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The Armed Syrian Opposition: Common Aim but No Vision

Marwan Qabalan | August 2013

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Abstract

In response to the dearth of academic studies written on the Syrian opposition, this study reviews the various Syrian military organizations that are currently active against the Syrian regime, and discusses the circumstances that led to their formation, their intellectual and political character, their links, and the parties that finance them. This analysis argues that these organizations may be divided into two main movements: one with a secular outlook and the other with Islamist leanings. The author maintains that these different military groups emerged spontaneously, and that their birth was a reaction to the violence of the regime rather than an intentional political act. Moreover, the lack of clarity and vision among the majority of these groups is further aggravated by the fact that these military formations and their command structures were largely created by individuals with low levels of education.

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Introduction

Two years after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, and more than a year after its metamorphosis into an armed uprising aimed at bringing down the regime through military means, failing to topple it peacefully, the map of the Syrian opposition military formations is beginning to take shape. Although these formations still lack a coherent structure or central authority that is capable of unifying them—and continue to multiply to the point that there are now hundreds of military groups—it is indeed possible to distinguish two major currents within the armed Syrian opposition: secular-leaning military formations, the majority of which are part of the Free Syrian Army, and the Islamist brigades.[1]

This study examines the most prominent formations of the armed Syrian opposition that are active on the ground, and investigates their emergence and the circumstances that led to their creation, in addition to studying their main trends, the parties that fund them, and the relationships between their various components. Lastly, this paper examines the potential scenarios for the evolution of the relationship between the armed opposition groups, and the impact these scenarios could have on the course of the Syrian revolution and the future of Syria as a whole. The study concludes that these formations share a clear aim, and that they all agree on the necessity to bring down the despotic regime; they disagree, however, on everything else, including the identity of the prospective state and its political system. The main factors that contribute to the lack of clarity of vision among the majority of the military organizations include: the spontaneous development of the majority of these groups, the fact that they came more as a reaction to the violence of the regime than as the result of intentional political acts, and the illiteracy of many who created and lead these groups. By shedding light on these issues, this study aims at filling a major gap in the academic studies that focus on the armed Syrian opposition.

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[1] In the first draft of this paper, a third movement—foreign fighters—was identified. Despite their small numbers, as evidenced by numerous studies and intelligence reports, the majority of these are active ideologically and on the ground as part of the Islamist brigades. It is also important to note that this paper does not seek to identify the entirety of the armed factions, as there are over 600 of them according to some estimates; instead, this report focuses on the most prominent and efficient of these groups. Finally, I wish to thank a number of field activists, whose names cannot be mentioned for security reasons, who contributed much effort toward the accomplishment of this report.

The Emergence of Militarization in the Syrian Revolution

Like its counterparts in other Arab countries, the Syrian revolution began as a peaceful uprising with two dimensions: one relating to social demands and living conditions, and the other to public freedoms and human dignity. At first, the uprising consisted of spontaneous gatherings that emerged from the mosques after Friday prayer each week. The regime employed violence from the very beginning of the protest movement, hoping to quell it and prevent it from expanding. The regime's insistence on the use of violence was faced by a protest movement that maintained its peaceful character in order to achieve its objectives. However, events took a different turn with the escalation of the use of force against the peaceful protesters. At the same time, the Arab League's efforts to reach a political resolution to the crisis faltered, as did the initiatives within the Security Council, which aimed at pressuring the regime to change its policies and accept a smooth political transition of power.

From the beginning of the revolution, the regime has attempted to push it toward militarization in order to justify the use of violence against it, in addition to using scare tactics to assemble a popular base of support, by accusing the opposition of being terrorists and agents of outside forces. The security agencies were unleashed with the purpose of repressing the revolution, but its persistence and expansion has led the regime to resort to the army. The excessive use of force by the regime caused the appearance of cases of disorganized armed resistance, especially in the border regions, such as Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib governorate and in Tal Kalakh in Homs. There were also individual defections within the military, with some soldiers and officers refusing to fire at demonstrators. Though the majority of defections during the early phase of the revolution remained limited to the low and mid-level ranks, the most prominent defectors were Lieutenant Abdul al-Razzak Tlass and Major Hussein Harmoush.

Secular–Leaning Military Formations

Three months after the revolution's outbreak, defector Major Hussein Harmoush formed a military group that he called the Brigade of Free Officers, hoping to attract additional members of the military establishment who were opposed to the use of violence against civilians. Nevertheless, the initiative remained largely symbolic due to the limited number of defectors and the continuing peaceful character of the revolution. Events took a new turn with the creation of what became known as the Free Syrian Army and the military councils that were attached to it.

The Temporary Military Council of the Free Syrian Army

On July 29, 2011, Colonel Riad al-Asaad announced, from Turkey, that a Temporary Military Council of the Free Syrian Army would be founded, which took place on November 14, 2011, thereby beginning the formation of military councils. The military councils sought to provide an organizational framework to support the growth and proliferation of the armed activities against the regime's forces. The number of military defectors increased as the level of violence rose against the insurgent areas. The Temporary Military Council's founding statement announced the names of the council members and its internal charter, and defined its mission—the preservation of peaceful protests and their protection from "the tools of oppression and the military machine that is employed by the regime".[2] At the time, al-Asaad claimed that he had 15,000 fighters under his command.[3]

The Temporary Military Council stressed its independence from the Syrian National Council, which was founded on November 2, 2011 as a political umbrella for the Syrian opposition abroad, though it did not express a clear position toward it. The military council was characterized by a structure that lacked civilian rebels in its ranks or within its leadership.

The Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army

General Mustafa al-Sheikh's defection in December 2011 was the first serious test of the structure of the Free Syrian Army, which constituted the major component of the armed Syrian opposition at the time. This action represented a major challenge to Colonel Riad al-Asaad's leadership, as al-Sheikh carried a higher military rank, and according to military tradition, al-Asaad should have fallen in line behind the higher-ranking officer. Instead, al-Sheikh created a separate initiative, announcing the formation of the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army.[4] The declaration drew the anger of the Temporary Military Council, whose leadership accused General al-Sheikh of "not belonging to the ranks of the Free Syrian Army," and stated that his declaration was a

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[2] The Syrian, "Free Army Forms Temporary Council".

[3] Burch, "Exclusive," 2011.

[4] Oweis, "Army Defectors Form Higher Military Council," 2012.

mere individual initiative that was conducted without consultation. Therefore, they declared that al-Sheikh represents nobody but himself.[5]

The statement announcing the creation of the Supreme Military Council did not mention any specific military structure or names of those in leadership positions, as the Temporary Military Council had done. This raised questions regarding its ability to attract defecting Syrian officers. According to Major Khalid al-Hamwi, one such defecting officer, the Supreme Military Council included no more than seven officers.[6]

Following the regime's recapturing of the Baba Amr neighborhood in Homs in March 2012, domestic and foreign parties alike attempted to unify the armed formations of the Free Syrian Army, which culminated in the creation of a new local leadership structure for the Free Syrian Army that works in conjunction with its military leadership abroad. The structure included the names of military leadership within Syria in five major governorates: Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Deir Ez-Zor. Al-Asaad and al-Sheikh reached an agreement, granting General al-Sheikh the leadership of the Supreme Military Council, while Colonel al-Asaad was to lead the council's military operations.[7] The joint leadership inside Syria also published a code of conduct and a founding statement in order to stress the success of the unification process of the Free Syrian Army.[8]

Nevertheless, the joint military leadership of the Free Syrian Army, which was divided between those residing inside Syria and those abroad, quickly stumbled into internal conflicts. The first signs of this conflict appeared in April 2012 after Kofi Annan announced the UN and Arab League's initiative for Syria. Colonel Qasim Saadeddine, the Free Syrian Army's military command spokesman in Syria, said that the regime had 48 hours to prove its commitment to the ceasefire in accordance with the Annan plan. However, the spokesman for the Free Syrian Army abroad, Colonel Mustafa Abdul al-Karim, denied giving the Syrian government any grace period.[9]

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[5] Al-Jazeera News, "Confusion Over 'Higher Council' Claim," 2012.

