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EMPOWERING THE DEMOCRATIC RESISTANCE IN SYRIA

Bassma KODMANI

Félix LEGRAND

Arab Reform Initiative

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www.arab-reform.net

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About the Authors

BASSMA KODMANI is the director of the *Arab Reform Initiative* and a founding member of the Paris based NGO *Initiative for a New Syria*. She was a founding member of the Syrian opposition *Syrian National Council* until her resignation in August 2012.

FELIX LEGRAND is a research fellow for the *Arab Reform Initative* and a founding member of the Paris based NGO *Initiative for a New Syria*.

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Cover picture by AMMAR ABD RABBO , FSA fighters in Aleppo.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the peaceful uprising in Syria started in spring 2011 turned into an armed resistance after a few months in the face of savage repression by the Assad regime. Since then, the activists who picked up arms became dependent on support in money and arms to be able to continue. Few other than the Assad regime question this narrative. Yet the consequences of this dependence are often overlooked. The sources of funding for the rebels and the strings attached to them have since shaped the landscape of the armed rebellion, not the other way round. What we have in Syria is not an Islamist revolution but a popular uprising that received funding primarily from Islamist sources. Acknowledging this is essential and has far-reaching implications for defining an effective policy in the Syrian conflict.

As the United States, France and regional powers of the Middle East prepare for what appears to be an inevitable military strike on the Syrian regime of Bashar el Assad, questions are posed more urgently than ever: how to work with the armed opposition? who are the reliable forces? what are their capabilities? which groups can be part of the plan to replace Assad and how can the extremists be contained?

This paper examines the circumstances and conditions that shaped the Syrian armed opposition and surveys the groups that remain committed to a democratic political system and a pluralistic society in Syria.

It describes the extreme fluidity within the armed resistance which reflects primarily the diverse but most often unstable, and therefore, unreliable sources of funding for the rebels. It suggests ways to empower the pro-democracy groups as the best means to reach the dual objective of ending the dictatorship of Assad and achieving a democratic outcome in Syria and argues that the former objective has no chance of succeeding if the latter is not pursued simultaneously.

A self-reinforcing and largely self-defeating spiral has been at play over the last two years. Reluctance to provide the right kind of support at the right time has not resulted in lower levels of money and arm reaching the rebels but rather has allowed the wrong sources to become the main providers. With every increase in the support provided in exchange of loyalty to some Islamist agenda, fears have heightened among a growing number of Syrians regarding the outcome of the conflict and Iran has deepened its involvement on the side of the Assad regime to counter what it sees as a Saudi grand design of installing Sunni domination of the Wahhabi brand over the entire region.

Unity of ranks in face of the regime remained for a long time the overriding rule for the armed resistance. But as extremist groups sought to dominate in certain areas, efforts by mainstream Syrian groups to re-gain control of the resistance and re-instate its original objectives are leading to a *de facto* triangular struggle involving the regime, radical Jihadi groups and the democratic opposition.

These dynamics on the ground have major implications for policy:

It is high time that Western governments make clear to their regional allies that support for certain groups with a non-democratic agenda is frightening to many Syrians and delaying the fall of Assad.

If money and arms are defining the direction of the conflict, the fluidity of the armed groups should be used as an opportunity to shape the situation on the ground. Western and regional powers should select and empower leaders of democratic groups to redress this balance in their favor within the FSA itself. If properly equipped, pro-democracy groups have the potential to spearhead a movement to

alter the balance of power in the battlefield to their advantage and reassure a large portion of Syrians sitting on the fence.

Basic relief for the fighters is just as important as the procurement of weapons. An effective strategy to allow pro-democracy groups to regain the initiative should combine civil and military support, bringing stable and reliable support as the only way for leaders of pro-democracy groups to retain the loyalty of their fighters and ensure effective command. Only at this condition is it possible to identify the groups that can be trusted and supplied with sophisticated weapons.

The Supreme Military Command cannot be expected to alter on its own the balance of forces on the ground in favor of democratic groups. Donors have continued to select their own favorite groups even after the creation of the SMC. The SMC is a reliable channel but donors should designate the beneficiaries of the support in coordination with it.

The Supreme Military Council should be assisted in its effort to chart an operational security plan for the protection of all vital sites and areas across the country. Its chairman would be in a position then to seek the commitment of regional and local commanders to implement the plan thus allowing the SMC to vet groups in the process.

Small multi-sectarian groups are fighting the regime in areas where it still enjoys support usually at hight risk for their security. Providing limited military support to such groups would go a long way in weakening the Assad family; it would pose a serious challenge to the regime which will hesitate to respond with massive bombings in the same way as it does in areas where the resistance is dominant; it would pre-empt the emergence of a demarcation line as a prelude to partition; lastly, it would mend relations between the various communities of the country after the regime worked to stir them up against each other.

I. Introduction

One of the most challenging exercises in the Syrian conflict today is to identify all the groups fighting on the ground who call themselves revolutionary forces. In peaceful contexts, the process of identifying the groups which should be included in a political process usually involves scrutiny of their commitment to abide by democratic rules defined in a constitutional framework.

Criteria differ, however, in the context of an armed conflict such as the one in Syria. As the regime is determined to destroy the social fabric of the country and is threatening the integrity of the Syrian state, the objective of ending Assad family rule becomes inseparable from the objective of rescuing both the state and society. It requires an approach that pursues both objectives at the same time. If the WHAT (Assad's ouster) is unanimously shared by the armed groups and activists of the uprising, then the HOW becomes the real question. If the prominence of radical Islamist groups is frightening to many Syrians and to many countries (on both sides of the fence), then it is clearly a mistake to allow the domination of Islamist groups in the struggle to achieve the primary objective of removing Assad. For too long now, struggles over the HOW have been delaying the realization of the desired outcome.

Over the last 18 months, dozens of investigative studies, reports and articles have been produced by intelligence and military officers, human rights organizations, scholars and journalists focusing almost exclusively on Islamist groups (Muslim Brothers, Salafis and Jihadists of various brands and origins). While the growth of such groups is indeed alarming and merits serious analysis, the volume of writing about them leaves observers with the impression that all the fighters on the ground are Islamist, that democratic groups are non-existent and that Assad's removal will inevitably lead to control of Syria by Islamist forces.

The Assad regime itself invests heavily in media networks to demonize his opponents. Its target audiences are first and foremost the political elites and public opinion of Western countries. It has engaged in smear campaigns against political figures and, since the confrontation evolved into primarily a military one, the regime has resorted to a multi-faceted strategy of infiltrating and manipulating certain groups while describing them all as Jihadists.

This report provides an alternative and more accurate narrative. Based on a thorough field investigation inside Syria, it maps groups that have remained committed to the original demands of the uprising for a free, democratic and pluralistic Syria. It describes the factors that have shaped the movement on the ground, the conditions in which armed groups operate and the resilience of those national democratic groups that have, against all odds, maintained their commitment to a liberal Syria. It calls for a different approach by acknowledging where the pressure points lie and by working from two different ends: from the providers, who procure money and arms, and from the receivers, those political and military figures on the ground who inspire and provide guidance to resistance groups.

An active and intrusive approach appears necessary if support for the revolution is to succeed in producing the best outcome for a pluralistic Syria.

This is not to say that democratic groups are isolated and need to be hand-picked from the midst of an ocean of Islamist Syrians. The Syrian revolution has not turned Islamist but is funded mostly by sources with an Islamist leaning, leaving revolutionary groups with a democratic bent struggling to survive as orphans in terms of sources of support.

An active and intrusive approach appears necessary if support for the revolution is to succeed in producing the best outcome for a pluralistic Syria

The terms 'democratic' or 'pro-democracy', as used here to describe different groups, are not based on ideological considerations but on the consideration of what is required for maintaining a pluralist and unified Syria, as will be explained below.

If pro-democracy groups are provided with the right kind of support, this will catalyze and reveal the support that they enjoy within Syrian society, enabling them to grow rapidly. They can then reconnect the armed struggle with Syria's diverse social environment and prompt a re-*Syrianization* of the uprising. The purpose of this report is to provide an operational map of reliable groups who have the potential to become launching pads for an active strategy. Our efforts to identify pro-democracy groups in this report are primarily aimed at extricating the struggle from the multiple agendas that have spilled into Syria over the last two years.

The report does not advocate splitting the ranks of the resistance, particularly as the enemy remains whole: the Assad regime. The report does, however, call for applying highly selective criteria in vetting groups on the ground with a view to empowering them and shifting the balance among anti-regime forces in their favor. The groups described in this report and listed in the annex are ones that have shown consistent commitment to democratic principles throughout the last two years, even under dire circumstances. Some groups are certainly missing from the list and still need to be identified. The report should therefore be considered a work in progress and will be updated on a regular basis.

We do not dispute the need to strengthen the formal bodies representing the political and the military opposition, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or National Coalition of the Opposition) and the Supreme Military Council. These bodies are very much needed and the revolution has suffered long enough from the weaknesses and divisions within the opposition. Both should be supported and encouraged to develop institutional and executive capacity. But it is unrealistic to expect these new bodies to develop ties with groups on the ground or establish an organizational system overnight. This challenge is often under-estimated.

The first section of the report clarifies the criteria used for selecting democratic groups. The next two sections describe the context that shaped the opposition movement on the ground over the last two years and outline the roles and activities of outside supporters and members of the opposition.

The following two sections analyze the objectives and structures of various groups that work to uphold the unity of Syria and a pluralistic political system. The analysis is based on a thorough investigation undertaken inside Syria over the last two years, including lengthy discussions with political and military leaders of the opposition. A table of identified groups and their key attributes is included in the annex. Names of units and numbers of fighters fluctuate, reflecting the extreme fluidity of the military situation. The report analyses the constraints that cause this fluidity, provides a concrete account of patterns of cooperation in the battlefield and analyzes the causes of tension between groups.

