

# The Free Syrian Army: A decentralized insurgent brand

BY CHARLES LISTER

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## Executive summary

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has evolved significantly since its emergence in the summer of 2011. At the time of its formation in late-July 2011, its founding leader Colonel Riyad al-Asad described the establishment of a force with a dual purpose: to protect peaceful protesters demonstrating against President Bashar al-Assad's regime and to initiate resistance operations against his security forces. Colonel Asad also made clear that the FSA was intended to be a centrally-commanded insurgent organization. However, over the years that followed, the FSA has struggled to live up to such grand expectations.

This paper argues that the FSA's decentralization is at least in part a consequence of the United States withholding early and significant support for the group in the first year of its founding. Such support would have had a better chance of solidifying the FSA brand from the outset; disciplining regional actors and constraining their provision of support through one united channel; reducing dysfunction within FSA ranks; and would have sent a determined signal to the Assad regime of united international opposition to its rule.

Nevertheless, despite or perhaps because of its decentralization, the FSA remains the cornerstone of Syria's moderate<sup>1</sup> opposition component. The FSA is also strategically important because of its extensive civilian popular base and its representation of the revolution's original vision and brand. For the U.S. and allied countries seeking an eventual solution to the crisis in Syria, the FSA's military pre-

eminence does not necessarily have to be the sole objective, but sustaining its ability to represent opposition communities is of crucial importance, given its mainstream<sup>2</sup> positions.

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1. For the purposes of this paper, "moderate" is taken to refer to the original ideals that drove the protest movement and early stages of the revolution in Syria: dignity, justice, freedom and liberty. More broadly, "moderate" opposition groups should be understood to refer to those that are explicitly nationalist in terms of their strategic vision and local in terms of membership; as well as those who seek to help to engender a democratic or otherwise liberal and representative system of government based on the principal of a consistent rotation of power. Members of a moderate opposition group also seek to re-establish Syria's historical status as a harmonious multi-sect nation in which all ethnicities, sects and genders enjoy an equal status before the law and the state.
  2. For the purpose of this article, "mainstream" will be taken to represent a broadening of the term "moderate" as a description of groups whose political and ideological positions and vision remain representative of the breadth of civil society standing behind the opposition to Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria.

## May 2011–December 2012: From resistance to insurgency

Beginning in Deraa and Damascus in early-March 2011 and quickly spreading near-nationwide by April, Syrians calling for political reforms were repeatedly confronted with tear gas, machine gun and sniper fire and mass arrest. Many people were “disappeared,” including children, like 13-year-old Hamza al-Khateeb, whose horrifically defaced corpse was returned to his parents a month after his April 29 arrest by officers from the notorious Air Force Intelligence.<sup>3</sup>

The month of April 2011 had been one of steady regime escalation in response to proliferating protest. The protests conducted on Friday, April 22 became known as “Great Friday” after more than 100 protesters were killed by security force bullets.<sup>4</sup> Three days later, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) launched a major assault on the southern city of Deraa, where protests had first erupted in mid-March. Over five days, the city was besieged from all corners and the central Omari Mosque was raided and ransacked. Events there sparked the first defections from Syria’s armed forces.

Only a week later, the SAA initiated a second major military operation, besieging and then assaulting the city of Homs. That sparked the very first incidents of armed insurrection, including the killing of three soldiers in Al-Rastan at the end of May by defected officers and allied civilians who would soon become part of Homs’ main opposition force, Liwa Khaled Bin Walid.<sup>5</sup>

Through May and into early-June, the SAA began conventional warfare operations against protest sites and residential districts in cities like Homs, where anti-Assad demonstrations were increasing in both scale and frequency. In addition to such

‘military’ suppression, the more shadowy and brutal acts of indiscriminate kidnapping, torture, murder, rape and pillage against inhabitants of pro-protest communities encouraged components of the opposition to militarize their activities.

“Picking up guns was not what we had in mind when we first took to the streets,” the leader of one FSA group active across northern Syria told this author. “But we were being slaughtered like lambs simply for peacefully protesting, what choice did we have? I myself saw two children no older than six die in front of my eyes. First, we had to protect our people and second, we realized the regime was not backing down. We had to commit to the next step.”<sup>6</sup>

With violence escalating across Homs, Deraa and Hama, the killing of 100 soldiers around the Idlib town of Jisr al-Shughour on June 4 categorically changed the nature of Syria’s uprising. Nestled along the Turkish border, Idlib governorate’s relative social conservatism had lent it strongly towards adopting a more reactive response to regime brutality. Moreover, the town of Jisr al-Shughour in particular had a gruesome history with Bashar al-Assad’s father Hafez, who ordered a helicopter-borne raid on the town in 1980 that killed hundreds.

This time around, the mountains of Jebel al-Zawiyeh—along with areas of Homs and Deraa—had been the early hot-beds of armed resistance to the Assad regime. “Joining the Free Army was not difficult,” as Idris al-Raad told this author. Now a senior political official in Faylaq al-Sham, Raad continued: “Those of us could walk to the [Idlib] mountains and join any of the groups there, that’s how I first met Col. Asad... in Darkoush.”<sup>7</sup>

3. Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, “Tortured and Killed: Hamza al-Khateeb, age 13,” *Al Jazeera*, May 31, 2011.

4. Sara Ghasemilee, “Mourners shot at Syrian funerals,” *Al-Arabiya*, April 23, 2011.

5. Liam Stack, “Children Are Among Casualties of Syrian Military Raids After Demonstrations,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2011.

6. Author interview, March 2016.

7. Author interview, February 2016.



For many Syrians, the events in Jisr al-Shughour and the regime's subsequent escalation and retaliation in places like Homs confirmed the viability and necessity of armed resistance for sustaining Syria's revolution. As Yassin-Kassab and Shami have made clear, "militarization was not solely a natural human response to regime brutality; it also grew from the logical realization that civil resistance was not enough, that the regime would only go if forced."<sup>8</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Syrian soldiers began defecting, refusing to fire on their own people. Despite executions of defectors, Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush announced publicly alongside 150 soldiers under his command his defection from the 11th Battalion in the village of Bdama in Idlib in a video released on June 9.<sup>9</sup> Although he swore himself to a more defensive posture, Lt. Col. Harmoush's defection in Bdama, just 10 kilometers west from Jisr al-Shughour, spelled the start of truly organized armed resistance in Syria.

Harmoush and his hurriedly established Free Officers Battalion (FOM) proved a powerful catalyst that sparked a flurry of defections and the eventual formation of the FSA in late-July. By March 2012, roughly 60,000 Syrian soldiers had defected.<sup>10</sup> Many joined the FSA and provided on-the-ground leadership to dozens of Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) heavily manned by civilians and that identified themselves as part of the FSA.

In addition to Col. Asad, a number of other soon-to-be prominent defected officers had emerged and begun to shape armed opposition dynamics in Syria, even before Col. Asad's proclamation of the FSA's formation. In Homs, Lieutenant Ibrahim Ayoub, Captain Yousuf al-Hamoud and two brothers, Major Ahmed Bahboh and Captain Abdullah Bahboh, came to form a capable core of armed resistance (within Liwa Khaled Bin Walid) in Homs

city, as well as in the towns of Talbiseh, Al-Houleh and Al-Rastan. In Deraa, young men had begun to coalesce around Captain Qais al-Qahtaneh and would soon form the influential group Alwiyat al-Omari. "As of now, the security forces that kill civilians and besiege cities will be treated as legitimate targets. We will target them in all parts of Syria's territories without exception,"<sup>11</sup> said Col. Asad, upon founding the FSA on July 29, 2011. Speaking from southern Turkey alongside six other recently defected SAA officers, Asad asserted that the FSA would, "work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity to bring this regime down, protect the revolution and the country's resources, and stand in the face of the irresponsible military machine that protects the regime."<sup>12</sup>

Four additional defected officers inside Syria were part of Col. Asad's leadership. At the time, most officers defecting inside Syria were announcing their allegiance to Lt. Col. Harmoush's FOM, and this continued even after the FSA's announced establishment. For example, only days after Col. Asad's video statement, Capt. Qais al-Qahtaneh announced the formation of the FOM's "Southern Sector."<sup>13</sup> Several officers in Al-Rastan followed with declarations of their own respective loyalty to the FOM.<sup>14</sup>

This was an important developmental phase for Syria's armed opposition. Across the country, multiple new AOGs were forming every week. The majority of them were aligning themselves with the FOM or the FSA, with only a small number of others asserting their independence.

Lt. Col. Harmoush's kidnap from southern Turkey by Syrian intelligence officers in early-September threw the fledgling opposition into disarray. Days after his disappearance, Syrian state media aired an interview with Harmoush in which, clearly under

8. Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), p.80.

9. Rania Abouzeid, "The Soldier Who Gave Up on Assad to Protect Syria's People," *TIME Magazine*, June 13, 2011.

10. Emre Peker and Donna Abu-Nasr, "Syrian Armed Forces Desertion Said to Surge to 60,000," *Bloomberg*, March 15, 2012.

11. "Syrian Army Colonel Defects, forms Free Syrian Army," *Asharq al-Awsat*, August 1, 2011.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition," *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2012, p.18.

14. *Ibid.*, p.17.



duress, he renounced the opposition as a Muslim Brotherhood plot—a line consistently used by the regime. He was executed several months later.<sup>15</sup>

Whether an act of pure opportunism or genuine Syrian unity—or both—Col. Asad immediately set about uniting the FOM and the FSA. On September 23, the unification was formalized into an expanded FSA, composed initially of 22 separate factions.<sup>16</sup> The FSA would continue to grow at a fast pace in the months that followed, with individual factions establishing active communications links with the senior leadership in southern Turkey. By the beginning of December 2011, the FSA had established official relations with the exiled political opposition, the Syrian National Council (SNC), formalizing its status as Syria's main armed opposition.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst the international intervention in Libya, Western governments hesitated to determinedly support armed resistance in Syria early-on. Despite initial Western indecisiveness, exponential escalation of state-directed violence against mounting anti-government protests catalyzed the growth of the resistance movement. From its beginning the FSA required and sought out external sources of support. However, due to Western hesitancy, the resulting vacuum was filled by a chaotic influx of money and eventually weaponry from regional states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

Through early-2012, the FSA led a process of rapid expansion in both the scale and tempo of operations. The incidences of guerilla-style raids and ambushes more than doubled between January and April 2012, while the frequency of IED attacks rose by more than 100%.<sup>18</sup> As a result, nearly 1,000 security force personnel were killed

in FSA-linked attacks between March and June 2011.<sup>19</sup> More FSA AOGs formed in February and March 2012 than in all of 2011.<sup>20</sup>

The FSA began to evolve from a small centralized leadership involved in resistance to one running an insurgency. AOGs had also begun demonstrating increasing levels of tactical and—crucially—strategic competence. While in 2011 a majority of AOG operations had been simple fire-and-forget raids and IED ambushes, early-2012 saw groups operationalize the use of more complex assault tactics in coordination with multiple groups.

As an extension of this qualitative advance in capacity, the FSA began to be increasingly represented on the ground by large factions capable of shaping local and provincial dynamics. By the Spring of 2012, these 'shaping groups' included Alwiyyat al-Omari in Deraa; Liwa Khaled Bin Walid and Kataib al-Farouq in Homs; Kataib Harmoush and Kataib Jebel al-Zawiyeh in Idlib; and Kataib Abu al-Fid'a and Kataib Osama Bin Zaid in Hama.<sup>21</sup> According to senior Southern Front official and defected officer, Issam al-Reis, "the FSA was a vision that was institutionalized in 2012. Everyone who believed in the revolution, believed in the FSA as a force to protect and to further the revolution's cause."<sup>22</sup>

Led by capable and socially-grounded defected officers with established links to the FSA's central leadership, these groups became the lifeblood of multiple provincial military councils (PMCs), mechanisms through which the FSA's leadership in Turkey coordinates logistics, strategy and everyday operations with groups on the ground. A portion of the FSA's Turkey-based leadership, led by Colonel Qassem Saadeddine, even deployed into Idlib for a time as a forward-deployed "Joint Command."

15. "Assad forces execute Free Syrian Army founder, report," *Ya Libnan*, January 30, 2012.

16. Basma Atassi, "Free Syrian Army grows in influence," *Al-Jazeera*, November 16, 2011.

17. Alexandra Zavis and Rima Marrouch, "Syria opposition groups agree to coordinate efforts," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2011.

18. Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 2012, p.11.

19. Liz Sly, "Syria rebels gaining ground, strength," *Washington Post*, June 8, 2012.

20. Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency," *Institute for the Study of War*, June 2012, p.17.

21. Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition," *Institute for the Study of War*, March 2012.