[6] Ibid.

[7] *Al-Akhbar English*, "Syrian Rebels Form Local Command Structure," March 30, 2012.

[8] Sterling, "Syria Rebel Fighters Vow to Shun Torture," August 8, 2012.

[9] Wood, "Syrian Commanders Split," May 31, 2012.

The different stances and visions between the two ruptured in May 2012, with Colonel Saadeddine announcing that the leadership inside Syria is the only one that is permitted to speak on behalf of the Free Syrian Army: "We lead the operations and we mobilize the street… and [Riad al-Asaad] represents no one but himself."[10]

The Joint Military Command of the Syrian Revolution

On July 1, 2012, a new military formation—the Joint Military Command of the Syrian Revolution—was announced by the defecting General Fayiz Amr. According to the statement, the Joint Military Command was to be composed of the general command, which is staffed by four senior officers.[11] This organization, however, quickly expanded and its leadership was given to Adnan Sello, a retired Syrian general, during a meeting that was held in Antakya, Turkey, two weeks after the initial announcement.[12] This new military organization elicited a wave of reactions, the most notable of which came from the Free Syrian Army's leadership abroad; Colonel Malik Kurdi, vice-chairman for the leadership abroad, denied any agreement with General Sello regarding the formation of the Joint Military Command, adding that the members of this military command do not enjoy any real support at home.[13]

In contrast, the Joint Military Command of the Syrian revolution's formation, in addition to General Sello's appointment as general commander, was welcomed by the leaders of the Free Syrian Army inside Syria, who expressed their desire to benefit from all the military cadres on our side.[14] This announcement came as a new blow to the command of the Free Syrian Army abroad, which appeared to be completely isolated from the military factions fighting on the ground inside Syria, not to mention their inability to represent or lead these armed groups, as they claimed they were.

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[10] *Daily Star*, "Syria-based Rebels Slam Exiled FSA Leader," May 31, 2012.

[11] Joma, "Fayiz Amr Reads Founding Statement," July 2, 2012.

[12] *New Centre*, "A Brigadier and 18 Generals Command," July 14, 2012.

[13] *BBC Arabic*, "Division Among Free Syrian Army, May 31, 2012.

[14] Wood, "Syrian Commanders Split," May 31, 2012.

The Syrian National Army

Following his defection in August 2012, Brigadier Mohammad Hussein al-Haj Ali, who had previously headed the National Defense College affiliated with the Syrian Army's High Military Academy, proposed an initiative for the unification of the armed factions of the Syrian opposition, arguing that he was the highest-ranking active officer to defect from the regime's ranks. He also called for the formation of a new military body—the Syrian National Army—implying that the regime's army, which is firing at civilians, was not a national army.[15] A number of senior defecting officers met in Turkey in late August 2012, conducting difficult negotiations over the issue, in the end declaring the formation of the new body.[16]

This new military command did not last long despite the fact that it brought together a large number of senior officers. The Syrian National Army failed to establish itself as the unifying framework for the armed Syrian opposition factions for a number of reasons, including the fact that the creation of the Syrian National Army was an attempt to contain the armed Islamist groups, a project designed and supported by foreign powers, which negatively impacted the army's image. Additionally, Brigadier al-Haj Ali failed to impose himself as an effective field commander, and was content to participate through media statements away from the battles, which made him lose credibility. The multitude of foreign agendas acting on the ground, each supporting specific military formations that serve as local tools of influence for the foreign backers, are also a factor.[17]

The Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils

Almost a month after the attempt to form the Syrian National Army, numerous military brigades in Syria announced the formation of the Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils, which was made up of three main levels: the general command, the coordination bureau, and the military councils in Syrian governorates. In its statement, the Joint Command called upon all the revolutionary and military forces in Syria to join

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[15] al-Samadi, "Fragmented Syrian Opposition," 2012.

[16] Free Syrian Army, "Announcing the Founding Statement," September 3, 2012.

[17] *Elaph*, "The Rupture between Opposition and Field," March 22, 2012.

it and work in tandem in order to "serve the revolution and the people and to bring down the regime".[18]

Both the Syrian National Council and the Muslim Brotherhood gave their blessings to this new formation.[19] Many politicians, activists, and Syrian and Arab clergymen also supported the new body and participated in its creation, including Sheikh Ahmad al-Sayasna, Sheikh Uthman al-Khamees, Dr. Fahd al-Khanna, MP Muhammad Hayif al-Mutairi, Sheikh Muhammad Dawi al-Asimi, political activist Abdullah Barghash, in addition to Sheikh Muhammad al-Areefi and Sheikh Saad al-Buraik, who spoke to the conferees by telephone.[20]

The Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils and the brigades attached to it were capable of establishing a strong presence on the ground during the second year of the revolution due to the extensive coordination between the military councils and the Islamist brigades in their actions on the battlefield. This was a result of the presence of influential religious figures in the founding conference and their blessing of the new military body, in addition to the availability of large regional support—whether in the form of states or individuals—making the Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils into one of the most important military wings of the opposition against the Syrian regime's forces.

The Higher Joint Military Command Council

In December 2012, the Higher Joint Military Command Council was announced in Antalya, Turkey, and is considered to be the broadest, most mature, organized military umbrella for the secular forces of the armed Syrian opposition. The council's founding came after extensive consultations among the leaders of the military and revolutionary councils and the leaders of the most prominent brigades in Syria. Over 200 representatives of the opposition military factions that are effectively present on the ground were chosen to be part of what came to be called the Committee of Revolutionary Forces. Subsequently, thirty individuals were elected, with six representatives for each of the five military fronts in Syria (North, Coast, Center, South,

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[18] *BBC International*, "Al-Jazeera Says Joint Military Representative," September 30, 2012.

[19] *Al-Hayat*, "Vice-Overseer Faruq Tayfur to al-Hayat," October 26, 2012.

[20] "Statement of Formation of Joint Supreme Military Command," YouTube video, December 10, 2012.

and East). These included 11 officers and 19 civilians from among the rebels, who became the members of the Higher Joint Military Command Council. The leadership then elected General Salim Idris as the head of the General Staff of the Free Syrian Army.[21] In order to attract all the effective military forces on the ground, the new body chose to remain free of any clear ideological affiliations.[22] The council's formation came immediately after the creation of the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which became the broader umbrella for the Syrian political opposition abroad, was announced in Doha in November 2012.

General Characteristics of the Secular Military Formations

Despite the large number of secular military formations and the differences between them, they share some general characteristics, some of which bear more importance. Defecting regime soldiers and officers announced the creation of their groups, which they primarily represented as being "military". Since the majority of defectors—especially during the first phase of the revolution—escaped the country due to the regime's persistent influence and control over the majority of Syrian territory, most of these groups were announced from abroad, most commonly from Turkey. Thus, these groups are often criticized for not being established at home, unlike the Islamist brigades and the other armed groups that are affiliated with the Free Syrian Army. In addition, the majority of the secular military councils were created because the regional and international forces involved in the Syrian crisis wanted to regulate the military aspect of the revolution, fearing a slide into chaos or an ascension of extremist Islamist forces. During the creation of these military councils, representatives of regional and international forces were noticeably present during the majority of the talks.[23]

Furthermore, certain broad political ideas are shared by the secular military formations. The founding statements of the military councils adopted general formulas, such as striving to build a democratic state that respects the will of the people and the principles of international law. The majority of statements had no mention of Islam or its role in post-Assad Syria, except for that of the Joint Command of the Revolutionary

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[21] al-Ghoudowi, "Brigadier Salim Idris," January 7, 2013.

[22] Notably, the al-Nusra Front, the al-Farouq Brigades, and the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades—the three largest armed forces in northern Syria—did not join the new command.

[23] Ballout, "Western Intelligence Triage," December 7, 2012.