The final section suggests directions for an effective strategy to limit the proxy aspect of the war, work towards re-*Syrianizing* the revolution and reassure the hesitant, terrified Syrians who fear both the regime and the instability.

A note should be added on the choice of words in this report. Terms such as 'revolution', 'conflict', 'rebel', 'resistance fighter', 'democratic', 'liberal' and 'secular' are highly charged. For Syrians, the narrative of the conflict is extremely important as the regime continues to invest much effort and funds into negating the crimes and horrors that its forces are committing. Our objective is not to engage in this controversy but to bring clarity for decision-makers who seek to build a strategy for achieving a democratic outcome.

II. Who are the pro-democracy groups?

The groups identified in this report were not selected on ideological grounds but rather based on one practical consideration: are they dedicated to preserving the integrity of Syria as a nation-state in which all citizens can feel they want to belong. In selecting the groups listed in the annex of this report, we strictly limited the selection to groups who showed clear commitment to the original liberal non-sectarian values which animated the popular peaceful uprising of spring 2011.

By 'pro-democracy', we mean those groups who fight for establishing a Syrian state for all its current citizens, those who espouse a national agenda of pluralism, equal citizenship, and advocate the rule of one civil law for all. In addition to their commitment to principles, we also monitored considerations related to their actions since the start of the uprising in the civilian sphere, including the delivery of assistance to the population on a non-discriminatory basis and the management of civil affairs (local councils, education curriculum, civil courts) in ways that preserve the civil nature of public institutions and diversity within society. The organization of the armed resistance on non-sectarian grounds and the treatment of detainees are also major criteria.

Groups identified here are the ones most likely to build a Syria which can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself

Lastly, and most importantly, is the willingness of groups to abide by the decisions of a civil political authority and to be part of a comprehensive security plan for stabilizing the country, as the Supreme Military Council is seeking to do. Groups with these traits are those most likely to build a Syria which can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself. They do not have the capacity to do so without some outside assitance but they would be most amenable to cooperation with the governments of neighboring countries and international powers to bring security back to the region. These groups are the voice of a large section (arguably the majority) of the silent Syrians who are sitting on the fence.

It would have been justified to include other groups described as moderate or mainstream Islamists, who should be clearly distinguished from the extremist and Jihadi groups. They reflect the moderate Islam, which Syrians like to call social Islam traditionally prevalent among the Sunni community in Syria and therefore are part of the social fabric of the country. Some are known to be close to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The political leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood is committed to a democratic and pluralistic agenda for post-Assad Syria. This is clearly stated in the political platform of the Muslim Brotherhood published in 2004 and re-confirmed in a document published in 2012**.** Several conservative religious leaders have also indicated their commitment to a political system that protects the rights of all minorities. Syrians from all communities and ideological backgrounds do not question the right of these figures to be part of the political transition and to play a role in the future political system.

We have chosen, however, to exclude them from our report for two main reasons. First, they have received (and continue to receive) massive support in arms and money from sources that have denied non-Islamist groups the same kind of support. This has had the effect (even if unintended) of frightening more Syrians than of gaining supporters for the revolution. Second, the Assad regime's strategy has sought to tear apart the social fabric and to call on its regional allies to transform the popular uprising into a sectarian conflict pitting Shias against Sunnis – including the formation of a purely sectarian militia of Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese Shias. In this context, providing further support to the Sunni Islamist groups is objectively playing into the hands of the regime. An effective strategy to counter these plans entails a targeted effort to empower the groups that are clearly committed to a unified, democratic Syria.

Extremist Jihadi groups pose a problem of a different kind. Most Syrians see them as alien to the social and political fabric of the country. They run wild and shut down civilian life, calling for establishing an Islamic theocracy more often than they mention the fall of Assad. High ranking military officers of the Free Syrian Army and Muslim religious leaders have called on them on many occasions to leave the country.

Maintaining unity in the ranks of the opposition has been unanimously seen as a requirement for success, mostly for valid reasons which remain relevant. Yet the moto of unity at any cost has often served as a cover for extremist Jihadi groups to work their way into Syria and promote their agendas without meeting significant resistance from other opposition members. As is shown below, combating extremist Jihadi groups should not be seen as a sign of further division but as an attempt to purge the ranks of the resistance from elements that bring it discredit.

III. The context that shaped the movement on the ground

The situation on the ground in Syria has been largely shaped, on one hand, by the extreme brutality of the Assad regime and, on the other hand, by the paralysis of the international community (as illustrated by the absence of a UN Security Council resolution condemning the repression).

Manufacturing radicalism

The regime resorted to disproportionate use of force from the first days of the uprising as part of what it believed had been a successful deterrence strategy over the four preceding decades. The motto of Assad's father had been "terrorize and rule".

His son and family had no better recipe to maintain their control over the country and protect their rule. The ideal enemy (who quickly becomes the best objective ally) in this strategy is extremism. The moderate and secular figures of the opposition become the most dangerous. They have been targeted in effect one after the other by the *shabiha*, the pro-Assad militias.

Moderate and secular figures of the opposition are seen as the most dangerous for the regime and are targeted one after the other

Victims include a surgeon assassinated in his medical clinic, a prominent economist and planner of local councils tortured to death in prison, Christian human rights lawyers defending prisoners and a prominent Alawi political leader among numerous others.

Loyalist slogan written on the wall of a village in Idlib; "al-Assad or we burn the country".

The activists who started the peaceful uprising in 2011 were left with two options: either stop the uprising altogether (as peaceful protest became impossible) or take up arms. The appetite for taking up arms was unequal among the different groups. Many were torn and desperately sought new tactics to keep the movement peaceful. But as activists witnessed the killings of brothers, children or neighbors, or were tortured in prison, the incentive to fight became irresistible. The process of radicalization was set in motion. Periodic massacres (such as in al-Hoola in May 2012, al-Heffa in June 2012, Daraya in August 2012, etc.), some of which were committed while the UN supervision mission (UNSMIS) was still on the ground in Syria, sent new young men to join the fight.

Eventually every group, even those most averse to the militarization of the struggle, became directly or indirectly implicated in the military resistance.

'Only God is with us'

A combination of factors created what the activists on the ground call a "godly climate". When the regime moved to use the most extreme forms of violence, - including the use of chemical weapons at a smaller scale than the attack on the Damscus *Ghouta* in August 2013 - upholding the struggle was not anymore a question of "who is ready to fight" but increasingly "who is willing to die". Jihad became the most effective rallying cry.

The lack of sophisticated weapons was decisive in giving the Jihadi groups a prominent role in the military confrontation with the regime. In the absence of effective weapons to face the advances of the regime's artillery and air force, bombings and suicide attacks against strategic targets such as security buildings and military bases, became the only way to hurt the enemy and achieve some successes in an asymmetrical war. Jihadis excel at this type of tactics and can become a weapon in their own right. Jihadi groups were determined to use this battlefield edge to win the space to impose their rules on areas they came to control.

The inadequate international response and the fact that no force stepped in to protect the civilian population from slaughter have had devastating consequences. Not only was a Libya-like intervention (which many Syrians had hoped for) out of the question, but it was not even possible to achieve minimal agreement among members of the UN Security Council to condemn the crimes of the regime or to secure the channeling of humanitarian relief to the civilian population. More than two years into the conflict, regional and international inhibitions, strategic interests and rivalries allow criminal behavior to continue with impunity, leaving Syria's people with a bitter feeling of having been abandoned.

The curse of geopolitics

Syria emerged as the most sensitive pivot of the complex regional equation. The regime's efforts focused on making the sectarian issue a key element of its strategy. The approach seemed to be "*If you can't divide and rule, divide to prevent anyone else from ruling, and trigger spill-over and spill-in, exporting risks and importing new dangers*."

These factors combined to create the conditions for a proxy war. Every group engaged in the fight became dependent on external financial and military support, and hence vulnerable to manipulation. The regime increasingly relied on the support of its allies and on the opposition side, money and arms were made available to those who agreed to swear loyalty to a patron, and patrons multiplied rapidly.

In the Middle East, funding is overwhelmingly from Islamic sources and brings with it a conservative agenda. Money circulates through complex channels, some of which are controlled by governments but many of which are managed through private business and religious networks. These networks were first established in the late 1970s and early 1980s to support the Islamic resistance in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation, and have been re-activated during conflicts in the Balkans, Algeria, Yemen and Iraq over the last three decades. While some of the funds are channeled with the blessing of the governments of Gulf countries, thus making them directly responsible for the *Islamization* of the resistance, these networks are often richly endowed with private resources and are in some cases too powerful for governments to confront, even if they chose to.

Syrian fighters have become recipients of this aid and leaders of military groups drew influence and power over their fighters thanks to their ability to secure funds and arms. The regime thus created the incentive (bringing along its own patrons to fight on its side); conservative religious networks provided the means and tools to the resistance; and with those came multiple political agendas.

The role of the political opposition

While the multiple sources of funding and agendas are largely responsible for the fractionalization of the armed opposition, the political opposition also carries part of the responsibility for the broader lack of cooperation among anti-regime groups. The lack of any experience in working and planning jointly, and let alone leading a military confrontation, the lack of trust, partisan competition, personal ambitions and, last but not least, the readiness of figures in key positions to serve the interests of influential regional actors, all combined to make consistent coordination between the political leadership of the opposition and the armed groups on the ground a wish that never materialized. Neither the Syrian National Council established in November 2011 nor the National Coalition of the Opposition created a year later succeeded in serving as a national political umbrella for the armed opposition. Instead, different political factions developed their own ties with different groups on the ground. Here again, many among the liberal democratic camp within the opposition remained reluctant for some time to acknowledge that the armed struggle was inevitable, while the Islamist forces were quick to start organizing the flow of arms and, when the first officers defected from the Syrian army, to seek to control them through funding. Fighters, both civilians and military officers, who were averse to the *Islamization* process of the revolution longed for political guidance and support from political figures who failed to engage with them.

