

MARCH 2013

ELIZABETH O'BAGY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 9

THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY



Cover Photo: The Bab al-Salameh border crossing under Syrian rebel control. Taken on January 31, 2013 by Elizabeth O'Bagy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- Fragmentation and disorganization have plagued Syria's armed opposition since peaceful protestors took up arms in December 2011 and began forming rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army. A lack of unity has made cooperation and coordination difficult on the battlefield and has limited the effectiveness of rebel operations.
- Since the summer of 2012, rebel commanders on the ground in Syria have begun to coordinate tactically in order to plan operations and combine resources. This cooperation has facilitated many important offensives and rebels have taken control of the majority of the eastern portion of the country, overrunning their first provincial capital in March 2013 with the capture of al-Raqqa city. However, rebels have been unable to capitalize on these successes, and fighting has largely stalemated along current battle fronts particularly in the key areas of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus.
- In order to overcome the current military stalemate, the opposition needs to develop an operational level headquarters that can designate campaign priorities, task units to support priority missions, and resource these units with the proper equipment to execute their missions. Recently, the opposition has established a new national military structure that may grow to serve this purpose.
- On December 7, 2012, rebel leaders from across Syria announced the election of a new 30-member unified command structure called the Supreme Joint Military Command Council, known as the Supreme Military Command (SMC). The Supreme Military Command improves upon previous attempts at armed opposition unification through higher integration of disparate rebel groups and enhanced communication, which suggest that it could prove to be an enduring security institution.
- The SMC includes all of Syria's most important opposition field commanders, and its authority is based on the power and influence of these rebel leaders. Its legitimacy is derived from the bottom-up, rather than top-down, and it has no institutional legitimacy apart from the legitimacy of the commanders associated with the council. Thus, the SMC is not structurally cohesive, and its ability to enforce command and control is dependent on the cooperation of each of its members.
- The incorporation of rebel networks has resulted in chains of command that are not uniform across the five fronts, with each sub-unit retaining their own unique authority structures.
- The SMC's primary function to date has been to serve as a platform for coordination. Regardless of the limits of its current command and control, the SMC has played an important role in syncing rebel operations with several notable successes. It has allowed for greater opportunities for collaboration and coordination among the disparate rebel groups operating in Syria.
- As the SMC develops its institutional capacity, its ability to assert greater authority will likely depend on its transactional legitimacy and its ability to distribute critical resources to rebel-held communities.
- To date, disparate sources of funding have significantly handicapped the rebels' ability to unite and consolidate authority on a national level. Although private sources of funding will likely continue outside the parameters of the SMC, uniting the support channels of rebels' main state sponsors will be fundamental to ensuring the legitimacy of the new organization. The ability to provide resources and material support to its sub-units is the determining factor in whether or not the SMC will be able to unite rebel forces under its command and establish a level of command and control.

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- The SMC has the potential to serve as a check on radicalization and help to assert a moderate authority in Syria. If the SMC can create enough incentives for moderation it will likely be able to marginalize the most radical elements within its structure. To this end, the SMC has recognized the importance of the inclusion of some of the more radical forces, while still drawing a red line at the inclusion of forces that seek the destruction of a Syrian state, such as jihadist groups like Jabhat Nusra.
- Ultimately, even if the SMC only serves as a mechanism for greater cooperation and coordination, it is a significant development in that it has united the efforts of rebel commanders across Syria. It is the first attempt at unity that incorporates important commanders from all Syrian provinces and has enough legitimacy on the ground to even begin the process of building a structure capable of providing a national-level chain of command.
- Syria's state security apparatus will collapse as the Assad regime finishes its transformation into a militia-like entity. The Supreme Military Command is currently the only organization that could serve to fill the security vacuum left by this transformation. As the Syrian opposition begins to build a transitional government, the SMC could create a framework for rebuilding Syria's security and governing institutions if properly supported. The SMC's ability to act as a basis for a national defense institution will be an important component in filling the power vacuum left by Assad's fall and will aid in a secure and stable Syria.
- There remain a number of critical obstacles ahead for the SMC. They include the incorporation of existing command networks, which will have an impact on command and control and resource allocation; mitigating the strength of extremist groups; and managing disparate sources of financing. Overcoming these obstacles will be difficult, especially as the nature of the conflict transforms and the sectarian polarization makes it more challenging to create a strong military institution and professional armed force. Although the SMC must do its part internally to overcome these obstacles, its success will largely depend on greater international support and access to more resources.
- The goal behind U.S. support to the opposition should be to build a force on the ground that is committed to building a nonsectarian, stable Syria, with a government more likely to respect American interests. Working with the SMC could enhance America's position vis-à-vis Syria's armed opposition and provide a mechanism for stability should the Assad regime fall.



MAP 1 | SYRIA LOCATIONS LISTING

1 Abu Duhur	16 Dumayr Airbase	31 Khirbet Ghazaleh	46 Qalat al Madiq	61 Taftanaz Airbase
2 Abu Kamal	17 Furqlus	32 Kiswah	47 Qamishli	62 Tal Aybad
3 Afrin	18 Haffeh	33 Laqbah	48 Qardahah	63 Tal Qartal
4 al Bab	19 Halfiyah	34 Maarat al Numan	49 Qataneh	64 Tal Rifat
5 al Lejah	20 Harim	35 Marea	50 Qbeir	65 Talbisseh
6 al Qusayr	21 Houleh	36 Marj Ruhayl Airbase	51 Qutayfah	66 Taqba Airbase
7 al Safir	22 Izraa	37 Mastouma / Shayrat Airbase	52 Rabia	67 Telkalakh
8 Ariha	23 Jableh	38 Masyaf	53 Rankous	68 Tiyas Airbase
9 Atareb	24 Jarrah Airbase	39 Mayadin	54 Ras al Ayn	69 Wadi Nasariyah
10 Azaz	25 Jasim & Inkhil	40 Minakh Airbase	55 Rastan	70 Yabrud
11 Bab Hawa	26 Jebal al-Zawiya	41 Mismiyah	56 Saiqal Airbase	71 Zabadani
12 Baniyas	27 Jisr al-Shughour	42 Muhradeh	57 Sanamein	
13 Binnish	28 Khalkalakh Airbase	43 Nasariyah Airbase	58 Saraqib	
14 Dael	29 Khan Sheikhoun	44 Nawa	59 Suqalabiyah	
15 Damascus Int'l Airport	30 Kherweis Airbase	45 Palmyra / Tadmor	60 Suwayda Airbase	

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By Elizabeth O'Bagy

The opposition movement in Syria has been fragmented from its inception, a direct reflection of Syria's social complexity and the decentralized grassroots origin of the uprising. This condition has plagued Syria's armed opposition since peaceful protestors took up arms and began forming rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2011. A lack of unity has made cooperation and coordination difficult on the battlefield and has limited the effectiveness of rebel operations. It has also reduced the rebels' ability to garner international support and backing.

To achieve the tactical benefits of uniting forces, rebel commanders on the ground have planned and executed joint operations and coordinated resources beginning with rebel offensives in the summer and fall of 2012. However, as rebels have reached the limits of their ability to confront hardened regime strongholds, fighting has stalled along current battle lines. In order to overcome the current military stalemate, rebels will need to consolidate gains, develop a campaign strategy, and coordinate their maneuvers at the operational level. These requirements depend upon the successful unity of effort, if not command, across rebel groups throughout Syria.

After numerous failed attempts at unification, rebel commanders have created a new centralized leadership body that may succeed where others have failed, if given sufficient resources. On December 7, 2012, rebel leaders from across Syria announced the election of a new 30-member unified command structure called the Supreme Joint Military Command Council, or the Supreme Military Command (SMC). This announcement followed a three-day conference held in Antalya, Turkey that was attended by more than 260 rebel commanders as well as security officials from the United States, Britain, France, the Gulf States, and Jordan.¹

Some have dismissed the new Supreme Military Command, arguing that rebel attempts to unify have continuously floundered. These critics point to a number of previous organizations that had failed to achieve the same objective, including the February 2012 Higher Revolutionary Council and the September 2012 Joint Command. The Supreme Military Command should not be seen as a new organization, however. Instead, it is a composite of previous organizations which rebel

commanders have improved by adapting to significant lessons learned. Most notably, the new SMC blends grassroots representation with exiled defector expertise, and establishes combat support and combat service support functions in order to improve the delivery of materiel and resources to rebel ranks.

Until now, disparate sources of funding have significantly handicapped the rebels' ability to unite and consolidate authority on a national level. As the SMC develops its institutional capacity, its ability to assert greater authority and unite rebel forces under its command will likely depend on its transactional legitimacy, especially its ability to distribute critical resources to rebel-held communities. The SMC must demonstrate its legitimacy by consolidating the support of rebels' main state sponsors, even if some private sources of funding continue to flow to forces outside of its channels.

A new U.S. policy supports the SMC's legitimacy. Secretary of State John F. Kerry announced on February 28, 2013 that the U.S. will provide non-lethal aid, including food, medicine, and training assistance, through the Supreme Military Command of the Free Syrian Army.² This announcement represents the first time that the U.S. has publicly committed itself to sending non-lethal support to Syria's armed opposition. The shift is intended to empower Syria's moderate forces, although it falls short of the weapons and equipment that Syrian rebels have requested. The policy decision against providing lethal aid is largely due to concerns over the emergence of powerful Islamist brigades and extremist groups in Syria. By offering support through the new military command, the U.S. is looking to build a better relationship with Syria's armed opposition and check the radical elements within its ranks.

As the U.S. looks to support Syria's opposition in new ways, understanding the composition and structure of the Supreme Military Command will be vital in determining the viability of the organization and the effect such limited support will have. Although there remain limits to its current command and control, the SMC plays an important role in synchronizing rebel operations. It has increased opportunities for collaboration and coordination among the disparate rebel groups operating in Syria. It also has the potential to serve as a check on radicalization and help to assert a moderate authority in Syria. If the SMC can create strong incentives for moderation, it will likely be able to marginalize the most radical elements within its structure.

The SMC has made a concerted effort to bring armed revolutionary groups under the umbrella of a unified military command by building strong links with armed opposition groups inside Syria and creating a platform for the development of a countrywide military strategy. Yet despite the significant progress the SMC has made, a number of critical obstacles lie ahead. They include the incorporation of existing command networks, which will have an impact on command and control and resource allocation; mitigating the strength of extremist groups like the Foreign Terrorist Organization Jabhat Nusra; and managing disparate sources of financing which pose problems for providing material aid to rebel-held communities. Overcoming these obstacles will be difficult, especially as the nature of the conflict transforms and the sectarian polarization makes it more challenging to create a strong military institution and professional armed force. Although the SMC must do its part internally to overcome these obstacles, its success will depend on greater international support and access to more resources.

The SMC is currently the only organization that, if properly supported, could ultimately help fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the state security apparatus and establish a framework for rebuilding Syria's security and governing institutions. As Bashar al-Assad's security institutions have diminished, giving rise to an increase in pro-regime militia activity, the creation of a united rebel front is a critical step in building a transitional structure that can fill the security vacuum and ensure stability in a post-Assad Syria. The Supreme Military Command may be the last opportunity for the U.S. to help empower an organization that could serve to fill the security vacuum left by this transformation.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS AT UNIFICATION



Syria's armed opposition is often described as a fractious array of rebel groups. Many groups refer to themselves as members of the Free Syrian Army, or FSA. This term, however, is not used in reference to a specific organization, but rather as a sort of catch-all brand name referring to the Syrian armed opposition in general. In this way, the FSA label should be understood as a synonym for "the resistance," similar to *la resistance* in France during WWII.

Although it is true to say that the armed opposition has been highly fragmented because of the proliferation of rebel group names and affiliations, two organizational patterns have emerged over the course of the armed struggle that help make sense of how Syria's opposition is structured. Specifically, rebel units can be loosely classified into two different categories: localized battalions and larger "franchise" brigades.

Localized battalions tend to associate themselves predominantly with the FSA and are organized loosely through the provincial Military Councils. These units fight within a limited geographical scope typically in defense of their home village or town, are rarely ideologically driven, and are funded by the international patrons of the Joint Command or other FSA sponsors.

On the other hand, franchise brigades have emerged that tend to be led by civilians or other low-ranking defectors, are more ideologically motivated, and tend to be patronized by private donors.³ The franchise brigades, such as the Farouq Battalions or Suqour al-Sham Brigade, are often much larger, conduct operations in multiple provinces across Syria, and operate independently of FSA structures. Although these rebel units often cooperated with one another under the unified goal of defeating the Assad regime, the bifurcation between localized battalions and franchise brigades has frequently led to infighting and fractures within rebel ranks.⁴

Another significant obstacle to greater unification has been the gap between exiled leadership and field commanders operating inside of Syria. Since the creation of the Free Syria Army (FSA) under the leadership of Riad al-Asaad, commanders working from outside of Syria have proven unable to direct combat operations or significantly affect events inside. This has resulted

in little internal cooperation taking place on a cross-province level, with field commanders maintaining total authority over their specific forces.

Initially a substantial impediment was posed by the isolation of defecting officers and soldiers in officer camps in Turkey. Unlike the refugee camps that were situated closer to the border, these officer camps were located deeper inside Turkey. They were also much more tightly controlled by the Turkish government.⁵ Their location and additional security requirements made it difficult for officers inside of the camps to connect with field commanders. Despite the obvious limitations in command and control, this leadership body claimed to represent all rebel groups operating inside of Syria and was recognized by foreign powers as the leaders of the armed opposition. However, this exiled leadership body was removed from events on the ground and unrepresentative of grassroots opposition groups.

Although many rebels continue to pledge allegiance to Riad al-Asaad and nominally recognize him as the leader of the FSA, they widely acknowledge that he exerts no influence over the internal leadership of groups operating inside Syria.⁶ Since the creation of the FSA under Asaad, rivalries within the ranks of the exiled leadership have perpetuated its image as a disorganized command. These rivalries have also led to some officers breaking away from the central FSA leadership body in order to establish their own command structures, most notably General Mustafa Sheikh and the creation of the Higher Revolutionary Council in February 2012.⁷ Yet Sheikh's council faced the same difficulties as did the FSA leadership in connecting with field commanders, and it proved just as ineffective. By the summer of 2012, Sheikh reconciled with Asaad, and the Higher Revolutionary Council was rejoined with the FSA leadership in Turkey, despite continuing tension and rivalry between the two.⁸ Their reconciliation was an attempt to retain a sense of legitimacy and relevance as their authority was increasingly challenged by the growing influence and power of rebel commanders inside Syria.

The Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Council

During the summer of 2012, conditions along the Turkish border significantly changed. Starting in May 2012, a series of successful rebel offensives allowed rebel units to seize large swaths of territory along the Turkish-Syrian border.⁹ By consolidating their control over a number of important border crossings, rebel

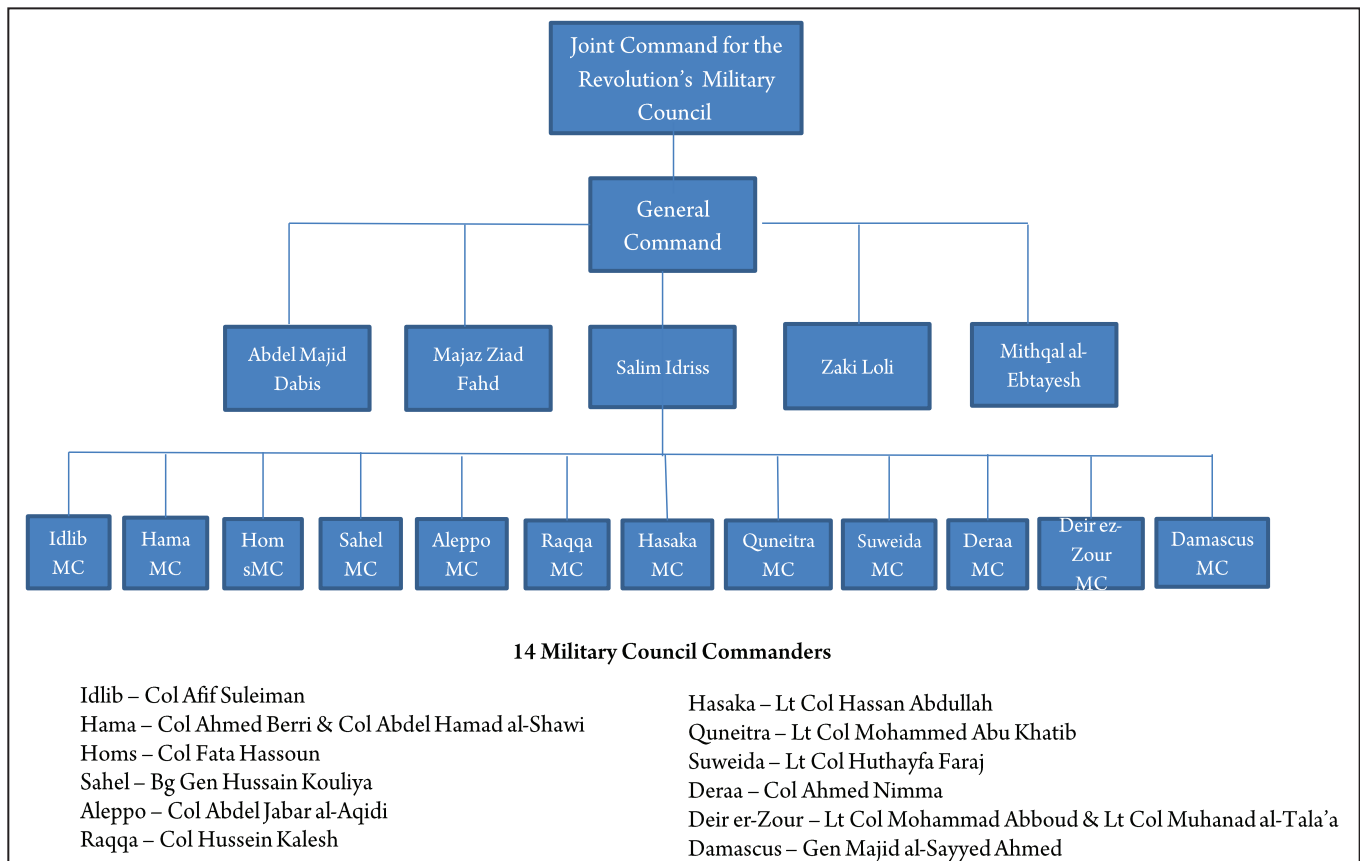
units were able to open communication channels with the leadership based in Turkey and also gained access to more reliable supply routes. Although the Turkish government denied any part in arming the Syrian rebels, many Syrians claimed that Turkey's "red light" on the border had been turned green, and large consignments of weapons were being openly smuggled into Syria.¹⁰

The open secret of arms transfers coincided with indications of CIA involvement along the border and news that Turkey had set up a secret base, along with allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in order to direct vital military and communications aid to the rebels.¹¹ As international consensus swung largely in their favor, the rebels were able to seize upon tactical gains and border access to create a de facto liberated zone in northern Syria.