Military Councils, which noted that the identity of Syria is based on moderate Islam, the respect of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, and the commitment to international pacts and treaties as long as they do not contravene the Islamic Sharia.[24] This was due to the significant religious presence in the founding conference of the Joint Command, in addition to the new body's desire to build bridges with the Islamist brigades that had begun to show their effectiveness on the ground. Some of the Islamist brigades expressed the desire to join the joint military councils, but wanted the role of Islam mentioned, either for ideological reasons or for reasons related to funding.[25]

In addition, the military councils are all based on a clear military structure, in terms of the hierarchy of the leadership and the distribution of tasks and operations. Nevertheless, a state of confusion plagues the majority of their military leaderships; for instance, most of the military figures represented in these bodies had been part of previous revolutionary military formations. In fact, a number of notable officers were present in every new formation that was announced. Moreover, the defection of senior officers, with the ranks of general and brigadier, led to conflicts over who deserved to assume the military leadership; while some officers argued that they were the first to defect, others insisted that the military hierarchy must be respected.[26] Despite the effectiveness of some of the military formations, there is no indication that they will be capable of regulating the armed activities of the Syrian opposition, given the reigning state of division in the councils and their lack of effective tools for applying pressure.

Finally, there is a general lack of trust in the political opposition abroad, which impacts the military formations. The majority of the political opposition movements abroad have attempted to create links with the various secular military councils in an attempt to garner a degree of legitimacy or credibility, and to insinuate that they have some influence on military decision making in the field. However, the majority of these attempts failed. While the National Council attempted to create a channel of communication with the Free Syrian Army in order to coordinate with its military formations, the bureau of communication and military coordination remained a media

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[24] "Statement of Formation of Joint Supreme Military Command," YouTube video, December 10, 2012.

[25] Personal Interview with a field activist who attended the founding meeting for the joint command in August 2012.

[26] *Elaph*, "The Rupture between Opposition and Field," March 22, 2012.

tool devoid of influence. However, this situation began to change slightly after the announcement of the Higher Joint Military Command Council, which was blessed by the Syrian National Coalition.

Islamist–Leaning Military Formations

The same factors that led to the militarization of the revolution have also led to its Islamicization; the extreme violence employed by the regime against peaceful protesters and the regime's tendency to adopt a sectarian discourse from the beginning of the protests have pushed many protesters to resort to a religious discourse. Furthermore, the overlap between the domestic and regional political alignments, on the one hand, and sectarian cleavages, on the other, has spontaneously furthered the Islamicization of the revolution and the appearance of forces and currents that adopt political Islam, specifically Sunni Islam, against the regime and its allies. The most prominent and effective Islamist forces on the Syrian scene are The Support Front for the People of Syria, the Syrian Islamic Front, al-Ansar Islam Coalition, and The Front for the Liberation of Syria.

Jabhat al-Nusra Li Ahl al-Sham (The Support Front for the People of Syria)

On January 24, 2012, Abu al-Fath Mohammad al-Julani, the leader of the Jabhat al-Nusra Li Ahl al-Sham, or al-Nusra Front, made the group's first statement, calling upon Syrians to embrace the jihad and raise arms against the Syrian regime.[27] Since March 2012, the group has earned the support of many jihadi theorists, including Abu Mohammad al-Shanqeeti, a prominent member of the doctrinal committee of Manbar al-Tawheed wal Jihad; Sheikh Abu Mohammad al-Tahawi, a well-known Jordanian Salafist; Sheikh Abu al-Zahraa al-Zubaidi, a famous Lebanese jihadist; and Hani al-Sibai, an Egyptian sheikh affiliated with the salafi jihadi movement. These clerics have been promoting the group and aiding in its financing.[28]

The Front believes that bringing down al-Assad's regime is the first step toward the establishment of an Islamic state. It also adopts a sharp rhetoric toward religious

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[27] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," October 12, 2012.

[28] Ibid.; see also Zelin, "Jihadists in Syria on Internet," October 18, 2012.

minorities, dubbing Alawites as "Nusayris"[29] and Shiites as "Rafidah,"[30] and presenting itself as the frontline defender of Sunnis.[31] The group is mostly composed of Syrian fighters who gained fighting experience in the jihad arenas in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and others; it also includes other Arab fighters, Turks, Uzbeks, Chechens, Tajiks, and a minority of Europeans.[32] The al-Nusra Front has been attracting more and more Syrians, not for ideological reasons, but because of its effectiveness in combat, its abstention from seeking material gain, and its plentiful funding from outside sources.[33]

The group gained fame for claiming responsibility for massive and effective suicide attacks, and its use of media strategies similar to those employed by al-Qaida and its affiliated organizations. There are also close links between the official media production company of al-Nusra, White Lighthouse Media Production, and al-Qaida's internet networks, such as the Shumukh al-Islam Network and the Islamic Fidaa Network.[34] Recently, the Front announced that it pledged allegiance to the head of al-Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in an attempt to prevent the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida from dominating the organization and its decisions.[35] This announcement came after the head of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Bahdadi, said that al-Nusra would merge with the

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[29] The Alawi religion, previously known as Nusayri or Nosairi (named after Ibn Nusayr or Nusair) or al-Ansariyyah (named after the Syrian mountain range area), is a syncretistic religion with close affinities to Shia Islam. The Nusayris, or Alawis, share concepts with Shia and Sunni Islam along with other religions, including Christianity. The term "Alawi" was adopted by the group in the early 20th century to emphasize their relationship with Ali ibn Abi Talib [editor's note].

[30] *Rafidah* (rejectors) are, broadly speaking, Shiite Muslims who reject (*rafad*) the rightly guided caliphs (*Rashidun*) Abu Bakr and Umar. Many Muslim scholars, however, have stated that the term Rafi Um cannot be applied to Shiites in general, but only to the extremists among them who believe in the divine right of Ali to succeed Muhammed and condemn Abu Bakr and Umar as unlawful rulers of the Muslim community. To the majority of the Shiites, who do not condemn Umar's immediate successors and assert Ali's right to the caliphate over Muaawiyah (the first Umayyad caliph), the term Rafie is pejorative, and coined by their opponents to cast the shadow of extremism on them.

[31] al-Taweel, "The Nusra Front," January 9, 2013.

[32] Malek, "Syrian Conflict Drawing Jihadists from Europe," April 3, 2013.

[33] Jammo, "al-Nusra Front: A Rough Strategy," January 8, 2013.

[34] Zelin, "The Rise of al-Qaeda in Syria," December 6, 2012.

[35] Agence France-Presse, "al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to al-Qaeda," April 10, 2013.

Iraqi organization in order to form a new organization, called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[36]

Al-Nusra Front has distinguished itself by devoting part of its time and resources to social work. In cooperation with the al-Fajr Islamic Movement and Ahrar al-Sham, the al-Nusra Front founded the Movement of Muslim Youth as a civilian organ that conducts civil society activities, especially civilian aid (e.g., supplying civilians with bread in the city of Aleppo).[37]

The Syrian Islamic Front

The creation of the Syrian Islamic Front was announced on December 21, 2012, immediately after the announcement of the formation of the Higher Joint Military Command in Antalya, which is why many viewed the Islamic Front as a response to the council. It is composed of a broad coalition that includes a large number of Islamist groups, notably Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, and the al-Fajr Islamic Movement.

The Syrian Islamic Front generally focuses on action in the field, but it also engages in civilian activism "in its different branches: political, religious, educational, and humanitarian, so long as all activities are within the bounds of the Islamic law," as required by its founding statement. Accordingly, the Front is open "to all Islamic active brigades on the ground of [their] beloved Syria".[38]

The evolution of the Islamic brigades is constant, with groups moving according to the revolution and the various ideologies present. For example, Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria—a coalition of Islamist brigades—is either an evolution of the Syrian Revolutionary Front, founded by Ahrar al-Sham, or, alternatively, it is a new creation, which would signify that Ahrar al-Sham has withdrawn from the Front in order to join the new coalition, without announcing, or explaining, this shift.