Since the resistance became armed, sources of funding and the strings attached to them have been shaping the landscape, not the other way round

Since the resistance became armed, sources of funding and the strings attached to them have been shaping the landscape, not the other way round. The Syrian revolution has not become Islamist but is desperately in need of support and has largely received funds and arms from Islamist sources, some controlled by identifiable sources and others controlled by shadowy networks that connect the most improbable bedfellows. Tracing them is complex and is tied to the internal politics of the Gulf states and to the multiple games that Iran, Iraq and the Syrian regime have played in recent decades. This important issue merits a thorough investigation which falls outside the scope of this report. Its implications for Syria, however, are at the heart of our subject.

Once a group of activists has picked up arms, it must secure ammunition at any price and its leader is required to at least feed its fighters. As petty as this may sound, it is at the heart of the problem. During the early days of the armed uprising, opposition figures joked that "The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is for sale". Armed groups choose names for their brigades that are likely to please the funders. It has often been reported how some governments and private networks suggest that a group change its name in order to receive financial and military support in exchange. Many groups spontaneously choose Islamic names, resort to religious vocabulary and strive to project an image of religiosity through their media statements and Facebook pages.

When a leader cannot provide for the minimum vital needs of his fighters who face the risk of death every day and when he cannot secure the arms and ammunitions that allow the fighters to take an effective role in battles while they watch well equipped Islamist brigades with frustration, they end up abandoning their leader and the group to join better endowed units, which to date have invariably been more radical. If anything, this is indicative of the determination of the fighters not to give up the fight rather than of any fundamentalist inclinations. Exceptions such as *Kataeb Wehda Wataniya* (KWW) described below provide a model not only because they are secular and multi-sectarian but because they received steady funding from non-islamist sources and kept their identity and cohesion even though they did not find the means to grow.

Once the well-supported groups gain military control over areas, the continued flow of money provides them with the means to control the distribution of vital commodities, medical care, the management of hospitals and the production of oil. More alarming for their long term implications are the opening of religious courts and the enforcement of Islamic Sharia law and the control of education through the imposition of a fundamentalist curriculum of the Wahhabi brand in schools.

The Islamist armed groups have been particularly focused on the imposition of Islamic law. Professional lawyers and judges with connections to Syrian civil law are denounced either as "secular" (which amounts to atheism in their vocabulary) or as agents of the Baath regime. Civil courts in the rebel-held areas are often threatened and some are forced to close. In Dooma for example, a rebel-held town in the suburbs of Damascus, all attempts at opening a functioning civil court have failed. Local liberal leaders and the few lawyers who remain in the city (only 5 out of 200 lawyers have not fled) say that only when the FSA (by which they mean the non-Jihadi moderate groups supported by the Supreme Military Council) gains control will it be safe to enforce civil law. In the north, a few successes exist such as in the town of Salqin where the legal body (*hay'a shariya*) which applies religious law abandoned it to *Jabhat al-Nosra* which in turn abandoned it, allowing civil lawyers to take over. In Aleppo, non-Islamic professional lawyers and judges are seeking to reach a common understanding with the Supreme Military Council and the newly created local police force to gradually restore civil law into the city.

Is the tide turning?

Recent developments, have encouraged a change of attitude among liberals and among non-politicized armed groups which are generally averse to the Islamists' political agenda. In liberated areas such as al-Raqqa, al-Tabqa, Douma, the countryside of Aleppo and Idlib province, there has been a steadily growing trend over the last year of increasing resentment among those who want a liberal democratic Syria. In the name of protecting a sacred unity in face of the regime, liberal democratic armed groups have remained discreet about their resentment and largely powerless lacking the basic means to challenge the radical groups. Many of their leaders believed that the showdown with the extremists was inevitable but considered that the time had not come for opening this second front. They thought that this could only benefit Assad and that it should be postponed until after the fall of the regime. Instead, they sought dialogue and sought a *modus vivendi* with Islamist groups.

The change of attitude has been induced by several factors. First, the extremists of *Jabhat al-Nosra* and the *Islamic State of Iraq and Sham* (both offshoots of *al-Qaeda*) began to impose strict rules and provocative measures which alienated large segments of the Syrian population thus showing what many saw as their "true (ugly) face". Second, the earlier successes of the Jihadis have not been consolidated and have failed to tip the balance in favor of the anti-Assad resistance. Third, the opposition, both political and military, has come to believe that the motto of unity has become counterproductive, that it has been used by the Islamist forces and their patrons as a cover to dominate the political opposition and the resistance, and that it has frightened a large portion of the hesitant Syrians sitting on the fence, thus damaging the image of the revolution altogether. Lastly, the debates in the United States Congress, the British Parliament and the European Union on the dangers related to the delivery of sophisticated weapons to the opposition for fear that the arms might end in the hands of extremists has undoubtedly emboldened some groups to come out and state clearly where they want to belong. But their message is invariably the same: if the means are made available, we will be in a position to reverse the trend on the ground.

Liberated areas offer stark examples of the unwillingness of resistance groups and of the civilian population to provide cover for the abuses of the extremists. Section IV below provides examples from the field of the clashes that are multiplying between mainstream resistance groups and radical Jihadis. These cannot be equated with infighting within an already fractious armed opposition. Rather, they are attempts to rid the resistance of alien elements who worked their way into Syria and stand as an obstacle to unifying the ranks of the FSA. These efforts contribute to the goal of re-*syrianizing* the movement. FSA leaders (and hopefully their foreign patrons) now understand the damage caused by the willingness of some FSA units to work with *Jabhat al-Nosra* and realize that this cooperation made the West reluctant to provide military aid and gave Mr. Assad an opportunity to depict the entire opposition as driven by foreign-backed extremists.

IV. The forces on the ground

The Role of the Supreme Military Council

It is rarely noted that most defected military officers from the Syrian army are steeped in the dominant political culture of post-independence Syria which is nationalist and secular. Their language, vision, priorities and reactions to events indicate clearly a nationalist, albeit a pan-Arabist bent. They often see that the Assad regime has led astray the true nationalist doctrine of the Syrian army and used it as a cover to build its sectarian special forces to dominate and control the armed forces. Hence when we use the word 'nationalist' we refer to this political culture which permeates very widely the army and is also a strong feature within large sectors of society.

Salim Idriss, leader of the SMC

The November 2012 creation of the Supreme Military Council (SMC) with General Salim Idriss at its head is a significant achievement in the process of organizing a large part of the armed resistance on the ground that operated under the franchise of the Free Syrian Army but did not have any command structure of sort.[1] The actual integration and unification of command can only start to happen if regional and international supporters of the resistance develop serious coordination among themselves. Salim Idriss's elevation to the head of the SMC is a reflection of such a consensus. He is respected among Syrian military defectors and fighters for his personal qualifications and integrity. So far, however, he has been a mere coordinator for the channelling of military supplies and admits that he has little authority over troops on the ground. Many testimonies from the ground indicate that donors most often dictate their conditions to him by designating specific armed groups as beneficiaries of their aid. Idriss has therefore been treading the path drawn for him and has not been in a position to decide on priorities as he sees them. This complicates his relationship with the 30 military leaders who form the unified High Command of the SMC and expect to have a say in the distribution of money and arms channelled through Idriss.

Idriss is first and foremost a professional military officer with no apparent political leanings. He clearly favours military officers when dealing with armed groups and is pushing for the creation of military divisions led by professional army officers. In June 2013, when the National Coalition of the Oppposition, the formal representative body of the opposition was expanding, it decided to include representatives of the SMC in an effort to enhance coordination between the political and military opposition. General Idriss was asked to designate 15 military figures. These commanders have all come out in support of the non-Islamist camp within the coalition, thus reducing the influence of the Islamist groups.

Donors have continued to select their own favored groups after the creation of the SMC by earmarking funds to certain groups even when channeling funds through the SMC

In brief, the creation of the SMC does not resolve the problem of determining which groups to support within Syria. Donors have continued to select their own favored groups after the creation of the SMC by earmarking funds to certain groups even when channeling through the SMC.

[1] On the formation and structure of the SMC, see ELIZABETH O'BAGY, *The Free Syrian Army,* Middle East Security Report 9, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013

Idriss will need to be a key pillar in any comprehensive plan for the armed opposition that may be developed with the active collaboration of regional actors (notably the Gulf monarchies and Turkey), the United States and European countries. However, he cannot be expected to alter on his own the balance of forces on the ground in favour of democratic groups.

Pro-democarcy Fighters

Detailed research has been published on the various Islamist groups and coalitions of the rebellion, overshadowing the non-Islamist groups. These groups do not have sufficient resources to develop national franchises in the same way as Islamist groups such as *Jabhat al-Nosra (JAN)*, the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) or the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF).

Despite the apparent pervasiveness of Islamic coalitions, many armed groups who operate under the franchise of the Free Syrian Army have maintained their political identity against all odds, refusing to become the implementing arms of foreign donor agendas. We have chosen to call these groups "pro-democracy fighters" as their agenda is limited to the original democratic objectives of the uprising. They can be organized into three categories.

The first category includes groups initiated by senior military defectors. These groups usually resent the politicization of their actions and consider that the army should stay out of politics. They sought to coordinate their actions with the primary body of the political opposition, first the Syrian National Council and later the National Coalition of the Opposition, but they refused to swear loyalty to any particular group and have been consistently marginalized in favor of more ideologically flexible civilian-led brigades.

Many armed groups who operate under the franchise of the Free Syrian Army have maintained their political identity against all odds, refusing to become the implementing arms of foreign donor agendas

The second category includes groups anchored in a political movement. These are mostly revolutionary activists who find guidance from political parties or figures with socialist, communist, nationalist or liberal affiliations.

