



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## CASE ANALYSIS

# Syria's Armed Uprising: The Status Quo

Policy Analysis Unit | July 2016

Syria's Armed Uprising: The Status Quo

Series: Case Analysis

Policy Analysis Unit| July 2016

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>January to June 2016: Changes on the Ground</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Aleppo in the Eye of the Storm</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Central Syria: The Front Lines in Hama, Latakia and Homs</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Southern Syria: Frontlines in East Qalamoun, East Ghouta, West Ghouta and Quneitra</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Political and Military Tests</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Failure to Create a Unified Military Command: Repercussions</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>19</b>



## Introduction

This paper assesses the position of the armed Syrian opposition four years after the militarization of the country's revolution. It considers the implications of the shift in operations to ISIL-held territories in the north, which have become pivotal to the outcome of the conflict. Within this context, the continued internecine divisions that have paralyzed the armed Syrian opposition, specifically those armed groups operating as part of the Free Syrian Army, are considered anew. Internal divisions continue to reflect not only a multiplicity of foreign funding sources but are further rooted in the diversity of circumstances that lead to the formation of each group. Moscow's direct military involvement in the Syrian conflict and the shift of international focus to the battle against ISIL have only served to highlight these divisions, diverting attention away from the crimes of the Syrian regime. Since the pressing needs of nearly half a decade of armed struggle against the Syrian regime have not pushed factions to unite, new tactics must be developed.

With the aim of outlining a prospectus for the formation of a unified opposition military command, the first section of this report examines the on-the-ground developments of January-June 2016, as a series of actions and reactions that prevented the armed Syrian opposition from achieving a political resolution ahead of a democratic transition. Within these developments, a detailed description of each major armed group operating in Syria today sets out the parameters for an eventual unification.

## January to June 2016: Changes on the Ground

The armed factions in alliance with the FSA are waging battles across multiple fronts throughout Syria. The opposition's primary conflict remains against the regime and its allies, a fact which was reinforced in the wake of Moscow's direct military involvement on the side of Damascus, forcing the opposition into a defensive position. At the same time, the armed opposition is locked into armed struggle with ISIL forces. ISIL views opposition-held territories as easy-to-conquer locations. These could, if ever captured by ISIL, completely overturn the military balance of powers between ISIL and the Syrian regime. This developing balance has complicated calculations made by regional and international forces, allowing ISIL to maintain its strongholds, in particular around the city of Raqqa.

On a third front, the FSA-aligned opposition are pitted against the mainly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (a group composed of the mainly Kurdish People's Protection Units

known as the SDF), an independent fighting force seemingly amenable to receiving international support and implementing foreign agendas, at the same time as it upholds—with tacit support from both Russia and the United States—a commitment to Kurdish autonomy through the federalization of Syria. Since fighting on all three fronts is ongoing, it is clear that the internationally brokered ceasefire agreement of February 27, 2016 – meant to terminate hostilities between Syrian combatants with the exception of ISIL—is completely ineffective.

### **Aleppo in the Eye of the Storm**

With the aid of Russian aerial support as well as Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese Shia sectarian militia groups, the Syrian regime has, since February, been able to recapture the highlands north of Aleppo. The regime has also been able to encircle Tell Jabin and Tell Bashkooi from the north and the east. These gains meant that Syrian regime forces were given room to cut off the supply lines connecting opposition strongholds in the north Aleppo Governorate to Turkey\*. Assad's forces were also able to lift the opposition-enforced siege on the towns of Nubul and Zahraa, following their capture of a series of small towns also in the north of the Aleppo Governorate, including Hadraten, Maarasat Al Khan, Maeir and Kafeen.<sup>1</sup>

Once the Kurdish-aligned SDF entered the fray, it became clear that the Assad regime would use the group as a pawn in its military machinations and its ongoing conflict with the FSA-aligned opposition. This remains true even as the Assad regime continues to shell opposition-held sites and relies on Russian aerial bombing for further support.

Throughout the month of May, the northern Aleppo Governorate witnessed a guerilla war between the Free Syrian Army and ISIL. ISIL forces were able to utilize greater maneuverability to encircle FSA-aligned groups in the run-up to a series of attacks and counter-attacks. Hit-and-run tactics allowed ISIL forces to capture, on May 27, an area

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\* Syria is divided into 14 separate Governorates (*Muhafazat*, sing. *Muhafaza*), which are further divided into a total of 60 Districts (*Manatiq*, sing. *Mantiqa*). In general, a governorate takes the name of its major city. In this report, unless otherwise stated, "Aleppo", for example, will refer to the entire Governorate of Aleppo, and not only the city. "Rif Dimashq," which literally means "Damascus Countryside" is a separate governorate surrounding the larger Damascus Metropolitan District. It contains the District of Darayya, which itself contains the towns of East and West Ghouta.