22. Author interview, February 2016.

The establishment of the PMCs was not only a logical next step towards further professionalizing the FSA, but it also signaled to the West the development of a sufficiently organized armed opposition that necessitated external support. At this point, “the FSA was limited to ghanima (equipment seized from battle)... and in small levels, upon the black market,” Idris al-Raad explained. “It wasn’t until early-2012 when states started to send support.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus by the summer of 2012, the CIA received clearance to begin a limited and covert vetting process, aimed at discerning the most reliable and capable FSA groups to lend support.

By that time, however, the beginnings of intra-FSA political rivalries had already emerged into the open. In early-February 2012, defected General Mustafa al-Sheikh had announced the formation of the Higher Revolutionary Military Council, which in all respects, was a parallel rival to the FSA.<sup>24</sup> Contact was made with multiple FSA-linked PMCs, including those for Homs, Deraa, Aleppo and Hama. Although the FSA’s Col. Asad did eventually manage to negotiate the subsumption of General Sheikh’s structure into the FSA in late-March, the seeds of division and competition had been sown.

As the FSA continued to grow and fighting intensified, including in Aleppo and Damascus—the Red Cross declared Syria to be in a state of civil war in July 2012<sup>25</sup>—the continued lack of a centralized source of external support ensured an irreversible state of intra-AOG competition for resources. Competition may have encouraged the need for greater success on the battlefield, but it was detrimental to efforts to achieve organizational unity. PMCs had begun to act autonomously from each other and from the FSA’s central leadership in Turkey, which had become virtually incapable of influencing events on the ground. As one former senior PMC official explained:

We were fighting a real war, like nothing we had ever experienced before. Every day we were learning new ways of fighting, of adapting, and of course, we never had enough equipment for what we needed. We tried our best to keep communications with the officers in Turkey, but honestly, it was so difficult. Some councils had satellite phones purchased abroad, but we basically relied on cell phones and [human] messengers.<sup>26</sup>

The escalation of fighting in Aleppo and Damascus played a particularly significant role in ensuring that a single, centralized FSA organization remained unrealistic. Both battle theaters witnessed the emergence or consolidation of key shaping groups by the late-Summer of 2012—in Damascus, Liwa al-Islam (now Jaish al-Islam); in Idlib, Suqor al-Sham and Kataib Ahrar al-Sham; and in Aleppo, Liwa al-Tawhid. All four AOGs were ideologically more Islamist than typical FSA factions, but all except Kataib Ahrar al-Sham aligned themselves as part-and-parcel of the FSA movement. But as the FSA’s central leadership ceded authority over events on the ground, groups like Liwa al-Islam and Liwa al-Tawhid effectively grew into political and military movements of their own.

In September 2012, Liwa al-Islam, Liwa al-Tawhid and Suqor al-Sham paved the way towards forming a major new AOG alliance, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF). While the SILF’s 22 constituent factions all identified themselves as FSA members, the formation of an alternative organization inside Syria that represented roughly 50% of the entire armed opposition further crippled the FSA’s central leadership in Turkey. The subsequent establishment of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) by 11 non-FSA AOGs, including Ahrar al-Sham, in December 2012—which represented approximately 25% of the armed opposition—underlined more clearly the importance of on-the-ground dynamics in shaping the potential for centralized leadership structures.

23. Author interview, February 2016.

24. “Confusion over Syrian ‘higher council’ claim,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 6, 2012.

25. “Syria in civil war, Red Cross says,” *BBC*, July 15, 2012.

26. Author interview, March 2016.

Despite such unfavorable circumstances—or more likely because of them—the collectively named multilateral ‘Friends of Syria’<sup>27</sup> gathered 260 AOG leadership figures, including those of SILF and SIF, in the southern Turkish city of Antalya in December 2012 for a three-day conference. At its close, the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was established as a unified command structure for the entirety of the FSA inside Syria. Staffed by a combination of in-country commanders and Turkey or Jordan-based defected officers, the 30-man SMC was headed up by General Salim Idriss.

Idriss’ SMC was founded upon the condition that its AOG members would begin receiving substantial financial and military support from ‘Friends of Syria’ states. As one attendee sarcastically stated afterwards, “we accepted everything because they promised us everything, even paradise.”<sup>28</sup> While Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar had already established their own chaotic systems of support, the U.S. used the SMC’s establishment as the catalyst for the initiation of *non-lethal* support (vehicles, communication equipment, food and medical supplies) to ‘vetted’ FSA factions later in December 2012. Separately, the CIA used SMC-linked channels to begin ferrying in small-scale *lethal* supplies, with a variety of Croatian-made weapons first appearing in-country in January 2013.<sup>29</sup>

This was a formative period for the FSA and Syria’s broader AOG movement. From mid-2011 through the Spring of 2012, the FSA had been an exponentially growing movement, with dozens of constituent factions, almost all led by defected, trained military officers. Although its central leadership was based across the border in southern Turkey, communications and limited tactical and strategic coordination did exist.

However, this organically expanding insurgent movement required substantial centralized assistance for it to reach the desired objective of true structural unity. What it got instead was a disunited, chaotic and deleterious mishmash of support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. By acting independently and often through multiple independent channels relying on personal contacts, these regional states contributed towards the decline of the FSA from its true potential, despite their supportive intentions. As senior Faylaq al-Sham political official Idris al-Raad makes clear:

Regional countries began forming ties with Free Army battalions [in early-2012] through intermediaries and also relatives of battalion leaders living in the regional countries... Col. Assad did play a role also in coalescing some of this effort via his officers in Turkey... But it was unrealistic to have expected him to communicate effectively with 120 battalions at once—revolutions are hard to centralize.<sup>30</sup>

A U.S. lead, backed by Europe, however, could have ensured a more structured and centralized system of support, and thereby stave off the internal Syrian and geopolitical rivalries that developed by mid-2012. Key early shaping groups mentioned earlier in Deraa, Homs, Idlib and Hama<sup>31</sup> would have represented viable channels for substantive external support when the dynamics of Syria’s armed opposition were truly malleable. That potential opportunity was missed and consequently by late-2012, the SILF, SIF and also then-ISI front group Jabhat al-Nusra had all risen to military prominence. This precipitated a period of intense division and decline within the FSA and the beginning of the end of its unity as a single organization led by a centralized leadership.

27. The Friends of Syria was a diplomatic grouping of governments and bodies who first formed in early-2012 in response to Russian and Chinese vetoes in the United Nations. The Friends of Syria members included: the United Kingdom, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Italy, Germany, France, Egypt as well as the African Union, the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations.

28. Neil McFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, “Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2012.

29. Eliot Higgins, “Evidence of Multiple Foreign Weapon Systems Smuggled To The Syrian Opposition in Deraa,” *Brown Moses Blog*, January 25, 2013.

30. Author interview, February 2016.

31. Alwiyat al-Omari in Deraa; Liwa Khaled Bin Walid and Kataib al-Farouq in Homs; Kataib Harmoush and Kataib Jebel al-Zawiyeh in Idlib; and Kataib Abu al-Fid’a and Kataib Osama Bin Zaid in Hama.

## January–November 2013: Division & decline

The winter of 2012–2013 produced a flurry of significant opposition victories, as the Assad regime's severe manpower shortage increasingly reflected itself on the battlefield. Following its formation, the SMC had ordered the breadth of the FSA opposition spectrum to prioritize attacks on the regime's capacity to deploy air power. While AOGs followed through on this targeting strategy, and while FSA-linked factions were involved in a majority of successful operations against air bases and other large facilities, it was groups with a more Islamist foundation that dominated or secured the actual advances. Jabhat al-Nusra in particular rose to preeminence in many areas of the country through the winter, taking lead command of several key attacks. One Islamist commander, based in central Syria, described the structural and organizational situation as follows:

The fact that the Free Army failed to unite into a single entity provided an opening for Salafi-jihadis. That was the knife that sliced apart future attempts to unite the Free Army and meant that the Free Army was virtually absent from the media and appeared quieter on the ground in 2013.<sup>32</sup>

The FSA's failure to demonstrate effective governance was also a critical issue that gave space for Islamists to exploit. One FSA commander based in northern Hama underlined this point above all others: "al-Nusra really took advantage of the Free Army's failure to control territory effectively, and to help the people justly—that's why we now have to deal with al-Nusra as a *fait accompli*."<sup>33</sup>

While Islamists gained increasing traction and demonstrated success, the regime also began a pro-

cess of recovery from early-2013 onwards. Seeking to address its shortage of loyalist manpower, the regime coordinated with Iran to establish the paramilitary National Defense Force (NDF), while Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and a variety of Shia militias acted as specialist force multipliers to the comparatively weakened SAA. The benefit of this strategy of supplementing manpower was first demonstrated in the regime's recapture of Al-Qusayr from opposition groups in May–June 2013.

The SMC attempted to coordinate a reinforcement of Al-Qusayr throughout the first half of May, with at least 20 FSA-linked AOGs cooperating to establish defensive lines around the town. Several other FSA-linked AOGs redeployed forces from elsewhere in Syria—including from as far as Aleppo, Deir ez Zour and Al-Raqqah—to further bolster the defense of the town.<sup>34</sup> Prominent SMC figures like Colonel Abdeljabbar al-Okaidi and Abdelqader al-Saleh travelled long distances to assume command roles. Despite such significant logistical efforts however, events on the battlefield demonstrated the divisive impact of the FSA's factional proliferation. Local groups refused to cooperate with outsiders, and overall, defensive operations revealed little to no strategic planning.<sup>35</sup>

Many of these failures were made public when those involved voiced their frustration with those they claimed had spoiled Al-Qusayr's defense. Only a month earlier, after beginning to receive assistance in the form of ready-to-eat food ration packs from the U.S. government in April 2013, SMC chief Idriss himself had begun issuing public comments decrying the lack of lethal support he was

32. Author interview, January 2016.

33. Author interview, March 2016.

34. Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2015), p.136.

35. Isabel Nassief, "The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo," *Institute for the Study of War*, January 2014, p. 18.

being provided. “We don’t have sufficient ammunition and weapons,” Idriss claimed. “We don’t have enough money for logistics, for fuel for the cars, for cars for the units. We can’t pay salaries.”<sup>36</sup>

Coming amid reports of regime chemical weapon use, which were substantiated by the CIA,<sup>37</sup> frustrations within the mainstream Syrian opposition were rising fast, driving divisions yet deeper. The CIA’s limited assistance to vetted FSA factions notwithstanding, the lack of substantive U.S. government support to the SMC and FSA signaled to many Syrians that even chemical weapon use could not convince the West of the need for substantive intervention—even despite President Obama’s August 2012 “red line” on chemical weapons.<sup>38</sup> Although an institution desired by many, the SMC’s inability to compel the West to act drastically undermined its reputation. In an interview conducted after the loss of Al-Qusayr, Col. Okaidi did not mince his words:

As for the SMC, they are located in Bab al-Hawa and some of them are inside, some in Saudi, some in Lebanon... But the majority are in Turkey. They’re disconnected from reality. In fact, I’m a member of this SMC, but I don’t attend their meetings and they don’t matter to me.<sup>39</sup>

As the leader of Aleppo’s Military Council, Okaidi’s bold takedown of the SMC was both broadly representative of opposition opinion and powerful in its impact.

Although the SMC’s status was clearly in rapid decline, the FSA nevertheless retained its revolutionary symbolism, albeit with diminished military ‘weight’ on the ground, particularly in the North. In southern Syria, FSA-aligned AOGs retained comparatively more influence vis-a-vis Islamist independents and Jabhat al-Nusra, although the latter groups still played key roles in a majority of opposition advances.

The emergence of ISIS as an actor separate from Jabhat al-Nusra in April–May 2013 added yet another powerful armed actor to the array of competitors a struggling FSA faced. While Jabhat al-Nusra had maintained a relatively pragmatic relationship with FSA AOGs, ISIS had little patience for those it deemed infidels. Its July assassination of Kamal Hamami, a senior member of the FSA’s Latakia PMC, symbolized the start of a methodical campaign to undermine its moderate, nationalist rivals. In August, ISIS took a lead role in coordinating a broader Islamist opposition offensive in Latakia that led to accusations of war crimes. The event forced SMC chief Idriss to visit the front and distance his men from the offensive in an attempt to keep his forces’ minimal support channels running.

Following nearly a year of FSA-led standstill, the siege of Menagh Airbase came to a quick and dramatic end following ISIS’ assumption of command in early-August. Col. Okaidi’s transfer of authority to ISIS’ then Aleppo leader Omar al-Shishani and a photograph showing Col. Okaidi alongside ISIS’ Egyptian commander Abu Jandal al-Masri during celebrations of the base’s capture both dealt the FSA a severe reputational blow. “In retrospect, that was a really big misjudgment,” a senior FSA figure from Aleppo told this author. “There was no escaping the value that [ISIS] brought to the Menagh operation. We did not join forces with [ISIS] because we shared their values, but simply to strike a defeat to the regime. Our role in the actual capture was small, however, so Col. Okaidi should not have appeared so publicly with Abu Jandal—that did not accurately represent the reality on the ground at the time.”<sup>40</sup>

What would soon follow would far eclipse that public relations disaster, however. On August 20, 2013 the SAA and several allied militia forces deployed onto the inner edges of Damascus’s East and West Ghouta suburbs in preparation for the widely

36. David Enders, “Syrian rebel leader Salim Idriss admits difficulty of unifying fighters,” *Mcclatchy DC*, May 7, 2013.