The opening of the Turkish-Syrian border and the establishment of a rebel-controlled northern Syria allowed for the first significant attempt to bridge the internal-external divide within leadership ranks of Syria's opposition. In September 2012, a video posted on YouTube filmed inside Syria announced the formation of the Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Council. In the announcement video, Brigadier General Mithqal al-Bateesh stated that he was forming the Joint Command in order to synchronize forces from inside and outside the country. Following Bateesh's statement, Major Mahir al-Nuaimi, former official FSA spokesman, added that the goal of the joint command was to "organize and systemize" the command structures in order to "make our actions more effective against this brutal regime."¹²

The Joint Command included an organized structure with a well-defined chain of command. It prescribed a General Command that would oversee and direct all rebel operations. The General Command had five members: Brigadier General Mithqal al-Bateesh, Brigadier General Salim Idriss, Brigadier General Abdel Majid Dabis, Brigadier General Zaki Loli, and Brigadier General Ziad Fahd. Below the General Command sat fourteen provincial Military Councils that were directly accountable to the Joint Command and were responsible for carrying out its orders in each of the provinces.

There was also a Coordination Office that was responsible for facilitating communication channels and helping to ensure the coordination and cooperation of the provincial Military Councils. The Coordination Office ultimately came to play a decisive role in the appointment

**FIGURE 1 | JOINT COMMAND STRUCTURE**

of the Military Council leaders after coming under the command of Saudi representatives working with the Joint Command. The effects of this Saudi influence will be discussed in detail at a later point.

At its inception, the Joint Command claimed that it accounted for 80 percent of armed opposition groups inside of Syria.¹³ While this figure has proven to be overestimated, many of the Joint Command members, particularly the Military Council heads, did derive legitimacy from experience in combat against government forces, and many commanded battalions and brigades inside Syria. In this way, the Joint Command sought to unite important field commanders with exiled leaders who had greater access to resources and support channels. It also sought to create a more inclusive leadership that could account for minority communities by including leaders such as Captain Biwar Mustafa, a Kurdish commander of the Salah al-Din Brigade, into the decision-making process.

From the beginning, the organization faced difficulties in asserting its control over the various armed factions inside of Syria. Within the organization, communication between leaders on the inside and those outside of the

country remained fraught, and a number of disputes arose over operations and strategy such that subordinate battalions broke off from the command.¹⁴

The Joint Command was also challenged by the rise of prominent Islamist and Salafist brigades in Syria. From its inception, the organization attempted to marginalize ideologically affiliated rebel units, fearing that any religious connotation undermined what they saw as an inclusive, secular movement. This was a deliberate decision made by the Joint Command in order to garner broader support from minority communities and to reassure the international community of the organization's adherence to democratic principles.¹⁵ It also reflected the credentials of the Joint Command, which was constituted by defectors who looked to establish a professional body based on their experience and knowledge of the Syrian military.

The Joint Command's avowed secularism did not, however, reflect conditions on the ground. By the summer of 2012, protracted fighting had led to a surge in religiosity and exacerbated sectarian fault lines. This situation paved the way for the proliferation of ideological groups among the opposition. These groups exhibited



PHOTO 1 | THE GENERAL COMMAND

significant influence on the ground. Consequently, the exclusion of Islamist and Salafist commanders ultimately led to rivalries among the prominent independent brigades and the Military Councils, especially in areas where Islamist or Salafist Brigades like the Farouq Battalions in Homs or the Suqour al-Sham Brigade in Idlib were more established and commanded significantly larger forces. In some cases, these rivalries devolved into armed clashes between the independent brigades and the Military Councils.¹⁶ Disagreements often centered on administration of rebel-controlled areas, including the practice of establishing religious courts to administer justice and flying the black flag typically associated with jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda.¹⁷

Part of the Joint Command's dispute with Islamist and Salafist brigades was due to the perception that other religious figures had been included in the Joint Command. The organization was initially criticized by many for its high-profile patron, controversial religious figure Sheikh Adnan Arour. Arour is well known in Syria for his fiery tele-salafist weekly satellite program, during which he has vowed to "grind the flesh" of pro-regime Alawites and "feed it to the dogs."¹⁸

His discourse has played well into the regime's sectarian narrative, and government forces have dubbed the opposition "Araeer," a satirical play on the Arabic plural form of Arour's name. Despite Arour's endorsement, the overall composition of the Joint Command remained moderate. The Joint Command had included Arour because he was an effective fundraiser in the Gulf, and multiple sources report that he was warned to temper his remarks or risk isolation.¹⁹ Overall, his inclusion is more indicative of the importance of ideological financiers in the Gulf rather than that of the Joint Command's ideology.

External factors also helped to fragment the leadership,

with disparate sources of external funding proving the largest obstacle. Two of the rebels' most important patrons, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are competing with each other for power and influence by supporting different groups inside of Syria. Although they initially agreed to unite support behind the Joint Command, a rift surfaced by late October 2012, when Saudi representatives working with the Joint Command believed that the Qataris had designed the structure to enhance their influence at the expense of the Saudis.²⁰

This perception prevented Saudi and Qatari sponsors from uniting their support behind the Joint Command, instead leading them to select individual allies from inside and outside the organization. This significantly contributed to the failure of the Joint Command by bypassing its distribution mechanisms and creating rivalries within the organization. As will be discussed later in the context of the new Supreme Military Command, Saudi and Qatari sources of funding must be united in order to create a single, unified command. If they are not, disparate channels of funding will continue to fragment the opposition and hinder its development into a viable post-Assad alternative security structure.

At the Joint Command's inception, the Qatari representatives were focused upon aiding the regional Military Councils by delivering goods to the Military Council leaders who would then distribute them to subordinate brigades. However, the Saudi representatives took control of the Coordination Office and began appointing commanders and deputies loyal to its leadership and positioning them into areas where the Saudis had less influence, likely as a means of countering the growing influence of the Qataris and in an attempt to gain wider influence over more independent rebel groups. Thus, although the Coordination Office was originally created to help support communication between the councils and handle logistics only, it came to hold even more power than the office of the General Command due to its ability to appoint and influence council heads.

This greatly angered many rebels who felt that the new leadership had been forced on them, and instead they chose to elect their own leaders. Thus, in a few provinces there were two functioning Military Council leaders, the appointed leader and the elected leader. Rivalries between these appointed and elected leaders continued to fragment fighting forces inside Syria, and often led to internal clashes where one or the other leader was

forcibly exiled from the area.²¹

The example of the Sahel, or coastal, Military Council best exemplifies the problems that arose due to foreign financing and influence. The official head of the Sahel Military Council, Brigadier General Hussain Kouliya, was appointed to the position by the Coordination Office at the behest of the Saudi representatives, despite having little authority over rebel forces operating in the Latakia province. Brig. Gen. Kouliya was widely distrusted on the ground, and rumors quickly circulated that he was both a spy for Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan and a CIA plant.²² In a meeting held by rebel groups in the province, rebel commanders rejected his leadership and instead elected Ahmed Rehal to serve as the head of Sahel Military Council.

Yet, because Kouliya controlled the access to resources, rebels were forced to continue working with him despite operational authority being placed in the hands of Rehal. Thus, for a short time following the meeting, both Rehal and Kouliya were serving as the leader of the Sahel Military Council, which led to conflicting commands regarding rebel operations and infighting over resource distribution.²³ Only through the creation of the Supreme Military Command and the appointment of a new leadership body for the coastal area has this conflict been resolved.²⁴

The favoritism displayed by the rebels' patrons also caused problems for the distribution of arms. The Joint Command's leadership had intended for the organization to serve as a mechanism for distributing arms and resources, yet weapons were continuously distributed in secret. State sponsors, alongside private suppliers, began to work outside of the framework of the Joint Command, seeking pledges of loyalty from armed groups inside the country regardless of whether they were part of the organization. Colonel Afif Suleiman, head of the Idlib Military Council, complained about the problems caused by disparate sources of funding. In an interview with TIME, he stated that the Saudi representative to the Joint Command Okab Sakr, a Lebanese businessman, "got involved in the issue of weapons to split our ranks, to divide the revolutionaries... He formed a rift within the council, and we are working to heal this rift."²⁵

In some cases, the independent brigades and the Military Councils worked closely together but chose to remain under separate leadership structures in order to exploit different channels of funding caused by patron



PHOTO 2 | BRIGADIER GENERAL HUSSEIN KOULIYA

favoritism. This is especially true in Aleppo, where Tawhid Brigade leader Abdel Qadir Salah cooperated with Aleppo Military Council leader Colonel Abdel Jabar al-Aqidi, despite officially retaining a separate leadership structure. In an interview, Col. Aqidi stated that despite the fact that the majority of groups in northern Aleppo worked closely together, they were forced to work under separate structures in order to retain access to a variety of funding sources.²⁶

Primarily as a consequence of disparate sources of funding, the Joint Command was never able to assert its leadership over the majority of rebel groups. It failed to implement command and control because its authority was undermined by the growth and influence of independent brigades that were ideologically distinct and had their own sources of funding. These groups were beholden to their suppliers, both private and state sponsors, and thus had separate operational imperatives from that of the Joint Command. Hence, operations were conducted independently, limiting their ability to achieve a strategic objective.

Ultimately, the Joint Command was unable to overcome these obstacles and establish a unified chain of command for rebel forces. Many of its leaders, however, learned from this first major attempt to unify external and internal command structures and carried these lessons over to the Supreme Military Command. Three of the five commanders on the General Command now sit on the SMC, and five of the provincial Military Council heads are members, with a number of others closely involved with the SMC although not officially members.

The Five Fronts Command

In early November 2012, the Syrian opposition convened in Doha in yet another attempt to unify ranks. The Doha

meeting was publicized as a political conference to unite the opposition based on the Syrian National Initiative, a proposal developed by prominent opposition figure Riad Seif to create a new coalition that would incorporate all factions of the Syrian opposition and replace the ailing Syrian National Council (SNC) as the legitimate representative of the opposition.²⁷ Unlike the SNC, which failed to connect with forces on the ground and suffered from a lack of legitimacy, the Syrian National Initiative sought to form a political leadership that was based on the inclusion of the grassroots opposition networks including the Free Syrian Army and other armed groups.²⁸

While all eyes were on this gathering of political leaders, the Qataris were also holding a private meeting for rebel commanders. They invited all provincial Military Council leaders, the most prominent rebel commanders from each of the larger brigades within the Joint Command structure, and commanders from the independent brigades. With promises of funding and weapons along with significant incentive money paid up front for attendance, many important commanders agreed to travel to Doha for the meeting.²⁹

The Saudis saw this second Doha meeting as an attempt to sideline their influence among the opposition and decided to create their own rebel organization by breaking away from the Joint Command structure. They reportedly offered vast sums to Military Council leaders and independent brigade leaders to refuse the Qatari invitation and work directly with Saudi Arabia instead.³⁰ Although many of the most important rebel commanders ignored the request and traveled to Doha, a select few commanders chose to stay in Syria and side with the Saudi representatives.

On November 5, 2012, while the Doha meetings were taking place, a video was posted on YouTube announcing the formation of the Five Fronts Command. In the announcement, spokesman for the Higher Revolutionary Council Louai Miqdad stated that the FSA had devised a new five front command structure to “unite rebel forces based on the strategic alignment of certain areas into five fighting fronts.”³¹ The announcement was featured prominently on *Al-Arabiya* and covered by *Asharq al-Awsat*, two Saudi Arabian media conglomerates, although it was never reported on by the Qatari media giant *Al-Jazeera*.³² This detail confirms the role of Saudi Arabia in the formation of the Five Fronts Command. Moreover, Louai Miqdad is a close associate of Lebanese



PHOTO 3 | LOUAI MIQDAD AND OKAB SAKR

businessman Okab Sakr, the former Saudi representative to the Joint Command mentioned previously, and is widely known as being loyal to Saudi patronage.³³

Shortly after Miqdad’s announcement, a video was posted on YouTube featuring Higher Military Council head Mustafa Sheikh confirming the formation of the five fighting fronts.³⁴ Both Sheikh’s and Miqdad’s endorsement of the Five Fronts Command suggests that, from the beginning, the organization was associated more with the external FSA leadership body than with forces on the ground. Unlike the Joint Command, the Five Fronts Command never received the buy-in from many important field commanders, and it failed to win the loyalty of the majority of rebel groups inside Syria. Many rebels believed it to be a clear attempt by Saudi Arabia to manipulate Syrian rebel groups and create a loyal proxy force.³⁵

Despite the fact that the command did not encompass a majority of forces on the ground, it retained a considerable amount of influence due to its resources. Some field commanders reported that they attended meetings with the command and ostensibly cooperated with them in order to gain access to funding and weapons, despite viewing the outfit with distrust.³⁶ It was also believed that the Five Fronts Command offered rebels more strategic insight and gave better tactical advice than the Joint Command. One rebel commander stated that the Five Fronts Command had “strategic vision,” which the Joint Command lacked, and it provided “better expertise on tactical operations.”³⁷ Thus, there were a number of commanders, such as Colonel Qassim Suad al-Din, who worked with both the Joint Command and the Five Fronts Command.³⁸

Although the Five Front Command achieved little success in uniting rebel groups under its coordination, the geographical division of Syria into fronts is a

precedent that still endures under the new Supreme Military Command and is a hallmark of continued Saudi influence during its creation.

THE SUPREME MILITARY COMMAND



The Doha meeting in early November 2012 resulted in the creation of a political organization, the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). The Coalition partially subsumed the previous SNC structure, incorporating some of its members into a new political leadership. Shortly after SOC's creation, rebel commanders decided to convene an internal conference to discuss the unification of rebel groups. Many of these commanders had attended the talks in Doha and had been in communication with the political leaders gathered there. They emerged from these meetings with a renewed interest in unification, in order to serve as the Supreme Military Command outlined by SOC in its plan for the establishment of a transitional government inside Syria.³⁹ In early December 2012, over 260 rebel commanders from all over Syria gathered in Antalya, Turkey to agree on a unified command structure, creating the Supreme Military Command with the goal of serving as a Defense Ministry for SOC's future transitional government.⁴⁰ The gathering was openly attended by security officials from the United States, Britain, France, the Gulf, Turkey, and Jordan, and it was monitored by international delegates from numerous countries.⁴¹

After three days of intensive talks, conference attendees agreed to create a formally organized and structured command called the Supreme Joint Military Command, most commonly translated as the Supreme Military Command (SMC). They expressed three main goals behind the creation of the SMC: to unite forces on the ground to prevent anarchy; to sideline external elements and reduce their influence over the fate of the Syrian people; and to prevent extremist elements from taking over centers of power in the country.

Once the structure was agreed upon, participants elected 30 members to serve on the new command, 11 former officers and 19 civilians.⁴² Although it is highly unusual for there to be elected positions within a military command, the opposition has sought to adhere to democratic principles and enforce a level of accountability by emphasizing the importance of elections. Thus, all current opposition leadership bodies, both political and

military, include elected positions.