Ahrar al-Sham Brigades (The Freemen of Syria)

Ahrar al-Sham is one of the most prominent Salafist groups in Syria, and is composed of more than 86 brigades distributed throughout Syria's governorates under the

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[36] Spencer, "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Merger with al-Nusra," April 9, 2013.

[37] Abouzeid, "Interview with al-Nusra," December 25, 2012.

[38] Yatim, "11 Battalions Announce Syrian Islamic Front," December 22, 2012.

leadership of a man who is referred to as Abu Abdallah. In its first recorded message, the movement clearly declared that its objective is to replace al-Assad's regime with an Islamic state, but also said that the current mental state of the population, led astray by the pro-regime religious institutions, should be taken into account. It also described the revolution as a jihad against the "Safavid conspiracy," a conspiracy that aims to establish a Shiite state encompassing Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.[39] The expansion of Ahrar al-Sham's geographic sphere of action was reflected by a more prominent presence in the media. In June 2012, Ahrar al-Sham was described as the largest military organization in the newly-formed Revolutionaries of Syria Front, a political-military alliance dominated by the Islamists. Despite the fact that the group was among the main participants in the creation of that alliance, it suspended its membership a day after it was created, which was seen as a reaction to the moderate rhetoric adopted by the al-Nusra Front. Six weeks later, Ahrar al-Sham renewed its membership after the coalition adopted a new political charter openly calling for the establishment of an Islamic state and asserting its commitment to international treaties and agreements, on the condition that they do not contravene the principles of the Sharia. At the time, the charter was seen as an attempt to reconcile the Islamic line, which Ahrar al-Sham and its allies demanded, with the necessity of maintaining a positive relationship with the international parties supporting the revolution.[40] Ahrar al-Sham also conducts various civil society activities, including the distribution of aid to the local population.

<u>Liwa al-Haqq (The Truth Brigade)</u>

Liwa al-Haqq was announced in August 2012, and is an alliance of several Islamist military groups: the Brigade of the Followers of the Prophet, the al-Ansar Brigade, the Brigade of the Martyrs of Baba Amr, and the al-Fath al-Mubeen Brigades, which includes: Sheikh Mahmoud al-Furati's Brigade, the Eagle Brigade, al-Huda Brigade, Siham al-Lail Brigade, Siba al-Barr Brigade, Ahrar al-Qalamun Brigade, and al-Nasir Li Deen al-Lah Brigade. Paratrooper Colonel Abdulrahman Swais was appointed as the military commander of Liwa al-Haqq.[41] In its first official statement, the group

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[39] For more information, see the official website of the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades: http://www.ahraralsham.com. See also al-Ameen, "The Local Character of the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades," August 21, 2012.

[40] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 15.

[41] *News Centre*, "Brigades of Homs Unite," August 15, 2012.

announced a pledge to pursue jihad until al-Assad's regime is replaced by a just Islamic rule. They also said that it was created in order to unify the revolutionaries in Homs; nevertheless, it has failed in attracting prominent revolutionary factions in the city,[42] and its relationships with other groups have been marred with tensions.[43]

Al-Fajr Islamic Movement (The Islamic Dawn Movement)

The al-Fajr Islamic Movement is a Salafist jihadi movement that conducts field operations in cooperation with other Islamist forces, such as the al-Nusra Front and the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades. Video clips published by the movement show that it has a close relationship with Sheikh Abu Baseer al-Tartusi, a Syrian Salafist sheikh who previously resided in exile in London before returning to Syria to join the revolution.[44] Al-Tartusi plays an important role in guiding many Islamist organizations, including the al-Fajr Movement and its armed brigades, the most important of which is the Sheikh of Islam Ibn Taymiyya Brigade.[45] Currently, the movement includes 18 brigades and groups that are distributed throughout Aleppo and its countryside, Maarat al-Numan, and parts of the Idlib countryside. The movement also has a theological committee and a media bureau that issues religious flyers and the *Islamic Syria Magazine*, which is distributed to the brigades; the movement also distributes aid to those in need.[46]

The Ansar al-Islam Coalition in Damascus and its Countryside

The Ansar al-Islam Coalition was announced in August 2012, and according to the founding statement, its mission is the unification of revolutionary and political

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[42] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 28.

[43] Personal interview with a Homs field activist in August 2012. This activist also said that tensions between the two sides reached a point where the regime forces were informed about a tunnel linking the Jouret al-Shayyah neighborhood to another one in the region controlled by the regime, which was used by Liwa al-Haqq in order to smuggle weapons, ammunitions and food. Once al-Farouq's Brigade learned about the tunnel, they demanded a 40 percent share of anything that passes through it, which Liwa al-Haqq rejected, prompting al-Farouq to inform the regime forces about the tunnel, which was then quickly destroyed.

[44] Roggio, "Al-Nusra Front Commanded Free Syrian Army Unit," October 19, 2012.

[45] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 29.

[46] Ibid.

movements, the establishment of an Islamic state, and the construction of a Muslim society. The coalition is composed of the Sahaba Brigades, the al-Habeeb al-Mustafa Brigade, the al-Islam Brigade, the al-Furqan Brigade, the Hamza Brigade, the Shield of Syria Brigades, the Brigade of the Descendants of the Prophet, and other groups.[47]

The Sahaba Brigades

The Sahaba Brigades were founded in March 2012, led at the time by Colonel Khaled al-Hubus.[48] The group claimed responsibility for the first operation that targeted the Crisis Management Cell in Damascus on May 20, 2012, which was an attempt to poison the members of the crisis cell. It is noteworthy that the group adopts the banner of the Free Syrian Army, rather than the Islamic banner, in its official emblem on its Facebook page.

The Al-Furqan Brigades

The brigades are composed of the Kanaker Martyrs Brigade, the Wisal al-Sham Brigade, the Ibn Taymiyyah Brigade, al-Ansar Brigade, Brigade of Special Missions, Abu Abkr al-Siddiq Brigade, Zayd Ibn Thabet Brigade, Ousud al-Furqan Brigade, the Dirar Bin al-Azwar Brigade, the Mujahidee al-Salhiya Brigade, the Assembly for the Liberation of Quneitra, the al-Ikhlas Brigade, the Ali Bin Abi Talib Brigade, the Omar Bin al-Khattab Brigade, and the Uthman Bin Affan Brigade.[49] The al-Furqan Brigades are most active in the Western Ghouta region (Artuz, Darayya, al-Kasweh, and al-Muadhamiya), but are also present in the southern parts of Damascus. This group has also established a presence outside the Damascus region through affiliated brigades, such as the Ali Bin Abi Talib Brigade in Idlib. The founding statement invokes the concept of jihad as a way of raising the word of God, establishing justice, and maintaining security and civic peace after the fall of the regime.[50]

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[47] "The Coalition Charter".

[48] *Syrian Change*, "The Announcement of the Sahaba Brigades," March 30, 2012.

[49] *The Revolution of the Free Syrians,* "The Military Council in Damascus," May 5, 2012.

[50] "al-Furqan Brigade Announces al-Furqan brigade," YouTube video, November 24, 2012.

The Al-Islam Brigade

Al-Islam is a military, jihadi, and political front that follows a strict military hierarchy, led by Zahran Abdullah Alloush, a graduate of the Islamic University in Medina, Saudi Arabia. This group has been active in the city of Douma and its suburbs since March 2012.[51] Unlike the other Islamist brigades that are affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, the al-Islam Brigade has chosen the black Islamic flag as its banner, and bases its activism on its interpretation of the concept of jihad. The group's media material is characterized by a strong religious content and a Salafist rhetoric that is different from the Islamic discourse found in the other Free Syrian Army brigades. The group's website displays photos and contributions by religious figures such as Sheikh Adnan al-Arur and Sheikh Nabeel al-Awadi, and their official Facebook page promotes Salafist thought to explain the group's ideological stance on various political and theological issues.[52] The brigade has also formed a Shura council and a theological committee that issues rulings regarding religious and practical matters.[53]

The Al-Habeeb al-Mustafa Brigade

This brigade was created in January 2012 in the Eastern Ghouta region of Arbeen. It includes the Harun al-Rasheed Brigade, the Dhu al-Nurain Brigade, Abdullah Abd al-Salam in Saqba, the Imam al-Hussain Brigade, the Engineering Battalion, the Umm al-Qura Brigade, al-Qaqa Bin Amro al-Tamimi Brigade, and others.[54]

The Descendants of the Prophet Brigade

The Descendants were established in July 2012, and are composed of the following units: the Brigade of the Martyrs of Bait Jinn, the Ahbab al-Mustapha Brigade, the Martyr Abu Ubaida Brigade, the Free of Bait Jinn Brigade, the Abu Dujana Brigade, the Omar al-Farouq Brigade, and the Conquerors' Brigade. In the group's founding

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[51] Personal interview with al-Islam Brigade leader, February 22, 2013.