37. Mark Landler & Eric Schmitt, “White House Says It Believes Syria Has Used Chemical Arms,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2013.

38. “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012.

39. “Interview with Colonel Aqidi Of The FSA on Qusayr, Jihadists, And The Supreme Military Council,” *Brown Moses Blog*, June 17, 2013.

40. Author interview, March 2016.



vaunted Operation Damascus Shield offensive, aimed at definitively vanquishing the opposition in Syria's capital. Early the following morning—a year and a day after Obama's "red line" statement—several districts of opposition-controlled East Ghouta were struck with sustained volleys of artillery rockets carrying Sarin nerve agent. By dawn, over 1,400 people were dead.<sup>41</sup> U.S. military assets were placed on immediate alert and made to prepare for 'limited strikes' on Syrian military targets.

The threat of U.S. military action in Syria had a number of profound effects. In Damascus, it sent pro-regime circles into a spiral of panic. Multiple non-opposition sources then in the city confirmed to this author that hundreds of key officials' families packed up their belongings and fled to Beirut in neighboring Lebanon. Military bases were evacuated, weapons transferred to emptied schools, and the city virtually shut down.<sup>42</sup>

This catalyzed a rapid mobilization of forces within the largely FSA-aligned opposition, which sought to take advantage of the regime's resulting weakness. "Our foreign contacts provided us with some intelligence, so that we could prepare to pounce," one FSA commander based outside Damascus claimed. Five other FSA commanders—two based around Aleppo, one in Homs, one in Deraa and another in Damascus—provided similar accounts.<sup>43</sup>

The threat of U.S. action also panicked those within jihadist armed groups, who feared America would take advantage of the situation in order to weaken al-Qaida and ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra evacuated many of its bases, ceased electronic communications and avoided public appearances for some time.<sup>44</sup>

Although multiple Western governments, including the U.S., would soon conclude that the Assad regime had indeed been responsible for the Sarin attack,<sup>45</sup> President Obama backtracked from his

"red line" stance and negotiated a deal with Russia, whereby Assad would cede his chemical weapons stockpiles for destruction. No military action would follow.

"It was a stab in the collective heart of the revolution," a senior FSA figure told this author. "The regime taught us as children that America was evil, but I'd raised my children to see the United States of America as *the* representation of freedom, liberty and justice. For me, that ended in September [2013]."

There can be no underestimating the catastrophic impact that the U.S. threat reversal had upon the FSA brand and on the SMC in particular. Seen by many Syrians as a U.S.-managed structure created in order to appease U.S. concerns over the reliability of providing *any* support to the FSA, the SMC lost all remaining credibility virtually overnight. Ten days later, ISIS seized the strategic town of Azaz from the FSA-aligned Asifat al-Shamal and a week after that, 13 of the most powerful AOGs in Syria fully renounced the authority of the 2012-formed and internationally-recognized political opposition (the National Coalition of Syrian Opposition and Revolutionary Forces, or ETILAF) and the SMC. By October, the regime had begun to exploit the SMC's diminished reach into Aleppo by launching a major offensive south of the city. The opposition's loss of a swathe of key towns there through November sparked another seething speech by Col. Okaidi, who accused both the ETILAF and SMC for again having failed to adequately support its forces.<sup>46</sup>

By the end of 2013, the most powerful AOGs that had up until that point aligned themselves overtly with the FSA—namely Jaish al-Islam (in Damascus, Idlib, and Aleppo), Suqor al-Sham (in Idlib) and Liwa al-Tawhid (in Aleppo)—formally withdrew from the SMC and joined a new alliance, the Islamic Front. Talks aimed at forming the front

41. Joby Warrick, "More than 1,400 killed in Syrian chemical weapons attack, U.S. says," *Washington Post*, August 30, 2013.

42. Author interviews, January–April 2016.

43. Author interviews, March–April 2016.

44. Charles Lister, "New Fears for Syria's Jihadists," *Foreign Policy*, August 29, 2013.

45. "US, UK, France blame Assad," *Reuters*, September 16, 2013.

46. Marlin Dick, "Leading FSA commander quits, lashes out at lack of support," *Daily Star*, November 4, 2013.

had been initiated in September, immediately after the U.S. refusal to act in Syria.<sup>47</sup> Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, all of whom felt betrayed by the U.S. policy reversal, were pivotally important in encouraging the Islamic Front's formation as a clear protest against what Western policy had allowed to take place in Syria.

Two-and-a-half weeks after being formed, constituent forces of the Islamic Front proceeded to take control of the SMC's main logistical headquarters, located in the village of Babisqa near the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. The facility—stocked full of weaponry, cash, and logistical equipment provided by the 'Friends of Syria'—had been controlled by the FSA's 1st and 2nd Battalions. According to reported details, upon detecting a suspected ISIS attack late on December 6, the FSA commanders issued a call for help from the Islamic Front. A local unit of Ahrar al-Sham fighters and a smattering of Jaish al-Islam members soon arrived and found the base virtually empty. "Idriss handed us the keys to the General Staff headquarters, while the officer in charge from the 1st Battalion gave us the keys to [another building]," said Jaish al-Islam spokesman Captain Islam Alloush.<sup>48</sup>

The SMC's loss of its primary in-country headquarters—to members of an independent Islamist front based *inside* Syria and formed in part as a protest against the moral inadequacies of aligning with the West—illustrated the extent to which the SMC had lost influence and control. According to one opposition figure present during meetings with Saudi, Turkish and Qatari officials in September and October 2013, the region was seething at the U.S.' deal with Russia. "I could not even repeat some of the insults our regional friends made at the time about the Americans in front of us. One official was visibly shaking with anger when he met with us in September. One of his deputies told us on the side that we should abandon all relations with the West in protest. Another said he'd actually considered leaving home and joining us in our fight!"<sup>49</sup>

By extension, the FSA brand suffered significantly. Its reputation declined in favor of those AOGs seen either as untouched by Western 'failings' or disinterested in dependence on Western support. Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS also benefitted in part thanks to this deleterious FSA trajectory, but most important was the subsequent expansion of 'super groups' that had distanced themselves significantly from the FSA name, including Liwa al-Tawhid, Jaish al-Islam, Suqor al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham.

Nonetheless, despite the growing threat of ISIS toward the broad spectrum of the Syrian opposition, even in late-2013 an opportunity remained for the FSA to reclaim relevance.

47. Author interviews with members of Jaish al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham and [then] Liwa al-Tawhid, September 2016.

48. Aron Lund, "Showdown at Bab al-Hawa," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 12, 2013.

49. Author interview, March 2016.



## December 2013–September 2014: Decentralization to revitalize

The FSA underwent a wholesale conceptual transformation in late-2013. The dramatic downfall of the SMC through the latter half of 2013 necessitated a change in Western policy towards the opposition. No longer could Western governments' policies center on empowering the SMC as the sole body through which FSA AOGs received command, control and logistics. In short, the idea of a single FSA with a centralized leadership in charge of strategic command and the provision of supplies was no longer feasible. Decentralization of the FSA was the only path forward, and perhaps more importantly, a reflection of reality as it already was.

Through 2013, the 'Friends of Syria' had quietly established military operations commands in Jordan and Turkey to coordinate the provision of finance, weapons, logistical supplies and intelligence to 'vetted' FSA AOGs. Each were staffed by military officials from more than a dozen countries. While the command center in Jordan (known as the MOC) had acted independently of the SMC, the facility in Turkey (the MOM) had worked primarily through General Idriss. "Until Babisqa, the MOM worked 80% through Idriss," said one influential Syrian opposition figure, responsible for forming several FSA AOGs and facilitating their relationships with Western governments. "But after that, the [SMC] did not matter."<sup>50</sup>

Thus, as the SMC weakened, the commands had increasingly focused on establishing direct relationships with individual FSA AOG leaderships. In December 2013, the loss of Babisqa represented the coup de grâce for the SMC's dominant status and catalyzed the shift towards decentralization.

With the SMC middle link removed, the MOC and MOM needed a more efficient process for providing assistance to the then more than 100 CIA-

vetted FSA AOGs across Syria. The solution began to take form in October 2013, when regional states supporting Syrian AOGs coordinated with the U.S. (specifically, the CIA) to facilitate a series of mergers of smaller factions into larger ones. These larger factions would be capable of operating on a provincial or cross-provincial level. Saudi Arabia in particular exerted strong pressure in this process, with Turkey and Qatar later assuming the mantle of responsibility from the late-Summer of 2014 onwards.

The first of these unifications, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF), emerged on December 9, 2013 through the merger of 14 AOGs present primarily in Idlib, but also on a small-scale in Hama, Aleppo and Damascus. The SRF's key figures—Jamal Maarouf, Col. Haytham Afeisi and Col. Afif Suleiman—all retained links to the weakened SMC, and indeed, several SMC leadership members made certain to clearly align themselves to the new FSA formation. However, the military-diplomatic pressures behind the scenes that had encouraged this unity transcended the SMC; they aimed to bolster *on-the-ground* formations rather than externally-based councils.

Three weeks later, a second similar alliance was struck—namely, Jaish al-Mujahideen, whose eight constituent FSA factions were strong in Aleppo. The SRF and Jaish al-Mujahideen launched a preemptive offensive against ISIS in northern Syria at the beginning of January 2014. That offensive—led from the start by core FSA AOGs, and later joined by independent Syrian Islamists, and then Jabhat al-Nusra—forced ISIS out of four Syrian provinces in 12 weeks—a considerable feat when compared to the still laudable accomplishments of Kurdish forces backed by U.S. air support since late-2014.

There were nevertheless some complications, including the refusal by some constituent units of

50. Author interview, April 2016.

non-FSA groups—notably Ahrar al-Sham and Suqor al-Sham—to engage in combat with ISIS fighters who were withdrawing to the city of Al-Raqqa. A sustained offensive seeking the total defeat of ISIS in Syria was also undermined by the localism of FSA factions, which frequently refused to operate outside of their ‘home’ areas.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, Syrians in Idlib and Aleppo continue to claim that that offensive was directed by foreign officials in the MOM in Turkey. “Let’s just say it was something those in the MOM had been talking to us about for some time,” said one such AOG leader from Aleppo. Another said his group received substantial weapons deliveries in December 2013, just prior to the offensive’s launch.<sup>51</sup>

By mid-February, another two FSA mergers had taken place: 12 groups coalescing into Harakat Hazm on January 25 and 54 groups uniting into the Southern Front on February 14. Thus, in the space of 10 weeks, 88 FSA AOGs that had been determined sufficiently capable and moderate in order to work through the MOC and MOM in 2013 had been unified into four groups capable of exercising far more influence than they had been individually.

That the U.S. had maintained a relationship with at least 88 armed opposition groups until this point was not a reflection of substantial American support. Instead, these relations had largely been sustained by noticeable levels of external support from Turkey and Gulf States, at times overseen or permitted by the U.S. It was thus regional states that filled the vacuum left by a lack of determined American effort. Unfortunately however, regional states lacked their own respective centralized mechanisms and also consistently aimed to out-compete each other. This only further damaged the prospects of FSA organizational unity.

It could therefore be argued that only a determined U.S. leadership role early-on in the crisis could

have had the potential to limit such individualistic dynamics—inside and outside Syria.

Nonetheless, when it came to fighting terrorism and not the Assad regime, a determined effort by the U.S. and its regional allies from late-2013 did eventually catalyze the effective unification of these groups. This placed the new FSA-branded coalitions into a favored political position on the international stage and several—including the SRF, Jaish al-Mujahideen and the Southern Front—chose to quietly attend the Geneva II peace talks in January–February 2014, despite overwhelming opposition to AOG attendance inside Syria.

As this newly decentralized FSA model became the favored norm, the SMC fell definitively out of favor and devolved into overt political infighting. In mid-February 2014, a statement was released by the SMC announcing the removal of Gen. Idriss from his command and replacing him with Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir and his new deputy, Col. Afeisi. Within hours, other SMC commanders decried what they called a ‘coup.’ Rumor abounded that this was a proxy battle between Saudi-backed Bashir and Afeisi and Qatar-supported Idriss. Afeisi in particular already had a history of accusing Idriss of favoring non-Saudi-backed AOGs through the SMC,<sup>52</sup> and he was backed by the opposition’s Interim Government Defense Ministry, itself backed by the ETILAF president Ahmed Jarba—himself seen as ‘Saudi’s man.’