<sup>1</sup> Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Research, "Aleppo Rebels Confront Russo-Iranian Stranglehold," March 24, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://goo.gl/QwcEmg>

of 70 km<sup>2</sup> that led to the loss of a number of military vehicles in the towns of Kaljabreen and Kafr Kalbain, and the siege of the small city of Marea, obliging FSA forces to hand over the town of Sheikh Issa to SDF control in return for the creation of a security corridor to allow civilians trapped in Marea a chance to flee.<sup>2</sup>

By June 8, however, various units loyal to the FSA (including the Sultan Morad Division, the 99<sup>th</sup> Division, the 13<sup>th</sup> Division, the Northern Division, and the Damascene Front) were able to mount a counter offensive that ultimately lifted the siege on Marea, ultimately leading to the capture of 12 separate positions in addition to a number of military vehicles. These gains permitted FSA forces to engage ISIL fighters across flashpoints in the towns of Kafra and Soran.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "ISIL Lays Siege to Marea, Separates it from Azaz," *Mada Syria*, May 27, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://goo.gl/9TPBm3>

<sup>3</sup> Paula Steih, "Fighting on Multiple Fronts Saps ISIL in the Aleppo Governorate as Opposition Lifts Siege on Marea," *Ash Sharq Al Awsat*, June 9, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://goo.gl/TIHjNp>



**Map 1 The Governorates of Syria. Note that spellings of governorate names differ across sources.**

At the Western end of the Aleppo Governorate, the regime has maintained its offensive against the towns of Bayanoon, Andan and Hayyan, all of which remain subject to Russian air strikes as well as the regime's artillery fire. The intensity of regime rocket attacks and shelling suggests that Assad forces are preparing for a ground invasion of the area, with the aim of securing the towns of Nubul and al-Zahraa, as well as the supply lines linking them to the south of Syria. Control of these towns would allow regime forces to pressure FSA formations in Kafr Hamra, the Handraat Camp, and the

Castillo Road: a vital supply line linking opposition points in Aleppo Governorate to the south and Idlib.<sup>4</sup>

While these battles were raging in the northern Aleppo Governorate, the southern part of Aleppo has been, since April 9, the site of a different series of skirmishes which pit Iranian Special Forces together with militia backed by Tehran, against a joint operations room headed by Jaish Al-Fatah (or “Army of Conquest”) a conglomeration of FSA-aligned Islamist groups. Tehran had previously dispatched its 65<sup>th</sup> Airborne Special Forces Brigade to join forces taking back Al Eis (southwest of the Aleppo Governorate), which Jaish Al Fatah had captured in early April.<sup>5</sup> By early May, the FSA-aligned opposition had gone on to take the town of Khalidia and the hills surrounding Khan Touman before eventually capturing the hamlet itself. By early June, the Jaish Al Fatah operations room had begun a second phase of attacks on the regime and its allies—on June 4 they seized a further six positions: Maarata, Maarata North, the hills around al-Qarasi, al-Humeiria, Qalaajia, and a Syrian Air Force base. From these locations, the rebels working through Jaish al-Fatah were able to attack regime locations in al-Qarasi, Khalsa, and Zeitan before eventually capturing Al Qarasi on June 9, giving Jaish Al Fatah forces control of 27 km<sup>2</sup> of territory in the Aleppo Governorate (see Map 2).<sup>6</sup>

The Assad regime’s response to these developments was to deploy a number of sectarian Shia militia (such as Hezbollah, Al Nujabaa, and the Bader Brigade) alongside its own regular military forces in the southern region of Aleppo. The conflicts in this region were so intense that Iran broke with established practice and has, since the spring of 2016, acknowledged the deaths of a number of its military personnel, including 45 officers and 175 soldiers.<sup>7</sup>