The command is divided into five geographic fronts with six elected members each: the eastern front, the western/middle front, the northern front, the southern front, and the Homs front. The "five fronts" construction draws upon the Saudi precedent of the Five Fronts Command and consolidates the fourteen Military Councils into five operational headquarters. The estimated geographic boundaries of the five fronts are illustrated in Map 2.

Five military deputies and five civilian assistant deputies were appointed by SMC members to head each front. These appointees are recognized for their tactical knowledge and combat experience, and are thus seen as important operational commanders for each of the fronts. Each front also has five departments to perform combat support and combat service support functions including Operations, Intelligence, Supply and Processing, Financial and Administrative Affairs, and Transitional Justice, with an appointed departmental head to oversee and supervise the actions of each department.⁴³ By contrast, the Supreme Military Command does not have corresponding departments at the Front level. Consequently, at this time, the SMC does not have organic support assets, nor does it have control over the allocation of resources that are obtained by the individual fronts. The significance of this formulation is its incorporation of existing supply chains and networks within each of the fronts in order to eventually channel them through the centralized units of the SMC. Until this occurs, the SMC will experience degradation in its ability to orchestrate operational priorities across all fronts.

The SMC does have two centralized departments, an arms committee and a financial committee, each composed of five representatives from among the council's 30 members.⁴⁴ At the head of the command is the Chief of Staff, who is aided by a support office, an arms office, and a communication office.

The Supreme Military Command should not be seen as a new organization that was created during a three-day time period by rebel commanders. Instead, it should be understood as the product of a process that has been underway for many months. Rebel commanders, both inside and outside of Syria, have slowly been developing the mechanisms and structural foundation for an organization that could unite rebel groups to meet requirements set by ground conditions, international

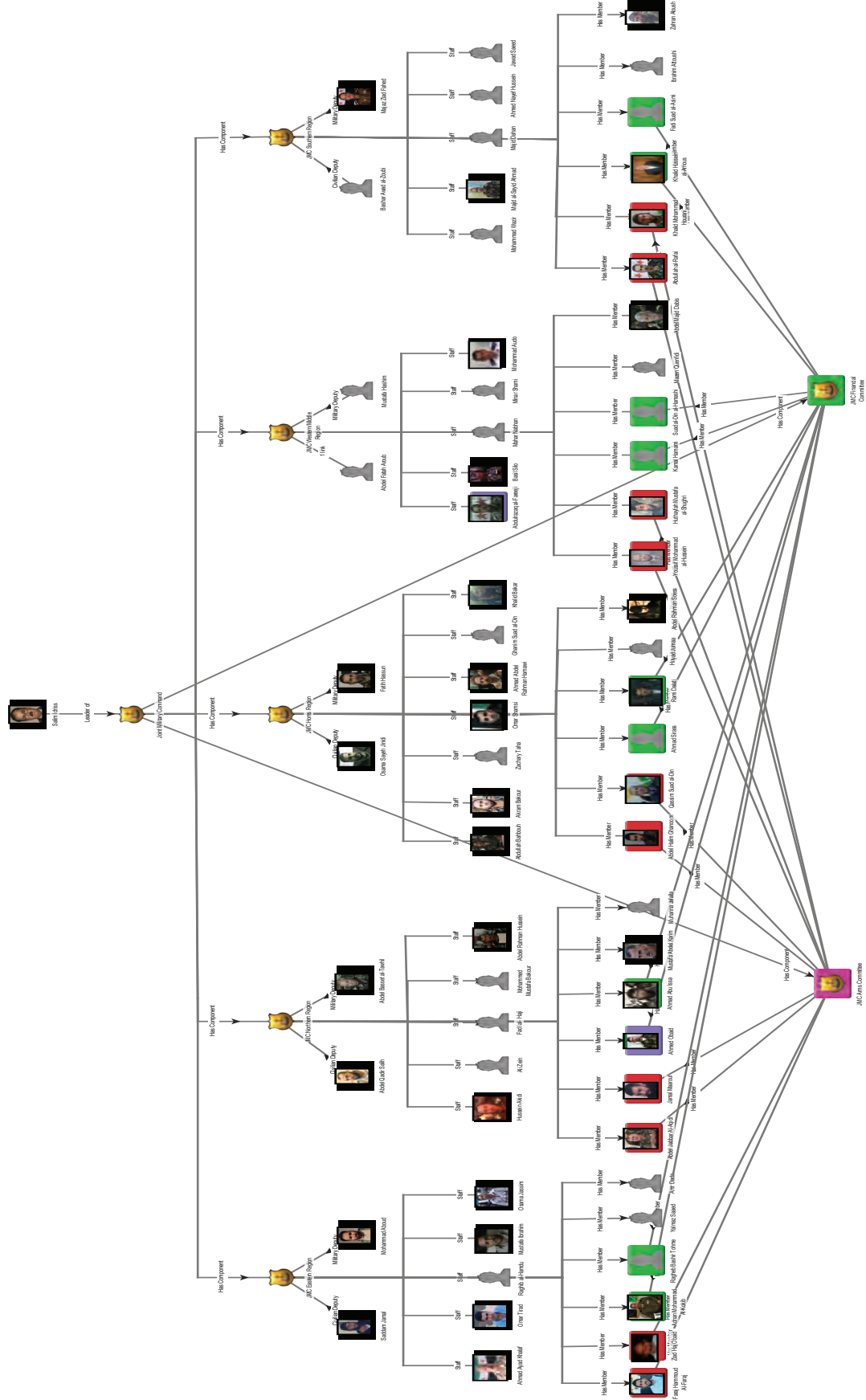
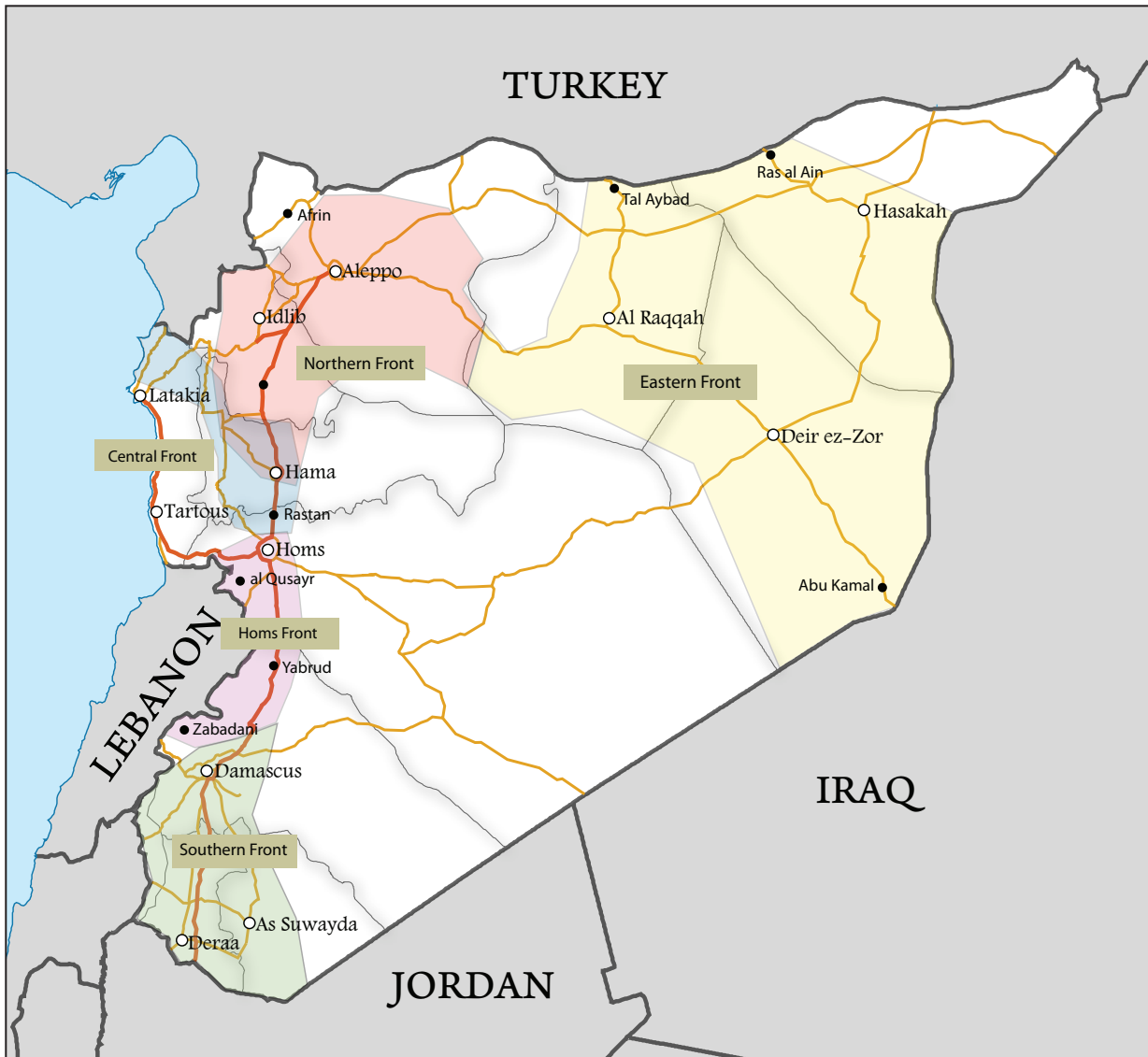


FIGURE 2 | SUPREME MILITARY COMMAND STRUCTURE



MAP 2 | AREA OF OPERATIONS FOR THE FIVE FRONTS

patron demands, and the severe limitations imposed by the operationally superior Syrian government forces. The process has been highly fluid, and the armed opposition has adapted as circumstances have dictated. Thus, each failed attempt at unification has contributed to opposition leaders' learning curve, and the new SMC has sought to address the problems that rendered these previous structures ineffective.

The SMC also represents the convergence of international patron interests. A necessary condition for the SMC's creation was an agreement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as the rebels' most important backers, to channel their support through one organization. Thus, the SMC is an amalgamation of the Qatari-designed Joint Command and its provincial Military Council

structure and the Saudi-designed Five Front Command. Although private sources of funding will likely continue to flow into Syria, aligning the resources of the two state sponsors is essential for the SMC to have transactional legitimacy and maintain the ability to serve as a reliable mechanism for distribution of resources.

Establishing a Chain of Command

In order to better understand the SMC's ability to establish a chain of command, it is necessary to first look at its organizational precedents, which underlay the SMC's foundation. Under the Joint Command, the Military Council heads were meant to report directly to the General Command. In practice, however, the General Command did not exercise operational



PHOTO 4 | SELECTED SUPREME MILITARY COMMAND MEMBERS

control over the councils. Thus, the organizations did not serve as a national-level organization, but instead were a collection of provincial-level organizations that conducted operations and organized logistics independently of one another. Each Military Council focused not on coordinating more effectively with all rebel units inside Syria, but rather on gaining the cooperation of rebel units within their limited areas of operation.⁴⁵

The Military Councils were largely successful in establishing a degree of command and control within their geographical scope. This success resulted in a maturing provincial-level insurgent structure through which the SMC is now looking to implement a national-level chain of command.⁴⁶ Thus, the SMC stands at the nexus of a grassroots military structure and a hierarchical military institution. Syria's armed militias are gradually attempting to transform into the likeness of a national army by applying a centralized, hierarchical structure.

Military defectors working with the SMC have retained their institutional military expertise. These defectors are seeking to create the framework needed to build a military institution that suits the characteristics of the opposition forces and realities on the ground. SMC leaders have therefore made compromises between theoretical structure and real-world application. Thus, while the SMC would like to function as a Defense Ministry at the head of an uncontested chain of command, it is currently more akin to a corps level headquarters that serves more to coordinate than to command.

Significant obstacles remain to creating an institutional framework capable of achieving a higher level of operational command. When the Military Councils and

independent brigades were incorporated into the SMC, their internal chains of authority remained intact. This decision has had two important effects. First, chains of command are not uniform across the five fronts, with each sub-unit retaining their own unique authority structures. Second, loyalty remains in the hands of the commander, rather than to the new SMC command. Thus, the SMC is not structurally cohesive, and its ability to enforce command and control is dependent on the cooperation of each of its members.

Although the SMC as an institution has little authority, it has asserted a degree of command and control through orchestrating the cooperation of its members and deputies. Weekly meetings are held to provide updates on current operations, coordinate efforts and actions, advise on tactics, and discuss future operations. These meetings typically include reports from each of the five fronts and updates on the movements and actions of associated rebel units; an assessment of current strengths and weaknesses; debates on how resources should be distributed and how they can be better utilized; and collective discussion on tactics and operations. Meetings are often led by Deputy Chief of Staff Mustafa Abdel Karim, who functionally serves as the operational commander overseeing the five fronts. He does not have the authority to issue commands, and decisions tend to be made collectively. Thus, Abdel Karim's primary role is to weigh rebel efforts with current resources, help assess the placement of assets, and mediate between the differing needs of front commanders and members.⁴⁷

For his part, the Chief of Staff, Major General Salim Idriss, is seen more as a political leader than as a field commander. Many members of the SMC remarked that his election to the position of Chief of Staff was in part



PHOTO 5 | FAROUQ TRAINING SESSIONS

due to his ability to serve as a “diplomat” for the council.⁴⁸ He was not chosen because of his command of significant ground forces or his operational effectiveness, but instead for his ability to serve as a political representative for the council and for his personal relationships to foreign officials, and more importantly, to suppliers.

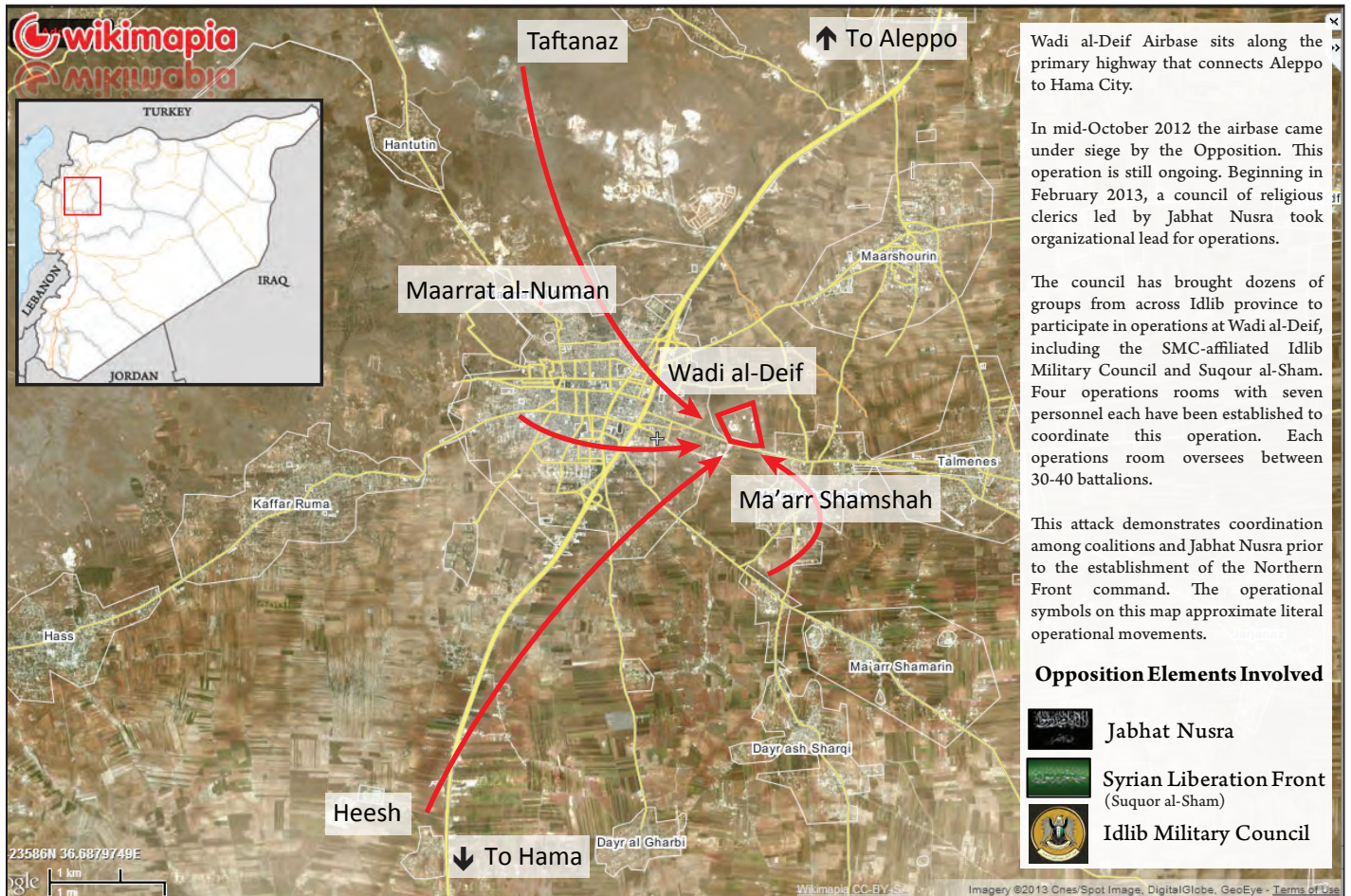
Since his defection in July 2012, Idriss has worked to unite rebel forces and create an organization that could establish command and control over them. He was an important liaison to the Qatari funders in facilitating the creation of the Joint Command, and he played an important role within the organization up until its merger into the SMC. He also has a warm relationship with SOC Secretary-General Mustafa Sabbagh. Regardless of whether Idriss’ relationship to Sabbagh and other officials has tangible benefits or not, Idriss has gained a reputation for his ability to access resources and distribute them to rebel groups fighting in Syria. Although this reputation helped secure him the position of Chief of Staff, he has so far struggled to meet expectations and has faced difficulty obtaining resources and distributing them to the fronts. Moreover, because Idriss’ role is perceived to be more political than military, rebel commanders do not see him as the head a top-down chain of command. This has limited his ability to assert authority over the individual SMC commanders who exercise the highest level of command on the ground.