This chaotic mess played out almost entirely between exiled or non-Syria-based figures. Some PMC leaders inside Syria insisted on defending Idriss’s role as SMC chief, but by and large, the impact on the ground was minimal. In fact, Bashir himself appeared not to have even known about his appointment. “I swear to God, no one was in touch with me. I knew nothing about it,” he exclaimed shortly after the announcement.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps more than anything, the dissolution of the SMC into infighting underlined the totality of the institution’s

51. Author interviews, February–March 2016.

52. Aron Lund, “A Coup in the Supreme Military Council?” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 17, 2014.

53. Ben Hubbard and Karam Shoumali, “Top Military Body Against Syria’s Assad Is In Chaos, Undermining Fight,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2014.

decline. That attempt to solve the SMC's factional issues in March 2015 then ended with a fistfight in Istanbul's Wyndham Hotel,<sup>54</sup> further proved the need to refocus on dynamics inside Syria.

Despite its streamlined structure, the FSA still remained a branded movement composed of individual, locally-rooted AOGs whose relative influence over broader military dynamics had been in decline since early-2012. Ahrar al-Sham and independent Syrian Islamists, including those groups that detached themselves from the SMC (and thus from the FSA) in late-2013, now held sway over almost all core battle theaters with the Assad regime. Meanwhile, Jabhat al-Nusra remained a highly influential organization, to whom the breadth of the *Syrian* opposition still looked to for assistance in giving an offensive its best chances of success. Without more lethal support from external parties, Syrians continued to depend on al-Qaida's suicide bombers.

As in 2013, southern Syria still represented the FSA's best chance of retaining demonstrable influence. The February 2014 formation of the Southern Front had improved that yet further, becoming a pivotal component of the U.S.' moderate opposition body. Shortly after its establishment, the Southern Front led a series of strategic victories alongside other members of Syria's armed opposition in the South—in parts of Deraa between March 18–22 and in Quneitra between April 6–8 and 23–28.

However, a new challenge was approaching. Bolstered by its dramatic conquest of the Iraqi city of Mosul, its subsequent advances further into Iraq's interior and then its proclamation of a Caliphate, ISIS comprehensively defeated Jabhat al-Nusra in eastern Syria, forcing their withdrawal to Deraa in southern Syria in the late-Summer of 2014.

Although some more pragmatic Jabhat al-Nusra leaders like Abu Mariya al-Qahtani were amongst the new arrivals to southern Syria, the reinforced Al-

Qaida presence in the South primarily bolstered the influence of hardliners like Iyad Tubasi (Abu Julaybib) and Dr. Sami al-Oraydi. The former would soon initiate a covert assassination campaign against both FSA figures and Syrian Islamists deemed a threat to the jihadist project. Oraydi, meanwhile, was set to become Jabhat al-Nusra's chief Sharia official and de facto deputy leader—a position he would use to exert a more hardline stance against the FSA.

The U.S.' September airstrikes targeting not just ISIS but also a shadowy wing of Jabhat al-Nusra labeled the "Khorasan Group" placed additional pressure on FSA AOGs in the North. These northern groups had thus far maintained a delicate balance with Jabhat al-Nusra focused on prioritizing military victories despite substantial political-ideological differences. All those FSA groups in northern Syria receiving assistance through the MOM, particularly those with U.S.-made BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles, saw their relationships with the West and the U.S. in particular become a public relations liability. In response, most AOGs issued statements of condemnation, renouncing U.S. action against Jabhat al-Nusra as counter-revolutionary, despite many such groups' private concerns about Jabhat al-Nusra's objectives in Syria.<sup>55</sup> This was a clear indication of Jabhat al-Nusra's stranglehold over the breadth of Syria's opposition. The FSA in particular dared not say anything else.

"When al-Nusra declared their allegiance to al-Qaida [in April 2013], the Free Army began to change its vision of the group, but we did not have the strength to do more than that. But we were suspicious," said one FSA commander formerly based in Damascus. "After the American strikes, we became even more suspicious, but at the same time, we were trapped—how could we do anything but protest? We are always asked why we accept al-Qaida within our midst. It's simple: we wouldn't if we had more support and were more confident in our allies in the international community."<sup>56</sup>

54. Susannah George, "Throwing Windmills at the Wyndham," *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2014.

55. Charles Lister, "Are Syrian Islamists moving to counterbalance Al-Qaeda? Will it last?" *Brookings Institution*, March 23, 2015.

56. Author interview, March 2016.

## October 2014–September 2015: Strategic subjugation

Compounding the power disadvantage described above was the pressure Jabhat al-Nusra itself felt to assert its own jihadist credentials more aggressively. U.S. airstrikes in September 2014, and especially the June 2014 declaration of the ISIS Caliphate, placed the onus on Jabhat al-Nusra to begin to more discernibly demonstrate its theological credibility. Given their overwhelming strategic importance to the group, areas like Idlib, Latakia and western Aleppo were where Jabhat al-Nusra focused its assertiveness. This in turn posed a substantial challenge to FSA groups in that region, including the SRF, Harakat Hazm, Jaish al-Mujahideen and others.

October 2014 marked a turning point when, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra began meting out harsh punishments, such as stoning men and women to death for adultery and prosecuting people for ‘witchcraft.’ By the end of the month, the group found itself in open conflict with the SRF when a small sub-unit of the SRF attempted to defect to Ahrar al-Sham in the Idlib village of Bara. When the SRF defectors were attacked by SRF loyalists, Jabhat al-Nusra came to their rescue. This resulted in a steadily escalating war between Jabhat al-Nusra and the SRF, and later with Harakat Hazm, which had attempted to intervene.

It was a one-sided conflict. Between October 26 and November 7, Jabhat al-Nusra and its local ally Jund al-Aqsa captured at least 23 villages and towns from the two FSA groups, and seized their respective headquarters, thus comprehensively defeating the SRF and forcing Harakat Hazm into Aleppo. SRF leader Jamal Maarouf, who had long been a controversial figure accused widely of corruption, was forced into exile in Turkey. This represented the first total defeat of an FSA AOG since the start of the conflict in 2011.

Four months later, amid a spate of assassination attempts against FSA commanders across northern and southern Syria (blamed variously on Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS), Harakat Hazm met a similar fate, forced to dissolve after repeated run-ins with Jabhat al-Nusra in and around Aleppo. Since the SRF’s defeat, Harakat Hazm spent the time periodically blocking Jabhat al-Nusra’s movements and detaining its fighters at checkpoints. The group’s kidnap of senior Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Eissa al-Tabqa in late-February 2015 was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Nusra declared war on Harakat Hazm on February 25 and the group announced its dissolution on March 1, after just five days of fighting.

Despite both the SRF and Harakat Hazm being the hallmark of the CIA vet and equip process—having been the first to receive U.S.-made BGM-71 TOW missiles—they received no help from their international backers when under attack by al-Qaida. Although Harakat Hazm and the SRF were not particularly popular amongst Syrians, and their defeat, therefore, not much of a disappointment, the lack of U.S. involvement sent a concerning message. As one FSA commander explained, “Honestly, Syrians distrusted Jamal Maarouf and [Harakat] Hazm had been causing trouble for some time before its defeat, so we were not too angry about that. That America said or did nothing was incredible hypocrisy. How are we to trust America when it supplies us with support and then leaves us to die under al-Qaida’s guns?”<sup>57</sup>

While in isolation one could have determined the defeat of Harakat Hazm and the SRF as the start of a concerted Jabhat al-Nusra campaign against the FSA, it was primarily an opportunistic targeting of two groups left vulnerable to attack because of insufficient support. Although Jabhat al-Nusra would not attack another FSA AOG until February 2016,

57. Author interview, March 2016.

the destruction of two of the FSA's most high-profile factions sent a message to the remaining opposition of the consequences they risked should they oppose the group's expanding influence in northern Syria.

The impact of these developments in northern Syria was also felt in the South, where the Southern Front boldly declared in April 2015 that it would cease any and all coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>58</sup> Although large multi-group operations continued to include both groups, this was done on the condition that independent Islamists like Ahrar al-Sham would act as intermediaries for any necessary coordination. This was a delicate balance, as demonstrated by the dynamics of offensives carried out on the large 52nd Brigade base in Deraa, and then the Al-Thaala Airbase in Al-Suwayda in June. "The MOC had told us for a long time we could not work with al-Nusra, but this was the first time we truly tried to make that point," a senior Southern Front official told this author. "Certainly, al-Nusra's actions in the North encouraged us to make that decision."<sup>59</sup>

Beyond the Southern Front's 'halfway house' cessation of cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's mainstream opposition had already set about adapting to the potential threat posed by the al-Qaida affiliate by way of a less confrontational, and thus less risky, strategy: unity. The *Wa'tasimo* Initiative was announced in August 2014 by 18 of the most powerful mainstream AOGs, almost all of whom were strongly aligned to the FSA. With a moderate Islamic foundation—the announcement was made by prominent Sheikhs Hassan al-Dugheim and Abdulmoneim Zeineddine—the initiative sought to establish within months a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) uniting as many AOGs as possible under one umbrella based *inside* Syria.

The *Wa'tasimo* Initiative came three months after the publication of the Revolutionary Covenant by

the Islamic Front and four other major AOGs. The document excluded any reference to an Islamic State and sparked strong condemnation from Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>60</sup> Like the Revolutionary Covenant, the RCC also excluded al-Qaida. As it happened, the RCC was formally established in early-December 2014 by 72 AOGs, including *all* vetted FSA factions as well as all key independent Syrian Islamist groups.<sup>61</sup> While it set itself up for likely insurmountable challenges—establishing a 7,000-man 'National Army' and a nationwide opposition judiciary based on the Unified Arab Code—the RCC demonstrated the extent to which Syrian-Syrian unity was possible, spanning the breadth of the exclusively *Syrian* opposition. Unfortunately, the initiative gained little meaningful traction on the ground, partly because no regional or international country supportive of the opposition lent the RCC any discernible assistance. By that point, it seemed that maintaining the FSA as a decentralized brand had become the accepted reality.

While similar unity initiatives were realized for more effective militarily operational purposes, like the Al-Jabhat al-Shamiya coalition in Aleppo, Jabhat al-Nusra's military primacy continued to ensure that it remained a priority for inclusion in coordinated armed operations. A prime example was Jabhat al-Nusra's inclusion in the Jaish al-Fateh coalition that would capture Idlib city on March 28, 2015. That seven-group coalition—the driving force behind which was Ahrar al-Sham—included two tacitly FSA-aligned, but at the time, non-vetted groups, Jaish al-Sunnah and Faylaq al-Sham,<sup>62</sup> as well as Jabhat al-Nusra.

The dramatic success of the Islamist-dominated Jaish al-Fateh in capturing Idlib city in three-and-a-half days was seen as having isolated the FSA's core from what was the biggest 'opposition' victory since the conquer of Al-Raqqqa city two years earlier. However, several 'vetted' FSA AOGs had

58. Tom Perry, "Southern Syria rebels set collision course with al Qaeda," *Reuters*, April 14, 2015.

59. Author interview, March 2016.

60. "Nusra rejects trials for regime figures, demands 'death by sword,'" *Syria Direct*, May 21, 2014.

61. Mousab Alhamadee, "Islamists come out on top in new effort to unify Syrian rebel groups," *McClatchy DC*, November 29, 2014.

62. Faylaq al-Sham would later acquire vetted status.



in fact been involved in supporting Jaish al-Fateh's early advance on Idlib by blocking its main roads to prevent intervention by regime reinforcements. In the days and weeks following the city's capture, the MOM in Turkey issued permission to all 'vetted' FSA factions to get involved in subsequent offensives across Idlib. These groups' TOW anti-tank missiles subsequently proved invaluable in securing the ground for many of Jaish al-Fateh's later advances.<sup>63</sup> This was a substantial break from the MOM's usual ban on coordination with Jabhat al-Nusra; however, the move ensured that the FSA remained at least a relevant—if not necessary—component of the Idlib military dynamic.

The move soon proved necessary. Idlib province's eventual conquest soon encouraged Jabhat al-Nusra and various jihadi allies to begin asserting their rule in an increasingly unilateral and aggressive fashion. In northern Aleppo, Jabhat al-Nusra comprehensively destroyed the U.S. Central Command's \$500 million Train and Equip program, which had sought to recruit Syrians to fight ISIS. The initiative completely disregarded the fact that Syrians were preeminently focused on fighting the Assad regime. As a result, the two small batches of trained fighters that were sent into northern Aleppo in July and September 2015 were little match for Jabhat al-Nusra's brute power.