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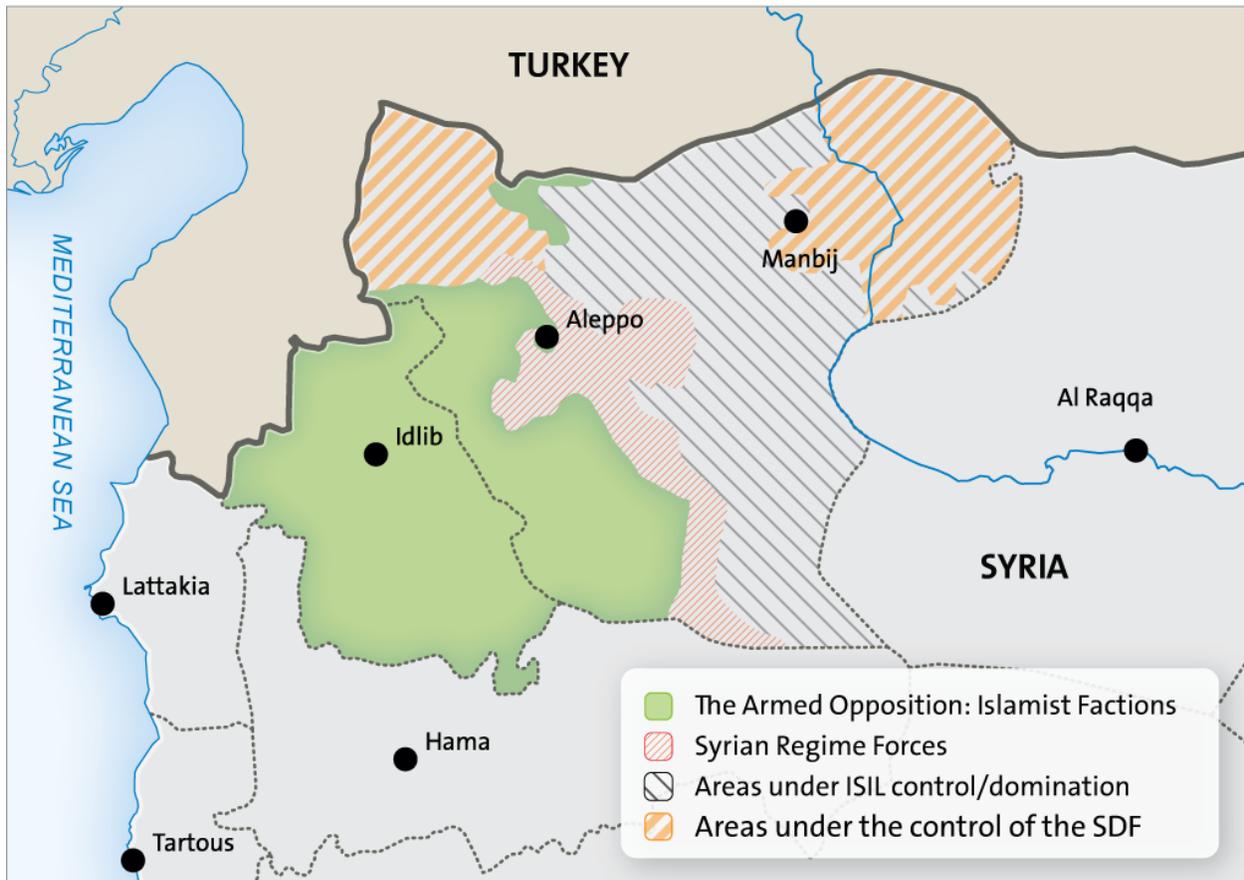
<sup>4</sup> See ‘On-the-Ground Maps,’ published by the *Omran Center for Studies*, June, 2016, available online (in Arabic): <https://goo.gl/O0ItWu>

<sup>5</sup> “Battles in the North of the Aleppo Governorate Pit Opposition Groups Against Each Other,” *An Naba Al Watani*, May 7, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://www.alnabaa.net/557466>

<sup>6</sup> “Jaish Al Fateh Captures the Town of Qarasi and Captures Iraqi Fighters in the Southern Aleppo Governorate,” *Enab Baladi*, June 9, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/83945>

<sup>7</sup> “Iran Acknowledges the Death of 50 of its Operatives in the Southern Aleppo Governorate,” *Ayun al-Khalij* June 5, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://www.gulfeyes.net/middle-east/331971.html>

**The Northern Front,  
covering the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, Al Raqqa and Hama**



**Map 2 The distribution of forces across governorates in the north of Syria.**

Meanwhile, in the eastern region of the Aleppo Governorate, the SDF have been engaged in a battle to wrest the north of Raqqa from ISIL control. Despite support from the United States, and the announcement by the Pentagon of the dispatch of military advisers to assist the SDF triumph, the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) by ISIL forced the SDF to hold back on their plans. Instead, on May 30 the SDF announced they would take their battle to Manbij with help from the international coalition against ISIL. By June 8, the SDF had taken a total of 69 positions surrounding Manbij, gaining control of a total of 448 km<sup>2</sup> in and around the town.

## Central Syria: The Front Lines in Hama, Latakia and Homs

Early in the year the regime was able, with Russian support, to capture the town of Kanasba (north of Latakia) barely a month after capturing the towns of Rabeea, Salma, and Doreen. From these positions, forces loyal to Assad were free to shell locations in the neighboring Idlib Governorate. Russian planes provided the support necessary to strike at locations surrounding the towns of Kanasba, Surmania, and Kobani as well as the highway linking Latakia Governorate to Jisr al-Shughour in the Idlib Governorate. In effect, Assad regime forces were making use of the February ceasefire to advance on opposition-held positions in and around Jisr al-Shoghour and in the Ghabb Plain more generally (see Map 2).<sup>8</sup>

Repeated and persistent violations of the February ceasefire by pro-Assad forces drove a number of the armed opposition groups under the FSA umbrella to form a new command and operations center in order to coordinate their responses. The resulting counter offensive allowed opposition groups to retake a number of positions, including Khirbet Al Naqoos, Khashba, and Al Baydaa. At the beginning of June, the regime recommenced its shelling of opposition locations in the Kurdish- and Turkmen-populated regions in the north, with a focus on Kabbani, a strategic location that could give the regime free passage to Jisr al-Shoghour, which it had for months sought to retake.<sup>9</sup>