These affiliations include the Socialist Union party, the People's party, the Nasserite party, the Democratic Baath party and a constellation of newer movements which are a mix of civil society organizations and political movements such as Muwatana, Nabd, Maan, the Democratic Pole, Kuluna Sooriyoon and a host of others. These groups have also been unable to grow due to a lack of access to resources.

The third category includes locally rooted groups whose names usually contain a reference to their village or neighborhood and who largely have minimal or mixed political leanings and rely on local resources and personal networks for support.

We describe only a few groups from each category as examples but there are innumerable groups spread across the country. Abu Ali, the richest man in a small town in the north who sold all his property to fund a brigade continues to drain his family's resources to secure food and ammunition for the fighters. HT, a wealthy secular businessman in his thirties from a bourgeois family created with his friends a brigade in Damascus and bought light arms from their own finances. They yearn for support and look to integrate with some organized group. Abu Rakan, a retired officer from the army but with a family fortune, sold all of the household's cars, family jewels and valuables to buy arms and secure ammunition for his fighters. Countless leaders of small brigades from all social classes have done the same. Once they had exhausted their resources, they waited for months for support from governments who had declared Assad illegitimate and his repression of the uprising unacceptable. Some ended up turning to Islamist sources to secure support, often explaining with

embarrassment and regret that they were left with no other choice.

Despite all the incentives offered by well-endowed Islamist groups, the pro-democracy brigades continue to exist. The recent resentment among local inhabitants of Islamist groups seeking to impose their rules has encouraged pro-democracy groups to work towards unifying their ranks. All of the pro-democracy groups described in the following section recognize the authority of the SMC.

Kataeb al-Wehda al-Wataniya (KWW)

The *Kataeb al-Wehda al-Wataniya (KWW)*[2] is a coalition of battalions and brigades with a clear secular and anti-sectarian leaning.[3]

National Unity Brigades

The coalition was created in August 2012 along with its political branch, first called the *Tayyar al-Wehda al-Wataniya* (National Unity Movement).[4] Activists and intellectuals close to this movement gathered in spring 2013 under the name of *Kuluna Sooriyoon* (We are all Syrians).[5] The movement was initiated by opposition figures from the Alawite community and brought in prominent liberal democratic figures from all sectarian communities.

The political movement is based on democratic principles with a strong emphasis on the proection of diversity and has a strong operational approach focusing on social reconciliation on the ground including the negotiation of truces between villages from different sectarian communities, the liberation of prisoners from both sides, assistance to defecting army soldiers as well as relief work in mixed areas.

The number of armed fighters in the *KWW* is estimated at 2000. Their main strongholds are in Reef Jisr al-Shughoor (Western Idlib) and the southern neighborhoods of Damascus. They also have a significant presence in Jabal al-Zawiya (Idlib province) and smaller units in Deraa and Deir Ezzor.

The *KWW* brigades are often multi-sectarian, including in certain sensitive areas such as Reef Latakia and two brigades operate in Salamiya (Reef Hama) containing Ismaili fighters.

Despite regular demands from independent brigades and individuals to join the group, the *KWW* often turn down newcomers due to a lack of resources. We were able to verify that hundreds of fighters have been told that they can only join the *KWW* if it manages to secure more funding.

Despite regular demands from independent brigades and individuals to pro-democracy groups to join them, these have been turning down these requests due to a lack of resources

In January 2013, the authors met the leader of a group of 200 fighters in *Jabal al-Zawiya*, who asked to join the *KWW*. His group was a member of *Ahfad al-Rasool*, a mainstream Islamist coalition inside the FSA. The leader claimed that they had joined this Islamist coalition in order to receive support but now decided to leave as they could no longer bear the

[2] National Unity Brigades.
[3] Information about this group was collected through regular contacts with political and military leaders and several visits in the province of Idlib between January and June 2013.
[4] www.syria-nul.com
[5] www.allsyrians.org

ideological discourse of the group. In June 2013, an independent FSA group of 1000 fighters of northern Idlib asked to join the *KWW* coalition. In both cases the *KWW* decided that they could not accept them into the coalition as they were not able provide them with ammunition.

The *KWW* rely on donations from Syrian expatriates, including members of the exiled Alawite community. A committee was formed abroad and is in charge both of vetting individuals and groups who want to join the *KWW*, and of the distribution of money, ammunition and weapons. This support has allowed the *KWW* to survive but is not significant enough to allow them to grow.

In al-Jabal al-Wastani and Sahl al-Rouj (Western Idlib), the *KWW* are the strongest force on the ground, despite the presence of some radical elements in nearby fronts. They actively participated in the liberation of the region and are now on the front line of the battle for the town of Jisr al-Shughoor. This region is mostly Sunni but there are isolated Alawite, Shiite, and Christians villages. Many civilians from these minority populated villages have fled but the *KWW* have put great efforts into convincing minorities to stay and have prevented the occupation of empty Alawite houses by radical armed groups who tend to consider Alawite property as spoils of war. Contacts have been made between leaders of *Katibat Ahrar Bdama* and *Liwa' Shuhada' al-Jabal al-Wastani* (both part of the *KWW*) and community leaders who have demanded security guarantees for the return of populations to their villages. The *KWW* does not have the sufficient resources, for the moment, to ensure protection for the return of these populations.

In Western Idlib and in Northern Latakia, the *KWW* are now cooperating with defected judges to open civil courts implementing Syrian civil and criminal law, despite pressure and threats from the now widespread sharia courts. At least two courts have started operating since July 2013.

The *KWW* recognizes the authority of the Supreme Military Council despite the fact that they have not received any support from it. Thus the *KWW* operate autonomously from the SMC, as do most opposition groups in Syria. More recently, the *KWW* have participated in the formation of the *Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya (JAS),*[6] a secular oriented coalition under the umbrella of the SMC, led by Colonel Qassem Saad Eddin. As the future of the *JAS* depends on the financial and military support it hopes to receive, at the time of the publication of the report the *KWW* continues to exist as an autonomous coalition within the *JAS* (described below).

Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya (Front of the Freemen Syrians)[7]

Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya
Front of the Freemen of Syria

The leader of the *Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya (JAS)*, Colonel Qassem Saad Eddin, is an air force pilot by training and a leading FSA colonel from the town of Rastan who defected from the air force in February 2012[8] along with hundreds of officers and initiated the first military councils in spring 2012. Al-Rastan, a small town North of Homs is known to be a stronghold of the Syrian military and has provided thousands of officers to the Syrian regular army. Former Minister of Defense Mustapha Tlass, who served for decades under Hafez al-Assad, is from al-Rastan and was the artisan of the massive enrollment of young men from his hometown into the army. His son Manaf was the

[6] Front of the Freemen of Syria
[7] The authors conducted several trips to Syria and Turkey to meet with leaders of the JAS. The last trip to Northern Syria was end June 2013.
[8] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqWLrhs6bxo

commander of the Republican Guard until his defection in July 2012.

Colonel Saad Eddin established the first military council in Homs and later in other provinces with the goal of building a military organization for the rebellion. Though a practicing Muslim, he is known for his liberal opinions and rejection of an Islamist agenda based on the principle that an army has no business in taking any ideological position. He, along with other high and middle rank defectors, were sidelined by regional donors who preferred to support groups willing to espouse their agenda. He has managed to maintain significant popularity as he is one of the figures of the FSA leadership who remained inside Syria. He is now one of the 30 members of the unified High Command of the SMC and its spokesperson inside Syria.

In May 2013, Colonel Saad Eddin, announced the creation of *JAS*, the Front of the Freemen of Syria, under the direct authority of the SMC.[9] This group brings together secular, nationalist and moderate forces that had mostly been left out of existing networks of resource distribution. The Front grew rapidly in the north and central regions of the country and numbered over 20 000 fighters within a few weeks.

Until July 2013, the *JAS* was composed of battalions and brigades that kept their names and leaders unchanged. Six weeks after its formation however, the leadership of the Front decided to reorganize by forming divisions, brigades and battalions holding numbers instead of names on the model of the Syrian Army. It was decided that each group should be either led or assisted by a defected officer. In July 2013, the nascent structure of the *JAS* included a military command, political advisors and fifteen specialized branches. Along with the military branches, all led by senior officers (colonel and above), the *JAS* has set up a judicial office, led by the defected military judge Lieutenant Adnan Kawkab, a member of the High Command of the SMC. This office is also composed of lawyers[10] in charge of ensuring the respect for international conventions. A political committee was formed by intellectuals and politicians in the liberated areas to assist and advise the military leaders of the *JAS*.

The creation of the Front aims at establishing a balance of power with other organized fronts such as the *Jabhat al-Nosra* (the radical Jihadi group linked to al-Qaeda and completely independent from the SMC) and the Syrian Islamic Front and Syrian Islamic Liberation Front which are partly under the SMC's authority. These Islamist fronts have been able to create national franchises thanks to their ability to access important resources in the early stages of the armed struggle. Colonel Saad Eddin's Front, the *JAS* is the largest non-Islamist organized coalition at a national level and probably the largest group under the direct authority of the SMC. The most active and integrated brigades of the Front are located in northern Syria (Aleppo, Idlib and Hama),[11] but the group is currently growing in Homs, and has smaller units in the other provinces.

Colonel Qassem Saad Eddin, Leader of the JAS

Colonel Saad Eddin and Colonel Zyad Haj Obeid, both members of the SMC leadership, created the "brigade for the protection of civilians and of public and private property" in April 2013.[12] This brigade operates in Aleppo city and countryside and has several units in charge of protecting factories and public buildings as well as a special unit in charge of investigating cases of looting.