The period of October 2014 to September 2015 had been a challenging one for the newly decentralized but unity-focused FSA movement. The conflict with the Assad regime had become particularly intense, but the competition posed by Jabhat al-Nusra was a grave threat to moderate AOG influence. Additionally, as Jaish al-Fateh took form and vanquished regime forces across Idlib, the FSA looked to have been relegated to insignificance. However, FSA AOGs continued to represent a core revolutionary constituency in Syria, and as international attention began to switch to political efforts, the *mainstream* nature of the FSA would ensure not only its relevance, but also its potential as an indicator of the conflict's future trajectory.

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63. Charles Lister, "Why Assad is Losing," *Brookings Institution*, May 5, 2015.

## October 2015–present: Revival

Following the regime’s significant losses throughout 2015—particularly in Idlib—the Russian military launched an airborne intervention in defense of the regime at the end of September. Earlier in July, Russia and Iran had conducted a joint assessment that concluded a high likelihood of the Assad regime’s collapse by the year’s end following recent defeats to the opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>64</sup> Russia’s intervention was therefore nothing short of a Assad bailout and consequently, the principal targets in the first months of airstrikes were the mainstream *Syrian* opposition, particularly the FSA.

In a campaign of air-to-ground and ground-to-ground bombardment that effectively amounted to an all-out assault on opposition-controlled territories (rather than AOGs specifically), nearly 1,400 civilians—including 332 children and 195 women—were killed by the end of January 2016.<sup>65</sup> A significant number of FSA weapons depots, logistical facilities, operational headquarters and training bases were destroyed, along with nearly two-dozen hospitals—including one built by the U.K. government<sup>66</sup> and several run by *Médecins Sans Frontiers*.<sup>67</sup>

“It was bombing like we’d never seen—constant bombardment, as many as eight jets in the sky at once,” one Homs-based FSA commander explained. “At the beginning, it seemed to be targeted because it was our bases and facilities that were struck. After that, it was indiscriminate.”<sup>68</sup> In the wake of such escalation, regional states held two coordination meetings with FSA groups in southern Turkey to plan a response.

Although man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) were discussed in these meetings, AOGs were told “it was not possible for now,” according to Liwa Fursan al-Haq leader Major Fares al-Bayoush.<sup>69</sup> According to several opposition sources, however, a small number of Chinese-manufactured FN-6 MANPADS did make their way into northern Syria, primarily to Ahrar al-Sham. Several were used in ultimately successful attempts to down two Syrian regime jets in March and April 2016.

Despite being heavily targeted in the opening months, FSA factions in Idlib, northern Hama, Aleppo, Homs and elsewhere were quick to demonstrate their determination to combat Russian-backed regime ground offensives. Equipped with their U.S.-made TOW missiles—supplied in increasing numbers by the MOM following Russia’s intervention—groups like the 13th Division, Liwa Fursan al-Haq, the 1st Coastal Division and Jaish al-Izzeh repeatedly neutralized regime armored vehicles en route to attack opposition positions. As a demonstration of the value this would have had, the rate of TOW-use by ‘vetted’ FSA factions rose by 850% in the period of October 1–20, as compared to all of September 2015.<sup>70</sup>

The demonstrable impact that had upon preventing any major regime advance through to the end of 2015 brought the FSA unparalleled influence inside Syria, even attracting celebratory remarks from Salafist figures, with Ahrar al-Sham Shura Council member Kinan al-Nahhas (Abu Azzam al-Ansari) and Jabhat al-Nusra founding member Maysar Ali

64. Author interviews with Western officials, January–April 2016.

65. “Russian airstrikes kill 1400 including 527 children and women,” *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, January 30, 2016.

66. Lauren Williams, “Russian bombs damage British-funded bakery designed to help 18,000 Syrians,” *The Daily Telegraph*, January 28, 2016.

67. Richard Spencer, “MSF-backed hospital in Syria destroyed by Russian air strikes,” *The Daily Telegraph*, February 15, 2016.

68. Author interview, December 2015.

69. Author interview, October 2015.

70. Charles Lister, “Russia’s intervention in Syria: Protracting an already endless conflict,” *Brookings Institution*, October 21, 2015.



Musa Abdullah al-Juburi (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani) both publicly proclaiming “God Bless the Free Army” in October 2015.<sup>71</sup>

When Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani told a group of Syrian journalists in December 2015 that “there is no such thing as the Free Syrian Army,” Jaish al-Islam’s political chief Mohammed Baraykdar went public with a stinging rebuke, aligning his group with the FSA: “Just die in your rage. Jaish al-Islam is Free and the Free Army is Muslim.”<sup>72</sup>

This revealed a crucial, but complex reality. Technically, the FSA only included groups that met a set of combined factors: they self-identified as belonging to the ‘Free Army’ brand; were ‘vetted’ by the MOM or MOC; and maintained loyalty to the original, moderate ideals of the revolution. However, the fact still remained that even more independent Islamist factions like Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham saw themselves as inherent components of the same revolution that gave birth to the FSA and when circumstances aligned more favorably, they would not see it as controversial to affix their identities to the FSA. As a leading member of Ahrar al-Sham explained:

The Free Army was the big banner that at a certain point in the revolution’s history, embodied the determination to renounce the regime’s army and atrocities and then demonstrate the will to fight it and protect our people at any cost. These values are still present in any true revolutionary group today.

Crucially, the FSA units’ deployment of TOWs had the most significant impact in core Jabhat al-Nusra areas of influence, like Idlib and Aleppo. Perhaps for the first time in the conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra became dependent on the FSA to sustain tactical and strategic interests, rather than vice-versa. Most importantly however, the FSA’s revival thanks to its defensive activities in late-

2015 and early-2016 closed the political gap between it and the so-called independent Syrian Islamist factions like Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. More than any others, those groups had become cornerstones of the whole Syrian armed opposition, despite having distanced themselves from the FSA brand for some time. Now they reverted to identifying with it with pride.

“Our brothers in Faylaq [al-Sham], our brothers in Jaish al-Islam, and our brothers in Ahrar [al-Sham], we have been fighting alongside each other from the start, but in that time, we showed what we could bring to the battle. Maybe for some, it was a re-awakening of the Free Army’s potential, but it wasn’t anything new,” said one leader of a ‘vetted’ FSA faction based in Idlib and Aleppo.<sup>73</sup>

While the violence acutely escalated due to the Russian intervention, the international community accelerated efforts to pursue a political settlement to the Syrian crisis. Starting in Vienna in late-October, all key stakeholders in the conflict formed the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and formulated an 18-month peace plan. Assuming the mantle of opposition leadership, Saudi Arabia convened a two-day conference in Riyadh in which an unprecedentedly broad-spectrum opposition body—the Higher Negotiations Committee, or HNC—was established, bringing together AOGs, political opposition groupings and civil society.

Sixteen AOG representatives were invited to the meeting in Riyadh, thirteen of whom were FSA members, with the remaining three from Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. When it came to shaping an opposition platform, the continued prevalence of the FSA was clear for all to see. “We have struggled through division and the world has let us down so many times, but the Free Army never disappeared,” one FSA leader based in Damascus told this author. “When politics re-assumed importance, the world finally realized our significance again.”

71. [https://twitter.com/azzam\\_ansari/status/651780436964823040](https://twitter.com/azzam_ansari/status/651780436964823040) & [https://twitter.com/abo\\_hmza\\_g/status/652061910163132416](https://twitter.com/abo_hmza_g/status/652061910163132416).

72. Twitter: [https://twitter.com/sfean\\_alhmwi/status/676066494380380164](https://twitter.com/sfean_alhmwi/status/676066494380380164).

73. Author interview, February 2016.

After a failed first round of talks in late-January 2016, the ISSG negotiated the initiation of a nationwide cessation of hostilities (CoH), which excluded designated terrorist organizations like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Despite much skepticism surrounding its viability and notwithstanding some violations, the CoH held largely in place for several weeks. For the first time since 2011, Syrians across the country came back to the streets on Fridays, resuming their weekly protests against the regime and resurrecting the nationalist slogans of the revolution. The FSA flag featured most prominently within this protest rebirth. “The Free Army is the people’s revolutionary psyche,” Faylaq al-Sham’s political deputy Idris al-Raad told this author. “People are beginning to remember this and return to their roots... our [political] ideas have matured and now more than ever, we have demonstrated the potential to represent a cohesive national force capable of securing stability and security and to prevent the division of the country.”<sup>74</sup>

Weeks earlier, Jabhat al-Nusra had banned the flying of the FSA flag in Idlib, permitting only its black flag or the white flag associated with Jaish al-Fateh. That protests across many parts of Idlib so suddenly took on a pro-FSA nationalist tone represented a significant challenge to Jabhat al-Nusra’s primacy. Without an intense level of conflict, Jabhat al-Nusra was no longer able to sustain the relationship of inter-dependence it had worked so hard to establish between itself and the Syrian opposition.

As preparations were finalized for a second attempt at peace talks in Geneva in mid-March, Jabhat al-Nusra’s patience expired. In the Idlib town of Marat al-Numan, its fighters raided Friday protests on March 11, sparking clashes with the town’s FSA group, the 13th Division led by Col. Ahmed Saoud. By March 13, Jabhat al-Nusra had forced the 13th Division to withdraw from

the town altogether, which caused popular uproar. For over 100 days in a row, Marat al-Numan’s residents took to the streets calling for the downfall of Jabhat al-Nusra, with Friday protests in Idlib, Aleppo and elsewhere often adopting a critical stance to the al-Qaida affiliate and a boldly supportive one for the FSA. Even senior Ahrar al-Sham figures—like Kinan al-Nahhas, Hossam Salameh and Abu Taleb Abuleyn—took to the streets embracing the FSA flag.<sup>75</sup>

Forced into Turkey, Col. Saoud, a heavily built man with a stern gaze, remained insistent his forces would return—“God willing, we’ll be back in a week and those animals, those donkeys from al-Qaida will never return.”<sup>76</sup>

As it happened, Col. Saoud did not return to Idlib and those FSA factions that remained in the governorate continued their militarily submissive posture vis-à-vis their jihadist neighbors. Nevertheless, while Col. Saoud remained a persona non grata in Idlib, he reoriented his factions’ fighters towards northern Aleppo’s countryside, where they intensified their fight against ISIS. Three weeks following his violent expulsion from Idlib into Turkey, Col. Saoud visited his fighters in northern Aleppo, where he remained on and off throughout the summer.

It was thus in the space of three months in early-2016 that shifting dynamics once again revealed the socially-grounded popularity of the FSA and the fact that, absent horrific levels of violence, many people turned to the FSA and not the militarily powerful Jabhat al-Nusra. The sustainability of that dynamic reversal, however, depended on three things: the CoH remaining in place, the fulfillment of humanitarian conditions set out in the ISSG-backed UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and the political track demonstrating real progress towards a political transition in Damascus.

74. Author interview, February 2016.

75. For example: [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/705788652992012288](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/705788652992012288), [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/708279148033273856](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/708279148033273856), [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/708294250186854401](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/708294250186854401), [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/713395764240719873](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/713395764240719873), [https://twitter.com/Charles\\_Lister/status/713399791447842816](https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/713399791447842816)

76. Thanassis Cambanis, “The Syrian Revolution Against Al-Qaeda,” *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2016.

Hostilities steadily escalated from late-March onwards, and soon after, Jabhat al-Nusra convened two weeks of talks to convince Syrian AOGs of their interest in resuming fighting. Their argument proved persuasive and a number of multi-group offensives were launched in Idlib, southern Aleppo, northeastern Latakia and northern Hama. That spelled the effective end of the CoH. Tellingly, even the 13th Division's Aleppo-based units joined the offensive south of the city. There was no doubt that AOGs had felt increasingly exasperated at what they saw as blatant regime violations of the CoH, but Jabhat al-Nusra had put forward a strong argument. "They put pressure on our commanders to join the operations and used many resources to make the people pressure us to fight back," one FSA commander based between eastern Idlib and western Aleppo said. "We were backed into a corner, knowing we eventually needed to retaliate against the regime."<sup>77</sup>

In the months that followed, hostilities steadily returned to their pre-CoH levels, except in southern Syria, where the FSA's Southern Front was strong-armed by neighboring Jordan—which controlled its only source of support—into abiding by an uneasy continued cessation that it had agreed upon with Russia.<sup>78</sup> Externally-imposed restraint proved a challenge for the Southern Front's leadership to sustain through the summer of 2016, as restless tribes and more Islamist-minded opposition groups accused it of having betrayed the revolution.<sup>79</sup> For months, southern Syria's tribes threatened to withdraw their support from the Southern Front altogether. However, in mid-August all of the coalition's key constituent members launched a small offensive alongside other opposition forces against regime positions in the governorate of Quneitra, potentially indicating an abrogation of Jordanian control.