Even as the ceasefire was being negotiated in January, Syrian forces were able to exploit the cover provided by Russia's aerial campaign to capture the town of Deir Al Firdees in the Hama Governorate, and the neighboring electricity power station located on the boundary of the northern Homs Governorate and the south-southwestern edge of the Hama Governorate.<sup>10</sup> While the ceasefire initially witnessed a sharp decline in intensity of the regime offensive in the area, the calm was short-lived; with no fewer than 20 Russian air sorties targeting the town of Harbnafsa in tandem with regime shelling in the days and weeks after the international agreement was signed. By May

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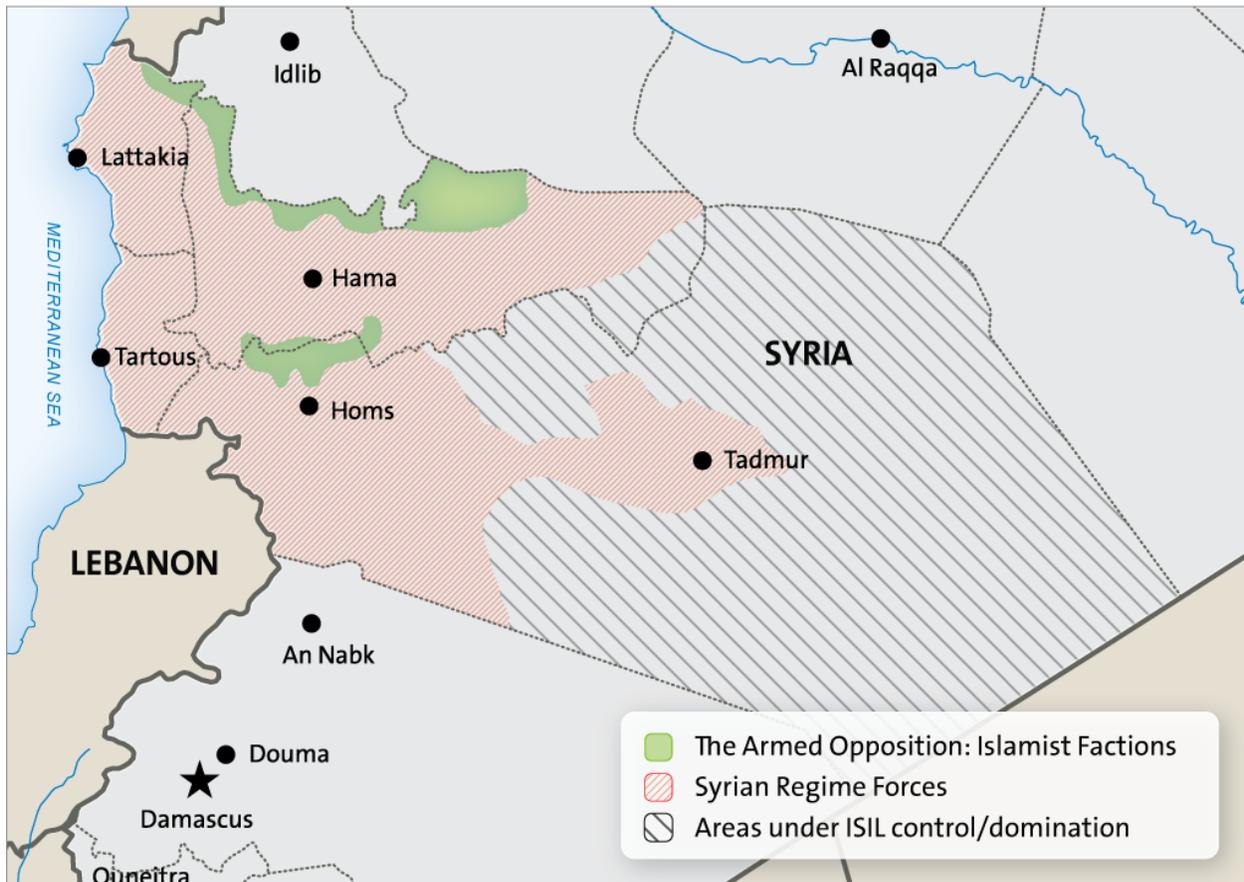
<sup>8</sup> "The Syrian Regime's Systematic Violations of the Ceasefire," *Omran Center for Studies*, April 26, 2016, available online (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/UkYE4i>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "Daily Report," from The Syrian Democratic Union, January 15, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://sdusyria.org/?p=25086>

12, FSA-aligned forces in Harbnafsa were able to break the deadlock and capture the regime-held town of al-Zara and its surrounding region (see Map 3).<sup>11</sup>

**The Central and Coastal Front,  
covering the governorates of Lattakia, Tartous, Hama and Homs**



**Map 3** In central Syria, fighting centers around the Homs governorate and Tadmur, also known as Palmyra.

<sup>11</sup> Amna Riyad, "Scores of Regime Dead Following Renewed Fighting Near Al-Zara and Harbnafsa in the Hama Governorate," *Smart News*, May 20, 2016, available online (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/bbyxND>