[52] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 17.

[53] *Al-Uqab*, "Formation of the Decision-Making Council," December 1, 2012.

[54] For more information, see the official website of the al-Habeeb al-Mustafa Brigade: www.lewaa-almostafa.com.

statement, the organization declared that it aims to "rais[e] the word of God and defend its religion and the disinherited through the proclamation of jihad".[55]

The Ansar al-Islam coalition announced a major restructuring of its organizational hierarchy, with some factions leaving the coalition, most notably the al-Islam Brigade, leading to a public debate between the Ansar al-Islam coalition and the al-Islam Brigade;[56] the al-Islam Brigade announced in a statement issued by its political bureau that the restructuring had taken it by surprise, and denied that it had requested to leave the coalition. Following its statement, the group announced that it joined the Front for the Liberation of Syria,[57] even though the Ansar al-Islam coalition issued a statement when the Front for the Liberation of Syria was created, protesting its inclusion of the al-Islam Brigade in their founding statement,[58] which the brigade then countered.[59]

The Front for the Liberation of Syria

The Front for the Liberation of Syria is a coalition of Islamist brigades that was announced in September 2012, and is composed of the following brigades: the Suqour al-Sham Brigade (in Idlib and Hama), the Ansar al-Islam coalition (in Damascus and its countryside), the al-Farouq Brigades (in Homs), the Amr bin al-As Brigade (in Aleppo), and the Council of the Revolutionaries of Deir Ez-Zour. The Front for the Liberation of Syria declared its commitment to Islam as "the main source of legislation, while stressing respect for the religious and ethnic diversity in society"; the group also said that it will contribute to "filling the institutional and security void during the transitional period after the fall of the regime".[60]

While at a first glance, the Front for the Liberation of Syria appears to be a jihadi movement, it is not, in fact, an ideological alliance since it includes moderate Islamists

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[55] The Announcement Prophet Grandsons Brigade," YouTube video, 2012.

[56] Al-Habeeb al-Mustafa Brigade Facebook page.

[57] "Islam Brigade Joins Liberation Front," YouTube video, December 12, 2012.

[58] For more information, see Al-Habeeb al-Mustafa Brigades website, http://www.lewaa-almostafa.com/?op=A&id=128.

[59] The official Facebook page of the Sahaba Brigades: http://www.facebook.com/kataibalshaba.

[60] The official Facebook page of the Front for the Liberation of Syria: www.facebook.com/jbhtthryrswrya.

alongside Salafist jihadi factions. The group is often represented by Mazen Sheikhani, a media spokesman who is headquartered in London. However, its effective leader is Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh (aka Abu Issa) from the village of Sarja in the Jabal al-Zawiya region in Idlib. Abu Issa is the leader of the Suqur al-Sham Brigade (see below), which is one of the largest Salafist groups in northern Syria, controlling an important part of the Jabal al-Zawiya region, as well as peripheral parts of Idlib and northern Hama.[61]

The rhetoric of the group's founding statement is noted for its moderation and political maturity. It designated the objectives behind its establishment to be:

> Firstly, overthrowing al-Assad's regime with all its pillars. Secondly, protecting all Syrians—regardless of their beliefs, ethnicities, and sects— and their private and public property. Thirdly, preserving security and regulating the circulation of arms after the fall of the regime, so that the people can gain their freedom and decide their own future, with Allah's help. Fourthly, insisting on the sovereignty of Syria, its unity, and its independence.[62]

The Suqour al-Sham Brigade

Suqour al-Sham constitutes the largest military faction within the Front for the Liberation of Syria. Founded in November 2011, it became the main striking force of the revolution in Idlib within a few months, and has around 4,000 fighters. In the first video released by the group showing its attacks against government targets, its leader, Ahmad Issa al-Sheikh, said that the group was part of the Free Syrian Army. However, in the following weeks, the brigade dropped its references to the Free Syrian Army, and began to adopt an increasingly Salafist discourse in its videos and statements. Since then, al-Sheikh has appeared in a video issuing directives to his fighters and explaining to them that their ultimate objective should be the establishment of an Islamic state.[63] More recently, the group began to soften its extremist Salafist rhetoric by expressing more moderate viewpoints. In the media, especially when meeting with Western journalists, al-Sheikh and other leaders of the brigade—state that their final objective is the establishment of the Islamic state, but they also speak of guaranteeing the

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[61] Lund, "Holy Warriors," October 15, 2012.

[62] From the official Facebook page of the Front for the Liberation of Syria.

[63] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 16.

democratic rights of minorities, which is a position closer to that of the Muslim Brotherhood than to traditional Salafist discourse.[64]

Al-Ansar Brigade

The al-Ansar Brigade has been active in the city of Homs and its suburbs since March 2012, and describes its main mission as performing jihad. It also encourages the "correct" Salafist demeanor, and speaks openly of the sectarian nature of the ongoing conflict. The group adopts the white Islamic banner, and extends bridges with other Salafist opposition factions. In its literature, the group speaks of the "corrupt environment" in which its members used to live before the revolution in the army and civilian life. Media on the group's website also demonstrates the groups belief that opposition fighters who do not practice religious rituals as "sick" brothers who must be treated and healed.[65]

General Characteristics of the Islamist Battalions and Brigades

Despite the fact that all Islamist brigades, battalions, and other armed factions in Syria say that their frame of reference is the Quran and the prophetic Sunna, these disparate groups have not united in a single political or military body. There are a number of ideological variations among them, with some adopting the international jihadi thought, which is closer to that of al-Qaida, while others adopt a centrist Islamist discourse. The majority of these groups, however, describe themselves as Salafist. On the other hand, while most of these groups view the struggle against the regime as a jihad against an atheist, secular regime, the intensity and content of the ideological discourse varies from one faction to another. These Islamic factions, however, share several general characteristics: influence, social background, and political propositions.

These groups are endowed with important resources that permit them to influence the population, such as their religious discourse, plentiful funding sources, active aid networks, a wide network of social relations, and an effective media team. In other words, the Islamist groups have more resources than the other armed opposition

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[64] Ibid., 20.

[65] Ibid., 22.

groups in Syria, and are able to provide a comprehensive framework that satisfies the needs of the Syrian population. Socially, the class makeup of these groups reveals that the majority of the members come from rural areas, which provides an optimal environment for action because there is a widespread feeling of marginalization in the countryside, a solid network of social relations in rural society, and a conservative character in the Syrian countryside in general.

Lastly, the political philosophical stance of these groups is unanimously the belief that the Syria of the future should be Islamic, though they disagree over how to achieve this objective and how this would look its final form. While some argue for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate, others want a national Islamic state ruled by the Sharia; for others, the idea is seen merely as an attractive slogan that meets the public's approval.

Relationships between Syrian Military Opposition Groups

The relationship between the different formations of the armed Syrian opposition has become a problematic issue because of the emergence of clear dividing lines between the two main movements of the military opposition—the military councils and the Islamic brigades. This has at times led to friction, and even mutual elimination, as happened between the Farouq Brigade and the al-Nusra Front in the north. In other instances, the relationship between the two movements is based on cooperation and coordination in the field, such as during the conquest of al-Raqqa.

