In a clarification interview with SMC chief of staff Idris on June 24, both said Akidi remained within the SMC based on his role as head of the Aleppo Revolutionary Military Council. Whether he will continue to retain the position of chief of the Northern Front on the SMC's Armaments Committee remains unclear. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?client=mv-google&gl=US&hl=en&v=HYKm3XWRja8&nomobile=1> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=DGpWSrNwNWw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=DGpWSrNwNWw).
12. Ibid. Also based on discussion with senior U.S. government official, June 26, 2013.

### 3 Causes for Pause: Spoilers and Risks

*Aaron Y. Zelin*

THE RISE OF Salafi and other jihadist actors among the Syrian military opposition is a reality the United States must understand if it wants to engage the opposition. Whether Washington likes it or not, it has to deal with the opposition that has resulted from its own dithering, not the one it wants or is ideal. The time for the latter has passed. With their ascendancy, Salafi groups have become integral to every aspect of the war, from fighting to local law and order and the provision of basic needs. While the opposition is very much divided, it is interconnected in many ways as well as a means of survival. Understanding its intricacies is essential to U.S. policy in Syria.

#### The Rise of Salafis

In the past year, Islamism has been ascendant within the ranks of the Syrian rebels. Three main types of Islamists are active: Ikhwanis aligned with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB); mainstream Salafis and global jihadists; and generic Islamists, not loyal to any particular group or ideology. This chapter will focus only on the Salafi element, for two reasons. First, the United States is already aware of what it will get with the Ikhwanis; and, second, generic Islamists are unknowns in terms of which way they could sway in a post-Assad scenario, so speculating about them (especially those aligned with the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front) does not yet make sense.

The two main fighting forces in Syria that can be described as Salafi are the global jihadist organization, Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front),<sup>1</sup> established by al-Qaeda in Iraq in late July 2011, and the locally focused Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (the Free Men of the Islamic Greater Syria Movement; originally Kataib Ahrar al-Sham), which formed early on during the peaceful protests. (See figure 8.) Neither group publicly announced itself (which each did independently of the other) until January 2012.

The Salafis' ascendancy can be attributed in part to the vacuum created by the lack of Western leadership and action in late 2011 and the first half of 2012 and due to the combat experience many Salafi fighters gained next door in Iraq in the previous decade during the American occupation. While these factors provided the potential for the rise of the Salafis, however, they do not explain how they actually gained popularity and the trust of the civilian population. Primary to the preeminence of these forces is the "soft power" used by groups like Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra in the fields of governance and social services, in contrast to the military force of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions.

What truly changed views of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and Ahrar al-Sham was when units aligned with the FSA began taking on governance functions in northern Syria in October and November 2012 and failed miserably. Many local reports noted the looting of



FIG. 8 Jabhat al-Nusra (left) and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyyah (right) logos.



stores, bread factories, and heating oil, followed by the extortion of higher prices from civilians<sup>2</sup> and the levying of high de facto taxes at checkpoints by FSA-aligned fighters. According to Sheikh Omar, the leader of the non-Islamist Ghuraba al-Sham (Strangers of the Levant), “Our members in Aleppo were stealing openly. Others stole everything and were taking Syria’s goods to sell outside the country. I was against any bad action committed by Ghuraba al-Sham. However, things happened and opinion turned against us.”<sup>3</sup> The FSA has yet to recover from these soured perceptions among the populace.

Meanwhile, in response to the FSA-induced shortages, Salafi actors intervened and took control of the distribution of bread and other foodstuffs. JN’s takeover of the grain silos helped alleviate incipient starvation among civilians; the group also helped provide protection—by not allowing individuals to steal or pillage stores—for these basic needs, including fuel.<sup>4</sup> (See figure 9.) Since then, JN, now viewed as fair arbiters who would not deprive the populace like the FSA did, has taken over the main bakeries in places like Aleppo. The *New York Times* reported the group was even selling the bread to individuals at less than 20 percent of the real price on the black market.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, so successful was JN in its provisions that by early February 2013 it had been able to store up to eight months’ worth of grain, as well as provide subsidies to farmers for the forthcoming harvest.<sup>6</sup>

These efforts won popular support for JN. For instance, Abu Ahmed of Aleppo told the *Christian Science Monitor*, “Before I met [JN], I thought they were tough and not easy to work with, but after working with them I found that the opposite of that is true. I don’t believe Jabhat al-Nusra will be bad. I think both the domestic and international media has deformed their image.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Colonel Riyad al-Assad, the founder of the FSA and one of its senior commanders, praised JN by declaring, “They are our brothers in Islam.”<sup>8</sup>