While the South stayed largely calm in comparison to the rest of the country, the conflict in northern Syria remained intense throughout the summer of 2016. Eastern districts of Aleppo city, which were controlled by the FSA-dominated Fatah Halab coalition, were besieged twice by pro-regime forces, with the first siege temporarily broken by a broad-spectrum offensive launched by Jaish al-Fateh and FSA factions. Meanwhile, the United States and Russia were negotiating intensely to reintroduce a CoH to Syria, while providing a mechanism for jointly coordinated strikes against both al-Qaida and ISIS in Syria. It was within this context that Jabhat al-Nusra announced its purported breaking of 'external' ties to al-Qaida and its rebranding to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS), or the Front for the Conquest of the Levant.<sup>80</sup> Perceived widely within the opposition as a concession to long-time Syrian demands for Jabhat al-Nusra to break its extra-Syrian ties of allegiance, the rebranding was then followed by the successful breaking of the Aleppo siege, led by JFS.<sup>81</sup>

As JFS continued to exert its influence over the mainstream opposition and the FSA on the ground, U.S. demands for FSA factions to "decouple" themselves from frontlines on which JFS was present went unheeded. Therefore, the opposition reacted with deep skepticism when the U.S. and Russia announced a comprehensive deal on Syria on September 9. The deal involved a sequenced introduction of a new CoH, a partial grounding of the Syrian Air Force and the provision of aid to all besieged areas of the country, followed by the formation of a Joint Intelligence Center (JIC) for the coordination of airstrikes against JFS and ISIS.<sup>82</sup>

The rapid breakdown of that agreement precipitated the most aggressive and sustained aerial

77. Author interview, April 2016.

78. Author interview with Jordanian government official, October 2016.

79. Hassan Hassan, "Southern Front rebels are at risk of disintegrating," *The National*, September 4, 2016.

80. Charles Lister, "The Nusra Front is Dead and Stronger Than Ever Before," *Foreign Policy*, July 28, 2016; Charles Lister, "The Dawn of Mass Jihad: Success in Syria Breeds Al-Qa'ida's Evolution," *CTC Sentinel*, September 7, 2016.

81. "Syria opposition says rebels break siege of Aleppo," *Al Jazeera*, August 8, 2016.

82. David Brunnstrom and Tom Miles, "U.S., Russia clinch Syria deal, aim for truce from Monday," *Reuters*, September 10, 2016 and Suleiman al-Khalidi & David Brunnstrom, "U.S.-Russian Syria peace deal raises rebel doubts as fighting rages," *Reuters*, September 10, 2016.

attack on opposition-held eastern Aleppo of the conflict. Russian aircraft were blamed for an intentional two-hour attack on a UN-mandated humanitarian aid convoy and over 500 people were killed in two weeks of bombing that followed. Bunker buster bombs were used for the first time, including on hospitals constructed underground. By early-November, the stage looked set for an all-out pro-regime ground offensive on the city, the outcome of which had the potential to severely damage the confidence of the mainstream and FSA-branded opposition.

## The FSA today: Not [yet] a missed opportunity

The FSA could potentially have become an effective, single and centralized armed organization, but to have done so would have required substantially more and singularly coordinated support than it received. That it took the U.S. an entire year to acknowledge the value of providing even *non-lethal* assistance to the FSA reveals a significant misjudgment of the situation that resulted in the loss of a potentially invaluable opportunity. A more determined U.S. effort to coordinate a substantial program of support to the moderate opposition would not have to have been about regime change. Instead, the objective could have been centered around controlling the evolution of a growing insurgency and sending a determined and clear message to the Assad regime regarding the limits of its brutality.

As conflict continued and intensified in late-2011 and throughout 2012, the FSA steadily fell victim to poor central leadership selection; communications difficulties; regional state rivalries and a resulting intra-FSA competition for external support; and the growth of rival Islamist and Salafi-jihadist movements. The complexity of the conflict and the opposition itself encouraged a proliferation of armed opposition groups (AOGs) who each individually sought to out-compete the other for international attention and support. In particular, this intra-opposition competition directly discouraged organizational unity, which one could feasibly argue could only have been prevented by an early and determined U.S. and allied support and coordination effort on behalf of the FSA in its first months.

These factors, amid others, contributed to the FSA's failure to develop into the centralized and tightly coordinated moderate insurgent movement that its original founders had hoped for. Once the U.S. and allied governments did determine it necessary to coordinate an effort to bolster the moderate

opposition in late-2012, it was arguably too late. The establishment of provincial military councils (PMCs) and then the Supreme Military Council (SMC) through 2012 and into 2013 were laudable initiatives that suffered the consequences of what had been missing until then. Both the PMCs and the SMC could have presented some potential value to the FSA, but the lack of a punitive Western response to the chemical weapons attack on opposition-held eastern Damascus in August 2013 dealt a severe blow to the 'moderate' brand, which had tied itself to relations with the West.

Ultimately, five years of hindsight provides some recognition of what it might have meant had the U.S. and allied governments more determinedly taken the lead in managing an armed uprising in a place like Syria. Such is the responsibility of being the world's sole superpower.

Since its period of decline in 2012–2013, it has become all too easy to dismiss the FSA as a fictional entity. Some elements of the original SMC continue to claim that a central FSA leadership exists, but there is little to no evidence that they retain any meaningful influence in terms of determining events on the ground. Instead, the FSA has consolidated its status as a powerful revolutionary brand. Regional and international states—with U.S. oversight—now provide support to 'vetted' FSA factions through tightly-controlled 'military operations rooms' in Turkey and Jordan, ensuring a continuation of some FSA influence on the battlefield.

By late-2016, the FSA had come to represent an expansive, socially and symbolically powerful but complex umbrella movement, composed of dozens of semi-autonomous armed opposition groups (AOGs) that are united by the original moderate ideals of Syria's revolution. The FSA is a decentral-

ized insurgent movement that continues to represent the core ideals of Syria's revolution: dignity, justice, freedom and liberty. As senior Southern Front figure Issam al-Reis explains:

The Free Army is the result of a nationalist vision for Syria, embodied by different cooperating brigades distributed throughout the country. These brigades come together in shared operations... We believe in a moderate Syria for all Syrians; we are against any non-nationalist or divisive project.

In many respects, the FSA has become a brand to be identified with by AOGs who either established themselves specifically as FSA-loyal factions or by independent AOGs during times of particularly intense opposition unity or de-escalated conflict. There is no meaningful central FSA leadership, but the identity with which FSA-branded AOGs attach themselves to remains entrenched within opposition areas of Syria.

During several weeks of ceasefire across Syria in February 2016, the re-emergence of peaceful protest within opposition areas of the country saw the FSA dominate in terms of expressions of popular support. In areas where the al-Qaida affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra was most powerful, such as in the north-western governorate of Idlib, protesters demonstrated against both the Assad regime and al-Qaida, while celebrating the FSA. This proved to be the most prominent example since 2011–2012 of the continued popularity of the FSA brand within opposition civil society and the effect on independent Islamist AOGs was clear. Shortly thereafter, their leaders joined the pro-FSA protests and publicly adopted the FSA's flag and slogans.

As a collective umbrella of AOGs, however, the FSA remains less impactful man-for-man when compared to some the military capabilities of Syria's larger Islamist opposition groups and jihadist factions like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, or JFS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). There are a variety of reasons for this, including FSA factions' lower levels of external

military assistance; an overreliance upon younger and less experienced recruits; and a lack of inter-insurgent influence in order to secure frontline roles in important operations. With southern Syria abiding by a long-term freeze in hostilities and Aleppo under siege, many FSA factions are therefore more likely to play supportive roles in opposition advances, rather than securing the advances themselves.

Nevertheless, beyond their military capacity to conduct effective stand-off attacks; anti-tank and armored vehicle strikes; and offensive support, the most strategically important FSA capability is its extensive civilian popular base. For the U.S. and allied countries seeking an eventual solution to the crisis in Syria, the FSA's military preeminence does not necessarily have to be the sole objective, but sustaining its ability to represent opposition communities is of crucial importance, given their mainstream positions.

To this day, the FSA *does* remain politically moderate and for now at least, it remains open to and hopeful for an augmented level of U.S. and Western support. More than any other development in recent years, the initiation of the CoH revealed the scale of the FSA's socio-political influence, as its slogans, flag, members and leaders took to the streets for renewed political protest across the country. When the 'Friends of Syria' facilitated a conference to determine representatives of a broad-spectrum opposition, FSA factions comprised over 85% of the AOGs invited.

It is for this reason that the more than 80 FSA AOGs (see Annex I) that the U.S. currently assesses as 'vetted' and sufficiently moderate to receive assistance must continue to be provided support and protection. Overtly expanding support to the FSA would likely court controversy in the immediate term and would be unlikely to be entirely 'clean,' but securing the continued existence and relevance of a moderate opposition would be worth that risk. A consistent argument used to oppose sending weapons to the FSA has been the likelihood of such arms changing hands. However, the most high-profile weapons provision program to the



FSA—the BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missile—has demonstrated an extremely low rate of proliferation of 0.8%,<sup>83</sup> indicating the viability of continued or expanded levels of such assistance.

Given the continued escalation of conflict and the potential for an opposition defeat in Aleppo, the trajectory of developments look more likely to favor opposition actors on the more Islamist and extremist ends of the spectrum. The long-term consequences of maintaining a policy of just-enough support to the FSA means a methodical loss of U.S. leverage over the crisis in Syria.

While to many, Syria seemed a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian country before 2011, delicate socio-political currents had been seething under the surface for some time. Moreover, the U.S. government and its intelligence apparatuses were wholly aware of the Assad regime's deep history of facilitating the growth of jihadist militancy and manipulating it for Damascus' own domestic and foreign policy agendas. ISIS itself benefited significantly from Assad's facilitation of its predecessor jihadi movements' emergence, growth and fierce fight against the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq from 2003–2010. In fact, it is likely that hundreds of U.S. soldiers may still be alive today, were it not for Damascus' assistance to the Islamic State in Iraq's (ISI) operations.

The same jihadist infrastructure Assad allowed to develop throughout Syria for use in coordinating the recruitment of foreign fighters, their training, and deployment into Iraq was used by ISI in late-2011 to establish its then Syrian wing, Jabhat al-Nusra. Those efforts were then buttressed further by Assad's release of several hundred jihadist detainees from Syrian prisons at the uprising's outset.<sup>84</sup>

Without a more substantial base of logistical, financial and military assistance, individual FSA factions will continue to be overshadowed by independent Islamists and al-Qaida-linked jihadis in many strate-

gic geographic areas of battle. In fact, as international diplomatic efforts (in which the FSA by definition is expected to cooperate) aimed at 'solving' Syria continue to struggle, the reputational credibility of the FSA brand will continue to decline.

That some portion of the mainstream armed opposition, including several FSA-branded factions, had considered very seriously the prospect of merging with JFS through July and August 2016 underlined the shifting balance of influence. Given military and diplomatic pressures and increasingly confident Islamists, the adverse effects of factionalism are likely to raise their heads again.

It should have been self-evident that the eruption of a nationwide revolution in Syria in March 2011 and the birth of a rapidly growing armed resistance movement from June 2011 would eventually have provided an opening to extremists. The speed with which the revolution grew and the extent to which the regime violently suppressed it while showing no interest in meaningful reform should also have made it clear that considerable instability and conflict was likely to last. The U.S., therefore, should have sought out viable partners on the ground as quickly as possible, so as to manage what was quickly consolidating into an armed conflict.

An earlier and more concerted effort to bolster the capabilities of the FSA would have boosted its chances of creating the necessary conditions for a viable political process that would have forced the regime to compromise. Such an effort would never have been clean, easy, or even certain, but it is hard to argue that it would not have provided a *better* chance of ameliorating the kind of dangers that now emanate from Syrian territory. Mass migration; regional destabilization; a possible re-establishment of al-Qaeda Central in northern Syria; an ISIS Caliphate and proliferating terror attacks in Europe; an emboldened Iran and expansionist Russia, are all entirely or in part a consequence of what Syria was allowed to become.

83. According to monitoring data of BGM-71 TOW missile use in Syria since the system's first appearance in April 2014 and until September 30, 2016: out of 1,039 TOW missiles were fired, nine were utilized by non-vetted FSA factions. See <https://justpaste.it/SyriaATGM>.

84. Charles Lister, "Evolution of an Insurgency: How Syria Was Radicalized," *Foreign Affairs*, March 14, 2016.



## Policy recommendations

Despite their military disadvantage, it will take a considerable continuation of conflict for the FSA's civil support base to completely erode. It is therefore critically important to acknowledge the current trajectory of the conflict in Syria. The Assad regime continues to display no interest in discussing any political transition. Instead, it seeks to protract the conflict further in an attempt to undermine moderates like the FSA—moderates whose identities make them more closely aligned with the fate of a political process. Forcing a diplomatic initiative onto the 'ground' without some level of protection or guarantee for the future viability of the FSA risks encouraging the further erosion of its influence. Such a scenario runs directly counter to the interests of any government that seeks to bring back some level of stability to Syria.