Generally speaking, the relationship between the different components of the armed Syrian opposition can be described as fluid, with a complex dynamic that is influenced by a number of factors, including differences in political stances and ideological views, funding sources, and relationships with the political opposition. These relationships, though a sensitive subject, are exceptionally important due to their ability to have serious consequences on the revolution; in other words, the type of relations between the various armed groups can hasten the fall of the regime or, conversely, lead to the perpetuation of the existing impasse—or even engender new forms of violence that can propel the country into a state of complete chaos.

Political Stances and Ideological Views

The various ideological stances among the armed opposition have led to many frictions, especially as there is an absence of a unifying body for all these armed groups; instead,

we are facing numerous formations and brigades that diverge greatly on political and ideological questions, excluding any ideological unity for the armed opposition and opening the door to intellectual tensions that are tangibly reflected in the field.

The Ideological Views of the Military Councils

The secular military councils, and the factions that make them up, have not approached ideology in a specific manner, nor have they launched clear political programs. The intellectual and ideological component of the military councils resembles "general principles," the majority of which were declared by the groups' leaderships in their founding statements. The military councils are generally unaffiliated with a specific political or doctrinal movement, and agree on the necessity of dealing responsibly with the international community, as well as the establishment of a democratic state that guarantees the rights and freedoms of all citizens.[66] The military councils may have adopted this discourse in order to become a trusted entity for foreign powers, the West specifically, to deal with instead of the regime. This broad discourse reveals the lack of political vision among those councils, and the fact that its leaders do not possess a clear and well-defined political program that can be expressed in a coherent language. This is largely due to the fact that all the defecting officers had previously served in the regime's army, which was dominated by the Baath school of thought for over half a century.

It is also clear that the leaders of the military councils have attempted to distinguish themselves from the Islamist groups and their religious discourse, with the exception of the Joint Leadership of the Revolutionary Military Councils. The Joint Leadership called for the establishment of an independent Syrian state with a centrist Arab-Islamic identity based on justice, equality, respect for human rights and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, and commitment to international, Arab, and regional treaties and agreements so long as they do not contravene Islamic Sharia law.[67]

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[66] For more information, see Free Syrian Army, "The Local Coordination Committees "Code of Conduct," August 8, 2012.

[67] "Statement of Formation of Joint Supreme Military Command," YouTube video, December 10, 2012.

Generally speaking, the military councils are weak in terms of promoting their ideas, due to their lack of means to connect with the popular base, as well as the fact that the councils were not very aware of the importance of this issue to begin with. Moreover, the councils lack a charismatic figure capable of mobilizing the people and promoting a comprehensive political vision that can be adopted by the opposition in the street.

The Ideological Views of the Islamist Brigades

Despite the fact that the Islamist brigades adopt the Sharia as their frame of reference, they also propose a number of diverging views regarding minorities, the shape of the future state, and international treaties and charters. Broadly speaking, the Islamist groups a share a sectarian view of the conflict, and, with varying intensities, strive to establish an Islamic state and promote the adoption of Islamic customs and rituals in daily life. Nonetheless, some of these groups have a more moderate stance toward Alawites, such as the al-Islam Brigade. While adopting a Salafist discourse, the al-Islam Brigade considers the calls for sectarian cleansing against Alawite civilians to be religiously impermissible and detrimental to the interests of the revolution.[68]

The attractiveness of the Islamist brigades and their power of influence is due to the fact that they possess effective tools of outreach, including the mosque, imams, clerics, and humanitarian aid. These strengths are often employed to promote the Islamist agenda and to attack their adversaries, especially the military councils, which they view as tools of a foreign project that is far from the teachings of Islam.[69]

The variations in the visions and ideological postures among the armed groups are the most significant hurdle preventing the establishment of a unified body for the Syrian military opposition. In this regard, a sharp debate took place between two prominent jihadi theorists, Abu Mohammad al-Shanqeeti and Abu Baseer al-Tartusi, over the acceptability of joining the Free Syrian Army. Al-Tartusi's opinion was that joining forces with the Free Syrian Army was permissible, while al-Shanqeeti believed that the group is a secular organization that calls for democracy, which contravenes the principles of the Sharia. However, al-Shanqeeti later modified his position, judging that all Salafis

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[68] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 18.

[69] In an interview, a field activist said that in one of the mosques of the Eastern Ghouta calls were publicly made against the military council that is active there. The council was accused of theft and of working against the teachings of Islam.

should regroup into a single front (i.e., the al-Nusra Front), while stressing the need to avoid clashes with the Free Syrian Army. In fact, al-Shanqeeti decided that it is permissible to cooperate with the non-Islamic brigades when necessitated by the conditions of battle.[70]

These religious rulings have influenced the relationship between the al-Nusra Front and the other brigades that are active on the ground. Since July 2012, a relationship of cooperation and coordination has begun to emerge between the al-Nusra Front and some of the Free Syrian Army groups, especially those with an Islamist bent. In Aleppo, for instance, cooperation clearly took place between al-Nusra and Liwa al-Tawheed during the battles to control various parts of the city.[71] Moreover, a spokesman for the revolutionary council in Aleppo and its countryside, which is an active military formation affiliated with Liwa al-Tawheed, announced that the al-Nusra Front fighters are welcomed as heroes in the city.[72] This cooperation was also noticeable during the battle to control al-Raqqa and other regions in the north. These instances, however, do not mask the existing state of tension between the two sides, which has led to clashes—albeit limited—between al-Nusra and other brigades that are affiliated with the Free Syrian Army. For example, combatants belonging to the a-Farouq Brigade in the north kidnapped and executed the head of the al-Nusra Front's Shura council, Abu Mohammad al-Shami al-Absi.[73] For its part, the al-Nusra Front is believed to be responsible for the killing of one of the major leaders of the al-Farouq Brigade in the city of Sarmin in northern Syria in early January 2013, after he was blamed for assassinating al-Absi four months earlier—despite the fact that the al-Farouq Brigade did not accuse al-Nusra directly.[74]

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[70] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad".

[71] Jammo, "al-Nusra Front," January 8, 2013.

[72] Abd al-Qadir Salih, commander of operations for Liwa al-Tawheed, interviewed by Al Jazeera Arabic, August 11, 2012.

[73] Al-Absi is of Syrian origin. He went to Afghanistan in order to join the jihadi movement; there he met with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and joined his group. He returned to Saudi Arabia shortly before the September 11 attacks, and lived in Sudan before returning to Syria in 2011. See *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, "The Assassination of al-Absi," September 8, 2012.

[74] *Al-Hayat*, "Killings between al-Nusra and al-Farouq Brigades," January 12, 2013.

Furthermore, Free Syrian Army field commanders have expressed their increasing rage at the behavior of the jihadi groups, especially the al-Nusra Front, which they have accused of attempting to "steal" the revolution and its objectives.[75] These increasing tensions are clearly displayed in Aleppo's countryside, which has become a bastion for well-armed jihadists who are propelled by an ideological vision, many of them adopting the discourse and thought of al-Qaida and viewing Syria as an arena for international jihad.[76]

However, the most notable conflict occurred on November 18, 2012, when a number of Islamist military formations announced their rejection of the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and declared their intention to establish a just Islamic state. This statement was signed by the al-Nusra Front, the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, Liwa al-Tawheed, The Islamic Shahbaa Brigade in Aleppo, the al-Fajr Islamic Movement, the Nation's Shield Brigade, the Brigade of al-Tawheed Andan, the al-Islam Battalions, the Brigades of Muhammad's Army, the al-Nasser Brigade, the al-Baz Battalion, the Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih Battalion, and the Shield of Islam Brigade.[77]

The signatories of the statement represented a broad ideological spectrum, ranging from a non-ideological Sunni movement, such as the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade, a Free Syrian Army faction that is active in northwest Aleppo, to groups with a general Islamist tendency, such as Liwa al-Tawheed, to a number of jihadi organizations, including the al-Nusra Front, the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, and the al-Fajr Islamic Movement.