After the takeover of liberated and semi-liberated areas of the north and east of Syria, Ahrar al-Sham also played an important role in providing aid to civilians, as well as engaging them socially. Ahrar al-Sham



**FIG. 9** Ahrar al-Sham provides bread to children.

provided bread and water to those internally displaced in areas like Ain Beida and medicine in Sarmada<sup>9</sup> and set up a forum in al-Raqqah for citizens to express their views and opinions on the future of the city after its liberation.<sup>10</sup> Ahrar al-Sham has also been able to educate children and youth on Islamic cultural topics as well as Quran lessons.<sup>11</sup>

These activities have helped provide some semblance of normality to areas that have seen much destruction over the past couple of years, and they highlight in many cases why civilians have embraced both Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, even if they do not necessarily agree with every aspect of their ideology. As these groups take control over social services and governance and are viewed as fair arbiters who are acting in the best interests of the people, some citizens may well become socialized, either now or in the near future, into the way of life for which the Salafis hope in a post-Assad scenario.

Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra have had a head start in winning the hearts and minds of the average citizen. Even if the United States and its allies are more forceful in supporting non-Islamist or “moderate” Islamist elements, they will have to contend with the Salafi groups in this regard as well as on the battlefield. Furthermore, elements within the FSA will have to clean up their acts if they want to regain the trust of the populace. A successful operation to pursue and achieve American interests will not be easy to accomplish and has the potential to fail outright.

## Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham

Although they are both Salafi, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham are different and have distinct political goals and objectives. Ahrar al-Sham is more locally oriented than Jabhat al-Nusra (though a recent interview with al-Jazeera Arabic about Sykes-Picot being obsolete is somewhat worrying).<sup>12</sup> Ahrar al-Sham is also distinguished by not being involved with attacks on civilian areas, by not embracing suicide attacks, and by not disseminating its media releases through forums authenticated by al-Qaeda, but rather through its independent website, Facebook page, and Twitter account.<sup>13</sup> Most important, Ahrar al-Sham, unlike Jabhat al-Nusra, is not calling for a global caliphate and is only focused on establishing an Islamic state within Syria.

Jabhat al-Nusra, on the other hand, may have put *hudud* (fixed punishments) on hold, but instituting harsh penalties is in their future plans. JN military commander sheikh Abu Ahmed in Ras al-Ain in Hasaka governorate made clear where things would head when he declared that alcohol, tobacco, cinema, and “immoral TV” would be banned. His justification was that these actions and activities “corrupt the morals, especially of young people. Just look at the West.”<sup>14</sup>

The sections below describe Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham in greater detail.

**Jabhat al-Nusra.** On the national level, Jabhat al-Nusra is led by the self-styled “*al-Fatih*” (the conqueror) Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani (al-Golani). Little is known about him, although many suspect he hails from the Syrian Golan region because of his *nom de guerre*. His operational security is top notch, since he covers or blurs out his face and obscures the real sound of his voice with software tools in official releases. Moreover, when, in December 2012, leaders from Salafi groups in the opposition gathered to discuss the creation of an Islamist umbrella coalition, al-Jawlani did not show his face during the entire meeting, according to a participant.<sup>15</sup>

Under al-Jawlani is the *Majlis al-Shura* (consultative council). Although information about the council is scant, it is likely to include a series of committee

heads, among them leaders of a sharia committee, a military committee, a finance committee, and a relief committee.

In any type of conflict with nonstate actors, knowing for certain how many individuals are in an organization is difficult. This is especially so for a very secretive group like Jabhat al-Nusra. Credible though unverifiable estimates suggest that as of late 2012 or early 2013, it had anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 members.<sup>16</sup> A few thousand prospective members and independent jihadists are also believed to be fighting alongside JN.