## Southern Syria: Frontlines in East Qalamoun, East Ghouta, West Ghouta and Quneitra

The Assad regime was able to make the most out of in-fighting between Jaish Al Islam and Jaish Al Fustat—two Islamist opposition groups, which operate in the area around East Ghouta, and are allied with the FSA—to clamp down on the southern periphery of East Ghouta. This left Harasta and Al Qantara open for a regime clampdown, and given this area’s strategic importance, the regime was prepared to make huge sacrifices to control it.<sup>12</sup> These sacrifices paid off and, by capturing the agricultural lands to the south of East Ghouta, Assad forces were able to cut off food supplies to the rebel stronghold. Control of these areas tightened Assad’s grip on the road to Damascus International Airport, which now serves as a safe haven outside of the range of the opposition’s Katyusha rockets.

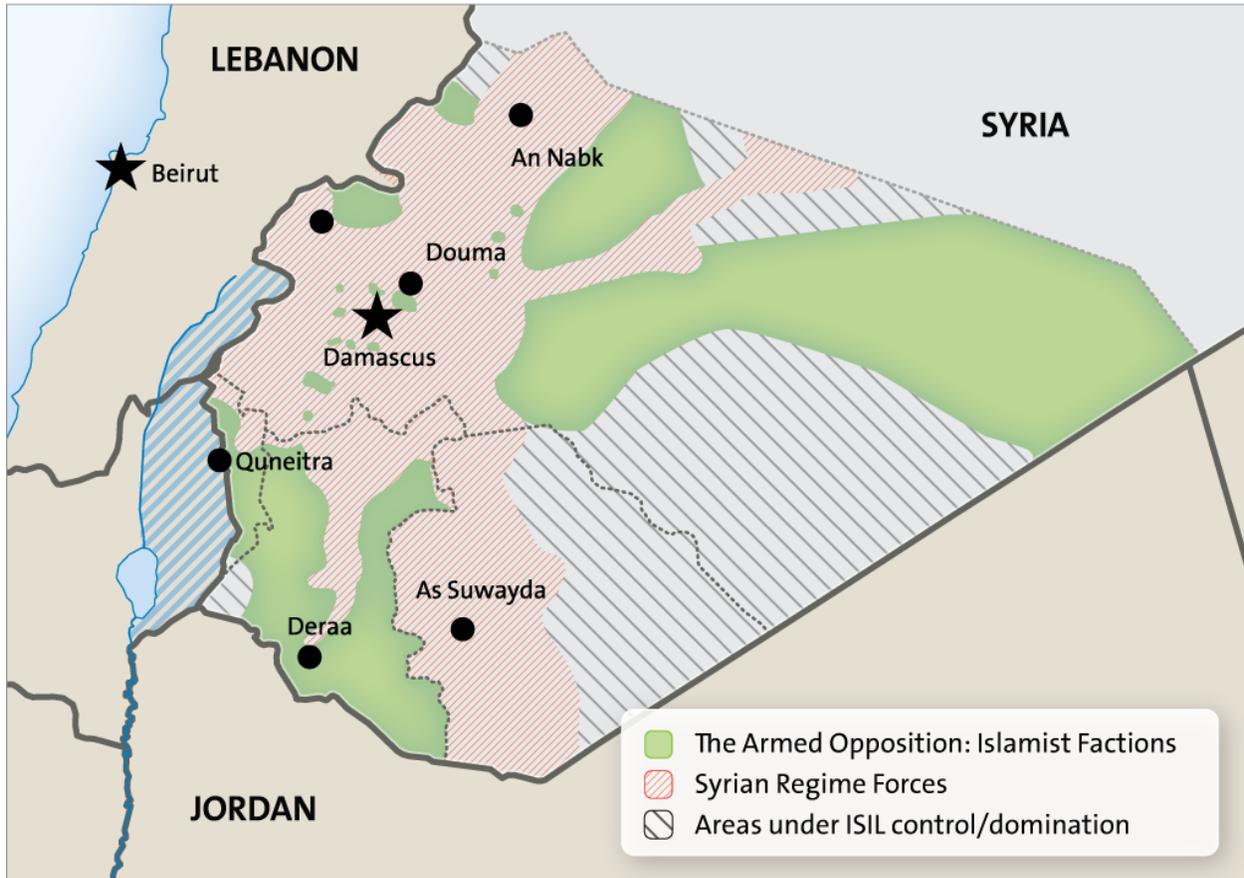
In West Ghouta, FSA units were able to capture Deir Khaiba on May 31, giving them control over the wider region’s access routes. The regime retaliated by using so called ‘barrel bombs’ against sites in West Ghouta, including Al Baydaa, Zakya, and Khan Al Sheikh.<sup>13</sup> The town of Darayya, in the same governorate of Rif Dimashq, was targeted with the same barrel bombs, together with a further 35 surface-to-surface missiles in the first week of June alone. The siege of Darayya began only after the population of Maadamiya had been subdued, eventually trading weapons for food supplies. With the siege of Darayya, all became quiet on the southern front, notwithstanding multiple campaigns against the city of Deraa itself. This followed the capture by regime forces of the town of Sheikh Maskeen. By April, the FSA-aligned opposition defeated the pro-ISIL “Yarmouk Martyrs” group to retake the territories of the Deraa Governorate. In the neighboring Quneitra Governorate, FSA allied forces were quick to announce a campaign to relieve the besieged citizens of Darayya. In its first day, this joint effort was able to liberate the nearby agricultural area of Doha Farms (see Map 4).