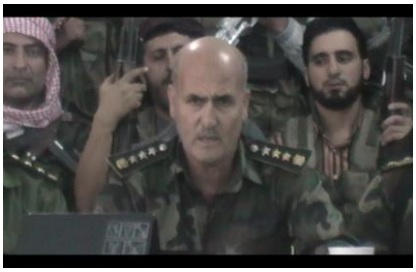
[9] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMKAZP2dnAM
[10] Most of the lawyers are members of the Tajamuu al-Muhameen al-Ahrar, the Free Lawyers Association based in Antakya who promote the application of the Syrian civil and criminal law in the liberated areas.
[11] Authors were present at a gathering of leaders of brigades of the JAS on June 23rd in Northern Syria and conducted series of interviews.
[12] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3mn07HBDGo

Senior Military Figures

High ranking officers of the Free Syrian Army have been able to build a strong reputation, leading efficient brigades while maintaining a strict military and nationalist identity. Despite their experience, local support and military successes, they have received far less support than other groups who had accepted to abide to islamists agendas.

General Ahmad al-Faj

General Ahmed Al-Faj leads the *Tajamuu Alwyat al-Muutasim billah* in Atareb, Aleppo. This group is known for having led the long siege and battle of Military Base 46 from September to November 2012, one of the most crucial battles for the liberation[13] of the province of Aleppo.[14] General Ahmad al-Faj holds great resentment against radical groups such as *Fajr al-Islam* and *Jabhat al-Nosra* who he accuses of having only participated in the final assault of the base to get hold of war spoils. His group includes 1500-2000 fighters and some heavy weapons and tanks, for which they manufacture their own shells and ammunitions.[15]



General Abdel-Nasser Farzat
leader of Jabhat Ahrar Halab

General Abdel-Nasser Farzat leads *Jabhat Ahrar Halab,*[16] a coalition of brigades fighting in Aleppo Province. Like General Ahmed al-Faj and Colonel Qassem Saad Eddin, he has never left Syria since the the beginning of the uprising. He proudly claims to have refused funding from Islamic networks and insists that despite pressures, he refused to change the name of his unit for a religious or politically connotated name. He emphasizes the need for the FSA to keep a strict military discipline and identity. He even claims that he has never defected from the Syrian Army, but simply joined the FSA.

Community based groups

Tribes

The tribes of Syria are a key force among the anti-Assad armed resistance. They are present mainly in the Hama, Hasakeh, Deir Ezzor and Raqqa provinces as well as in the Horan region in the south. Tribal groups are well organized and armed thanks to their strong connections across the border with tribes in Iraq as well as with the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula in all the Arab Gulf monarchies. While some tribes have struck alliance at the local level with Islamists and Jihadi groups, many FSA brigades composed and led by tribal figures oppose and sometimes clash with extremist forces. For security reasons, they did not accept that we disclose information about them.

[13] Apart from the western part of Aleppo City and several surrounded positions, the province of Aleppo is under opposition control.
[14] Syrian Rebels set-up camp on hilltop Base 46, al-Arabiya News November 21 2012.
[15] Several interviews were conducted with General Ahmad al-Faj in June 2013 in Atareb.
[16] The Front of the Freemen of Aleppo

Dooma

The suburban city of Dooma is in many ways a microcosm of the Syrian resistance. It provides a perfect illustration of the efforts by democratic political forces to resist the rise and growing domination of Islamist forces. Dooma was one of the first towns to be entirely liberated from regime forces in the Damascus area and probably the largest town controlled by the resistance outside the liberated north. A large portion of the inhabitants have been displaced and the remaining population is approximately 200 000. Dooma is located in the northern part of the Eastern Ghoota in the suburbs of Damascus. It has been under opposition control since the end of the summer 2012, and has since been under an intense military siege. It has been dubbed the Stalingrad of Syria due to the massive destructions. Dooma is historically a stronghold of the opposition to the regime. It is home to some of the most prominent figures of the leftist and nationalist opposition figures and has always been watched with distrust by the Assad regime. Understandably, the army has avoided recruiting any officers from Dooma.

Liwa' Shuhada' Dooma

The armed rebellion in Dooma is almost entirely organized and led by civilians[17] and influential political activists while traditional respected figures and community leaders provide guidance to the armed groups.

In spring 2013, eight military units of diverse political orientation operating in Dooma came together on the basis of their rejection of rigid and extremist Islamists and formed a coalition with the hope of regaining control over the city from the Salafists. Its member groups are all led by Arab nationalist, moderate Islamist, Nasserite or socialist local figures. *Liwa' Shuhada' Dooma* and *Liwa' Usood al-Ghoota*[18]. They are the two main groups who challenge the powerful Salafi group *Liwa' al-Islam*.[19]

Liwa' al-Islam, led by Zahran Alloosh, (the son of a Wahhabi sheikh) is the best-endowed armed group with some 16 000 fighters operating in Dooma and the surrounding area. The Salafi *Liwa'* has been able to take control of strategic institutions such as the prison of al-Touba and the tribunal. It has monopolized the distribution of wheat and taken control of buildings for the delivery of various social services. *Liwa' al-Islam* enjoys consistent outside support, mostly from unidentified sources and is the only group in Dooma that pays its fighters a regular monthly salary. *Liwa' al-Islam's* hegemonic and authoritarian practices, as well as recent misbehavior,[20] have caused resentment among the inhabitants of Dooma. The *Liwa'* is also held responsible for poor military planning in waging the battle of al-Keemia' which lasted over 8 months and caused the loss of more than 1200 fighters. It was accused of having deliberately stopped short of launching the assault on al-Keemia' after receiving orders from outside political forces linked to the agenda of its foreign donors and sacrificed lives unnecessarily. While it is difficult to verify the accuracy of this story, it is clear that massive defections from the *Liwa's* ranks have occurred after the battle and that its popularity has been severely affected. This has given new momentum to the other political and military forces which emerge as competing forces but continue to suffer from the lack of resources to gain the upper hand.

As long as the battle to break the siege of the town by regime forces is ongoing, all forces – Islamist or secular – fight together in the battlefield.[21] However, they do not share arms, ammunition or financial

[17] Liwa' al-Bara', led by the Captain Abu al-Nasr from Rastan, assisted by two local activists.
[18] Other brigades are listed at the end of the report
[19] Shabab al-Huda battalion, a mainstream Islamist group close to the Muslim Brotherhood is part of the Coalition. It is generously funded by the Muslim Brothers but does not share its resources with other brigades and battalions in the coalition.
[20] Liwa' al-Islam is accused of looting and occupying public buildings, and committing assassinations.
[23] In May 2013 all of the FSA units in Dooma gathered and formed the Majles al-Mujahidi, to coordinate the battle against the regime, and to try to break the siege of the Ghoota.

resources and when it comes to the control and management of the town, armed groups and political figures from the two groups operate in a context of strong competition.

Deraa-Suweida'

While extremist Jihadi groups have not been able to consolidate their presence in the south as they have in the north, Islamist groups have been able to control networks of resource distribution and have strongly influenced the political orientation of the armed groups on the ground. In Deraa, several FSA units are led by defected officers or civilians with a clear democratic and liberal orientation. The authors of the report are in contact with them, but were not authorized to disclose the names of their units and of their leaders as they fear to be publically identified as "non-Islamists" and thus boycotted by donors. Members of non-Islamist units complain of discrimination such as unequal distribution of relief and of care in Islamic funded hospitals, mainly in Jordan. We have identified one such division in Deraa (composed of four brigades), along with two independent brigades.

The regime still enjoys total control over the Druze populated province of Suweida' and support from a significant part of its population. For a variety of reasons, the opposition in Suweida' has been reluctant to take up arms: out of commitment to the peaceful struggle of the first months of the revolution, but also to avoid being caught in the civil strife and risk exposing the whole Druze community (approximately 3% of the population) to danger and out of fear of a violent response by the regime.

Colonel Marwan al-Hamal (right) leader of the Revolutionary military council of Sweida

The armed Druze opposition therefore had to set their base in neighboring Deraa province. The Revolutionary Military Council of Suweida led by Colonel Marwan al-Hamad includes 6 battalions (around 500 fighters, most of them Druze), operating in Deraa and conducting underground operations in Suweida. It closely cooperates with small units led by Druze officers operating in the province of Aleppo (*Katibat al-Shahid Kamal Joomblat)*[22] and in the Eastern-suburbs of Damascus (*Katibat Fida'yi Bani Maaroof)*[23].

Al-Raqqa

In Al-Raqqa*, Liwa' Thuwwar al-Raqqa*, commanded by Abu Eesa is a representative example of locally rooted brigades. It is composed of civilian activists from the city who decided to carry arms and organize as a unit to defend their city in face of *Jabhat al-Nosra* and the *Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham* (ISIS). [24] They are strongly supported by the population which sees them as a bulwark against the extremists of al-Qaeda and are close to the democratic movement *Muwatana*. In the city of Tabqa in the province of al-Raqqa, tribes have a strong role. Tribal groups were the first to prepare for the military fight against the regime which they tought early on was inevitable.

[22] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaMVUEbT0Bk
[23] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngiyLYvQmqM
[24] The Jihadi group Jabhat al-Nosra split in April 2013 when part of the group merged with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's al-Qaeda branch in Iraq and became the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). Part of Jabhat al-Nosra refused the merger and confirmed its direct allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Liwa' Thuwwar al-Raqqa

Among them the Nasser tribe who consider themselves to be the original inhabitants of the province and the bedrock of the revolution in the region including of the armed resistance. Their military arm is the *Liwa' Aws al-Qurani* led by Abdel Fattah al-Sheikh Mooss (Abu Mohamad) composed of 1000 fighters. It includes *Saraya al-Furat-Katibat al-Shura* (led by Mohamad Ben Abdallah) which expanded recently to include three additional battalions. These groups were the first armed groups in the al-Raqqa province. They played an active role in the liberation of al-Raqqa and in the current siege on the Tabqa military airport.

The *Liwa'* held some 110 prisoners from regime forces, half of whom were liberated (mostly Sunni prisoners) while the other half were kept in detention in the hope that the *Liwa'* could serve to negotiate the liberation of some of their own fighters. The prisoners seem to be held in decent conditions. Turkish journalists and representatives of Human Rights Watch were allowed to visit them.