The process for becoming a member of JN is far more stringent than for any other fighting force within Syria. Before joining, one needs *tizkiyya* (personal assurance) from two frontline commanders—in other words, two commanders must vouch for the character of the individual and his potential.<sup>17</sup> To attain this, says Abu ‘Adnan, a JN religious scholar and sharia official in Aleppo, a new recruit must undertake a ten-day religious training course “to ascertain his understanding of religion, his morals, his reputation.” (See figure 10.) Individuals who pass this test and are “initiated” into the group then undertake a fifteen- to twenty-day military training program to prepare them for the front lines.<sup>18</sup> Although JN likely uses a number of training grounds, the main one is al-Fatih (after JN’s emir) Military Camp.<sup>19</sup>

Jabhat al-Nusra has three main streams of funding to pay its fighters and wage its war against the Assad regime. When JN was first established with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in the summer of 2011, AQI provided seed funding to jumpstart its operations. Since then, according to Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Husseini al-Qurayshi al-Baghdadi, the emir of AQI, AQI sends half its funds to JN each month.<sup>20</sup> Similar to other al-Qaeda branches, JN is also believed to have funding from private individuals (though not governments) in Gulf states. Some JN fighters told the McClatchy news service in December 2012 that most private funding comes from Saudis.<sup>21</sup> These two funding streams have given JN an advantage over some other factions, since the money goes to them directly rather than being funneled through multiple sources, such as units under



FIG. 10 Jabhat al-Nusra's training camp, 'al-Fatih.'

the banner of the FSA. This has allowed JN to pay its fighters \$150 to \$200 a month.<sup>22</sup>

The third funding stream is not in the form of liquid currency but comes from hard-fought efforts on the battlefield. While Abu Ahmed, JN's military commander in northern Hasaka, downplayed having received outside finances, he explained JN had gotten its weapons via independent purchases—likely on the black market—and as *al-ghanima* (spoils of war).<sup>23</sup> The *ghanima* had come from attacks on military installations and airports, which, once taken over, have yielded caches of weapons and ammunition to JN and other Salafi factions.<sup>24</sup>

**Ahrar al-Sham.** While accounts of the formation of Ahrar al-Sham differ, Abu Zayd, one of the founders, claimed that its earliest mobilization took place following the Egyptian revolution and before the beginning of the Syrian uprising.<sup>25</sup> Others report it began organizing after May 2011, when the Assad regime gave a general amnesty to individuals in prison.<sup>26</sup> In any case, the group officially went public in early 2012, around the same time JN also officially announced its presence (likely a coincidence).<sup>27</sup> It is led by Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi.<sup>28</sup>

Currently, Ahrar al-Sham is the lead group in a Salafi umbrella formation called the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), which was formed on December 21,

2012.<sup>29</sup> The SIF's main goals are to overthrow the Assad regime and then institute sharia as the framework of an Islamic state, in line with the teachings of the *salaf* (pious predecessors from Islam's first three generations).<sup>30</sup> Ahrar al-Sham's leader also leads the SIF, but its more public face is that of spokesperson Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Suri, who also helped found both Ahrar al-Sham and SIF and is currently serving as a commander in charge of the Shariah Board in Bab al-Hawa, on the Turkish border.<sup>31</sup>

When Ahrar al-Sham went public in January 2012, it claimed to be operating with 25 battalions.<sup>32</sup> After growing internally and merging with other groups, it now controls at least 113.<sup>33</sup> Although Ahrar al-Sham began as a movement primarily based in Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama, its presence is now nationwide, and it is a key fighting force in most major battles.<sup>34</sup> For good reason, it is seen as one of the most competent fighting forces on the ground, as one of its commanders in al-Raqqa illustrates: "We had sleeper cells inside [al-Raqqa] for a long time. When we entered the city, they rose and implemented the plan. The project was devised a long time ago."<sup>35</sup>

At least 5,000 to 6,000 fighters are believed to be in Ahrar al-Sham,<sup>36</sup> which is one of several groups that includes foreigners. Prior to taking the battlefield, new recruits and members train in "sports, shooting, and



[taking] care of your weapon.”<sup>37</sup> (See figure 11.) The Ahrar al-Sham fighters are best known for their successful sieges and assaults.

Financially, Ahrar al-Sham’s funding streams are a lot more open than JN’s. It has received money from the network of Kuwaiti Salafi preacher Hajjaj al-Ajami, Saudi-based Syrian preacher Adnan al-‘Arur, and Kuwaiti Salafi politician and ideologue Hakim al-Mutayri, as well as individuals from Qatar.<sup>38</sup> A member of Ahrar al-Sham told *al-Monitor* that the group gets its “money from the Gulf—mainly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as Kuwait and Bahrain.”<sup>39</sup>

Ahrar al-Sham has also been in cooperation with government-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from Turkey and Qatar. The December 2012 video proclaiming the creation of the SIF showed its members providing aid to Syrian civilians in the form of boxes and flags bearing the logos of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) and of the Qatar Charity, which used to go by the name Qatar Charitable Society.<sup>40</sup>