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<sup>12</sup> “The Southern Strip is in Regime Hands: Opposition Factions Pushed Out of East Ghouta, *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, May 20, 2016, available online (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/2uqGjJ>

<sup>13</sup> “Assad Forces Attempt to Capture Khan El Sheikh to the West of Damascus,” *Enab Baladi*, May 17, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/80041>

**The Southern Front,  
covering the governorates of Rif Dimashq, Damascus, Deraa and Quneitra**



**Map 4** In southern Syria, competing forces seek domination of the capital, the surrounding governorate of Rif Dimashq and the border crossings with Jordan.

FSA-aligned forces have displayed remarkable steadfastness and resistance, and demonstrated their ability to secure considerable gains against massive challenges, including an onslaught of intense Russian aerial bombardment and increased Iranian militia involvement.

With this in mind, it is possible to identify a number of the key issues which are set to continue influencing the battlefield actions of the armed Syrian opposition:

- Given the multiple fronts on which the opposition is fighting, there will be a continued attrition of personnel and resources. This is particularly true of opposition groups active on the northern front, who are simultaneously fighting the Assad regime, ISIL, and Kurdish groups.

- Deep-rooted partisanship has occluded the formation of a unified strategy for action. As a substitute, armed groups have only been able to coordinate on retaliatory actions. Lack of sustained coordination means that once a frontline has been pacified, no plans are put in place to deal with any recommencement of hostilities. This has particular relevance for the Southern Front.
- A deepening of the internal rifts is driving internecine battles between opposition groups. This has been disastrous in many cases, particularly in the fighting around East Ghouta.
- The disjoint between armed opposition and political action has meant, in the context of a frail negotiations process, that the armed opposition has not provided political representatives with any reasons for optimism or tangible victories that can be translated into diplomatic traction.

## Political and Military Tests

A myriad of armed opposition groups are active across Syrian battlefields. These groups have diverse capacities, financial support networks, ideological backgrounds, and are active across a number of different geographic zones. Perhaps the only unifying factor is their dedication to toppling the Assad regime in Damascus.<sup>14</sup> The tables below detail some of the diversity of these armed groups—highlighting, as well, the failure to implement effective governance in the liberated zones under their control.<sup>15</sup>

### Armed Opposition Groups on the Northern Front

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<sup>14</sup> Marwan Kabalan, "The Armed Syrian Opposition: Common Aim but no Vision," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, August 14, 2013: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/4bd15c98-978f-427c-9856-3cb727a56f5b>

<sup>15</sup> For more details see, Elizabeth O'Bagy, "The Free Syrian Army," *Institute for the Study of War*, March, 2013: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/The-Free-Syrian-Army-24MAR.pdf>; Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War," The RAND Corporation, 2014: [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND\\_PE115.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf); Felix Legrand, "The Resilience of Moderate Syrian Rebels," Arab Reform Initiative, September, 2014: [http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/20140922\\_Legrand\\_FSA\\_EN\\_formatted\\_final.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/20140922_Legrand_FSA_EN_formatted_final.pdf); "Syrian Frontlines Update," October 9, 2015, The Carter Center: [http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/syria-frontlines-update.pdf](http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/syria-frontlines-update.pdf); and also "Syria Countrywide Conflict Report No. 5," February, 2015, The Carter Center.

Group	Area of operation	Number of fighters	Ideological orientation	Advanced weapons?	Notes
Islamic Ahrar Al-Sham	Southern Aleppo, Idlib, pockets in Ghouta, and other areas.	10,000	Islamist	Yes	The group is a member of the Ansar Al Sharia ("Champions of Sharia") and Fateh Idlib ("Conquest of Idlib") operations rooms.
Jaish Al Sunna	Idlib, northern Aleppo	600	Islamist	No	Involved in the Conquest of Idlib operations room.
The Sultan Morad Division	North and West of Aleppo Governorate.	1,000	Free Syrian Army	Yes	Formed in December 2015 by the merger of three groups: The Sultan Mehmet Brigade, The Zaki Turkmeni Brigade,
16th Infantry Division	Aleppo City and western Aleppo.	800	Free Syrian Army	Yes	
13th Division	Idlib, Hama, Aleppo City and southern Aleppo.	1,500	Free Syrian Army	Yes	A member of the Revolutionary Council, this is the first FSA faction to obtain TOW missiles.
The Northern Division	Northern and western regions of Aleppo.	1,000	Free Syrian Army	Yes	Formed in December 2015 following the merger of the Knights of Justice Brigade and the 101st Division.