In a sign of the SMC’s enhanced authority, Gen. Idriss was able to exert pressure on the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade to ensure the release of 21 U.N. Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) peacekeepers who were detained by the brigade on March 6, 2013. In a video posted online immediately following the detention, the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade accused the UN troops of assisting

regime forces and announced that the peacekeepers would be treated as “war prisoners” and would not be released until the Syrian military withdrew from the area.⁴⁹ Shortly after, a subsequent video disavowed the initial statement and claimed that the UN forces were being held for their own protection and were being treated as guests.⁵⁰ The fact that the Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade replaced the original more hostile statement with a far more conciliatory statement indicates that the brigade responded positively to pressure it received from the SMC as well as fellow rebels in the Deraa province. Rebel commanders from the Southern front confirmed that the brigade bowed to pressure and allowed the peacekeepers to be safely escorted to Jordan.⁵¹

While the case of the detained UN peacekeepers is a promising sign of greater command and control, the SMC’s current emphasis remains on collective decision-making rather than top-down commands. Regardless of the limits of its current command and control, the SMC has played an important role in synchronizing rebel operations. It has provided greater opportunities for collaboration and coordination among the disparate rebel groups operating in Syria. Through the SMC, rebel commanders in the north are now able to better communicate with commanders in central and southern Syria and collectively discuss ways to improve the effectiveness of operations, including the allocation of forces and resources when necessary.

The SMC has therefore enhanced the level of cooperation at a cross-provincial level. No longer do rebel brigades operate solely within a distinct provincial geographic boundary. More often, brigades are lending forces and allocating resources to aid in operations occurring in areas outside of their distinct fronts and are developing cross-provincial campaigns as part of the larger strategy to target regime infrastructure. This loaning of personnel to weight effort is particularly practiced by the larger franchise brigades that are organizationally more developed and have internal hierarchies capable of command and control. Unlike the smaller, localized battalions, franchised brigades such as the Farouq Battalions and the Tawhid Brigade have broadened their areas of operations and are sending support to the other fronts in which key battles are taking place. This suggests greater cooperation is taking place within each of the fronts as well as across fronts in order to achieve strategic objectives.



MAP 3 | THE BATTLE FOR WADI AL-DEIF

Part of this enhanced cooperation among rebel groups includes new training courses being offered by some of the larger brigades to train forces from across the five fronts. Videos have surfaced on YouTube of troops from the Deraa Military Council being trained by two commanders from the Farouq Battalions. The training classes are part of an organized effort by the Fajr al-Islam Battalion in conjunction with experienced and efficient commanders from the Farouq Battalions.⁵² According to statements made during the video, these comprehensive training courses include physical fitness and weapons training, with a more robust military syllabus to be developed in the future. Such cooperation is unique as the Farouq Battalions do not have active units in Deraa, and these different groups have not previously shown the inclination to work together.

The video also announces that this group is its second graduating class, and part of a larger effort to unify Islamic brigades in the south and ally them with groups in the north.⁵³ To this end, troops in the south are being trained by commanders from the north. The division

between rebel groups operating in the north and in the south is significant and its implications will be discussed later in this report. That cross-brigade and cross-front joint endeavors are taking place to account for the divide and create a greater parity of forces is a testament to the desire for greater cooperation and represents a higher level of coordination than previously seen.

The effects of a coordinated dialogue on operations are already apparent in a number of recent rebel successes. For example, unlike previous offensives that tended to be disorganized and poorly coordinated by a few loosely linked brigades, the operations targeting Wadi al-Deif military base have been carefully planned and are part of a wider strategy to attack the regime's reinforced structures. Multiple units from across Syria have participated in the operations, and many have brought significant resources to bear in this key battlefield.⁵⁴ Although the SMC did not take the organizational lead in this case, it did help to facilitate the movement of forces and allocation of resources from other fronts.⁵⁵



MAP 4 | OPPOSITION CAMPAIGN UPDATE

In Aleppo, the SMC has also had a significant impact on the overall effectiveness of rebel operations. For months, rebels have been concentrating efforts on airbases with limited success. During a meeting between northern front commanders and others from the SMC, in which the current state of operations was discussed, it was agreed that the best way to overrun crucial airbases in Aleppo would be first to take control of the security complex tasked with their physical security. These commanders worked together to devise detailed plans for an operation against the regime's 80th regiment headquarters, known as Base 80.⁵⁶ This facility was responsible for the security of Nayrab military airbase, which shares a facility with Aleppo International Airport. These plans included specific tactical training of rebel units and multiple surveillance missions prior to the operation, suggesting a much more organized and

effective approach being undertaken by rebels.⁵⁷ Thanks in part to weapons acquired by the arms committee of the SMC, rebels successfully overran the base and captured a large stockpile of ammunition.⁵⁸ This was the second Syrian military installation to fall within two days, with rebels taking control of al-Jarrah airbase the day before.⁵⁹

The SMC has also provided greater transparency, so that rebel groups are more aware of who is in charge of which sectors in each geographical area. It has also extended its command and control by combining independent operations rooms and holding weekly meetings for brigades. Ultimately, even if the SMC only serves as a mechanism for greater cooperation and coordination, it represents a significant development because it has united the efforts of rebel commanders across Syria. It

is the first attempt at unity that incorporates important commanders from all Syrian provinces and has enough legitimacy on the ground to even begin the process of building a structure capable of providing a national-level chain of command. As the SMC develops its institutional capacity, whether it will assert greater authority will likely depend on its ability to distribute critical resources to rebel-held communities.

Overcoming the Internal – External Divide

The most significant difference between the SMC and previous organizations is that its leadership is composed entirely of rebel commanders from inside Syria. Unlike previous organizations that sought to incorporate field commanders but vested final authority in the external leadership body, the SMC's authority is based on the power and influence of the field commanders. A concerted effort was made to include all of Syria's most important field commanders, and to create an organization that was based on the leadership of Syria's current armed units.

With few exceptions, each member of the SMC, including representatives and deputies, is the commander of significant forces on the ground, and all are widely respected for their role in leading operations against the regime. Important field commanders who are now part of the SMC include: Abdel Qadir Salah, head of the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo; Mustafa Abdel Karim, head of the Shield of the Revolution Brigade; Ahmed Issa, head of Suqour al-Sham Brigade in Idlib; Jamal Marouf, head of the Syrian Martyrs Brigade in Idlib; Osama al-Jinidi, head of the Farouq Battalions; and Gen. Ziad al-Fahd, head of the Damascus Military Council.

Authority within the council is not based on former rank, and there is no internal hierarchy comprised of defectors and civilians. Instead, authority is based on each member's operational effectiveness and the amount of forces he controls. In the few exceptions where members are not in command of ground forces, such as Faraj Hammoud al-Faraj with the Eastern Front, they retain influence as important distributors who provide access to resources and supplies to rebel-held communities. In many cases, access to resources has helped boost the authority of civilian commanders within the SMC, creating parity in power between civilian commanders and defecting officers. While defectors are valued for their experience and bring important institutional memory in helping to fashion the SMC into a functioning Ministry of Defense,

SOC	Syrian Opposition Coalition
SNC	Syrian National Council
FSA	Free Syrian Army
SMC	Supreme Military Command
SLF	Syrian Liberation Front
SIF	Syrian Islamist Front

they have been criticized by civilian commanders for their inability to develop effective tactics and operations given current ground conditions and limited resources. Thus, defectors play an important role in helping to create an institutional framework, but they are less influential in the planning and coordination of specific tactical operations.⁶⁰

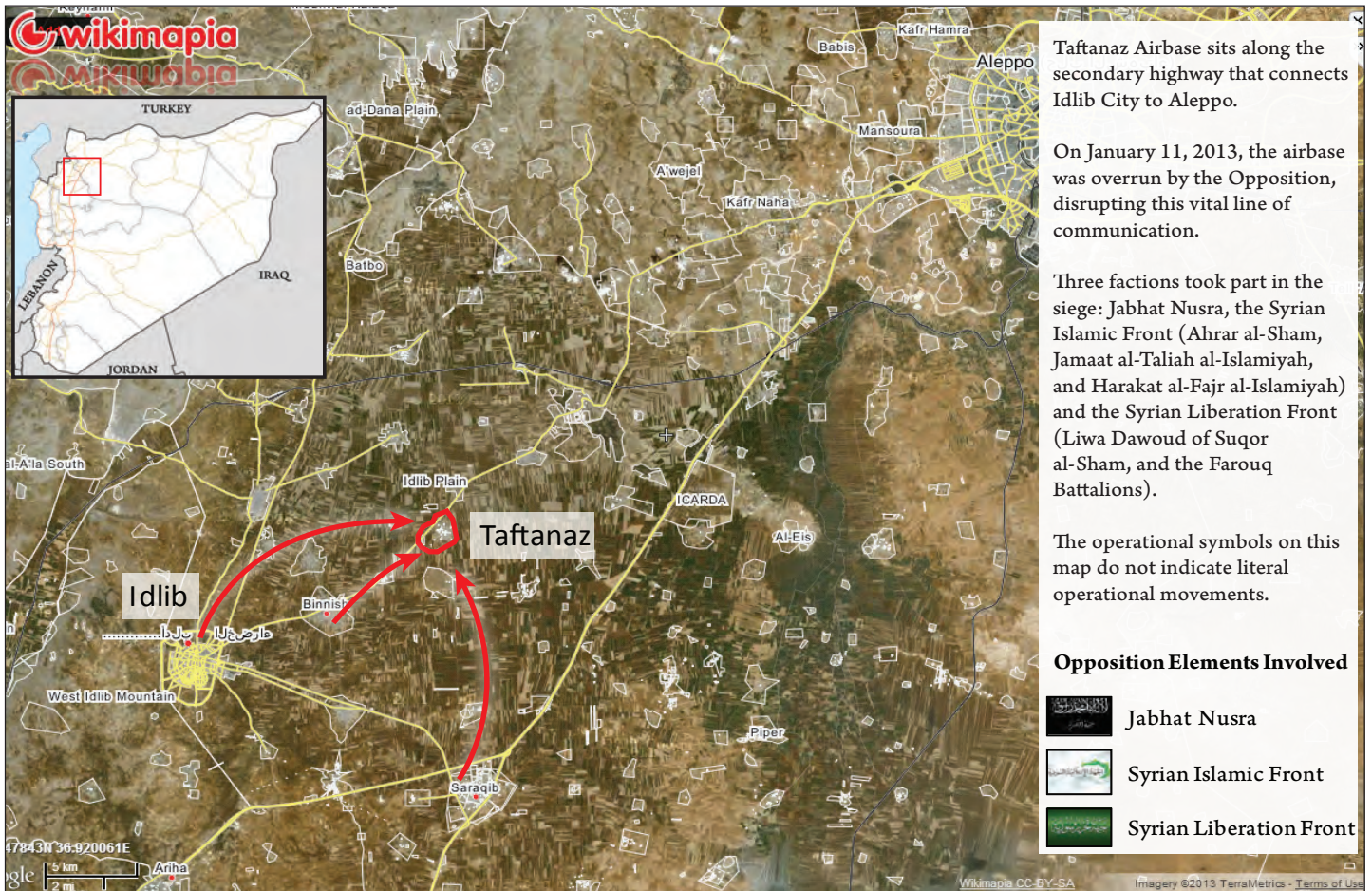
Operations and Tactics

Gen. Idriss has publicly stated that SMC components are helping to direct every battle, citing close cooperation between the battalions carrying out the operations and the SMC Operations Room located inside Syria. As part of overseeing operations on the ground, Idriss and his deputy Abdel Karim describe a two-phase plan beginning with the “war for the airports” followed by the “war for artillery and missiles.”⁶¹ These sequenced concepts of operation highlight the areas that the rebels identify as the regime's centers of gravity: its air power and weapons superiority. By targeting the infrastructure of these centers of gravity, rebel commanders are attempting to conduct shaping operations that will ground the Syrian Air Force and limit the regime's weapon capabilities. Achieving these two goals, in turn, will create the conditions enabling their success in the final battle for Damascus, according to SMC leaders.

This plan reveals a sophisticated operational design based on the SMC's identification of what will be the



PHOTO 6 | SOC SECRETARY GENERAL MUSTAFA SABBAGH



MAP 5 | THE BATTLE FOR TAFTANATAZ

most decisive battle in their campaign combined with an understanding of what operations are needed to set conditions for the decisive effort. Connecting current tactical successes through this operational level of war will be critical in achieving the strategic objective of Assad's defeat. Coordination at the operational level is where the SMC will be able to achieve the greatest impact on rebel effectiveness.

Unlike previous offensives that tended to be disorganized and poorly coordinated by a few geographically-linked brigades, recent rebel offensives have demonstrated a high-level of planning and coordination. In clearing well-defended regime positions in Aleppo province, Idlib province, and Deir ez-Zour, rebels were able to concentrate adequate forces, coordinate their actions, bring heavy weapons to bear, and sustain operations while under regime air attack.⁶² This demonstrates a marked improvement in their operational performance, and suggests that rebels are overcoming their organizational limitations.

The recent rebel offensive in Damascus is different from the others. It does not appear to be designed to hold territory, but to keep Assad on his back foot. The rebels have taken positions, withdrawn, and hit other positions, a strategy that appears to be working. Prior to this offensive, the front lines of battle in Damascus were in Daraya. Now, it appears that Assad may be abandoning his fight there to concentrate on holding the eastern districts of the capital.

It is important to note that recent successes are not a direct result of the operational control of the SMC, and there is little evidence to show that the SMC has played an organizational role in these operations. However, these successes are attributable to enhanced cooperation among rebel commanders that has been made possible through SMC channels. In this way, the SMC has proven to be an important mechanism for greater cooperation. It has brought together field commanders from all across Syria and provided an unprecedented structure for coordination.

The SMC's Relationship to the Syrian Opposition Coalition

The SMC is officially operating on behalf of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, and its establishment is consistent with the Doha agreement. Both Gen. Idriss and Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) President Moaz al-Khatib have commented on the close relationship between SOC and the SMC, and the two co-signed a document determining that the organizations' objective was the fall of the regime and the dismantling of the security apparatuses.⁶³ That the two organizations maintain close relations is important to the SMC because of its intention to serve as a Defense Ministry for a transitional government, as well as its hope that it will receive better support and resources by cultivating its relationship with the internationally recognized coalition. To this end, SOC has supported the work of the SMC by conducting outreach with foreign officials on behalf of the organization and attempting to funnel more military aid to the SMC. At the end of February 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the US would provide non-lethal support to the SMC, via the Coalition. Thus, the relationship has produced material aid to the SMC, although this aid falls short of the desired weapons and arms capability requested.⁶⁴

The relationship between the two organizations is largely derived from the personal bond between SOC Secretary General Mustafa Sabbagh and Gen. Idriss, and the two are in frequent communication with one another – often attending meetings side by side. Sabbagh is a former Syrian National Council (SNC) member. Although he was listed as an “independent” member of the SNC, Sabbagh has deep ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. As part of the SNC's military bureau, he was reportedly one of the most important distributors of Muslim Brotherhood funding to the Syrian opposition during the early stages of the conflict.⁶⁵ This causes some concern among SMC members who distrust both the Muslim Brotherhood and the SNC's continued role within SOC.