**Military relations between Salafists and non-Islamists.** Unlike many fighting forces in Syria, both Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham can deploy military capabilities on a nationwide level. They have conducted operations in all provinces except Tartus. When both groups first began they were mostly only conducting hit-and-run, improvised explosive device (IED), and sniper attacks. Since then, both have mastered more regular military formations, as well as conducting sieges at airports, bases, and villages. Although the two organizations are separate, their military capabilities have complemented one another, especially in the past half year:

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and Jabhat al-Nusra have clearly formed somewhat of a mutually interdependent relationship, whereby the former appears consistently as the public face of a jihadi offensive campaign, announcing operations, updating followers on their progress, and then (more often than not), declaring victory, while the latter acts as a group more akin to a special force playing an elite frontline role. Acting together, the two groups have been incredibly decisive in their publicized operations.<sup>41</sup>



FIG. 11 Ahrar al-Sham fighter practicing with weapon.

Both organizations have been best known in recent months for their successful sieges and assaults, as well as their involvement in some of the decisive victories at the Taftanaz airbase (Idlib) and Jarrah airbase (Aleppo) and the liberation of al-Raqqa city (although both were at the failed battle of al-Qusayr). They are also involved in current operations to free the prisoners in Aleppo and clear checkpoints in Dar’a and other smaller campaigns in Damascus and Idlib.

The interconnectedness of fighters and their operations, even among groups with different world-views, could create challenges to assisting the rebels. “Generic” Islamist groups, such as Suqur al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Faruq Brigades, and Liwa al-Islam, have leaders in the Supreme Military Council, yet they very much interact and conduct most military operations in coordination with militant Salafi groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>42</sup> A scenario where these groups would no longer interact is difficult to envision, especially since all are aiming for the creation of an Islamic state, even if they have different conceptions of what that means. The overlap between “acceptable” rebels and non-Salafi Islamists intersects in the Supreme Military Command (SMC), but on the battlefield the lines between those inside and outside the council do not seem too relevant.

### Jabhat al-Nusra’s Relationship with the Non-Islamist Opposition

Two episodes highlight the problems Washington faces in trying to drive a wedge between Salafist jihadists and the non-Islamist opposition: the U.S. designation of Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization and

Jabhat al-Nusra's *bayat* (oath of allegiance or fealty) to al-Qaeda central.

**Designation of Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorists.** Opposition to the U.S. designation of Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization in Syria, which was officially announced on December 11, 2012, was swift and extended well beyond groups ideologically sympathetic to JN's radical goals. This solidarity once again highlights the solidarity of fighters with JN, despite ideological differences, because of its efforts against the regime. More funds from the West will not necessarily make this kinship go away.

The reaction among anti-Assad Syrians to the designation was perhaps best captured by an image that appeared on Facebook shortly after the news broke. In it, residents of the northwestern town of Kafr Anbel hold up a poster showing Barack Obama pointing accusingly toward a flag associated with JN, saying, "Terrorism." Behind the U.S. president is Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, standing triumphantly on a pile of murdered Syrian civilians.<sup>43</sup> (See figure 12.)

This image reflected the reality that the Syrian opposition simply did not view JN as the primary threat to the country—that designation still belonged to Assad's murderous army. Nor was it lost on Syrians that the Obama administration, which had provided

scant military assistance to their efforts to topple the regime, was now singling out a rebel group that had become perhaps the revolution's most effective fighting force.

Islamists also condemned the Obama administration's decision. The "generic" Islamist group Suqur al-Sham ("the Falcons of Greater Syria") released a statement from its leader Ahmed 'Issa al-Sheikh on December 9 rejecting the designation. The group stressed the importance of unity and cohesion among the different rebel factions and emphasized that JN was like any other brigade working to overthrow the Assad regime. Sheikh referred to Assad's army as the real terrorists in Syria and concluded with a reminder of U.S. "crimes" committed in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>44</sup>

The Syrian National Council (SNC), which was the face of the revolution until it was superseded by a new coalition, released a statement rejecting the move. The council, which continued to wield considerable influence in opposition politics, went on to explain that the Assad regime's massacres were the true terrorism in Syria today.<sup>45</sup> The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood also stated that the decision to designate Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist group was "very wrong."<sup>46</sup> The chief of staff of the FSA, brigadier general Salim Idris, piled on, saying JN was not a terrorist organization, and that it "depend[ed] on young, educated Syrians" for its efforts.<sup>47</sup>



FIG. 12 Activists in the town of Kafr al-Nabl in response to U.S. designation of Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization.