Talbiseh

In Talbiseh, a large group of defected army officers from the Talbiseh area near Homs created a division and called it the 6th division composed of several brigades and commanded by Muqadam Yusef Hadid.

Formation of Military Divisions

In June 2013, General Idriss attempted to reorganize the isolated local FSA brigades and merge them into military divisions (*firqa*). The goal is to bring together isolated FSA brigades and battalions, organize them into a professional army based on the structure of the regular Syrian Arab Army and exclude armed groups that claim to fight under the name of the FSA without following its values.

In June 2013 rumors spread that the United States and the SMC will only distribute aid to groups organized into unified "divisions" composed of several brigades. A figure of 200 000 $US was circulating as being promised for each *firqa* as an incentive for groups to coalesce.

Since this date, several divisions have been spontaneously announced and have sought to register with the leadership of the SMC. Division, brigade and battalion names have been replaced with numbers and military defectors have been given leading positions. The political orientation of each unit depends on the brigades involved in its initial formation. Although some divisions have clearly taken position in favor of an Islamic state, such as the 3rd Division in Deir Ezzor,[25] most tend to put forward a strict military and politically neutral identity. As these formations were only recently created and as leadership positions have been redistributed, it is too early to describe the political orientation of many of these divisions. Some groups such as the 10th division of Damascus and the 33rd division of Idlib are entirely composed of and led by secular nationalist elements that have continually refused Islamist funding.

In late June 2013, in the liberated areas of the province of Idlib, local FSA units came together to form the 33rd division led by defected Lieutenant Colonel Ammar Dayoub.

This division brings together around 1700 fighters deployed across Idlib. They announced its formation and

[25] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyzHVudIOHo

its composition on YouTube, first in a video shot in Jabal Zawiya on June 22nd, and then in a new video shot a few days later after they decided to replace all the civilian brigade leaders with defected officers.[26] In the video, Lt. Col. Dayoub announces that the division is under the authority of the Northern Front of the SMC (led by Colonel Abdel-Basset al-Tawil).

Tajamuu Humat al-Thawra
Founders of the 33rd Division

The division is formed of different brigades and battalions, whose inclination can be clearly identified as nationalist or secular. Founding members of the division include the former brigades of the *Tajamuu Humat al-Thawra,*[27] which has a clear secular and anti-sectarian leaning. The spokesman of the 33rd division is Lieutenant Muhanad al-Ayssama, a defected officer from the Druze community and former leader of the 333rd brigade of the 33rd division.

10th Division Forces of the Capital

In Damascus, secular brigades operating in the southern neighborhoods and in the Eastern Ghoota gathered in early July to form the 10th Division. The group is currently composed of 1200 fighters in two brigades, *Liwa' al-Adala* and *Liwa' Seif al-Dimashqi*, and is led by Yassin al-Maydani (civilian leader) and Captain Rami Tlass (military leader). At the time of publication, they were expecting another brigade to join to be able to be recognized officially as a division by the SMC.

In Talbiseh as mentioned above, the 6th division was created.

Lastly and most importantly, the *Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya (JAS)* restructured the Front by operating a new vetting process of its fighters, this time individually (rather than whole battalions and brigades as it initially did) and formed three divisions. The current number of armed men had reached 7000 in August 2013. The three divisions are firqa 25, 35, and 45. They comprise five brigades each, briging the total number of brigades to 15.

The future success and unity of these and other divisions recently formed across Syria will only be sustainable if they receive support from the SMC. If such assistance does not materialize, these groups will remain isolated, rely on their own personal networks of solidarity and remain vulnerable to defections. For example, the 33rd Division had not received any support from the SMC at the time of finishing the report. The leaders of the newly formed divisions have expressed their concern as they face difficulties in convincing their troops to stay united and wait for ammunition.

The future success and unity of the recently formed divisions across Syria will only be sustainable if they receive consistent support from the SMC

V. Fluidity

Observers of the Syrian military scene are often perplexed by the complexity and the fluidity of the situation on the ground. They are most often left with the impression that no group can be trusted to remain away from Jihadi groups. "Where are the democrats? If only they existed, we would support them!" is the refrain of leaders in the West – including among those sympathetic to the Syrian resistance.

[26] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-mlJNaQU18
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itgbVi62rSo
[27] Protection of the Revolution Union

The names of battalions and brigades can often be misleading and should not be taken as indicative of a political or ideological affiliation. The majority of groups names are determined by the search for funding. Non-Islamist groups choose names that they think will attract a rich Islamist source from the Gulf to fund them. Sometimes a government or a private donor offers to provide support to a brigade if it agrees to change its name to one with a religious overtone; many battalions carry several different names and join more than one coalition in order to multiply opportunities of receiving support. Conversely, extremist groups do not always carry names with an Islamic reference. The names of the units therefore cannot be taken as indicating the groups' political or religious leaning.

With every new coalition or front formed, groups disappear under one name and re-emerge with a new one under a different umbrella. Since June 2013 when the Chief of Staff of the SMC, General Salim Idriss, called for the formation of divisions as in a regular army, and reportedly promised to support each division with 200 000 $US, many battalions and brigades gave up their names and rushed to merge into a division (*firqa*), hence the emergence of *firqas*, listed above.

A battalion such as *Kataeb al-Jabal al-Wastani* is at the same time part of the *KWW* national group, joined the *JAS* and is now ready to join a *firqa*. The reason why they don't dissolve the original battalion is because they continue to receive some funding as part of the *KWW*, but the money and the arms were insufficient and prompted them to first join the *JAS* and now to seek a new division in the hope that they will be decently equipped to fight.

Almost all fighters, either individually or with their entire battalions have been part of at least three or four different groups. Some leave to join a brigade for a week or so and come back to their original unit. Units often keep their name but fighters move in and out of their ranks. As explained in more detail below, some of these movements are dictated by the need to cooperate among groups when facing an immediate threat by regime forces.

But the fluidity primarily reflects the diverse but unstable, and therefore unreliable, sources of funding. It is impossible under such conditions for any leader of a group to guarantee support to his fighters over several months and be in a position to retain them, nor can a leader refuse support offered by a source (usually with an Islamist agenda) without being blamed by his fighters and risk losing them. This has happened time and again and many leaders who have refused to swear loyalty to an Islamist donor have found themselves marginalized. Groups funded by Islamic sources with a conservative agenda invariably enjoy more stable funding and do not face similar problems. The fluidity among their troops is much more limited as a result.

The fluidity primarily reflects the diverse but unstable and therefore unreliable sources of funding

The evolution of *Kataeb al-Farooq* offers a good example of the loose and fluid allegiances that prevail in the rebellion. *Kataeb al-Farooq* was created in Homs by early defectors and civilian activists in summer 2011. Led by Abdel Razzaq Tlass, the first Syrian officer to publicly defect, *Kataeb al-Farooq* quickly gained popularity by taking a leading role in the battle of Homs in winter 2011-2012. Generous outside support, mostly from Qatar, allowed al-Farooq to grow and expand with branches in different parts of Syria. A year later, its northern branch, *al-Farouq al-Shamali*, took control of the border crossings of Bab-al Hawa and Tal Abyad on the Turkish border. *Al-Farooq* became one of the largest "national franchises", with many groups joining in the hope of receiving aid. In September 2012, *Kataeb al-Farooq* participated in the creation of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front. However, the drying-up of funding in addition to some personal disputes led the coalition to split into different groups (*al-Faylak al-Awal, Kataeb al-Farooq al-Islamia, Kataeb al-Farooq, Farouq al-Umma* and others). Today the original group of *Kataeb al-Farouq* led by Ossama Junaydi is losing its influence and many

battalions are leaving as they are not receiving any more support. Many brigades, however, remain nominally part of *al-Farooq* to benefit from the brand name of the coalition. Being part of a national coalition gives local groups weight when dealing with rival armed groups. But these operate autonomously and have become very diverse. *Al-Farooq* has basically ceased to exist in its original structure.

VI. Atomized but cooperating

Despite the fluidity and the atomization of the rebel forces, independent brigades of the FSA cooperate effectively in the battlefield. The absence of unity and of a top-down chain of command does not imply a lack of cooperation. However, tensions have recently emerged between radical Islamist and secular argroups.

The general staff of the Supreme Military Council has attempted to unify independent local groups through provincial military councils. These councils were set up to distribute weapons, ammunition and salaries and set up the early stage of an organized army with a centralized chain of command and supply distribution. However, the expected results were not reached, as a lack of resources did not enable the new local military councils to become the main sources of support to FSA armed groups. A minority of brigades became directly linked to the military councils but most remained independent and rely on informal networks of support.

Despite the fluidity and the atomization of the rebel forces, independent brigades of the FSA cooperate effectively in the battlefield

Examples of cooperation abound. Operation rooms (*Ghurfat amaliyat*), for example, are set up for each battle, bringing together all the commanders of the brigades participating in the battle irrespective of their ideological affiliation.

They agree on their respective roles and on the distribution of the war spoils. Very often, a brigade in a quiet area will send a group of fighters to fight for a few days on another front under the command of another brigade. Many stories are reported where an armed group has a certain type of weapon, but needs to "borrow" a fighter from another brigade because he alone masters the use of the said weapon. Fighters often shift from one brigade to another; this is especially the case when brigades do not provide salaries, to the point that many soldiers regularly change brigades depending on the developments in the battlefield and on the supply of weapons and ammunition to a certain group. Surprisingly, the fact that a fighter quits a brigade for another one is rarely seen as a problem by brigade leaders. A unit leader is the “owner” of his stock of weapons but not of his men, meaning that a fighter can quit a unit for another one as long as he leaves his weapon with his former unit.