The Sham (Damascene) Corps	Southern and western regions of the Aleppo Governorate, Idlib.	800	Islamist	Yes	Member of the Idlib Operations Room.
The Northern Front	Aleppo City, northern Aleppo.	2,500	Islamist	Yes	Incorporates a number of smaller units, including the Nouredine Zanki Brigades and the Army of Mujahideen.

The groups active on the Northern Front coordinate their efforts through a number of shared operations rooms, including:

- **The Fateh (“Conquest”) Operations Room, Aleppo Governorate:** was declared by rebels in the region on May 27, 2015. All of the major armed factions active in Aleppo participated in the formation of the center, which was accompanied by the announcement of the Army of Conquest (see Table above). The two joint organizations were able to capture a number of towns, cities, and military barracks from regime forces during the first six months of 2015. Internal divisions (often over which front to tackle first) turned the 31-faction group into a 20-faction amalgamation.
- **The Ansar Al Sharia (“Champions of Sharia”) Operations Room:** Thirteen military factions announced the creation of this operations room on July 2, 2015. The constituent groups have as their objective the liberation of the entire Governorate of Aleppo and, with the cooperation of other armed opposition groups, administering the liberated areas until that mission is complete. Participant groups include a variety of Islamist factions, most notably the Nusra Front and all subsidiary militia loyal to it as well as Ansar Al Din and Ahrar Al

Sham. Its effectiveness as a vehicle for coordinated efforts, however, has been severely restricted since the beginning of Russia's direct military involvement.<sup>16</sup>

- **Army of Conquest (Idlib Governorate) Operations Room:** announced on March 24, 2016 it is composed of Ahrar al-Sham; the Nusra Front; the Soldiers of Al Aqsa; the Army of the Sunna; the Sham Corps; the al-Haq Division; and Ajnad Al Sham. The joint operations room was meant as a prelude to the unification of Islamist factions' media, political, and military efforts in the battle to liberate the city of Idlib. They acted rapidly to put their own plans into action, and launched what was labeled the "Raid to Liberate Idlib" on the same day as the formation of the operations room. The initiative was successful after four days of combat. The operations room went dormant in the wake of its initial success, but was revitalized despite Syrian, Russian, and Iranian efforts to scale back these gains—driving home the need for the Army of Conquest.

### Central Syria and the Coast

Group	Area of operation	Number of fighters	Ideological orientation	Advanced weapons?
The Army of Victory	Northern Hama Governorate; the Ghab Plain; rural areas in Latakia Governorate	5,000	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The First Coastal Division	Jabal Al Kurd	700	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Second Coastal Division	Jabal al-Turkmen	350	Free Syrian Army	No
Homs Corps	Northern Homs Governorate	1,000	Free Syrian Army	Yes

<sup>16</sup> The announcement of the formation of this joint operations room is available in full (Arabic): "Ansar Ash Sharia Operations Room Formed to Liberate Aleppo Governorate," *Al Ittihad Press*, July 2, 2015: <http://goo.gl/KEEeKl>

The Homs Operations Room	Northern Governorate	Homs	800	Free Army	Syrian	No
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### Armed Groups in the Rif Dimashq Governorate

Group	Area of operation	Number of fighters	Ideological orientation	Advanced weapons?
Jaish al-Islam	In the center of the of the Rif Dimashq Governorate	21,000	Islamist	Yes
The al-Rahman Corps	Rif Dimashq	3,500	Moderate Islamist	Yes
The al-Fustat Army	Rif Dimashq	5,000	Jihadist	No
Ahrar al-Sham	Across Syria, center of Idlib Governorate	750	Islamist	Yes
Ajnad al-Sham	Darayya	1,800	Moderates	No
The Army of the Martyrs of Islam	Darayya	1,500	Free Syrian Army	No
The Lions of Eastern Syria	Eastern region Qalamoun	750	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Forces of the Martyr Ahmad al-Abdo	Eastern region Qalamoun	1,300	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The New Syrian Army	The Tanf border crossing; the Syrian Desert	600	Free Syrian Army	Yes

**Armed Opposition Groups Active on the Southern Front**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Area of operation</b>	<b>Number of fighters</b>	<b>Ideological orientation</b>	<b>Advanced weapons?</b>
Muhajiroun and Ansar	Al Hirak, al-Soura (Deraa Governorate)	700	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Lions of War	Al Lujja (Deraa Governorate)	2,000	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Army of the Clans	The Syrian-Jordanian frontier	350	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Army of Ababil (a Koranic reference)	Jassim (Deraa Governorate)	400	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Freedom Division	Al-Hirak	400	Free Syrian Army	Yes