Thanks to a successful regime propaganda campaign, the Muslim Brotherhood is widely resented on the ground for its role in the Hama massacre in 1982, and many Syrians distrust the organization.⁶⁶ This has fed into criticism of the SNC for being too closely allied with the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, rebel commanders have denounced the exiled coalition for being too far removed from the battles fought on the ground.⁶⁷

This negative view of the SNC and the Muslim Brotherhood has meant that the majority of SMC members prefer to keep their power structures and resource channels removed from the coalition. Thus, although officially operating within SOC's framework, rebel commanders are quick to point out that the Supreme Military Command functions on its own authority and as an independent body.⁶⁸

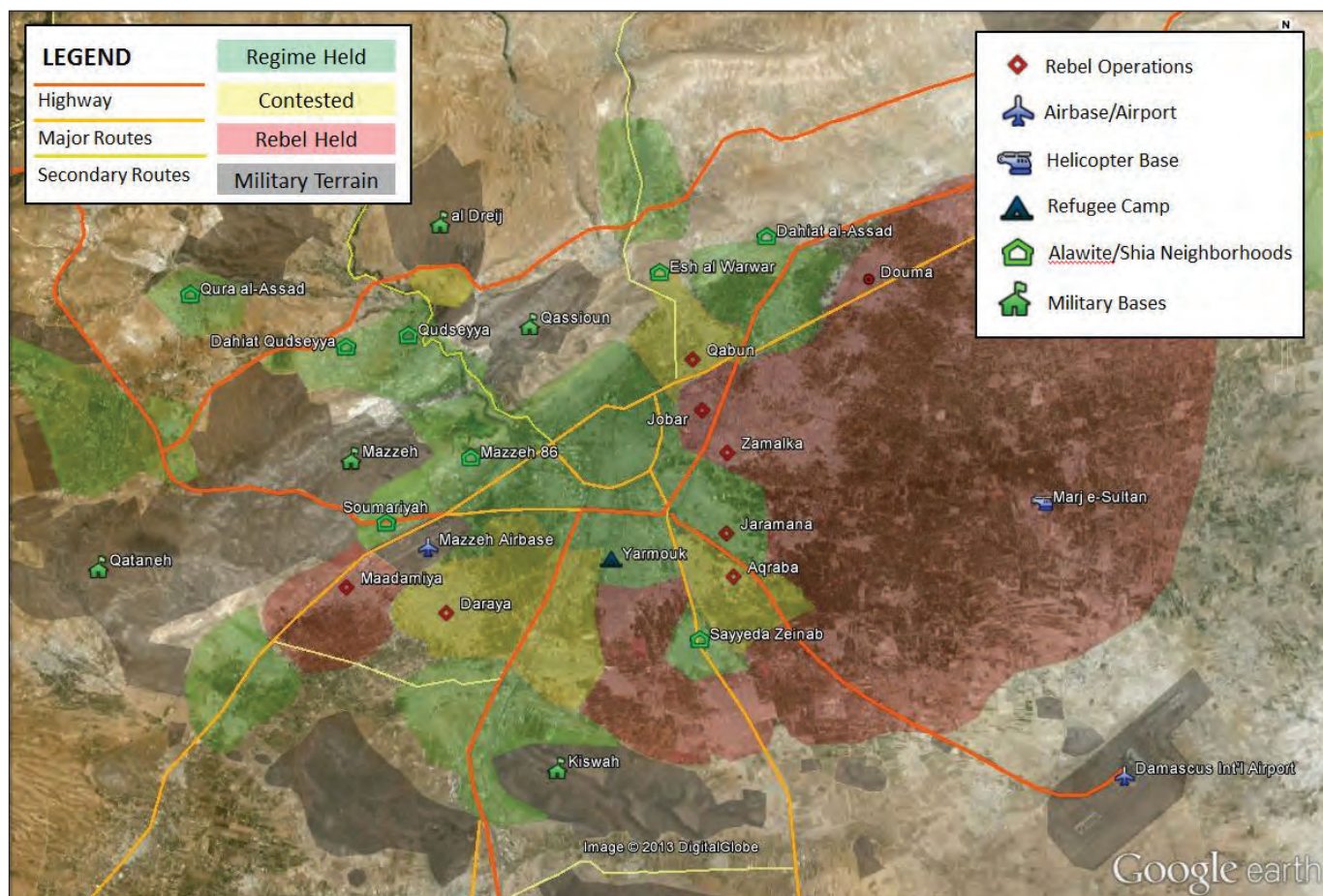
Moreover, warm relations between the two organizations are thwarted by the SMC's criticism of the Coalition for failing to create a transitional government. Gen. Idriss has repeatedly discussed the importance of a transitional government in relieving the pressure from the military councils and rebel groups who are currently responsible for administering rebel-held areas.⁶⁹ He often complains that rebel forces are unable to concentrate on operations and effectively consolidate due to governance concerns that are the responsibility of the SOC.

Rebels have had to take on civic roles, including efforts to restore electricity supplies and deal with bread shortages. This has reduced the rebels' operational capacity, resulting in operational pauses as rebels reach their thresholds of advance. Because the armed opposition does not have the capacity to provide services and basic necessities to rebel-held communities, the local populations often turn on the rebels. This is a crucial consideration in the formulation of plans for operations in key cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. Without the support of local communities, rebels will continue to struggle in taking urban centers.

REBEL OPERATIONS ON EACH FRONT

North

Operations in the northern provinces of Idlib and Aleppo have moved away from trying to gain territory in major urban centers and instead have focused on degrading the regime's air power by targeting air bases. The capture of Taftanaz military airport in Idlib province on January 11, 2013 through the combined efforts of multiple rebel units has been the largest air base captured by the rebel opposition, and perceived by many to be an indication of newfound strategic capabilities.⁷⁰ Although some reports denied a SMC role in the offensive, Gen. Idriss was involved in planning operations and a number of SMC component units participated in the Taftanaz campaign, including the Farouq battalions.⁷¹



MAP 6 | THE BATTLE FOR DAMASCUS

Since January 2013, the armed opposition has continued applying pressure to the Minakh, Nayrab, and Kweris military airports in Aleppo province, recently capturing the al-Jarra airbase and Base 80, which allowed for the expansion of operations against Nayrab and Aleppo International Airport.⁷² Besides targeting air bases, coordinated attacks have also been renewed against the strategic Wadi al-Deif military base located near Marret Numan, Idlib province. Operations against the military base have been undertaken to various degrees since October of last year, but the coordination implemented by Jabhat Nusra in cooperation with the Syrian Islamic Front and SMC sub-units represents a previously untried approach.⁷³ SMC cooperation with Jabhat Nusra and other extremist groups in Syria will be addressed in-depth at a later point.

East

Jabhat Nusra has largely spearheaded operations in the eastern front including the capture of the al-Thawra hydroelectric dam, Syria's largest. The capture of al-

Thawra brings the total number of dams in opposition possession to three: al-Thawra, al-Raqqa province; Ba'ath dam, al-Raqqa province, and Tishrin, Aleppo province.⁷⁴ While these victories have given significant leverage to Jabhat Nusra, other rebel units have been conducting strikes against the regime's energy sector in the east, expelling government forces from two oilfields and a gas field by early December 2012.⁷⁵ On November 22, 2012, the opposition was able further to consolidate their control over the countryside in Deir ez-Zour by capturing the key artillery base in the area, Mayadeen.⁷⁶ Since then, they have concentrated their attention on capturing Deir ez-Zour city, placing the Deir ez-Zour military airport under siege for months, pressuring the 133th brigade headquarters, and pushing into the Ommal and Matar Qadima neighborhoods.⁷⁷

In early March 2013, rebels successfully overran al-Raqqa city. This is significant because it is the first provincial capital to fall into rebel hands, and represents the first successful attempt by rebels to fully capture an urban center.⁷⁸

Central/West

In the west, rebel forces are solidifying positions in Jabal al-Akrad and Jabal al-Turkman. As a result, the local Alawi population has fled in force to Tartus, Latakia, and the Alawi Mountains, often leaving entire villages abandoned.⁷⁹ The Syrian army still controls the sky, however, and it has maintained a steady bombardment of the rebel-held region.⁸⁰ Rebel commanders on the ground say they are preparing for a major invasion of Latakia once Aleppo has been taken and supply lines secured, and they will be able to draw on roughly 10,000 fighters from Jabal al-Akrad and Jabal al-Turkman.⁸¹

In December 2012, the opposition carried out a number of operations against regime and Alawite strongholds in Hama province, capturing Halfaya and parts of Morek.⁸² The regime responded by launching a counter-offensive, retaking some important checkpoints along the main Aleppo-to-Damascus highway, and putting the rebels on the defensive. This forced rebel groups to re-allocate troops and resources from other operations in the north in order to maintain their control of strategic points along the highway. Thanks in part to enhanced weaponry that surfaced in the hands of SMC-affiliated units in early February 2013, the rebels successfully repelled a number of regime attacks, quickly recovering from losses that occurred during the regime offensive, and they have once again put the regime on the defensive.⁸³

Homs

Rebel operations in the Homs front have been comparatively limited since the regime's brutal shelling campaign of February and March 2012 forced rebels to withdraw from Homs city. Since then, the regime has concentrated its efforts to control Homs city and the strategic route from Damascus to the coast. Following a small uptick in clashes initiated by rebel groups in the area during mid-January 2013, the regime sent reinforcements to the city.⁸⁴ From that time, the regime has been carrying out a steady bombardment campaign against the city, while also moving against Rastan and capturing Jobar and Kafraya.⁸⁵ *Shabiha*, pro-regime militiamen, accompanied the regime troops to the province, and are believed to be behind the massacre of over 100 civilians in Basatin al-Hasiya on January 17, 2013.⁸⁶

Beginning in early March 2013, rebels launched a major offensive to retake parts of Homs city. Rebels managed

to break through government lines in the north and west to loosen the months-long siege on their strongholds in the center of Homs, despite coming under fierce aerial bombardment. In a calculated operation, rebel groups based in the nearby provinces of Homs and Idlib advanced from the north while brigades from rural Homs attacked government positions in the southwestern district of Baba Amr. Several roadblocks in the district fell to rebel fighters and dozens of regime troops were forced to flee to the regime-held neighborhood of Jobar. The regime responded by attacking the remaining rebel strongholds of Khalidya and al-Qusour in northern Homs city in an attempt to repel the rebel offensive.⁸⁷ Heavy fighting between the two sides was ongoing at the time of publication of this report.

South

Rebel gains in eastern Damascus, notably the capture of the Marj al-Sultan military airport on November 25, 2012, have forced the regime to cede territory on the peripheries of the city and concentrate their forces along the military strongholds and Alawi-majority neighborhoods located in the north and west.⁸⁸ A map recovered on the same day from a Syrian Republican Guard soldier and distributed through social media confirmed these positions, and listed Daraya (southwest), Aqraba (south), and Barzeh (northeast) as neighborhoods under contention between the regime and the opposition.⁸⁹ Heavy fighting and aerial bombardment throughout the city and the surrounding region persisted, with activists reporting regime reinforcements periodically sent into the strategic southwestern neighborhoods of Daraya and Mouadamiyah.⁹⁰

Violence in Damascus has recently escalated, to levels some activists compare to the July 2012 offensive for control of the city.⁹¹ The new push is a coordinated effort among six rebel groups led by Jabhat Nusra, who have dubbed the effort "Operation Epic in the capital of the Omayyads," and the Free Syrian Army. Fighting and regime airstrikes have been fiercest in Jobar, Zamalka, al-Zablatani, Qaboun, and the Damascus ring road.⁹² The rebels, who were able to briefly close the major highway running from Damascus to the north, say, "This is not the battle for Damascus. This battle is to prepare for the entry into Damascus."⁹³

ADDRESSING LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE OBSTACLES

The SMC has made a concerted effort to bring armed revolutionary groups under the umbrella of a controlled military command by building strong links with the localized battalions and franchise brigades and creating a platform for the development of a countrywide military strategy. It has also taken a number of steps to marginalize extremist groups by ensuring that all FSA battalions uphold the Geneva Convention, imposing strict age requirements for new recruits, and cutting off units that break the rules from receiving lethal and non-lethal support.⁹⁴ Yet despite the significant progress the SMC has made, there remain a number of critical obstacles ahead. Overcoming them will be difficult and pose a challenge to creating a strong military institution and professional armed force in the new Syria.

Converting Networks to Military Hierarchies

The majority of rebels still identify with individual leaders, rather than with unit names or military councils. Personal networks remain the key determinant in alliances and loyalties. Resource allocation and ideological affiliation weigh in as distant, secondary factors. Thus, the SMC has relied on the personal reputation of individual commanders for legitimacy that is derived from the bottom up, rather than top down. The SMC has no institutional legitimacy that is separate from the legitimacy of the commanders associated with the command. Although the SMC has been successful in incorporating important figures and their personal networks, it nevertheless faces a significant challenge in building a sense of national identity that can transcend personal relationships and ensure long-term loyalty to the Command. Building up its institutional legitimacy,

separate from the personal legitimacy of its members, will be as crucial to the council's ability to create the institutional basis for a Defense Ministry as its real structure and organizational function.

Overall, the SMC has had limited success in establishing a chain of command. The organizational divergence of military hierarchies and local networks has limited the ability of a central leadership body to consolidate a unified armed opposition force. In this way, the SMC has been able to serve as an important platform for mutual cooperation and coordination, but beyond that it has struggled to assert greater authority. This challenge arises partly because the SMC has given its components few incentives to subsume their existing networks under the SMC's nascent hierarchy. Until greater external support for the SMC materializes, these units are not likely to cede military authority to the SMC, preferring to retain the operational prerogative that comes with independent sources of financing.

Command structures based on networks rather than hierarchies allow the creation of a vacuum of agreed-upon standards. Without agreed-upon principles that can be pushed down an established chain of command, individual commanders tend to create codes of conduct unique to those under their direct authority and are then responsible for ensuring adherence.⁹⁵ This vacuum has resulted in conditions that have been conducive to looting and have led to popular perceptions of rebel commanders as warlords. Significant portions of the population have thus been alienated from the rebels, a condition which has in turn limited their ability to fight in urban centers. In order to be seen as a professional military command, the SMC must have the ability to police itself to ensure that this type of behavior is not condoned within its ranks. This includes the capacity



FIGURE 3 | GROUPS AFFILIATED WITH THE SYRIAN LIBERATION FRONT — SOURCE: SIF FACEBOOK PAGE

to establish a firm code of military justice and punish subordinate units that violate it.

Overcoming the North – South Divide

Although the opening of the Turkish border in summer 2012 helped to connect the armed opposition's external leadership with field commanders inside Syria, it created a schism between rebel groups operating in the north and those operating in the south. By gaining control of critical border crossings in the north, the rebels there could more easily bring in fighters, weapons, fuel, and other logistical support into northern Syria. Rebel commanders noted that Turkish officials were more willing to deal with them once they had established a de facto liberated territory, which gave them greater local authority.⁹⁶

The ability to cross the Turkish border freely and move among villages without fear of encountering regime forces resulted in a dramatic change in rebel capability in the north. Northern rebel groups became much stronger than their counterparts in the south. Their ranks swelled, they had access to functioning supply lines, and they had the space to maneuver in ways that were impossible for those operating in the south. Commenting on the different conditions of rebels operating in the north and those in the south, Ahmed Kaialy, a rebel who has fought in Aleppo and Damascus, stated "In Damascus, it is difficult to get guns and supplies, but in Aleppo, it is easy."⁹⁷

This schism is compounded by the fact that extremist groups have been the most effective at operating under conditions in the south. Because of their secretive nature and highly-organized, hierarchical network, Salafi-jihadist groups like Jabhat Nusra have dominated rebel operations in the south. While extremist groups as a whole are often better resourced and have better tactical knowledge than other rebel groups throughout Syria, the divide between moderate and extremist groups is much more significant in the south.⁹⁸ Other than the Salafi-jihadist units in the south, few of the larger franchise brigades operate in the vicinity. Most rebel units tend to be highly localized and oriented on the self-defense of their communities, rather than on offensive operations against the regime. Consequently, moderate forces are under-developed in and around Damascus, because they lack the organization and resources to compete with the Salafist-jihadist groups.

These two factors have created a discrepancy in power structures between northern and southern rebel groups. Not only are northern rebel groups larger, better organized, and tactically more effective, but they also have control over the supply lines running from Turkey. As a result, rebel commanders in the north have more authority and influence within the Supreme Military Command than do their counterparts in the south.⁹⁹ Some commanders are concerned by the polarity of forces in the north and the south, particularly given that their main focus remains on the final battle for Damascus. Whether this cleavage will affect resource allocation and the direction of future operations remains to be seen.

Incorporating Independent Units

The SMC's initial success has derived from accounting for the armed opposition's two diverging trends: the localized battalions associated with the Free Syrian Army, and the larger independent franchise brigades and their alliances. The SMC has incorporated the structure of the Joint Command and the leadership of the Military Councils, while also including commanders from the largest and most powerful independent franchise brigades, including the Al-Farouq Battalions in Homs, the Suqour al-Sham Brigade in Idlib, and the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo. This has meant that the SMC includes a broader spectrum of opposition forces than previous organizations, and it encompasses a wider range of individual actors and ideologies.

Although the SMC has been careful to repudiate the most extremist elements of the Syrian opposition, especially the Foreign Terrorist Organization-designated Jabhat Nusra, it has attempted to incorporate ideologically diverse groups and shown a willingness to work with commanders of all ideological affiliations, bringing together secular, Islamist, and Salafist commanders. Inclusion of independent ideological brigades is an important part of the SMC's ability to serve as a mechanism of national-level authority and implement command and control over the disparate armed opposition forces.