It is still entirely feasible that, with sufficient support, and backed by a more assertive U.S. policy which recognized the necessity of coercion rather than diplomatic persuasion, that the FSA can better assert and maintain its influence in Syria. A continuation of current policy may manage to sustain a slow-moving political process, but ultimately, the imbalance on the ground will ensure that fighting continues to trump talking. Another reversion to full-scale conflict without a mechanism for empowering the FSA will most likely guarantee that the only benefactors are extremists on both sides of the conflict. In that scenario, Syria will witness an acceleration of population displacement, catastrophic levels of violence and death, and the eventual erosion of the very foundation that the FSA was built upon: a yearning for freedom and opportunity.

There is no total military solution to the Syrian crisis. Only through a sequenced process of rebalanc-

ing the situation on the ground; credibly enforcing a civilian protection policy with fixed accountability measures; utilizing diplomatic and financial mechanisms to more determinedly pressure the Assad regime; and a qualitative and quantitative expansion of support to the FSA, can a durable political process be initiated. Putting faith in Russia as the sole mechanism for bringing Bashar al-Assad to a negotiating table has not yet succeeded and the consequences of repeated failures are yet more detrimental to long-term regional and international security. If the U.S. does not choose to take the lead in re-establishing a relative balance of power and political influence in Syria, we leave the job to regional states—states whose recent histories make clear lack the intent or capacity to run a cohesive and organized program of independent support.

### **1. Underlying Policy Shift: Credibly demonstrate that Assad must go**

U.S. and other Western officials have insisted since 2011 that Bashar al-Assad 'must go.' However, it is not enough simply to state policy or to indicate a desired outcome—what is necessary is to more discernibly insist on working towards it. In fact, as time has passed, the Obama administration has increasingly distanced itself from carrying out policies aimed towards this objective.

A key obstacle to achieving real progress in Syria has been the preeminent focus on combating terrorism (a symptom of the crisis, not a cause) and the refusal to acknowledge that doing so successfully is inextricably linked to first ensuring a political transition in Damascus. Thus far, the policy set forth by the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS has relied overwhelmingly upon local forces dominated by minority communities,

while the Sunni Arab majority plays a minor role. This is explained by the fact that the vast majority of the most capable Sunni Arab fighters in Syria are heavily preoccupied with defending themselves against the Assad regime and its various allies. However, Turkey's incursion into northern Aleppo in late-August 2016 and its anti-ISIS operations alongside mainstream opposition forces does provide a potential opportunity to include such actors in core operations, such as the upcoming battle for the city of Al-Raqqa.

The dramatic failure of CENTCOM's Train and Equip program in 2015 was testament to this inescapable dynamic: that the vast majority of Sunni Arab opposition fighters will not forgo their existential fight against the Assad regime in favor of doing America's bidding in the fight against ISIS, which poses a less urgent threat to them. Back in late-2013 and early-2014 however, ISIS *was* an imminent priority for Syria's opposition and as such, sparked the opposition's expansive offensive against the jihadist group. The scale of their success in forcing ISIS out of four provinces in 12 weeks is incomparably more significant than what the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have achieved in northeastern Syria in over two years of operations backed by U.S. air support.

Allowing Bashar al-Assad—or indeed any close alternative—to remain in power is also of medium-term benefit to al-Qaida, whose affiliate in Syria is inherently reliant on sustaining an intense level of conflict against his regime. The cessation of hostilities in Syria in early-2016 revealed that dynamic clearly, as the most moderate elements of Syria's opposition re-acquired preeminence almost overnight. In only one month of dramatically reduced hostilities, civilians and AOG members alike were reminded of the confidence that their revolutionary foundations lent to their cause. Nevertheless, Jabhat al-Nusra did succeed in convincing the armed opposition to resume fighting in April 2016 and has methodically strengthened since, with its rebranding as JFS moving it yet further towards entrapping the mainstream opposition into an inescapable relationship of military interdependence.

While the military removal of Assad from power—an 'opposition' victory—*would* also likely benefit al-Qaida in an interim period, the resulting process of determining Syria's political future and the necessary inclusion of the breadth of Syria's society within that process would in all likelihood see JFS' vision rapidly isolated. Faced with such a prospective scenario, it would seem to be worth accepting a possible short-term benefit to al-Qaida, knowing with confidence that the medium and long-term prospects for their extremist vision would be severely challenged. A political removal of Assad from power—a negotiated settlement—on the other hand would immediately undermine al-Qaida and JFS' narrative and vision for the crisis' resolution. Ultimately, either scenario would pose substantial challenges to the jihadists' modus operandi, which is founded upon and bolstered by conflict, not politics.

So long as the U.S. refuses to fully acknowledge the interrelation between the Assad regime remaining in power and a successful fight against terrorism in Syria, ISIS will be given at least an insurance blanket and al-Qaida will continue to thrive. In this sense, the FSA is not operationally a valuable counter-terrorism actor against JFS, but what it represents remains the best and most Western-friendly alternative to the Islamist trajectory that continues to develop. It seems now most likely that the international community has no more than 6–12 months to retain FSA influence in Syria and to re-empower the original moderate ideals of the revolution. Without such an effort, the U.S. faces the very real prospect of losing all meaningful leverage in a conflict with truly global ramifications.

Should a genuine political transition eventually be, a vast majority of Syria's armed opposition, including the FSA *and* independent Islamist factions, would in all likelihood then be freed up to become willing and formidable anti-ISIS fighters.

It is critically urgent not to reach this 'too late' scenario, after which extremism will almost certainly have established an unbreakable iron grip over any remaining moderate elements of the op-

position. Beyond ISIS, it is not a coincidence that al-Qaida's central leadership has been deploying senior figures to northern Syria since late-2012—the region is now seen as the core hub of the jihadist movement's future.

## **2. Continue & intensify work towards restricting aerial bombardment**

As the early-2016 CoH demonstrated so clearly, a reduction in hostilities and the resulting improvement in conditions for civilians on the ground is both detrimental to extremists and advantageous to moderates. The use of overwhelming and frequently indiscriminate aerial bombardment by the Assad regime and Russia have allowed extremist organizations to gain sympathy amongst desperate Syrians. Jabhat al-Nusra, for example, is seen by many Syrians not only as an acceptable actor present within their midst, but also as a necessary military partner in their revolutionary struggle.

The international community has at its disposal at least three UN Security Council resolutions (2139, 2165, 2254) that set forth the absolute prohibition of the use of barrel bombs and any indiscriminate use of artillery, shelling and airstrikes on civilian targets. Resolution 2165 specifically warns that such actions “may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.” That such actions have nevertheless continued almost unabated, including during the first internationally-mandated CoH (also set forth in a UN Security Council Resolution; 2268) underlines the extent to which the U.S. and its allies—not to mention the UN—are failing in their responsibilities to verify and enforce their own legislation.

As with President Obama's ‘red line’ reversal in August-September 2013, such policy insufficiencies only undermine those we claim to support, principally the FSA and the recognized political opposition body, the Higher Negotiations Committee (HNC)—not to mention the U.S. itself. So long as barrel bombing and other indiscriminate bombardment continues to target Syrian

people, extremists will be provided with more ‘ammunition’ to undermine the credibility of moderate forces like the FSA.

Militarily heavy and indiscriminate bombing also has an added practical benefit for pro-regime operations in that it catalyzes mass displacement and the emptying of formerly populated areas. Forced depopulation has been a well-practiced strategy by the regime in Syria for several years, since it transforms complex populated areas into easier to dominate targets.

To restrict aerial bombardment, the U.S. should consider the use of limited ‘safe’ or ‘no-bombing’ zones along border areas and threaten the use of limited, punitive strikes in response to flagrant abuses of the laws of war by the Assad regime. In conjunction with this limited threat of the use of force, the U.S. should simultaneously initiate a process of sanctioning Syrian Arab Army (SAA) officers identified as being involved in crimes against humanity. This should be conducted in an escalatory manner, whereby those sanctioned first are in lower positions of command. This would have an effect of inducing exponential pressure within the SAA's ranks, catalyzing a crisis of confidence at the heart of the regime's (and Russia's) key source of durable power.

While threatening limited, punitive strikes carries risks, the U.S. would pre-empt any likelihood of counter-escalation by warning Russia of the intent several weeks prior, thereby giving it time to deter regime violations. Making such a condition public would add further towards shaping dynamics leading up to any potential punitive actions. Moreover, it should also be acknowledged that, far from desiring a ‘war’ with the U.S., the Russian government appears determined to present itself as a great power capable of solving the Syrian crisis *alongside* the U.S. Combined with the fact that the basis behind such U.S. threats of action would be civilian protection, it remains nigh-on impossible to imagine a scenario in which Russia would choose

to shoot down a U.S. jet or cruise missile heading towards an unmanned target in the middle of the night.<sup>85</sup>

Should the U.S. and its allies decide to be both willing and thus capable of ensuring—or forcing—the regime to fully comply with its internationally-mandated expectations, it will produce two potentially beneficial results. Firstly, it would in all likelihood contribute towards a de-escalation of every-day conflict in many parts of the country where no battle frontlines exists. That would provide spaces for FSA-linked civil society and meaningful governance efforts to develop. Many previous attempts at FSA-led governance have failed precisely because regime bombing sparked a brain drain of trained and qualified professionals. Secondly, it would provide opposition forces with the space to focus or intensify their energy on rebalancing the power relationships on the ground vis-à-vis the regime on the battlefield. Only a relative balance on the ground can ensure the best chances for a viable political process.

### **3. Increase military & financial assistance to FSA through MOC & MOM**

In tandem with a more concerted and determined effort to restrict the use of aerial bombardment in Syria, the U.S. should work closely with its existing allies in the MOC and MOM to coordinate a significant qualitative and quantitative expansion of lethal assistance to vetted FSA factions. Should airpower usage be diminished, it will not be necessary to provide groups with anti-aircraft weapons, or MANPADS. This should be seen as the most favored option.

Should hostilities re-escalate and were the regime to continue to exploit its free-hand in the use of indiscriminate airpower, it seems highly likely that regional states will eventually choose to ignore U.S. fears and send in MANPADS to their respective favored factions. This already happened on a small-

scale, following Russia's intervention. In such a scenario, the only way to minimize the proliferation of regionally-provided systems would be for the U.S. to take charge of a minimal and tightly controlled policy of small-scale provision of MANPADS to select trained individuals (not factions). Classified work on developing technology to restrict the operation of such systems by location, user or time would necessarily be required.<sup>86</sup>

More broadly and more importantly, vetted FSA factions should be provided with greater quantities of BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles, as well as more portable systems similar to the FGM-148 Javelin. TOW missiles have proven especially valuable and effective on the battlefield for FSA groups, particularly as a source of discernible military value vis-à-vis the remainder of the armed opposition. However, the use of TOW missiles thus far has been restricted to targets spotted some time in advance, so that heavy launchers can be set in place. Portable systems would give FSA fighters the added advantage of being able to neutralize large, armored targets at shorter notice, lending more of a tactical and strategic value.

The U.S. appears to have begun shipping anti-tank systems designed to more effectively penetrate sophisticated armor to groups in Syria in late-2015. For example, the inclusion of 9K111M 'Faktoria' anti-tank guided missiles instead of 9K111 'Fagots' in late-2015 indicates a qualitative move to include systems containing tandem warheads capable of penetrating regime tanks equipped with explosive reactive armor (ERA). Also included in recent U.S. shipments were PG-7VT grenades, which penetrate ERA and are launched by the portable—though short-range—and easily available RPG-7 launcher.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to improving anti-tank capabilities, vetted FSA groups should also be provided with more advanced mortar and tactical-range howitzers and artillery pieces, as well as the training needed

85. Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Reaps the Rewards of U.S. Policy Failures on Syria," *The Daily Beast*, June 7, 2016.

86. Elias Groll, "The U.S. Wants To Design Safer Anti-Aircraft Missiles for Syria's Rebels," *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2016.

87. Jeremy Binnie, "Details of US arms shipment to Syrian rebels revealed," *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, April 8, 2016.

to use them effectively. Should regime airpower be successfully restricted, combat focus will inevitably shift towards a preeminent focus on the use of artillery systems for bombardment. In such a scenario, the opposition will necessarily require the capacity to counter the regime's—and likely Russia's—free ability to conduct such bombardment.

Greater quantities of small-arms and light weapons, as well as more reliable and advanced assault and sniper rifles will improve the everyday capabilities of individual FSA fighters. An expanded provision of portable secure communications technology will also prevent Russia, Iran and the regime from listening into opposition communications.