			Army	
The Pillar of Houran	Busra al-Harir (Deraa Governorate)	650	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Army of Yarmouk	Taiba, Nuseib (Deraa Governorate)	1,800	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The First Army	Ankhil (Deraa Governorate)	4,500	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The First Army Corps	Dail (Deraa Governorate)	2,500	Free Syrian Army	Yes
Fallujah of Houran	Naima (Deraa Governorate)	650	Free Syrian Army	Yes
The Syrian Rebels Front	Quneitra Governorate	1,000	Free Syrian Army	Yes

This multiplicity of armed opposition groups and their disparate geographical spread speaks to many of the political failures and setbacks of the Syrian opposition. It also explains their inability to face down the challenges born of Russian military involvement and the shift of international focus to the battle against ISIL. All of this took a toll on the diplomatic maneuverability and bargaining power of Syria's political opposition. Equally, however, the fractured state of the Syrian armed opposition reflects wider regional and global realities: the diversity of these groups is a direct result of the multiplicity of international actors each backing different factions with different aims in mind. These foreign backers often channel their support to the rebels through operations rooms active in Turkey (the 'Musterek Operasyon Merkezi' or MOM) and Jordan (Military Operations Center, "MOC"). In other cases, foreign governments pay monthly salaries of groups they back.

Addressing the setbacks suffered by the armed Syrian opposition will first require the harmonization of military efforts with not only the aspirations of the local communities within which they exist, but also with the national aims of the revolution and the Syrian political opposition's High Negotiating Committee. This aim will require a number of shifts:

- Shifting focus from partisanship to patriotic concerns. This abstract goal could take concrete form in the shaping of a joint General Command.
- Developing a strategic approach to counter terrorism. This could be done through the development of a clearly enunciated military revolutionary policy that allows the opposition to move from a defensive position against ISIL to an offensive one.
- Testing the mettle of the shared operations rooms and other types of coordination by taking more strategic, sustainable courses of action.
- Supporting the opposition movement's political/diplomatic opposition by achieving tangible aims that can be used to bolster negotiating positions.
- The creation of a joint Syrian opposition structure that represents the interests of the political opposition, the armed groups, and the civilian populations.
- The promotion of an alternative model of governance where military and armed groups do not rule directly, but protect civilian government institutions.
- Unification of diverse existing military doctrines/rules of engagement into a single revolutionary doctrine around which all factions in the Syrian opposition can unite. The document should make clear lines of information and hierarchies.
- The encroachment of trans-national opposition factions should be contained.
- Limited administrative decentralization should be achieved to prevent the outright division of Syria.

### **Failure to Create a Unified Military Command: Repercussions**

The Syrian armed opposition continues to lack a unified command structure. In the absence of any coordination between the political and military wings of the opposition, this fact continues to have negative repercussions for the future of the Syrian revolution as a whole. The lack of a common focus has entrenched partisanship and brought about a rise of warlords. Regional warlords have, in turn, shaped regional and global attitudes to the Syrian conflict.

The absence of unity means foreign players no longer view Syria through a holistic prism, but rather as a set of piecemeal regions controlled by a separate authority. In turn, this means that international actors treat each region with a separate security

approach, which is determined by the wider regional security climate and not the requirements of Syrian priorities. Further, divisive partisanship has deprived the Syrian people of an opportunity to formulate a nation-wide strategy that takes into account all of the capabilities, needs, and aspirations of the Syrian people, used in unity to topple the regime. Finally, the failure of Syria's armed opposition to effectively unite has enhanced the public credibility of non-Syrian armed groups active within the country's borders, allowing people to think more starkly in terms of the false dichotomy between terrorism and tyranny.

Today, the last remaining hope for the Syrian opposition is the formation of a joint, unified, nation-wide military body capable of facing down the triumvirate of forces that share an interest in defeating the opposition. Given the present international circumstances, such an aim can no longer be put on hold. For this broader goal to be achieved, the three most pressing objectives include:

- Identifying an effective Syrian power player that enjoys the support of regional powers in the battle against terrorism. This will allow the Syrian opposition to effectively oppose the Assad regime and ISIL. This would also allow the opposition to take hold of large swathes of territory currently controlled by ISIL.
- The creation of supply lines to resupply besieged Syrian opposition forces under ISIL siege in Aleppo and Homs.
- Creating the nucleus for a new, nation-wide military command for the opposition. This body would be tasked with preparing for the post-Assad transitional period—including the reformation and unification of security and military apparatus. This would also mean the creation of a military umbrella backed by international powers that integrates existing armed groups.

## **Conclusion**

The fractured nature of Syria's armed opposition groups remains the largest obstacle to realizing the aims of the revolution. This reality has been exploited by regional and global powers seeking to back one armed opposition group over another for their own interests. This has been an easy means of containing and managing the wider crisis. This has only deepened the rifts within the Syrian opposition. So long as the status quo prevails, the opposition will continue to suffer serious strategic setbacks. Unless the present state of affairs is rectified, the fragmented nature of the armed Syrian

opposition and attempts to stall its unification could ultimately lead to the complete defeat of the Syrian revolution.