Later that week, Syrians took to the streets to express their solidarity with JN. A coalition of coordinating committees and rebel battalions demonstrated under the slogan, “No to the Interference of America—We Are All Jabhat al-Nusra.”<sup>48</sup> The statement’s original 29 signatories later increased to more than 100.<sup>49</sup> Given the intense opposition to it by so many parts of the opposition, the designation not only provided JN with a further boost in its efforts to win over the populace, but also put the United States in the awkward position of being perceived as allied with Assad and the enemies of the revolution.

**The Bayat.** Even more unexpected was the support Jabhat al-Nusra gained after it publicly announced a pledge of *bayat* (oath of allegiance or fealty) to al-Qaeda central’s Ayman al-Zawahiri. On April 9, 2013, emir of AQI Sheikh al-Baghdadi, released an audio message announcing the extension of its “Islamic state” into al-Sham (the Levant), effectively confirming publicly the supposition that Jabhat al-Nusra was an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).<sup>50</sup>

While many in the opposition denounced AQI’s announcement and/or Zawahiri,<sup>51</sup> most dismissed JN leader Jawlani’s response a day later, when he admitted getting approval for the project in Syria from Baghdadi and receiving funds from AQI and publicly reaffirmed his *bayat* to Zawahiri.<sup>52</sup> For instance, Ahrar al-Sham leader Hamawi posted to his official Twitter account that “Syrians would not alter their position toward” JN because “they have given their blood and money to al-Sham.”<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, while it is true that Jawlani disavowed Baghdadi’s attempted takeover the day after al-Baghdadi’s message, Moaz al-Khatib—then the leader of the Syrian civilian opposition outside Syria—and others like him were naive to think JN was being forced into something against its own will even after Jawlani’s reassertion of the *bayat*.<sup>54</sup> On top of this, the mainstream Damascus Military Council backed JN and called for unity within the rebellion’s ranks,<sup>55</sup> while the United Media Office of Homs endorsed Jawlani’s audio message and stated that JN should not be

isolated.<sup>56</sup> Last, in an expression of defiance and sarcasm, a fighter with Kataib al-Faruq, a rival Islamist group to JN, even held up a poster that said, “I am a terrorist for fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra.”<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

Even if the United States and its allies decide to be more forceful in their help to the rebellion despite the risks arising from the opposition’s failure to disavow JN, many of the key fighting forces—even non-Salafis on the ground—may not want America to be involved. These fighters do not respect the outside opposition because its members are not fighting and spilling their blood for the future of the country.

The leader of Liwa al-Tawhid recently noted, “Our relation with [the] National Coalition used to be good but is now getting worse. They have not done anything tangible for us.”<sup>58</sup> And the leader of the Faruq Brigades stated, “There is a great divide between the Syrian national coalition and the actual armed groups that are fighting in Syria.”<sup>59</sup> Even if the United States works through the SMC, it might not see tangible results, especially since Liwa al-Tawhid and the Faruq Brigades have leaders on the council.

On top of this, unlike in Iraq, a large-scale negative reaction to jihadists’ being in control of territory does not seem to be taking place. Even after months of rule, individuals are still okay with JN. For instance, in al-Raqqa, three months after its liberation, a woman told Reuters her thoughts on the group: “They’re called terrorists, and we don’t accept this. They’re our sons. Us and them, we’re one thing. They defend us, and we defend them.”<sup>60</sup>

Unlike the United States, both JN and Ahrar al-Sham have a home field advantage. They also have had the ability to build up trust with different communities over the past year and a half through a variety of gestures, providing proto-governance, law and order, and social services. The United States is playing from behind and might never be able to catch up to or surpass these efforts, especially since it has lost so much respect as a consequence of its policies thus far in Syria. The battle could already be lost.

## Notes

- Also among the global organizations is the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which is nominally affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, and other, smaller formations. Due to the fluid nature of the ISIS and its unknown future trajectory, this research is focused only on the main Salafi groups within Syria. For more on the ISIS and its relationship with JN, see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Raqqa Governorate," *Jihadology.net*, June 3, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/04/guest-post-jabhat-al-nusra-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-raqqa-governorate>, and Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Aleppo Area," *Jihadology.net*, June 13, 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/13/musings-of-an-iraqi-brasenostril-on-jihad-jabhat-al-nusra-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham-aleppo-area>.
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# Implications: Realistic Appraisal, Targeted Assistance

*Patrick Clawson*

GIVEN THE ever-escalating scale of Syria's humanitarian disaster coupled with the threat this conflict poses to the region's security architecture, the question is not whether the United States should get involved, but rather when, how, and at what cost. Consider, for instance, that Syria contains the largest stockpiles of chemical weapons in the Middle East, and that terrorist organizations are ascendant in each of the country's three major areas: Hezbollah in the regime-controlled West, Jabhat al-Nusra in the Sunni Arab Center, and affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the Kurdish East. Or that instability in Syria runs the grave risk of spilling over into Iraq and Lebanon while presenting serious security challenges to Turkey, Israel, and Jordan.