Some of these groups distanced themselves from the statement the next day because of the strong reactions that came from civilian and military revolutionary organs, fearing that they would become associated with the extremist Islamist camp.[78] As a result, the statement was re-published in a new format four days later with the title "a corrected version". The commander of Liwa al-Tawheed, Abd al-Qadir Salih, said that the signatories had adopted the call for the establishment of a just state that would be

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[75] *Al-Hayat*, "The Free Syrian Army Responds to al-Qaida," April 10, 2013.

[76] Majeed, "Course of the Syrian Revolution Threatened," January 18, 2013.

[77] Muslim Brotherhood Syria, "The Repercussions of the Aleppo Brigades' Statement," November 22, 2012.

[78] Lund, "Aleppo and the Battle over the Revolution," December 4, 2012; and *al-Hayat*, "Syria: Islamist Fighters Reject the National Coalition," November 19, 2012.

administered in accordance with the Law of God, but without using the term "Islamic state". The new statement did not include any reference to the National Coalition, and the list of the signatories of the amended statement included all of the forces that had signed the original one, except the al-Nusra Front and the al-Fajr Islamic Movement.[79]

This clash of opinions toward the National Coalition has shed light on the intensity of differences between the components of the Syrian armed opposition. They show that it has been sliding toward intellectual and ideological conflicts, which threaten to widen the gulf between the Islamist brigades and the military councils, especially if the struggle against the regime turns into a protracted war.

The Question of Funding

The question of funding is one of the thorniest issues in the Syrian revolution, and constitutes the prime reason for conflict and fragmentation among the civilian and military factions of the opposition. The funders' different agendas, and their attempts to seize influence on the ground, not only place the forces of the opposition under difficult pressure, but also bring the possibility that some brigades could turn into private militias that receive their orders from the outside. Moreover, the variation between the interests of the funders, who choose to support specific factions at the expense of others, transfers regional and international competition onto Syrian soil; this is often reflected in the form of clashes on the ground, which can escalate to violent infighting. All these factors provide a warning that the Syrian situation could shift from a revolution on the part of an oppressed people against a despotic regime, to a proxy war between regional and international powers that are competing over influence in Syria. In general, there are three main sources of funding for the Islamist and secular armed opposition: foreign funding, networking, and self-financing.

Some foreign governments have attempted to create tools of influence on their behalf within the Syrian conflict. The most prominent states that finance the Syrian military opposition include the Gulf countries, Great Britain, France, and Turkey.[80] Secondly, organized networks with vast experience in providing money and weapons have been moving into Syria. The Islamist groups are especially known for enjoying large funding

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[79] Lund, "Aleppo and the Battle over the Revolution," December 4, 2012.

[80] *BBC Arabic*, "Saudi Arabia Pays Salaries," June 23, 2012; and "Qatar and Saudi Arabia Paying Salaries," June 23, 2012.

networks that extend across political borders. Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, and its shift toward armed action, some networks began to send support to the Syrian interior, relying on personal links through the local gentry, as well as preachers and clerics from Syria and other countries. Lastly, self-funding has emerged as a way of financing in order to compensate for the insufficient flow of external aid. Some groups have also resorted to this method in order to achieve a degree of independence vis-à-vis outside funders who impose conditions. Many armed groups have begun to exploit all of the economic resources that have fallen under their control, such as factories, economic establishments, machinery, vehicles, minerals, such as copper and iron, and other valuables, regardless of whether they were public or private property. In addition, they gain weapons and ammunitions from the bases of the regular army.

The military councils were formed amid a regional and international desire to regulate the military opposition's actions and to contain the "extremist Islamist" movements within it. Thus, the military councils largely rely on foreign governmental sources for their funding. Although it has been minute in scale, this funding has been linked to the policies of these governments and their view of the conflict; sometimes, monetary aid flows toward the military councils while, at other times, the flow is halted for reasons relating to the funders' interests and their views of the Syrian conflict.[81]

As for the Islamist brigades, their sources of funding vary between governments, organizations, committees, and individuals. The al-Islam Brigade and the al-Habeeb al-Mustafa Brigade rely on funding that arrives from individuals in the Gulf through intermediaries.[82] Other brigades rely on networks that are managed by preachers and Salafist clerics, such as the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, which is financed by the Popular Committee led by Kuwaiti cleric Hajjaj al-Ajami. Suqour al-Sham claims that its funding comes from Syrian and Arab expatriates, including the Syrian opposition figure Imad al-

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[81] In an interview, a civilian activist said that monetary aid arrived to the military councils in November 2012, part of which was spent on salaries for the revolutionaries, while the rest was devoted to the purchase of weapons. The activist also said that a number of military commanders were given money in order to establish military councils, and the majority of this funding came from Gulf states. See also: *al-Arabiya,* "The Free Syrian Army Disburses Salary," October 22, 2012.

[82] *Kulluna Shuraka*, "Douma: The Decisive Battle between the East Ghouta and Damascus," December 19, 2012.

Deen Rasheed. Other fighting brigades in Homs receive their funding from Salafist clerics in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.[83]

More recently, the Islamist factions and the military councils began to cultivate independent funding streams; the situation in Syria has engendered something akin to a war economy that is based on the concept of the bounty, in addition to black market trading and the imposition of fees and taxes by the brigades on commercial, agricultural, and other activities.[84] Furthermore, the trade and smuggling of oil through the Turkish borders has boomed, especially after the fall of a number of oil wells in northern and northeastern Syria into the hands of the armed opposition.[85] This trade has provided an important financial resource for some brigades, but it has also become a subject of conflict among them for the possession of these resources.[86]

The Relationship with the (Exiled) Political Opposition

The relationship between the military and the civilian components of the opposition encapsulates the majority of the ailments of the Syrian revolution: an absence of coordination and cooperation, a prevailing mood of conflict and competition, and a prioritization of special narrow interests over the interests of the revolution and its supporters. In general, the relationship between the two sides, military and civilian, has been characterized by instability and is influenced by multiple variables, most importantly the situation on the battlefield, foreign links, political developments, and each side's view of their role in the revolution.[87]

The Relationship between the Military Councils and the Political Opposition

Throughout the course of the Syrian revolution, the relationship between the military councils and the political opposition has witnessed ups and downs, but it has not

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[83] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 16.

[84] In an interview a civilian activist said that some brigades sell the equipment that they seize after occupying regime positions, in order to finance their operations.

[85] *Syria News*, "Opposition Sources Indicate Fighters in Control," April 8, 2013.

[86] *Al-Hayat*, "Al-Nusra Fighter," April 2, 2013. See also *Al-Hayat,* "Clashes between al-Nusra and Syrian Tribes," April 21, 2013, www.alhayat.com/505387.

[87] For the purposes of this paper, we shall treat the political opposition in exile as a single bloc, even though this simplification is not an accurate portrayal of the political opposition forces.

stabilized or established a clear foundation. Overall, their relationship can be described as one of competitive cooperation; each side needs the other, but each also resists the other's attempts to dominate. The political opposition, which emerged in exile, draws its legitimacy from its links and affiliation with the fighters on the ground, and the military councils need the exiled opposition as a political cover and façade for dealing with international parties, as well as funding. This is especially true after the formation of the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which became a principal recipient of international aid and funding provided to the Syrian revolution.

Thus far, the two parties have not been capable of establishing a viable institutionalized relationship, despite the fact that a positive change occurred after the formation of the National Coalition and the Higher Joint Military Command, which became the two broadest umbrellas for the political and military opposition in Syria. Nevertheless, the conflicts between these two organizations and their lack of coordination quickly became apparent; it appeared as if the two sides had inherited all the complications of the relationship between the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army. Some armed factions have expressed their reservations about the initiative launched by Ahmad Muath al-Khateeb, head of the National Coalition, calling for dialogue with the regime.[88] There was another altercation over the manner in which the interim Prime Minister Ghassan Hitto was elected.[89] The conflict escalated as accusations were exchanged between some military factions and currents within the coalition; in fact, some of those forces have threatened to bring down Hitto's government and prevent it from working inside Syria.[90]

The Relationship between the Islamist Factions and the Political Opposition

The relationship of the Islamist armed factions to the political opposition in exile appears to be even more complex than that of the secular military factions. This relationship is also marred by an intentional vagueness that is practiced by both sides. Broadly speaking, the approach to the relationship varies widely among different factions. Certain Islamist brigades tend to deal with the political opposition from a pragmatic perspective in terms of searching for funding, political cover, and military

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[88] Al-Mukhtasar, "The Regime Rejects al-Khateeb Initiative," February 5, 2013.