However, these groups' participation in the SMC raises the question of radicalization within the Syrian opposition. Specifically, the SMC has included members from both the Syrian Liberation Front and the Syrian Islamic Front and has worked with the Salafi-jihadi group Ahrar al-Sham, causing concern among its international patrons, particularly western allies looking

for a platform through which they can provide greater support to the opposition.

Originally called the Islamic Front to Liberate Syria, the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) was founded in September 2012 as a coalition of around twenty Islamist units. The coalition is headed by Sheikh Ahmed Issa, and its most important units include the previously mentioned Suqour al-Sham Brigade, the Farouq Battalions, and the Tawhid Brigade; as well as the Islam Brigade and the Deir ez-Zour Revolutionary Council.¹⁰⁰ Shortly after the formation of the Syrian Liberation Front, Ahmed Issa released a statement announcing that the group aimed to maintain brotherly relations with the FSA but refused to offer full support to FSA leadership that remained in Turkey.¹⁰¹

That the Syrian Liberation Front saw the external leadership cadres as the most significant problem for the FSA demonstrates why overcoming the external-internal leadership divide is so critical for the SMC. For the SMC, inclusion of SLF units is critical because they are the largest alliance operating in Syria and account for a majority of forces on the ground. The SLF also offers a collection of charismatic, publicly-recognized leaders who lend greater legitimacy to the organizations affiliated with them.¹⁰² Without their participation, the SMC would be forced to compete with SLF units for power and influence – a competition that it would likely lose.

To date, the SLF has viewed the SMC as a credible internal leadership body, and its leadership structure has been almost entirely incorporated into the SMC with Ahmed Issa of Suqour al-Sham, Abdel Qadir Salah of Tawhid, and Osama al-Jinidi of Farouq all serving on the council.

Although many analysts have expressed their concern towards the SLF for its emphasis on Islamic identity and adherence to Islamic law, the organization lacks a defined ideology or political platform. In fact, the SLF is perceived on the ground to be relatively moderate, with most of the more hard-line Islamist and Salafist groups choosing to join the Syrian Islamist Front instead.¹⁰³ The Syrian Islamist Front (SIF) was announced on December 21, 2012 in a video statement read out by the group's official spokesman Abu Abdel Rahman al-Suri.¹⁰⁴ They adhere to a fairly dogmatic Salafist ideology, insisting on a theocratic state ruled by a shura council. They are Syrian nationalists, however, and do not call for the unification

of Syria under an Islamic caliphate.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, unlike the SLF, which functions more as an alliance than as a unified leadership command, SIF sub-units have begun merging forces and leadership structures under a more hierarchical chain of command.

Among the SIF's most notable rebel units are the Ahrar al-Sham Battalions, the al-Haqq Brigade in Homs, and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya in Aleppo. Although the SIF's leadership structure has not been incorporated into the SMC as fully as that of the SLF, important individual leaders within the SIF are members of the SMC, including Abdel Rahman Soess, head of the al-Haqq Brigade in Homs. Moreover, SIF sub-units have important ties and connections to battalions and brigades associated with the SMC. This has allowed for a low-level of incorporation of the SIF into the SMC, and it paves the way for cooperation between the two structures with the SMC goal of eventually incorporating SIF leadership wholly within its framework.

Despite not being officially represented on the SMC, members of Ahrar al-Sham attended the Antalya conference and were party to discussions over the council's creation. Ahrar al-Sham units have also sent advisors and representatives to subsequent council meetings, and SMC commanders confirmed that Ahrar al-Sham has been cooperating on the ground with units associated with the SMC, particularly in the provinces of Homs and Aleppo, where Ahrar al-Sham units have prior relationships with formerly independent organizations and leaders such as the Northern Front Deputy Chief of Staff Colonel Abdel Basset al-Tawil.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, it is not surprising that recent rumors suggest that Ahrar al-Sham is looking to join the SMC in an official capacity.¹⁰⁷

There is no question that Islamist forces have earned much respect from Syrians, and that they are likely to play a significant role in Syria's future government. Thus, it is important for the SMC's legitimacy and credibility to include such forces. So far, the SMC has recognized the importance of their inclusion, while drawing a red line at the inclusion of forces that seek the destruction of a Syrian state.

The SMC's ties to Islamist and Salafist forces inside of Syria do warrant some concern, however. The FSA leadership, as a potential national-level authority, has long been recognized for its nationalistic character and adherence to a secular, pluralistic vision for a

future Syria. However, with the influence of the more religiously conservative forces now serving on the SMC, some fear that a moderate, pluralistic future for Syria is endangered. This begs the question of whether the SMC, as a democratic institution, is capable of incorporating hostile religious actors, and if so, what will be the long-term political effects of inclusion on the SMC and its sub-units.

Although the threat of extremism should not be underestimated, the SMC has the potential to serve as a moderating authority among radicalized factions fighting on the ground. The impetus for de-radicalization is largely structured by strategic calculations and political opportunities. If the SMC can create enough incentives for moderation, it will likely be able to marginalize the most radical elements within its structure. To this end, the SMC has recognized the importance of the inclusion of some of the more radical forces, while still drawing a red line at the inclusion of forces that seek the destruction of a Syrian state, such as jihadist groups like Jabhat Nusra. The case of the detained UN peacekeepers mentioned previously is an example of the positive influence that the SMC can have over more radical groups.

Some of the more religiously conservative groups also recognize the danger posed by these jihadist groups, creating a potential opportunity for the SMC. Recent infighting between some of the more Salafist rebel units and Jabhat Nusra is a positive sign of the rebels' desire to check jihadist ambitions in Syria. In early February 2012, clashes broke out between Tawhid Brigade sub-units and Jabhat Nusra battalions, with Tawhid attempting to establish its authority over that of Jabhat Nusra. Many Aleppan rebels expressed concerns that Jabhat Nusra is following a "foreign agenda" and has its own goals that are not aligned with the fall of the regime. Further clashes between Tawhid and Jabhat Nusra have centered on growing tension over the Kurdish issue, with commanders angry at Jabhat Nusra for diverting resources to fight Kurdish units rather than the regime, and over the distribution of humanitarian aid.¹⁰⁸

A schism has also emerged between Jabhat Nusra and its most reliable ally, the Syrian Islamic Front. Despite adhering to a more radical interpretation of Islamic law, many within SIF's ranks support some type of democratic governance. In a whitepaper posted on the *Shumukh al-Islam* jihadi forum on the struggle in Syria, the Shumukh strategists warn of the dangers of allying with "secularist-Islamists" who oppose the creation of

an Islamic caliphate and abide by the current borders established under the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement.¹⁰⁹ In an analysis of the white paper, Cole Bunzel discusses the growing rift between Jabhat Nusra and SIF over competing views on the Syrian state versus an Islamic caliphate as well as participation in political processes. Jabhat Nusra members reject democratic political processes as illegitimate and seek the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. On the other hand, SIF members largely believe in the integrity of a Syrian state and are willing to participate in some democratic processes including elections. Bunzel notes the "soft" position of SIF, saying, "That's just the kind of soft stance that JN [Jabhat Nusra] jihadists – and the authors of the Shumukh strategy – seem intent on opposing."¹¹⁰ This sentiment was confirmed by a group of Ahrar al-Sham fighters who reportedly clashed with a Jabhat Nusra battalion in Aleppo after being called "too weak" for their sympathy towards the Syrian state.¹¹¹ This reveals that even among the more radical groups in Syria they continue to exhibit nationalist sentiment and prefer some form of democratic processes, however limited.

In discussing the merits of inclusion versus exclusion of more radical forces within the SMC, the importance of unity among all rebel groups should take precedence. President Assad is likely counting on collapsing the attempts at a unified rebel strategy through the brutality of his forces and the cost of battle. Once that happens, he likely expects rebel ranks to fragment and more radical elements, like Jabhat Nusra, to come to the fore. At that point he would be in a position to market himself as the sole guarantor against terrorism and chaos. Infighting among rebel units only benefits Assad's strategy. Unity, regardless of ideological affiliation, will be important to defeating the regime and ensuring stability in a post-Assad Syria.



PHOTO 7 | M60 RECOILLESS GUN IN AQRABA



PHOTO 8 | RBG6 GRENADE LAUNCHER IN HAMA

Ultimately, whether the SMC is able to establish a level of authority of the more radical elements, or if the radical elements end up overpowering the more moderate forces, remains to be seen. Part of the SMC's ability to establish a level of authority over these groups will be dependent on the SMC's access to resources and ability to distribute goods and provide services to rebel-held communities.

Financing and Access to Resources

Creating a central channel for funds and arms to rebel groups goes hand-in-hand with creating a centralized leadership. To date, disparate sources of funding have significantly handicapped the rebels' ability to unite and consolidate authority on a national level. Previous attempts to create a centralized military command were stymied by backers going through personal contacts, picking favorites, and stirring rivalry and jealousy among the rebels. Consequently, rebels adopted the common practice of associating with more than one organization in order to diversify access to funding.¹¹² In other cases, entirely new organizations were created solely for the purpose of receiving money and weapons.

The case of the November 2012 Doha meeting provides a stark example of how diverse funding streams exacerbate the problem of fragmentation among rebels. On the one hand, rebel commanders were paid by Qatari sponsors to attend the meeting. On the other hand, Saudi sponsors paid rebel commanders not to attend the meeting. Thus, in order to receive funds from both sponsors, rebel organizations nominally split, sending one commander to Doha with the other staying in Syria. Although united under the same leadership structures, commanders claimed to be associated with different rebel groups and often professed affiliation to rival units.¹¹³

Moreover, current streams of funding tend to empower more radical forces, with the common perception on the

ground being that extremist groups are better funded. Thanks to generous support from private sources in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states, extremist forces, particularly Jabhat Nusra, are often better armed than secular forces, which have been deprived of resources by Western reluctance to permit lethal aid. Overcoming this deficit will be difficult for the SMC, and it will require a concerted effort from the international community. The recent announcement that the U.S. will provide non-lethal aid to the SMC, including training assistance, is a positive sign for the SMC.¹¹⁴ Whether such limited support will be enough to empower the SMC is uncertain, especially since it falls short of providing the much-demanded weapons and arms seen as necessary to defeating the Assad regime.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have reportedly decided to funnel their support through the SMC as part of an agreement between the two patrons to merge their proxy structures into one organization. Although private sources of funding will likely continue outside the parameters of the SMC, uniting the support channels of rebels' main state sponsors will be fundamental to ensuring the legitimacy of the new organization.

Despite the agreement between the two backers, SMC members have complained that they have not received the support that they were promised. These members stated that weapon flows to rebels "are drying up."¹¹⁵ One commander commented that the "streams of weapons that once poured into northern Syria are now only trickling."¹¹⁶ It is generally perceived that the U.S. and its western allies have put pressure on distributors to halt the flow of weapons due to the recent designation of Jabhat Nusra as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and growing fears of radical forces within the opposition.¹¹⁷

The ability to provide resources and material support to its sub-units is the determining factor in whether or not the SMC will be able to unite rebel forces under



PHOTO 9 | COLONEL AQIDI RECEIVES WEAPONS

its command and establish a level of command and control. In commenting on the SMC's ability to serve as a centralized command, the commander of a military battalion in northern Idlib province, Ahmed al-Qanatri, stated, "The structure is good, but all on the condition that we get something."¹¹⁸ The fact that the SMC has so far failed to provide weapons and resources to its sub-units has caused some of the commanders to question their relationship with the SMC. This is also partly the reason that rebel units continue to prioritize their brigade or battalion names and prefer to identify with their former alliances rather than with the SMC.

Yet complaints over the lack of weapons contradict reports that rebels have recently received a substantial boost in the form of heavy weapons. Recent YouTube footage suggests that rebels are receiving better quality arms, including anti-tank weaponry, rocket launchers, and more powerful rifles.¹¹⁹ Specifically, rebels have begun receiving significantly better weapons starting in early February 2013 through the Jordanian border in the southern province of Deraa. The weapons, which include RPG-22 rocket launchers, M79 Osa rocket launchers, M60 recoilless rifles, and Milkor MGL/RBG-6 grenade launchers, were all designed, manufactured, and used in the former Yugoslavia, and none of them are part of the Syrian military arsenal.¹²⁰ This influx of new foreign weapons helped spark a series of surprise attacks capturing several towns, border crossings, and roads in Deraa province. These weapons have also been linked to the offensive in Damascus, and reports suggest that they are playing a key role in the fight for the capital.¹²¹

A video posted in early February 2013 on YouTube shows Col. Aqidi, SMC member and part of the SMC arms committee, sitting with an M79 rocket launcher in his operations room in the Sheikh Saeed district in the south of Aleppo city.¹²² Little more than a week after the video was posted, rebels launched an offensive against a military barracks in the north of Aleppo city in which they brought a significant amount of firepower down on the barracks, enabling their capture of the building.¹²³ This offensive, combined with other rebel operations throughout the city, suggest that it is part of a new, coordinated strategy to hit at regime positions and weaken Assad's hold on the city.

This strategy reveals what the rebel commanders see as the regime's center of gravity in the ongoing battle for control of northern Syria and suggests that the armed struggle is entering a critical new phase. The

regime's lines of communication and supply between its stronghold cities are being seriously threatened. Rebel forces have seized chokeholds on the routes that link the strongholds of the regime to the active battlefields of northern and eastern Syria. These chokepoints are the fulcrum upon which the fortunes of Idlib, Aleppo, al-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour Provinces will be decided. In order to capitalize on these successes and successfully advance on the urban centers they surround, the rebels will need to distribute enhanced weapons capability to those actively fighting in these battles.

It is unlikely a coincidence that newly smuggled weapons from the former Yugoslavia ended up in the hands of a member of the SMC arms committee and that similar flows of weapons seem to be going to groups aligned with the SMC.¹²⁴ This suggests that the SMC is at least partially serving as a channel for the distribution of funding and weapons. It also represents a deliberate effort to place more advanced weapons into the hands of more moderate forces, rather than extremists. If there is indeed a new, organized, and well-funded effort behind the SMC, it could help to empower more moderate rebel forces.

Nevertheless, in order to shift the military campaign in their favor, rebel forces will need to acquire the necessary resources to break the current stalemate. Advanced anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons, as well as secure communications equipment and intelligence support, are a prerequisite for rebel success in Syria's cities where regime forces have consolidated and can carry out airstrikes against rebel forces without fear of retaliation. The SMC's legitimacy will depend on its ability to access these resources and distribute them to its sub-units in ways that sufficiently balance resources and assets without creating internal rivalries. However, the SMC's efforts to unify will be futile if its backers, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia, decide to work outside the SMC.

Outside of direct funding and weapons shipments, Gen. Idriss has formally requested U.S. help in training elite rebel units. In a letter dated February 4, 2013, Gen. Idriss seeks U.S. assistance in "training for: (1) special operations; (2) international humanitarian law; and (3)... in chemical weapons security." He also requested various supplies for these elite units, including: "(1) combat armor; (2) night vision goggles; (3) hand held monocular and longer range spotting equipment; (4) strategic communications; (5) winterization packs;

and (6) tactical communications.”¹²⁵ Gen. Idriss and other rebel commanders believe that creating an elite commando force could help check Syria’s drift toward being a failed state through the creation of a professional force that is able to self-police and ensure rule of law. So far, there has been no response to Gen. Idriss’ request. However, opposition sources say that negotiations are underway for the training, if not equipping, of a special task force in Turkey.¹²⁶

The non-lethal support promised to the SMC is a long way from the type of material aid rebel commanders need to create a professional armed opposition that will help reduce the risks of sectarian strife, revenge attacks, and a protracted civil war after the fall of Assad. As pointed out by Paul Mutter on *Syria Comment*, the \$60 million in aid promised to rebels is equal to a mere one week’s worth of US direct military aid to Israel and sixteen days’ worth of direct military aid to Egypt.¹²⁷ Providing greater support to the organization is necessary because the SMC will likely live or die on its ability to provide for rebel-held communities. Creating a strong military institution will be crucial to Syria’s democratic transition, and the Supreme Military Command is the first step in ensuring that the country’s army is a professional, nonsectarian force that submits to civilian governance and the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

In order to accomplish its goals the SMC will need greater international support, whether in the form of greater financing or provision of weapons. As the armed opposition advances, it will be responsible for providing services in liberated areas and distributing relief aid. This will strain the rebels’ limited resources and cause tension with local populations, if they are not adequately equipped to participate in the process of rebuilding the state. Ultimately, the SMC’s ability to serve as a viable leadership body will rest on its ability to provide for rebel communities.

The SMC presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the U.S. As policymakers struggle to ensure a level of American influence within the confines of the Administration’s noncommittal policy, working with the SMC could enhance the U.S.’ position vis-à-vis Syria’s armed opposition and provide a mechanism of stability should the Assad regime fall. However, fears of Islamists and a preference for counterterrorism solutions pose significant obstacles to greater cooperation with the SMC. The recent announcement that the U.S. will

provide non-lethal aid to the SMC, including training assistance, is a significant step in this direction. However, whether such limited support will be enough to empower the SMC remains to be seen.