Finally, vetted FSA factions should be provided greater financial capacities to pay salaries and to recruit additional swathes of fighters. Easy access to bountiful funding has determined the success and failure of many armed factions in Syria since 2011 and amid an inevitable competition for influence with more Islamist and extremist factions, the capacity to allow fighters to provide not just for themselves but also for their families will be of significant importance. As one senior FSA official claimed on the condition of anonymity:

If the Free Army received the kind of support that factions like Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar [al-Sham], many Syrians would switch to join us. Money and equipment gives a faction great prestige, especially given the poverty we are now stricken with as a nation.<sup>88</sup>

#### **4. Tie together civil, judicial & military support**

The ability to tie together and exploit involvement in civil, judicial and military activities remains a key facet of shaping influence on the ground. An important component of the success of Islamist and jihadi groups has been the closely interconnected nature of these three activities within their organizational makeup, and the willingness by their regional backers to provide

assistance that explicitly acknowledges and reinforces the inter-relation of the three activities.

The moderate opposition, in comparison, has struggled to demonstrate a superior capacity for governance, in part because its respective involvement in civil, judicial and military activities has remained mostly segregated due to restrictions emplaced by Western funders. Although there are laudable reasons for why civil society should be given the independent space to build civil institutions and why AOGs should not interfere with judicial systems, the reality is that these three activities are inextricably linked on the ground. FSA factions work on a local level to reinforce the authority of revolutionary judicial commissions and protect affiliated civil society organizations. Many civil society bodies support and lend local credibility to the leaderships and activities of FSA factions.

While controversial and unorthodox, U.S. assistance to the mainstream opposition should embrace this reality, not reject it. So long as financial and logistical support from the U.S. and other Western governments continues to insist on these three strands of opposition activity remaining separate, the moderate opposition as a whole will struggle—and likely fail—to compete with rival governance systems offered by Islamists, who naturally combine all three strands.

As the political process struggles and as hostilities eventually return back towards their pre-CoH levels, the relative advantage will swing back to those acting on the more extreme ends of the spectrum. It will therefore be more crucial than ever to ensure that the moderate opposition as a whole stands the best possible chance of developing a strong, civil-military social barrier to jihadist influence, especially in northern Syria.

#### **5. Defend, publicly recognize & politically engage FSA factions**

Thus far, there has been a strong hesitancy within U.S. and Western policymaking and implementing circles to publicly acknowledge providing support

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88. Author interview, April 2016.



to specific opposition groups for fear of affixing a divisive label upon their activities. While founded on pragmatic principles, this policy is arguably more restrictive than it is protective. Within Syrian circles, it is widely known which countries support which civil society groups, which AOGs, et cetera. With regards to the armed opposition in particular, it is virtually impossible not to know which AOGs have received ‘vetted’ status and thus receive support via the MOC or MOM. By extension, all such groups are identified by Syrians as having at least some relationship with U.S. intelligence bodies, as well as with regional states that directly provide them with arms and finance.

There can be little doubt that current circumstances complicate an AOG’s ability to have relations with U.S. intelligence. Since the Obama administration’s ‘red line’ reversal in August-September 2013 and the parallel rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and now JFS, this has become especially true. However, considering the extent to which *all* Syrians already know these links, it is all the *more* damaging when AOGs close to the U.S. are attacked by al-Qaida, receive no defensive assistance from the U.S., and are then defeated.

Because of the likelihood of this scenario, it would seem most damaging *not* to publicly acknowledge relationships of support or to forgo protection of one’s assets on the ground. It is little wonder that Jabhat al-Nusra feels that it can strike at a U.S.-backed AOG at will, when the U.S. itself stands by and watches it happen. For the sake of retaining any U.S. influence in Syria and for retaining the capabilities of FSA AOGs, this spurious non-policy must be reversed.

Finally, and as an extension of the above point, the U.S. and allied Western states must more intensively engage FSA factions on a *political* level. Rather than restricting contact and dialogue with such groups to military and intelligence engagements and monthly or bi-monthly meetings with the U.S. Special Envoy, adding a high-level and consistent political component helps to build and take ad-

vantage of AOG efforts to enhance their political leaderships and capabilities. When conditions on the ground are ameliorated enough to establish a genuinely durable political process, the involvement and productive role of AOGs will be crucial in determining both the credibility of the process and the feasibility of activating its outcome.

## **6. Facilitate dialogue between FSA & Kurdish YPG**

The unwaveringly hostile positions held by a broad expanse of the Syrian armed opposition with regards to the Kurdish YPG are detrimental to its long-term influence and interests. This hostility has worsened since Turkey’s intervention into northern Aleppo in late-August 2016, when mainstream opposition forces and units of the YPG and allied SDF militias engaged in sustained fighting. Despite having contributed significantly towards consolidating this hostile state of affairs, U.S. partiality towards the YPG as its ‘favored’ anti-ISIS actor means that FSA factions aggressively opposed to the Kurdish organization can be perceived negatively within U.S. policymaking circles. There are often legitimate sources of concern regarding the YPG and the geopolitical objectives of its PYD political leadership, but the interests of both parties are best served when at peace, not war.

The Kurdish YPG has also maintained a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the Assad regime since the eruption of Syria’s revolution. Since early-2016 however, tensions have risen between the YPG and pro-regime elements in northern Syria, peaking in late-April and again in August, when full-scale conflict broke out between the two in their shared city of Qamishli.

The U.S. and its partners should take advantage of such developments to initiate a politically neutral process of dialogue and mediation between the YPG and as broad a spectrum of Syrian AOGs as possible. Discussions would focus on breaking down barriers relating to each party’s interpretation of the others’ identity, relationships and ob-

jectives for Syria's future. Operating almost on an unofficial level—but with heavy behind-the-scenes diplomatic pressure on regional governments with a stake in the conflict to ensure the process continues—a sustained process of dialogue centered on determining areas of common interest would stand a good chance of ameliorating the hostile frames of reference each currently hold to the other.

The greater the extent of FSA faction involvement in such a process the better. Consequently, this process would need at minimum the acceptance—and ideally the support—of Turkey, which sustains an iron grip upon many AOGs in northern Syria and therefore influences their stances towards Kurds. While Turkey's enmity towards the PKK and YPG is clear for all to see, President Erdogan has also explicitly acknowledged—by previously initiating a unilateral ceasefire with the PKK and launching peace talks with it in 2013–2014—that outright military victory is impossible. Turkey's war with the PKK in the country's southeast paired with its proxy conflict with the YPG in northern Syria represents a substantial cost, especially following the failed coup that has since seen military resources dwindle. Given Turkey's incursion into northern Syria and the likely prevention of an integral Kurdish state of 'Rojava' from being established, the U.S. is now presented with an opportunity to encourage Ankara to consider the political option, at least in Syria, if not on both fronts.



# A summary of ‘vetted’ FSA factions

This is a list of factions that meet all of the following four conditions: those (1) ‘vetted’ by the CIA; (2) those receiving assistance via the Turkey-based MOM or Jordan-based MOC; those

(3) opposed to and actively combating the Assad regime, and (4) those consistently identifying with the FSA brand. As of September 2016.

Group Name		Area of Operations (by Province)	
<b>1st Regiment</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>Liwa Ahrar Souriya</b> <i>Aleppo</i>	
<b>16th Division</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>Al-Hamza Division</b> <i>Aleppo</i>	
<b>Thuwar al-Sham</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>Liwa al-Mu'tassim</b> <i>Aleppo</i>	
<b>Al-Jabhat al-Shamiya</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>51st Brigade</b> <i>Aleppo</i>	
<b>Jaish al-Mujahideen</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>Liwa Asifat al-Shamal</b> <i>Aleppo</i>	
<b>Tajamu Fastaqm Kama Umrit</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>99th Division</b> <i>Aleppo</i>	
<b>Kataib al-Safawah</b> <i>Aleppo</i>		<b>Faylaq al-Sham</b> <i>Aleppo, Idlib, Hama</i>	

**Free Idlib Army**

*Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia*



**Liwa al-Aadiyat**

*Latakia*



**Jaish al-Izzeh**

*Aleppo, Latakia*



**2nd Coastal Division**

*Latakia*



**21st Division**

*Idlib, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama*



**1st Coastal Division**

*Latakia*



**Jaish al-Tahrir**

*Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, Hama*



**Liwa Sultan Murad**

*Latakia, Aleppo*



**Jaish al-Nasr**

*Idlib, Latakia*



**2nd Division**

*Homs*



**Central Division**

*Aleppo, Homs*



**Jaish al-Tawhid**

*Homs*



**Jabhat al-Asala wal Tanmiya**

*Qalamoun, Homs*



**Alwiyat wa Kataib al-Shadeed**

*Ahmed al-Abdo*

*Qalamoun, Homs*



**46th Division**

*Aleppo, Hama*



**Harakat Tahrir Homs**

*Homs*



**Tajamu Suqor al-Ghab**

*Hama, Idlib*



**Jaish Usud al-Sharqiya**

*Homs*



**Liwa Sayfullah**

*Homs*



**Liwa al-Mu'tassim Billah**

*Deraa*



**1st Legion**

*Deraa*



**Mujahideen Houran**

*Deraa*



**1st Army**

*Deraa*



**Liwa Fursan Houran**

*Deraa*



**1st Artillery Regiment**

*Deraa*



**69th Special Forces Division**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



**Ahrar Nawa Division**

*Deraa*



**Houran Column Division**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



**Al-Qadisiya Division**

*Deraa*



**18th March Division**

*Deraa*



**Jaish al-Ababil**

*Deraa*



**Alwiyat al-Furqan**

*Deraa, Quneitra, Damascus*



**8th Brigade**

*Deraa*



**99th Division**

*Deraa*



**Liwa Ahfad al-Rasoul**

*Quneitra, Deraa*



**Fajr al-Islam Division**

*Deraa*



**Jabhat Ansar al-Islam**

*Deraa, Quneitra, Damascus*



**Alwiyat al-Omari**

*Deraa*



**46th Division**

*Quneitra, Deraa*



**Liwa Shabab al-Sunnah**

*Deraa*



**Fair al-Tawhid Division**

*Deraa*



**19th Brigade**

*Deraa*



**Jaish al-Yarmouk**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



**Liwa Tawhid Kataib Houran**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



**55th Brigade**

*Deraa*



**Alwiyat Saif al-Sham**

*Deraa*



**Usud al-Sunnah Division**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



**Liwa Moataz Billah**

*Deraa*



**Liwa al-Tawhid al-Junub**

*Deraa*



**Faylaq al-Rahman**

*Damascus*



**Fallujah Houran Division**

*Deraa*



**Liwa Shuhada al-Islam**

*Damascus*



**Liwa Shuhada Houran**

*Deraa*



**11th Special Forces Division**

*Damascus, Qalamoun*



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**Tajamu Ahrar Houran**

*Deraa*



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**Jabhat al-Sham al-Muwahida**

*Deraa, Damascus, Quneitra*



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**Liwa al-Karamah**

*Deraa*



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**Alwiyat Shuhada Dimashq**

*Deraa, Damascus*



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**Liwa al-Muhajireen wal Ansar**

*Deraa, Qalamoun*



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**Syrian Revolutionaries Front**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



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**Hamza Division**

*Deraa*



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**21st Division**

*Deraa*



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**1st Corps**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



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**Liwa Fajr al-Tahrir**

*Deraa*



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**Salah al-Din Division**

*Deraa*



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**Liwa Ansar al-Sunnah**

*Deraa, Quneitra*



## About the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a research initiative housed in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The Project's mission is to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on the changing dynamics in Muslim-majority countries and to advance relations between Americans and Muslim societies around the world.

To fulfill this mission, the Project sponsors a range of activities, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim communities all over the world. The broader goals of the Project include:

- Exploring the multi-faceted nature of the United States' relationship with Muslim-majority states, including issues related to mutual misperceptions;
- Analyzing the social, economic, and political dynamics underway in Muslim societies;
- Identifying areas for shared endeavors between the United States and Muslim communities around the world on issues of common concern.

To achieve these goals, the Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together leaders in politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from the United States and from Muslim societies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The Forum also serves as a focal point for the Project's ongoing research and initiatives, providing the foundation for a range of complementary activities designed to enhance dialogue and impact;
- An Analysis Paper Series that provides high-quality research and publications on key questions facing Muslim states and communities;
- Workshops, symposia, and public and private discussions with key stakeholders focused on critical issues affecting the relationship;
- Special initiatives in targeted areas of demand. In the past these have included Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, and Religion and Diplomacy.

The Project's Steering Committee consists of Martin Indyk, Executive Vice President; Bruce Jones, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies; Tamara Cofman Wittes, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Middle East Policy; William McCants, Senior Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow in the Center; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Center; and Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Project and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland.



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*Charting the path to a Middle East at peace with itself and the world*

Today's dramatic, dynamic and often violent Middle East presents unprecedented challenges for global security and United States foreign policy. Understanding and addressing these challenges is the work of the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. Founded in 2002, the Center for Middle East Policy brings together the most experienced policy minds working on the region, and provides policymakers and the public with objective, in-depth and timely research and analysis. Our mission is to chart the path—political, economic and social—to a Middle East at peace with itself and the world.

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