Local rebel groups have also created security committees bringing together members of different brigades to take charge of securing roads and communicating any suspicious movements of regime forces. When a particular area is under attack, local brigades or the security committees quickly circulate information to all groups in the area. An alert system has been set up to disseminate information about the movement of aircraft and helicopters. When a fighter-jet or a helicopter takes-off from a military airport, information about its movement is immediately passed through walkie-talkie allowing potential targets to find cover.

However, in the battlefield and in rebel-controlled territories, groups often don't cooperate on equal terms. Moderate groups lacking resources often find themselves dependent on the logistics of Islamist-funded brigades and end-up "assisting" them rather than participating in the battle on an equal footing. For example, fighters of *Katibat Shuhada' Al-Hurriya* in Jabal Al-Zawiya complained of having only one car for 150 fighters and were therefore dependent on other groups for the transportation of the fighters to the battlefield and for the evacuation of the wounded. The role assigned to each brigade is decided in an ad hoc operation room, in which the most well equipped group takes the leading role. Poorly equipped brigades often do not have sufficient ammunition to stay in the front line for a long period of time and are often given the role of securing the surrounding roads while better-equipped armed groups take part in the assault. During the battle for the airport of Taftanaz[28], the radical Islamist group *Jabhat al-Nosra* together with the Salafi movement *Ahrar al-Sham,* took the lead while small and poorly equipped local groups, such as *Liwa' Shuhada' Saraqeb*, were only given an auxiliary role.

Moderate groups lacking resources often find themselves dependent on the logistics of Islamist-funded brigades and end-up "assisting" them rather than participating in the battle on an equal footing

VII. Rising tensions with radical Jihadi groups

Increasing tensions between FSA fighters and radical Islamist groups have been reported in the last few months. A description of some of the recent clashes between mainstream groups and the radical Islamist/Jihadi groups provide insight into what is becoming in some cases a three way confrontation. A line has clearly been crossed after the clashes in al-Raqqa and Aleppo. Pro-democracy leaders of the FSA, local activists, lawyers and community leaders complain about the acts of intimidation on the part of radical groups such as *Jabhat al-Nosra, Ahrar al-Sham* and groups of foreign fighters. In July 2013, several people were killed in clashes between radical Islamist groups and brigades from the FSA. Earlier in the spring, tensions existed but isolated clashes were kept under control and cases of Jihadi aggression against the FSA or against activists were publicly attributed to the regime so as to contain further tensions.

Tensions in Al-Jabal al-Wastani

A mountainous region in the western province of Idlib, *Al-Jabal al-Wastani* is one of the main strongholds of the secular rebel group, *the Kataeb al-Wehda al-Watania.* Tensions there had been rising for some time between local rebels and *Jabhat al-Nosra*. Islamists frequently accused KWW fighters of being apostates because they oppose the establishment of an Islamic state. On June 19 2013, elements of *Jabhat al-Nosra* entered the village of al-Hamama and assassinated two civilians who they accused of having owned a bar in Damascus. Following the incident, a group of fifty *Jabhat al-Nosra* fighters tried to enter the village of al-Amoudia located west of the town of Darkoush on the road to the city of Idlib, this time to arrest someone they suspected of collaborating with the regime. Elements of the *Shuhada' al-Jabal al-Wastani* brigade, part of the KWW, stopped the group at a checkpoint and denied them entry into the village saying that it was the local court's jurisdiction to investigate such cases. As tension between the two groups rose, the KWW gathered seven of its battalions present in the region and forced *Jabhat al-Nosra* to leave the area. The following day, a number of brigade leaders of northern Idlib gathered and formed an alliance against *Jabhat al-Nosra*. This

[28] Province of Idlib, January 2013

alliance included 10 brigades:

- *Liwa' Shuhada' al-Jabal al-Wastani*, led by Lieutenant Colonel Safi Abdel Karim;
  Liwa' al-Reef al-Shamali, led by Ghayth Bakour;
- *Liwa' Ahrar al-Jabal al-Wastani*, led by Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed al-Ali;
- *Liwa' al-Ghufran*, led by Riyad Taha;
- *Liwa' Majd al-Islam*, led by Abdel Munim Ghanoum;
- *Liwa' Ahbab al-Rassoul*;
- *Liwa' Sayd al-Shuhada'*, led by the Colonel dr. Samih al-Ayssa;
- *Liwa' Ahrar al-Zawiya*, led by Abu Sayd;
- *Katibat al-Hurr*, led by Ahmed Jumaa;
- The Military Council of Jisr al-Shughour, represented by Fayez al-Jasem.

On July 2nd, elements of *Jabhat al-Nosra* tried to seize the checkpoint located at the entrance of the village of Maghat al-Jamous, held by the KWW. Members of *Jabhat al-Nosra* were arrested and finally released after negotiations with their leader. Clashes were avoided and the situation in al-Jabal al-Wastani remained under the full control of the KWW at the time of this report.

Clashes in al-Dana

While the KWW and their local allies have been able to keep *Jabhat al-Nosra* away from their stronghold, other secular brigades have had more serious issues with extremist groups. Elements of the 33rd Division in Idlib violently clashed with extremists after a long period of mounting tensions. In June 2013, the 33rd Division was created in the province of Idlib, gathering mainly secular and nationalist brigades from across the province. The main component of this new grouping is the *Tajamuu Humat al-Thawra*, a secular group with minorities within its ranks (as described in Section IV above). In mid-June, *Ahrar al-Sham* declared their refusal to fight alongside secular groups and expelled the *Tajamuu Humat al-Thawra* from the battle for the control of the Latakia-Aleppo highway in Idlib. After pressure from local FSA groups including *Tajamuu Humat al-Thawra*, *Ahrar al-Sham* finally agreed to allow them to take part in the assault.[29]

The 33rd Division of the FSA has brigades in the town of al-Dana in the northeastern part of Idlib province. This area is known for being a stronghold of militant Islamist groups coming from abroad. The al-Qaeda affiliated *Islamic State of Iraq and Sham* (ISIS), has been gradually taking control of the town.

On 5 July 2013, an anti-ISIS demonstration broke out and Islamist militants reportedly opened fire on the protestors. Elements of the 33rd Division intervened to protect the demonstrators and clashed with ISIS. Major clashes broke out later that day when members of the 33rd Division and civilians who had taken part in the demonstration, went to the Islamic court to try to file a complaint against members of the ISIS. The 33rd Division was ambushed by elements of the ISIS as they arrived at the Islamic court. Dozens were killed on both sides including the leader of one brigade from the 33rd Division, Ahmed al-Qash, who was beheaded. The local ISIS group, led by a Tunisian Jihadi, Abu Oussama al-Tunisi, has since taken total control of the town.[30]

[29] The authors interviewed fighters in Syria as they came back from the battle after being excluded by Ahrar al-Sham.
[30] The Presence of Al-Qaeda raises tensions in Syria, Al-Jazeera English, July 9 2013

Attack on the FSA leadership breaks the 'Sacred Union'

Kamal al-Hamami (alias Abu Basel al-Ladkani) was killed by members of ISIS on 11 July 2013, marking a turning point in the relationship between Jihadi groups and the FSA. Kamal al-Hamami was a senior FSA leader, a member of the Supreme Military Council and led the *Kataeb al-Izz Ben Abdel-Salam* in northern Latakia.[31]

Similar provocative steps were recently taken by the Jihadi group, ISIS, in openly targeting FSA leaders, civilian activists and political figures in an attempt to take control of the rebel-held areas. ISIS has hardly taken part in any recent battles against the regime and clearly concentrates on imposing its rule on the northern areas. The province of al-Raqqa and several towns in northern Aleppo[32] are now largely under ISIS control.

The FSA's reaction is for the moment uncertain. While some leaders confess in private that the only way for the FSA to retake control over the northern territories is by directly confronting ISIS, many fear that opening a new front will only benefit the regime.

The Fight over the Province of al-Raqqa

Tensions have been particularly high in the province of al-Raqqa. *Jabhat al-Nosra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* arrived in the region in January 2013. The leader of *Kataeb al-Farooq*[33] for the province of al-Raqqa, Mohamed Daher, allegedly killed a Jihadi leader named Fares al-Absi at the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey in September 2012. Since then, tensions have risen between *al-Farooq* on one side and *Jabhat al-Nosra and* ISIS on the other. Mohamed Daher survived several assassination attempts while a number of local FSA and tribal figures have been killed. Jihadis were rarely accused in public and after such incidents; tribal mechanisms of reconciliation were usually activated to prevent an all-out confrontation between the groups.

Tensions intensified, however, in June 2013 after a series of events. In early June, elements of ISIS stormed the headquarters of *Kataeb al-Farooq* in the city of al-Raqqa, arresting 25 people and evicting *Kataeb al-Farooq* from the city. This allowed the Jihadi groups, mainly the ISIS and *Ahrar al-Sham* to exert total control over al-Raqqa. A day after expelling *al-Farooq*, ISIS expelled local tribal brigades affiliated with *al-Farooq* from the border post of Tal Abyad.[34] *Al-Farooq*'s leader in the province of al-Raqqa, Mohamed Daher, had to flee to Turkey following clashes with elements of the ISIS. On 11 July 2013, ISIS arrested members of the local council of Tal Abyad and took control of the wheat silos of northern al-Raqqa.

The break-up of the union of anti-Assad forces implies a painful recognition that the conflict has become a triangular struggle involving the regime, radical Jihadis and the democratic opposition

In reaction to the hegemonic control of radical Islamist groups on the region, the local population has held several demonstrations and sit-ins against ISIS and *Ahrar al-Sham*. A group of civilians created the brigade *liwa' thuwwar al-raqqa* (described above) and the FSA is starting to reorganize in an attempt to bring the province back under its control. In a video statement on 17 July 2013, several FSA brigades announced the creation of the 11th Division.[35] In this statement, the FSA declared that it will not allow the existence of any armed groups in al-Raqqa outside of the control of the 11th Division of the FSA and declared Jihadi groups an illegitimate component of the rebellion.