Washington cannot end the fighting, but President Barack Obama's administration can help contain it. The United States should pursue a measured but assertive course, one aimed at preventing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from freely using his most lethal weapons, protecting civilians from indiscriminate slaughter, and supporting vetted elements of the opposition with weapons, intelligence, humanitarian aid, and reconstruction assistance. A shift in the balance on the ground will make Damascus—and Moscow—more likely to see a need for negotiations that lead to the departure of Assad and his entourage and the reunification of the country.

Assad's regime has proved adept at adjusting to a changing situation. If the West holds back, he may hang onto power. With the limited assistance they have received, the rebels have developed much more effective combat forces. They are well positioned to absorb additional aid.

Much of the debate about the risks of providing the rebels with lethal assistance has focused on what would happen to heavy armaments given to them. To a considerable extent, this debate has been overtaken by events. The rebels have been using—often

proficiently—tanks, field artillery, and anti-aircraft guns. More such weapons are by no means the only thing the military opposition needs, nor is greater access to such weapons the main explanation for the Salafi jihadists' influence. Logistical support, cash to pay troops, intelligence, and training in weapons use, tactics, and war strategy are all areas where the rebels are weak and the West has much to offer. Furthermore, such types of assistance can be targeted to vetted local units at least as easily as the supply of heavy weapons.

That said, the cooperation of local fighting units on the battlefield with others fighting the same enemy is inevitable. The United States worked with Stalin against Hitler not because Stalin shared U.S. values but because Soviet and American forces were fighting the same enemy. Believing that the Syrian mainstream opposition will adopt a different stance is unrealistic.

Desirable as it would be to have a unified civilian opposition controlling the military operations, it simply does not fit the deeply divided nature of Syrian society. More important and more realistic is improving the opposition's ability to govern areas where Assad's forces are no longer in control. The mainstream National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC) has done badly at providing civilian government services and delivering humanitarian relief—factors that have undercut its influence with the rebel fighting forces and contributed to support for jihadists.

A main lesson from this discussion is the value of being modest: modest about how well analysts can predict how the fighting will go, modest about how much the West can do to shore up its friends within the opposition, and modest about how much can be done to undercut the Salafist jihadists. But a need to be modest is no excuse for paralysis. More can and should be done.





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# The Authors

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**JEFFREY WHITE**, a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializes in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran. He is widely sought out as a commentator on military issues involving Syria, Israel, Hizballah, the Gaza conflict, and Iran.

Before joining the Institute, White completed a thirty-four-year career with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). He was a member of the Defense Intelligence Senior Executive Service (DISES), and served in a wide variety of senior analytical and leadership positions. White has received numerous awards for distinguished service as an intelligence officer, including the Secretary of Defense Medal for Meritorious Civilian Service, the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and the DIA Directors Awards for Exceptional and Meritorious Civilian Service.

**ANDREW J. TABLER** is a senior fellow in the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant. The cofounder and former editor-in-chief of *Syria Today*, Syria's first private-sector English-language magazine, Tabler achieved unparalleled long-term access to Bashar al-Asad's Syria. During fourteen years of residence in the Middle East, Mr. Tabler served, most recently, as a consultant on U.S.-Syria relations for the International Crisis Group (2008) and as a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs (2005-2007), writing on Syrian, Lebanese, and Middle Eastern affairs.

Tabler is author of *In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), and the 2007 Stanley Foundation report *The High Road to Damascus: Engage Syria's Private Sector*.

**AARON Y. ZELIN** is the Richard Borow fellow at The Washington Institute, where his research focuses on how jihadist groups are adjusting to the new political environment in the era of Arab uprisings and Salafi politics in countries transitioning to democracy. He also serves as a consultant and lecturer at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center's Practitioner Education Program.

Zelin is a frequent contributor to *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the *Atlantic*, and is the author of the New America Foundation's 2013 study *The State of the Global Jihad Online*. He independently maintains the widely cited website *Jihadology.net* and co-edits the blog *al-Wasat*.



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