The goal behind U.S. support to the opposition should be to build a force on the ground that is committed to building a nonsectarian, stable Syria and is likely to respect American interests. Providing greater support to the SMC does entail the risk of unintended consequences. Some of this support may flow to the more radical forces within the SMC. But the current policy of inaction carries much more risk. This policy has not prevented extremists from acquiring arms. Instead, it has prevented more moderate forces from acquiring arms and consolidating their authority while allowing the extremist forces to develop their own independent sources of support that are less easily monitored.

The conditions needed to bring about the Syrian regime’s demise are slowly being met, including the apparent coalescence of the opposition’s disparate political and military entities, along with their latest advances on the ground in Aleppo and Damascus. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov recently announced that the Assad regime may fall, while Syrian Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa commented that the Syrian army cannot defeat rebel forces. Momentum is shifting in favor of the opposition.¹²⁸

Syria’s state security apparatus will fall apart as the Assad regime finishes its transformation into a militia-like entity.¹²⁹ The Supreme Military Command is currently the only organization that could serve to fill the security vacuum left by this transformation. If properly supported, the SMC could establish a monopoly of force in Syria and potentially serve as the next Syrian Army. Empowering a unified and accountable leadership for the opposition, led politically by SOC President Moaz al-Khatib and militarily by SMC Chief of Staff Gen. Salim Idriss, is not only important from a command and control perspective. This structure, if developed properly, can create a framework for rebuilding Syria’s security and governing institutions in order to fill the power vacuum left by Assad’s fall and help to aid in a secure and stable Syria. To quote Gen. Salim Idriss, “The building of the new Syrian state has already begun, and the FSA battalions of today must be transformed into the post-Assad military of tomorrow.”¹³⁰

APPENDIX 1: WHO'S WHO – SELECTED SUPREME MILITARY COMMAND MEMBERS

	<p>MAJOR GENERAL SALIM IDRIS</p>	<p>Maj. Gen. Salim Idriss is the Chief of Staff for the Supreme Military Council. He previously served on the General Command for the Joint Command Council, and played an important role within the organization until its merger into the SMC in December 2013. He has a reputation for his ability to access resources and distribute them to rebel groups. He also has a close relationship with Syrian National Coalition Secretary-General Mustafa Sabbagh.</p>		<p>LIEUTENANT COLONEL ADNAN MOHAMMAD AL-KOKIB</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Eastern Front Lt. Col. Adnan Mohammad al-Kokib was an intelligence officer prior to his defection in late February 2012. Since then, he has been providing intelligence support to rebel commanders in the eastern region. He also serves on the recently established military court in the Eastern Front. He is a member of the SMC financial committee.</p>
	<p>BASSAM AL-DADA</p>	<p>Bassam al-Dada is the spokesman for the Supreme Military Council. Before serving on the Supreme Military Council, al-Dada was the political advisor to the Free Syrian Army. He is most known for accusing Hezbollah of supporting the regime and threatening to retaliate if the support continues.</p>		<p>SHEIKH AHMED ISSA</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Sheikh Ahmed Issa is the leader of the powerful Suqour al-Sham brigade in Idlib province, and the head of the Syrian Liberation Front. He is one of the most influential rebel commanders in Idlib province, and his brigade is known for being disciplined, trained and well-resourced. Suqour al-Sham is also known as one of the more Islamist brigades operating in northern Syria. His brigade runs three field hospitals, a Sharia court, and a prison. He is also a member of the SMC financial committee.</p>
	<p>FARAJ HAMMOUD AL-FARAJ</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Eastern Front Faraj Hammoud al-Faraj is originally from al-Raqqa province and currently a resident of Saudi Arabia. He is a member of the Syrian National Council, formally listed as part of the "Revolutionary Motion" political bloc. Faraj is widely known for his ability to procure funding and supplies.</p>		<p>JAMAL MAAROUF</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Jamal Maarouf, also known as Abu Khalid, is the leader of the Syrian Martyrs Brigade, formerly known as the Jabal al-Zawiya Martyrs Brigade, in Idlib province. One of the two biggest strongmen in Idlib province, he is known to pay his men a salary and offer them comprehensive training, and he has set up a prison and nascent court system in his village. He is also a member of the SMC arms committee.</p>
	<p>LIEUTENANT COLONEL MOHAMMAD AL-ABBOUD</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Eastern Front Lt. Col. Mohammad al-Abboud was the head of the Deir ez-Zour Military Council under the Joint Command Council. He is now serving as the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Eastern Front.</p>		<p>COLONEL MUSTAFA ABDEL KARIM</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Col. Mustafa Abdel Karim is the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Supreme Military Council. He is widely recognized as the operational commander of the SMC and oversees the five fronts, although with limited command and control. He is also the leader of the Dara al-Thawra brigade. Prior to the uprising, Abdel Karim served as a colonel at the University Training Administration.</p>
	<p>MAJOR OMAR TIRAD</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Eastern Front Maj. Omar Tirad is the head of the Intelligence department for the Eastern Front. He is the former leader of the Bashar al-Kheir battalion in Abu Kamal. His unit was instrumental in overrunning the air defense base in Abu Kamal.</p>		<p>COLONEL ABDEL JABAR AL-AQIDI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Col. Abdel Jabar al-Aqidi is the head of the Aleppo Military Council, and former leader of the Amr bin al-Aas brigade in Aleppo. He was also an important member of the Joint Command Council and has played a key role in attempts to unite the armed opposition. Aqidi is associated with the secular and moderate Free Syrian Army forces. He is also a member of the SMC arms committee.</p>
	<p>LIEUTENANT COLONEL MUSTAFA IBRAHIM</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Eastern Front Lt. Col. Mustafa Ibrahim is the head of the Free Syrian Army Battalions in Hasaka. He has good ties to a number of Kurdish militia units in Hasaka, and has fought alongside these Kurdish units against Jabhat Nusra battalions in the area. He is the head of the Financial and Administrative Affairs department for the Eastern Front.</p>		<p>ABDEL QADIR SALEH</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Abdel Qadir Saleh, also known as Hajji Marea, is the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for the Northern Front. He is the head of the powerful Tawhid Brigade, the largest brigade operating in Aleppo province. Prior to the uprising, Saleh was an import-export trader. Some fellow rebel commanders suggest that his background is one of the reasons why he is known for being well-resourced and accounts for his ability to access critical supply lines. Despite an open alignment with Jabhat Nusra-associated battalions in Aleppo, Saleh promotes a tolerant, pluralistic vision for Syria and has welcomed Christian and Kurdish units into his brigade.</p>
	<p>COLONEL ABDEL BASSET AL-TAWIL</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Col. Abdel Basset al-Tawil is the Deputy Chief of Staff for the northern front. Tawil is the head of the Quthayif al-Haq brigade in Idlib province. He is reportedly working with the Salafi-jihadist brigade Ahrar al-Sham, and is viewed with suspicion by some of the more moderate rebel commanders for his Salafist connections.</p>		<p>BRIGADIER GENERAL ZIAD FAHD</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Southern Front Brig. Gen. Ziad Fahd is the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Southern Front. He is also the head of the Damascus Military Council, and a former member of the General Command of the Joint Command Council. He is an influential commander in the southern region, and he has attempted to bolster more moderate forces in the south through outreach with Jordan.</p>
	<p>AHMED OBAID</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Ahmed Obaid is the head of the Martyr Amjad al-Hameed Battalion, named in honor of the former leader of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade in Rastan. He is part of the influential network of rebel commanders who were part of Khalid bin Walid brigade's formative period, and he has ties to the Farouq Battalions in Homs and the Rastan Military Council. He is also the former head of the Zaafaran Military Council's arms committee.</p>		<p>LIEUTENANT COLONEL MAJID AL-SAYID AHMED</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Southern Front Lt. Col. Majid al-Sayid Ahmed is the head of Ghouta Commandos Brigade. There are also multiple videos posted on YouTube in which he claims to be the head of the Military Council in Damascus. This has caused some tension between him and Brig. Gen. Ziad Fahd. He is the head of the Operations Department for the Southern Front.</p>

 <p>BRIGADIER GENERAL ABDEL MAJID DABIS</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Western/Middle Front Brig. Gen. Abdel Majid Dabis is the former head of the General Command for the Joint Command Council. He has been behind a number of attempts to unify rebel forces. He is also the former leader of the Nasr Brigade in Kafr Nabouda, although his unit remained small and he was never in command of significant ground forces.</p>	 <p>COLONEL KHALID MOHAMMAD HOURANI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Southern Front Col. Khalid Mohammad Hourani is the official spokesman for League for a Free Houran, a civilian-led organization that coordinates anti-regime activity in Houran. Hourani is a member of the SMC arms committee.</p>
 <p>HUTHAYFAH MUSTAFA AL-SHUGHRI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Middle/ Western Front Huthayfah Mustafa al-Shughri is the head of Ahfad Abu Bakr al-Sadiq Battalion in Baniyas. He has played a significant role in operations throughout Syria's coastal region, or Sahel, and has earned a prominent place on the regime's terrorist list for his activities against regime forces in Latakia province. He is also a member of the SMC's arms committee.</p>	 <p>AHMED ABDEL RAHMAN AL-HAMAWI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Ahmed Abdel Rahman al-Hamawi is the departmental head for Financial and Administrative Affairs for the Homs front. He is the head of the Suqour Homs battalion, a sub-unit of the al-Kadh Homs Brigade and a member of the Syrian Liberation Front.</p>
 <p>LIEUTENANT COLONEL ABDEL RAZZAQ AL-FAREEJI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Western/Middle Front Lt. Col. Abdel Razzaq al-Fareji is the Hama field commander for the Free Syrian Army. He is part of the original Free Syrian Army leadership that took up residence in Turkey, although he remained inside Syria to help conduct operations in the Hama province. He is the head of the Transitional Justice department for the Western/Middle Front.</p>	 <p>COLONEL ABDULLAH AL-RIFAAI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Southern Front Col. Abdullah al-Rifaa'i is the head of the Qalamoun Military Council and has close ties to Brig. Gen. Ziad Fahd of the Damascus Military Council. He is a member of the SMC arms committee.</p>
 <p>COLONEL MOHAMMAD AUDO</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Western/Middle Front Col. Mohammad Audo defected from the Interior Ministry in July 2012, where he served as an intelligence specialist. Since his defection, Audo has been assisting in intelligence support and now serves as the head of the Intelligence department for the Western/Middle Front.</p>	 <p>SHEIKH ZAHRAN ALLOUSH</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Southern Front Sheikh Zahran Alloush is the leader of the Islam Brigade (Liwa al-Islam) operating in the vicinity of Damascus. The Islam Brigade is one of the most powerful rebel groups in Damascus. Under his command, the Islam Brigade carried out the attack on the Syrian government's national security headquarters in Damascus on July 18, 2012 that killed Defense Minister Daoud Rajha, Deputy Defense Minister Asef Shawkat, and Assistant Vice President Hassan Turkmani.</p>
 <p>OSAMA SAYEH AL-JOUNEDI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Osama Sayeh al-Jounedi is the Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff for the Homs Front. He is the head of the Farouq Battalions in Homs, replacing Lt. Abdel Razzaq Tias after he left his leadership position following allegations of sexual impropriety. Al-Jounedi also sits on the leadership command for the Syrian Liberation Front.</p>	 <p>COLONEL QASSIM SUAD AL-DIN</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Col. Qassim Suad al-Din is the head of the Middle Zone Military Council. He has also served as the spokesman for the joint command of the Free Syrian Army, he was the leader of the Homs Front within the Five Front Command, and he has close ties to Higher Revolutionary Council General Mustafa Sheikh. In the Homs area, he has competed with the Farouq Battalions for influence and authority. He is a member of the SMC arms committee.</p>
 <p>LIEUTENANT COLONEL FATIH HASSUN</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Lt. Col. Fatih Hassun is the Deputy Chief of Staff for the Northern Front. He was the head of the Homs Military Council under the Joint Command Council, and has close ties to the Farouq Battalion. He is also connected to the Civilian Protection Committee, funded by the Muslim Brotherhood.</p>	 <p>MAJOR ABDEL HALIM GHANOOM</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Maj. Abdel Halim Ghanoom is the leader of the Ahl al-Athar Battalions in the Homs region, and has served on the development committee for the Homs Revolutionary Council. He is a member of the SMC arms committee.</p>
 <p>LIEUTENANT OMAR SHAMSI</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Lt. Omar Shamsi was an important deputy to former Farouq Battalions commander Lt. Abdel Razzaq Tias, and continues to serve as an important commander for the Farouq Battalions. He was also an early member of the Rastan Free Officer's movement and a member of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade before joining the Farouq Battalions. He is the head of the Intelligence department for the Homs Front.</p>	 <p>CAPTAIN ABDULLAH BAHBOUH</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Cpt. Abdullah Bahbouh defected from the Syrian 9th Armored Brigade and joined his brother Ahmad Bahbouh during the initial formation of Khalid bin Walid Brigade. He later served on the Rastan Military Council and has played a key role in operations in the Rastan area. He is the head of the Operations department for the Homs Front.</p>
 <p>COLONEL ABDEL RAHMAN SOESS</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Homs Front Col. Abdel Rahman Soess is the head of the al-Haqq Brigade in Homs, an associate of the Farouq Battalions. He also serves on the command for the Syrian Liberation Front.</p>	 <p>BRIGADIER GENERAL ABDEL RAHMAN HUSSEIN</p>	<p>Area of Operation: Northern Front Brig. Gen. Abdel Rahman Hussein is the department head for the office of transitional justice in the northern front. He is the former head of the Military Council for eastern Aleppo, and works closely with Col Abdel Jabar al-Aqidi from the Aleppo Military Council. He has attempted to maintain close relations to the Kurdish population in Aleppo and has been at the forefront of negotiations with armed Kurdish units in the province.</p>

APPENDIX 2: OPPOSITION UNITS

Aside from the military council system, two other major rebel coalitions pre-dated the Supreme Military Command (SMC). These coalitions encompass many of the independent brigades listed below. Since the creation of the SMC in December 2012, the majority of Syria's insurgent groups have declared their support for the new command. These groups include the Military Council network, many independent brigades, most of the mainstream Islamist factions, and even some of the more pragmatic Salafi groups. For example, the Syrian Liberation Front's (SLF) leadership has been incorporated into the SMC and many SLF commanders serve as SMC members. This has empowered the SMC, and allowed the command to draw legitimacy from their inclusion.

The Syrian Islamist Front (SIF) has been incorporated to a lesser degree. Few of its leaders are actively involved with the SMC, and SIF ranks have not been integrated into the new command. Cooperation does occur, however, and the SIF has demonstrated a willingness to participate in joint operations with SMC units. Due to SIF's cross-front presence, it is imperative for the SMC to work with their ranks strategically. To this end, SMC leadership has been attempting to work more closely with SIF units and integrate them into its network of commanders and rebel groups. Whether or not the SIF decides to fully align with the SMC will affect the command's ability to assert authority and marginalize the more extremist elements of the opposition. If the SIF decides to align with more moderate Islamist factions, it will pose a serious challenge to Jabhat Nusra, which has so far been able to wield more influence than its ranks would suggest.