[89] *Kulluna Shuraka*, "Final Warning to Hitto," April 10, 2013.

[90] Syrian Parties Info, "The Free Army Criticizes Muslim Brothers," March 30, 2013.

support, while other Islamist forces prefer to distance themselves from the political opposition. In turn, the political opposition adopts a similar approach, as it is in need of gaining the support of Islamist brigades, which represent the strongest and most effective force inside Syria.

Some of the clerics and theorists of salafi jihadism have proposed their vision for the relationship with the political opposition, including Sheikh Abu Baseer al-Tartusi, who specified two major conditions for dealing with the opposition. Firstly, it must not build links with the liberal or secular opposition, or the opposition factions that harbor anti-religious sentiments; and, secondly, that the political opposition coordinate its stances with the Islamist brigades, who should not be cast aside when making vital decisions. Abu Baseer says that the Salafists were not consulted in the process of the formation of the Syrian National Council, and that they differ with it over its acceptance of all the shades of the opposition, especially those with liberal and secular leanings, since these factions should not have the right to be part of the leadership of the Syrian revolution.[91] Nevertheless, Abu Baseer leans toward a pragmatic policy in order to avoid a confrontation with these political currents; he stated that "it is not necessary, at this stage, to open a battle with the other factions within the opposition; we are currently in the process of overthrowing the regime, and efforts should unite while maintaining [our] reservations toward the ideas of the political opposition".[92] Abu Baseer's influence is reflected in the stance of the Ahrar al-Sham Brigades, which expressed reservations about establishing links with the National Council.[93]

As a matter of principle, the al-Nusra Front refused to deal with the political opposition, especially since it represented a Western project aiming at the containment of the Islamic project. On the other hand, Liwa al-Tawheed deals with the opposition in a pragmatic manner without making any commitments.[94] Other Islamist factions maintain relations with some political currents within the opposition. In September 2011, the General Committee for the Protection of Civilians, a group headed by the former Muslim Brotherhood member Haitham Rahma, sent weapons and money to the city of Homs in

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[91] al-Abd, "Salafists in Syria".

[92] Ibid.

[93] International Crisis Group, "Tentative Jihad," 15.

[94] Ibid.

order to resist the regime's repression, the Muslim Brotherhood's first step toward supporting the revolution militarily. The groups that are believed to receive generous support from the Brotherhood include the al-Farouq Brigade in Homs, Liwa al-Tawheed in Aleppo, Suqour al-Sham in Jabal al-Zawiya, and the Ahrar al-Sham Brigade in Idlib.[95]

Prospective Scenarios for the Relationships between Armed Syrian Opposition Movements

With Syria turning into a battlefield for regional and international actors, and in the absence of tangible signs for a political or a military solution to end the crisis, there are serious fears regarding the emergence of destructive side-conflicts on the margins of the main issue, which remains the Syrian people's attempt to rid itself from despotism and transition toward a democratic system that guarantees freedom and furthers development. These side-conflicts threaten to turn into bloody confrontations between the factions of the armed opposition, especially after the appearance of fault-lines between these groups. Al-Qaida's entry into the conflict in a public and direct manner[96] points to the extent of contradictions that may surface and affect the relationship between the different factions with the armed opposition.[97]

While a muted battle over influence is already taking place between the secular and Islamist movements in the regions that are no longer controlled by the regime, this situation can quickly turn into an open confrontation in the event of foreign—specifically Western—encouragement.[98] The United States views the events in Syria as part of its war on terrorism, which is preventing a military victory for the Islamist opposition and simultaneously paralyzing the political resolution of the crisis. While Washington wishes to see the fall of al-Assad's regime, because that would weaken Iran's regional influence, it also views the continuation of the war in Syria as a low-cost method to weaken both the Syrian regime and its Islamist opponents. Moreover, the US is preventing the supply of money and weapons to the Islamist forces, which Washington

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[95] LeVivre, "Armed Struggle of Muslim Brotherhood," December 14, 2012.

[96] *Al-Hayat*, "Al-Zawahiri to the Syrian Armed Opposition," April 7, 2013.

[97] Agence France-Presse, "al-Nusra Pledges Allegiance to al-Qaeda," April 10, 2013; and *Al-Hayat*, "The Free Syrian Army Responds to al-Qaida," April 10, 2013.

[98] See, for example, El-Deen, "The Syrian Revolution and Theological Committees," April 10, 2013.

views as extremists, with the majority of support going to the military councils, which increases tensions and reinforces the notion that the councils are mere tools used by the West to establish its presence in the region. Furthermore, especially with the loosening of the regime's grip over the border region with Jordan and Israel, Washington began supervising the training of Syrian fighters to be used as local tools in order to prevent Islamist forces from controlling these vital regions, which also increases the possibility of a clash between the different military opposition factions in the Syrian south.[99]

Nevertheless, it could be argued that there is, so far, an insistence on the part of the military opposition not to slide into side-battles.[100] There are several scenarios that may determine the relationship between the different components of the military opposition. First, the current situation in which the brigades avoid direct clashes with each other while attempting to increase their influence in times of calm could continue, going so far as to cooperate in order to fight off the regime's forces in periods of confrontations.

Additionally, the opposition forces could enter into an agreement over the formation of a unified military body that gathers all the factions of the armed opposition, though this scenario does not appear probable given the many ideological differences and the foreign interference. Despite the fact that some Islamist forces have joined the Joint Military Command—the largest assembly of armed opposition factions—other important forces have preferred to remain outside this organization. Moreover, this leadership has yet to prove its ability to control or influence the armed factions theoretically under its command. Lastly, conflict and infighting among opposition forces could begin; as previously explained, this scenario may take place because of the ideological differences, the struggle over influence and resources, or even due to foreign incitement.

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[99] *Al-Hayat*, "The Guardian," April 8, 2013.

[100] *Syria News*, "The Military Council of the Free Syrian Army," April 12, 2013.

Conclusion

Like the political opposition, all of the Syrian armed opposition factions agree that their objective is to overthrow al-Assad's regime, and that they were created in order to defend the unarmed populace from the regime's extreme repression. However, they disagree on everything else; they do not have a clear answer regarding what will take place the day after the regime's fall, not even a road map for the overthrow of the regime, except for stating that military force is the only way to reach that objective.

While the majority of the armed factions call for unity and coordination, stressing that this is a decisive factor for winning the war, elements of discord tend to overpower such calls; ideological conflicts and struggles for influence and resources tend to overshadow other considerations. This comes at an extremely sensitive moment in the struggle in Syria and over Syria; thus, strategic wagers linked to regional and international competition abound. This situation is accompanied by an increasingly sectarian character of the struggle, as well as mounting violence, in the absence of any hope on the horizon for a political settlement that can preserve what is left of Syria and its historical and civilizational heritage.

These factors, which must be reflected in their political choices, indicate the scale of the responsibility that must be shouldered by the Syrian opposition, in general, and the military opposition in particular. If these groups continue to only work toward achieving narrow factional interests, and remain incapable of producing a viable national project, the country will slide toward the bleakest of scenarios. Conversely, if the opposition forces decide to rise to the responsibility and create a unifying, national military body that does not submit to foreign orders, this would hasten the victory of the revolution and save Syria from fragmentation—in addition to sparing Syria from regional conflicts that do not concern Syria directly—and permit the rebuilding of the state and society on a more just and humanistic basis.

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