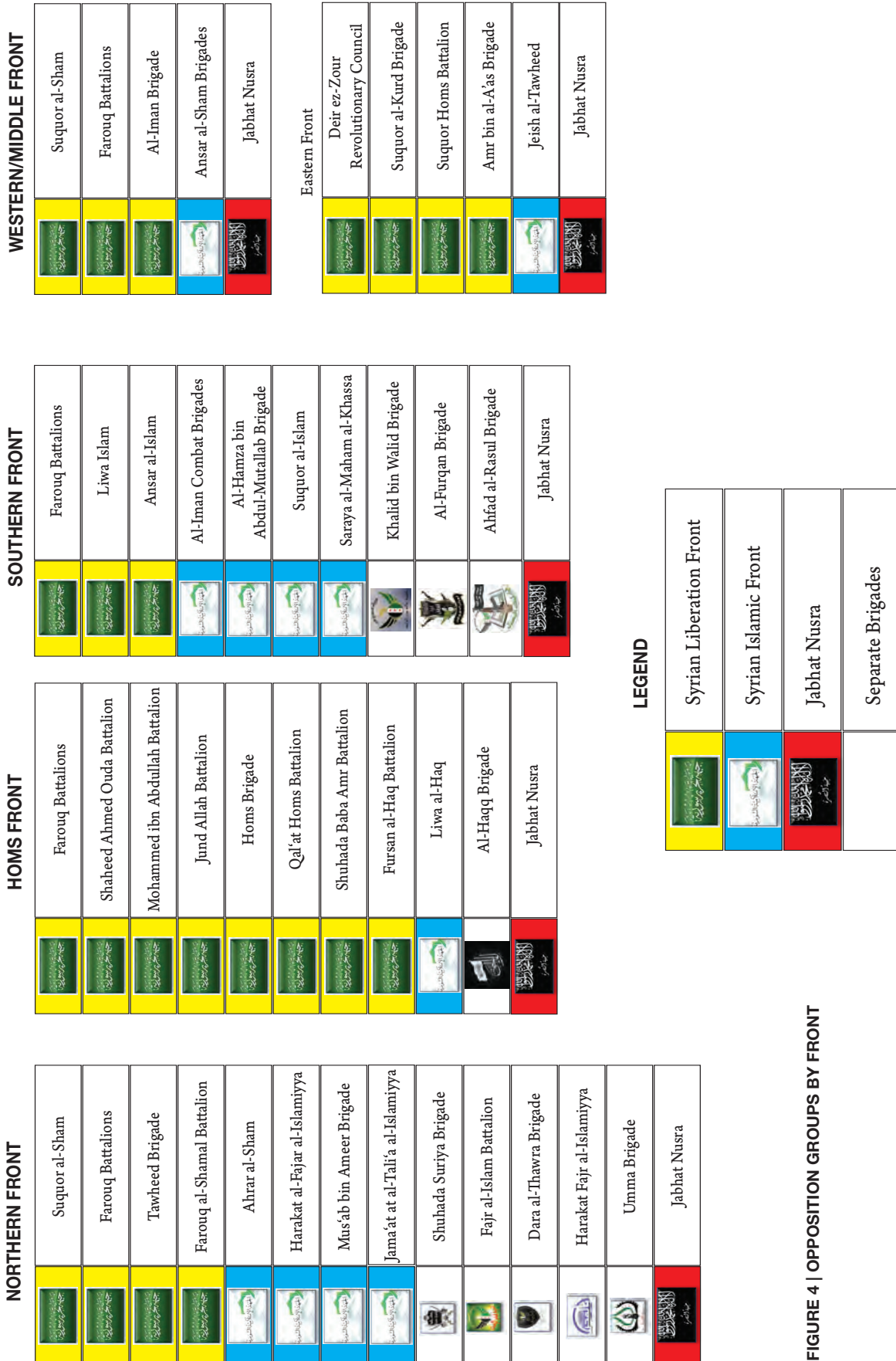
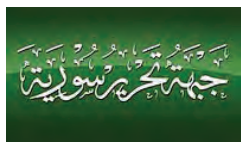


FIGURE 4 | OPPOSITION GROUPS BY FRONT

MAJOR REBEL COALITIONS

Syrian Liberation Front



The Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) was established in September 2012 as a coalition of roughly 20 Islamist groups. Although the SLF is not incorporated directly into the Free Syrian Army, due to the SLF's disdain for the fact that the FSA's leadership is located outside of the country, its leader Sheikh Ahmed Issa has expressed the SLF's desire to maintain "brotherly relations" with the FSA. The SLF has responded positively to the creation of the Supreme Military Command (SMC) and a number of the leaders of their key units, namely Ahmed Issa of Suqour al-Sham, Abdel Qadir Salah of Tawhid, and Osama al-Jinidi of Farouq, serve on the SMC council.

Suqour al-Sham (Idlib, Hama province): Commanded by Sheikh Ahmed Issa, leader of the SLF	Shaheed Ahmed Ouda Battalion (Homs)
Deir ez-Zour Revolutionary Council (Deir ez-Zour province)	Shuhada Baba Amr Battalion (Homs)
Farouq Battalion (Homs)	Mohammed ibn Abdullah Battalion (Homs)
Tawheed Brigade (Aleppo)	Jund Allah battalion (Homs)
Liwa Islam (Islam Brigade)	Homs Brigade (Homs)
Ansar al-Islam (Damascus)	Fursan al-Haq Battalion (Homs)
Suqour al-Kurd Brigade (Qamishli)	Amr bin al-A'as Brigade (Deir ez-Zour)
Suqour Homs Battalion (Homs)	Al-Iman Brigade (Hama)
	Qal'at Homs Battalion (Homs)

Syrian Islamic Front



The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) was formed on December 21, 2012, and is composed of Islamist groups that conform to a fairly dogmatic Salafist ideology and espouse the creation of a theocratic state ruled by a shura council. Despite these beliefs, the SIF has not called for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Syria, but rather are Syrian nationalists. The SIF leadership structure is not linked to the Supreme Military Council (SMC) as closely as the Syrian Liberation Front, but the leader of the al-Haqq Brigade is on the SMC council and various sub-units of the SIF are connected to brigades and battalions associated with members of the SMC. Ahrar al-Sham, while not officially linked to the SMC, had representatives present at the Antalya conference where the SMC was created, and they have cooperated with members of the SMC on military operations.

Ahrar al-Sham (country-wide)	Suqour al-Islam (Damascus province)
Harakat al-Fajar al-Islamiyya (Aleppo province)	Saraya al-Maham al-Khassa (Damascus province)
Liwa al-Haq (Homs province): Abdel Rahman Soess	Mus'ab bin Ameer Brigade (Aleppo province)
Al-Iman Combat Brigades (Damascus province)	Jama'at al-Tali'a al-Islamiya (Idlib province)
Al-Hamza bin Abdul-Mutallab Brigade (Damascus province)	Ansar al-Sham Brigades (Latakia province)
	Jeish al-Tawheed (Deir ez-Zour province)

BRIGADE-LEVEL REBEL ORGANIZATIONS

These include all franchise brigades detailed in the report.

Khalid bin Walid Brigade (Disbanded)



Area of Operations: Homs province

Commander: Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali (Deceased)

As of March 2012, the Khalid bin Walid Brigade was the largest and most effective rebel force operating in Syria with over 3,000 soldiers. After uniting various rebel commanders operating around Homs, the unit fought its first major engagement at the end of September 2011 when it conducted a fighting retreat against security forces in the town of Rastan. Since its formation, many of its commanders have since broken off in order to create the Farouq Battalions and the Rastan Military Council. Although the group has largely dispersed, many of today's important field commanders can be linked back to this brigade.

Farouq Battalions



Area of Operations: Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Damascus

Commander: Osama Sayeh al-Jinidi

The Farouq Battalion was established in Homs in 2011 and has since grown into one of the largest militant organizations operating in Syria. Although its center of gravity remains in Homs, recent operations have focused on Hama and Idlib provinces. The Farouq Battalions are a prominent member of the Syrian Liberation Front, allied to the Free Syrian Army. Current and former members of the Farouq battalion, as well as their affiliates, hold leadership positions in numerous organizations across the country including the Supreme Military Command, the Syrian Liberation Front, and the Muslim Brotherhood-funded Civilian Protection Committee. The Farouq Battalions are well trained, well funded, and adept at using social media to enhance their reputation for effectiveness.

Farouq al-Shamal Battalion

Area of Operations: Aleppo (Bab Hawa, Tal Abyad border crossings)

Commander: Abu Zeid

The Farouq al-Shamal Battalion is the northern branch of the Farouq Battalions operating in Homs and they share leadership and resources. Farouq al-Shamal controls the Bab Haw and Tal Abyad border crossings with Turkey. In September 2012, there was a dispute with a jihadist group over control of the Bab Hawa border crossing and the leaders of both groups were, resulting in tension between groups in the area.

Al-Haqq Brigade



Area of Operations: Homs

Commander: Colonel Abdel Rahman Soess

Al-Haqq's commander, Col. Abdel Rahman Soess also sits on the leadership council for the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) and is a member of the Supreme Military Command. The brigade was formed in August 2012 through the merger of seven different battalions operating in the Homs area, and

in cooperation with the Farouq Battalions. Its ideological leader is Sheikh Abu Ratib, a Salafist cleric, who has emphasized the importance of establishing an Islamic state in Syria. Shortly after the brigade's formation, tension between the al-Haqq Brigade and the Farouq Battalions over operational priorities caused a rift between the two groups. This led al-Haqq to branch off on its own and announce an alliance with Ansar al-Islam. However, there is little evidence to support a close relationship between the two groups. The al-Haqq Brigade and Farouq Battalions have since reconciled and there is overlap in leadership structures and operations.

Shuhada Suriya Brigade- "Syrian Martyrs Brigade"



Area of Operations: Jabal al-Zawiya, Idlib province

Commander: Jamal Maarouf

The Syrian Martyrs Brigade was formerly known as the Jabal al-Zawiya Brigade, a collection of a dozen battalions with hundreds of fighters. Although not officially part of the Idlib Military Council, the Syrian Martyrs Brigade has cooperated with the Military Council extensively and has coordinated attacks with a number of other groups in the region. The head of the Syrian Martyrs Brigade, Jamal Maarouf, is a member of the Supreme Military Command Arms Committee.

Fajr al-Islam Battalion



Area of Operations: Maarat al-Numan, Idlib province

Commander: Lieutenant Ibrahim Ali

Fajr al-Islam was formed in late April 2012 under the leadership of Lieutenant Ibrahim Ali. Fajr al-Islam has participated in military operations with other battalions in the area, including the Martyrs Battalion and the March 15th Battalion. It is a component of the al-Ansar brigade, which is affiliated with the Idlib Military Council, and its leadership works closely with Idlib Military Council head Afif Suleiman. They are not connected to Harakat Fajr al-Islamiyya in Aleppo.

Suqour al-Sham



Area of Operations: Idlib province, Jabal al-Zawiya

Commander: Sheikh Ahmed Issa

Suqour al-Sham is one of the largest and most powerful brigades operating in Idlib province. The brigade is also a prominent member of the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), and Sheikh Ahmed Issa is the leader of both Suqour al-Sham and the SLF. He is also an important member of the Supreme Military Command. The brigade works with a wide range of other militant organizations, including groups such as Fajr al-Islam. Suqour al-Sham not only is a well-organized militant organization, but also runs three hospitals, a Sharia court, and a prison in Idlib province.

Dara al-Thawra Brigade "The Revolution Shield Brigade"



Area of Operations: Northern Idlib province

Commander: Colonel Mustafa Abdel Karim

The leader of the Dara al-Thawra Brigade, Col. Mustafa Abdel Karim, holds a prominent position in the Supreme Military Command (SMC) as the Deputy Chief of Staff, and is widely considered to be the operational commander of the SMC. The Dara al-Thawra Brigade has worked with the

Tawhid Brigade and Ahrar al-Sham in the past, and is considered to have roughly 1,000 members.

Tawhid Brigade



Area of Operations: Aleppo province

Commander: Abdel Qadir Saleh (AKA: Hajji Marea)

The Tawhid brigade is a prominent member of the Syrian Liberation Front and its leader, Abdel Qadir Saleh, is a member of the Supreme Military Command. The Tawhid brigade is the largest militant group in Aleppo province and incorporates secular, Christian, Kurdish, and jihadist units. They were party to the November 18, 2012 statement that denounced Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC) leadership and expressed support for the establishment of an Islamist state in Aleppo. However, they later amended their statement, reshooting the video with Colonel Abdel Jabar Aqidi who is the head of the Aleppo Military Council and a supporter of SOC.

Harakat Fajr al-Islamiyya - "The Islamic Dawn Movement"



Area of Operations: Aleppo city and province

Commander: Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi

Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya is a Salafist brigade and member of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). It was part of a gathering of 14 rebel groups that released a video on November 18, 2012 that denounced the authority of the Syrian Opposition Coalition and expressed support for the "establishment of a just Islamic state" in Aleppo. In late January 2013, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyya announced the formation of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya along with two other battalions, the Islamic Vanguard Group and the Faithful Fighters Battalions, under the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham.

Ahrar al-Sham



Area of Operations: Aleppo Province, Idlib province

Commander(s): Abu Abdel Rahman al-Suri, Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, political leader Abu Ayman

Ahrar al-Sham is a coalition of dozens of smaller battalions and brigades that operate in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib. Ahrar al-Sham is a Salafist brigade and is the leading member of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). However, Ahrar al-Sham is also associated with the Idlib Military Council and the Free Syrian Army. Because of its flexibility, Ahrar al-Sham has participated in military operations with secular, Islamist, and jihadist organizations, such as when it took part in the capture of the Jarrah airfield, Aleppo province on February 12, 2013 and the capture of Taftanaz airbase, Aleppo province in January 2013. Ahrar al-Sham also took part in the November 18, 2012 statement that denounced SOC leadership and expressed support for the establishment of an Islamist state in Aleppo; they later claimed not to have backed the statement.

Umma Brigade



Area of Operations: Maarat al-Numaan, Idlib province

Commander: Abdel Mehdi al-Harati

The Umma Brigade is known for its assimilation of foreign fighters into the organization, primarily in a training capacity, according to the group's Libyan-Irish leader Mehdi al-Harati. Because of this

foreign influence, combined with Harati's preference for an Islamic government to be implemented after Assad, the brigade gained the stigma of being radical Islamists or jihadists – an accusation denied by members of the group. The Umma Brigade was estimated to have over 3,000 Syrian fighters as of September 2012, and contains specialists in communications, logistics, humanitarian issues, and heavy weapons. The Umma Brigade took part in the November 18, 2012 statement that denounced SOC leadership and expressed support for the establishment of an Islamist state in Aleppo, although they later amended their statement claiming they only supported the call for a “just state” that included all religious and ethnic groups in Syria.

Liwa al-Islam - “Islam Brigade”



Area of Operations: Damascus

Commander: Sheikh Zahran Alloush

Liwa al-Islam, a component brigade of Ansar al-Islam, operates chiefly in the Damascus neighborhoods of Douma and Eastern Ghouta. They claimed responsibility for carrying out the July 18, 2012 bombings in Damascus that killed Defense Minister Daoud Rajha, Deputy Defense Minister Asef Shawkat, and Assistant Vice President Hassan Turkmani. Liwa al-Islam is a driving force behind actions in Damascus, and is part of the current multilateral effort, codenamed “Operation Epic in the Capital of the Omayyads,” to gain ground and prepare for later sustained efforts against regime forces in the city. Liwa al-Islam is known to cooperate with Jabhat Nusra and conduct joint operations.

Ansar al-Islam



Area of Operations: Damascus

Commander: Abu Moaz al-Agha

Ansar al-Islam is a member of the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), a coalition of about 20 Islamist rebel groups that include Suqour al-Sham, Farouq Battalion, and the Tawhid Brigade. Ansar al-Islam is comprised of several battalions and brigades, including the effective Liwa al-Islam, and is currently working with the rebel groups participating in the “Operation Epic in the Capital of the Omayyads.”

Al-Furqan Brigades



Area of Operation: Damascus

Commander: Mohammad Majid al-Khatib

The al-Furqan Brigades are concentrated in Damascus, with smaller branches operating in Quneitra. The Brigades subunits include Abu Bakr al-Sadiq Brigade, the Umar Ibn Khattab Brigade, the Otham Ibn Afan Brigade, and the Ali ibn Abi Talib Brigade. The al-Furqan Brigades are loosely associated with Ansar al-Islam. They are not connected to the al-Furqan battalion operating in Deir ez-Zour.

Ahfad al-Rasul Brigade

Area of Operations: Damascus

Commander: Ziad Haj Obaid

The Ahfad al-Rasul Brigade is a component of Ansar al-Islam, a member of the Syrian Liberation Front. It claimed to have at least 400 soldiers in September 2012 and is composed of several battalions, most notably Al-Haqq battalion, Shuhada al-Jolan Battalion, and Suqour al-Jolan Battalion. In early September it announced the formation of the Suqour Jabal al-Zawiya battalion, giving it a presence in Idlib. Ahfad al-Rasul took part in the September 2, 2012 bombing that targeted the Syrian Army General Staff building in Damascus. Its leader, Ziad Haj Obaid, is on the Arms Committee for the Supreme Military Command.

Deir ez-Zour Revolutionary Council

Area of Operations: Dier ez-Zour

Commander: Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad al-Abboud

The Deir al-Zour Revolutionary Council is a member of the Syrian Liberation Front (SLC), and its head Lt. Col. Mohammad al-Abboud is the operational commander for the Eastern Front of the Supreme Military Command. The group has played a prominent role in the fighting in Deir ez-Zour, and has spearheaded many operations including the capture of Mayadeen army base and the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing near Abu Kamal. They openly cooperate with the Salafi-jihadist group Jabhat Nusra and the Deir ez-Zour-based Furqan Brigade.

Jabhat Nusra - "Al-Nusra Front," "Victory Front"

Area of Operations: Country wide- Damascus, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zour, al-Raqqa

Commander: Abu Muhammad al-Jolani

Since January 2012, Jabhat Nusra has claimed responsibility for over 600 attacks across the country-including over 40 suicide attacks. Jabhat Nusra is the most prominent Salafi-jihadist organization in Syria and is associated with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Due to the overlap in leadership structures between AQI and Jabhat Nusra, the organization was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States on December 10, 2012 as an alias for AQI. The group is well organized, well funded, and capable of executing large scale, multilateral operations such as the capture of Taftanaz airbase, Aleppo province, Furat Dam, al-Raqqa province, and "Operation Epic in the Capital of the Omayyads" in Damascus. While Jabhat Nusra has worked with members of the Supreme Military Command in the past, it has also clashed with units from the Tawhid Brigade and with Kurdish groups in northern Syria. Jabhat Nusra also took part in the November 18, 2012 statement that denounced SOC leadership and expressed support for the establishment of an Islamist state in Aleppo.

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