[31] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23283079
[32] In July 2013, ISIS had complete control over the town of al-Dana, and partial control of the border town of Jarablous and the surrounding villages.
[33] Kataeb al-Farooq is coalition of FSA brigades originating from Homs but now widespread across Syria (see Section 3 above). It is part of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front.
[34] In July, the border post was handed over by ISIS to Ahrar al-Sham.
[35] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3i7sBnMdK4

The consensus among groups had so far been to protect the unity of arms, and numerous examples exist of tensions resolved through peaceful means. However, the level of resentment against Jihadi groups by the civilian population and part of the FSA has grown to the point where it became clear to many that radical Jihadis had become a serious threat to the revolution. The Sacred Union that had prevented infighting within the armed opposition is not upheld at any price anymore. It should not be seen as further division within the uprising but rather as an attempt at re-gaining control of the resistance and its original objectives. Yet it does imply a painful recognition that the conflict has become a triangular struggle involving the regime, radical Jihadis and the democratic opposition.

VIII. Acting to secure a democratic outcome

Short of a political settlement, Syria's transition will be strongly influenced by the military configuration in the battlefield. As long as the prospects of such a political solution are remote, and no direct intervention to protect the Syrian population happens, all parties will continue to give priority to the military balance on the ground. Intervening to shape the situation on the ground is the best way to increase the chances of achieving the desired outcome of a pluralist democratic Syria.

Some countries in the West are now tempted to look at Syria as the new arena in the global war on terror. Maintaining this perspective risks leading to an absurd fight against ghosts of the kind that US President George Bush waged during his presidency, in which downing one terrorist led to the emergence of dozens of new ones. In this type of fight, the criminal Assad regime might start to be seen as an ally.

There is a consistency problem in complaining that the strong and well endowed groups are controlled from outside (mostly by countries with an Islamist agenda) while dismissing the ones who are not controlled from outside as too weak to make a difference. This seems to have been for a good part of the last two years the self-defeating rationale. What this report shows is the current state of the forces on the ground. This reality was different six months ago. The number of Jihadis was much smaller and there was no talk of the democratic revolution being 'kidnapped' as many believe today. Looking ahead six months from now, there are good reasons to expect that if no decisive action is undertaken, supporters of a democratic outcome in Syria will have lost more ground to the groups they depict as dangerous and moderate military and political figures will further lose their relevance.

There is a consistency problem in complaining that the strong and well endowed groups are controlled from outside (mostly by countries with an Islamist agenda) while dismissing the ones who are not controlled from outside as too weak to make a difference

Some key implications and directions for action emerge from this analysis:

Making of the 'proxy war' an opportunity. Those who depict the Syrian conflict as a proxy war stop short of drawing the right implications. If money and arms are defining the direction of the conflict, the fluidity described above should be used as an opportunity to shape the situation and influence the outcome. The pro-democracy groups are sure to attract new fighters to their fold and to grow rapidly if provided with the right kind of support. They have the potential to spearhead a movement to alter the balance of power in the battlefield and reassure a large portion of Syrians sitting on the fence.

Engaging in the battle of narratives. The regime continues to devote a huge budget for its media strategy in spite of its financial strain in order to keep control on the narrative of the conflict. In parallel, Arab satellite television networks have mostly contributed to promoting the Sunni Jihadi groups by broadcasting images of fighters holding the black flag and wearing black hair bands celebrating military successes and taking exclusive credit for them. Pro-democracy groups have the weakest presence in the Arab and international media and need to become more visible.

Engaging the governments of the region who are providing support. Western countries who denounced Assad's crimes have largely relied on regional actors to provide financial and military support for what was understood to be a common objective of ending the Assad regime.

They have often ignored the real agenda of these governments and failed to see how they select the recipients of the support. It is high time that Western governments make clear to their regional allies that the identity of the aid recipients on the ground must be compatible with the desired outcome of a democratic, pluralistic, united Syria and that support for certain groups with a non-democratic agenda is frightening to many Syrians and delaying the fall of Assad.

Western governments must make clear to their regional allies that support for groups with a non-democratic agenda is frightening too many Syrians and delaying the fall of Assad

Selecting effective leaders as interlocutors. Working with outside patrons of Syrian armed groups is a necessity, for reasons already mentioned, but this is likely to perpetuate the proxy aspect of the conflict. In order to re-*Syrianize* the resistance, the safest way to operate in such a fluid environment is to engage the leading figures connected with the armed groups of the three categories we have identified: professional military officers who defected from the army and remained on the ground inside Syria; political opposition figures with a clear democratic affiliation, or community leaders at the local level. These are the effective leaders who provide guidance to armed groups and have been securing minimal funds for them to survive. They are the most reliable partners in building constituencies for a democratic outcome.

Only a comprehensive strategy that combines civil and military support can allow pro-democracy groups to regain ground. The supply of basic assistance, essentially food and medical care for the fighters of pro-democracy groups is just as important as the procurement of weapons. In addition, the best way to allow the pro-democracy groups to gain cohesion is to guarantee a minimal monthly allowance for fighters over a reasonable period of time (e.g. one year). Many governments who do not wish to be involved in military support could still contribute to empowering pro-democracy groups by providing for the basic needs of the fighters' families. One example is that of the KWW described above. With very modest but stable funding and clear political guidance, KWW fighters have remained faithful to their units. They lack arms and ammunition but very few, if any, have left their brigades.

Working towards a credible chain of command for the SMC. There is every reason to believe that General Salim Idriss is genuinely working to build a military structure and a credible chain of command for the Supreme Military Council. It remains, however, a structure in the making and can at best coordinate between different fronts, ideally on a regional basis, but in reality it has had to integrate some existing blocks which had gained their strength thanks to support from sources with an Islamist agenda such as the Syrian Islamic Front or the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria. Any future success at building cohesion among pro-democracy groups will make them an effective bloc within the SMC. A coalition such as the *Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya* (JAS) has in effect replicated the model of the Islamist fronts which first pooled units together in a united front and are now major blocs within the SMC.

Advanced weapons come as a result. Stable and reliable support of the kind we mentioned is the only way for leaders of pro-democracy groups to retain the loyalty of their fighters and ensure effective command. Only then will the discussion about which groups should be supplied with sophisticated weapons find an adequate answer.

Empowering pro-democracy groups while respecting unity of ranks. Mainstream Islamists groups who are part of the Free Syrian Army and are represented within the Supreme Military Council continue to be massively funded and are currently the dominant force on the ground. A strategy aimed solely at unifying the ranks of the FSA as it currently stands carries the risk of acknowledging and confirming the hegemonic position of Islamist groups. An effective strategy to alter this balance is to support and empower leaders of democratic groups to redress this balance in their favor within the FSA itself. General Idriss can be considered a non-biased channel for transferring arms and aid to groups on the ground but even then, governments often earmark funds and arms to specific groups and the General is not always free to deliver them to groups of his choice. *It is therefore possible to work through the SMC while designating the beneficiaries of the support*.

Helping the FSA face attacks from extremists. Nearly all groups within the Free Syrian Army know that the showdown with the extremists will happen sooner or later. They differ only over the right timing of it. A majority would prefer to conduct the fight themselves as opposed to witnessing drone strikes by foreign powers. Here again, many groups identified in this report believe the extremists should be confronted now without delay and are hoping for the right equipments to do so.

Empowering the pro-democracy groups is the starting point for an effective strategy of developing projects of a civil nature. Civil institutions such as civil administration, education and, most importantly, legal institutions are in dire need of support. The latter is the strongest case in point. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, it has been very difficult and in many cases impossible, to operate a court applying Syrian civil law in areas where Islamic funded groups have control over security. Civil tribunals cannot enforce a sentence without the assistance of a police force or some local armed group. Support for civilian institutions is therefore vital to allow civil resistance to continue while military support is needed to correct the balance in favor of pro-democracy groups. But doing the former without the latter can onely lead to prolonging the situation, rather than accelerating an end to the conflict.

Targeting areas where the regime is still in full control. In the coastal region or in Suweida, for example, both areas where minorities (Alawites and Druzes) are either a majority or strongly present, small groups with a clear democratic agenda are working quietly against the regime. They are willing to take significant risks and are yearning for support. Providing limited quantities of small arms to such groups would pose a serious challenge to the regime as these are the areas where it believes it enjoys support and will hesitate to respond with massive bombings in the same way that it does in areas where the support for the resistance is massive.

The intent is not to divide the resistance. For now, the pro-democracy groups remain at the mercy of the Islamist funded groups in most of the significant battles. If properly equipped, they would be in a position to cooperate on equal footing with moderate Islamist groups and would be able to register some visible military achievements to make a psychological shift inside and outside Syria. As to the extremists of Jabhat el Nosra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham, nearly all groups within the Free Syrian Army know that the showdown with the extremists will happen sooner or later. They differ only over the right timing of it. A majority would prefer to conduct the fight themselves as opposed to witnessing drone strikes by foreign powers. Here again, the groups identified in this report believe the extremists should be confronted now without delay and are hoping for the right equipments to do so.

Pre-empting the emergence of a demarcation line. Cities and areas targeted by the regime over the last six months such as Homs, al-Hoola and Qusair are confirming suspicions about its intent to define a strategic corridor linking the Mediterranean coast to Damascus, thus accelerating the fragmentation of the country along sectarian lines. Whether Assad will be supported in his folly by his allies in Moscow or Tehran is difficult to predict. In any case, it is critical in this context to support groups which can maintain enclaves of resistance along the projected corridor in order to prevent the creation of a line that could emerge as the demarcation line in a partition plan.

The entire armed resistance, from all backgrounds, agrees that the fight against the regime has to continue and this is likely to remain the case as long as no alternative option appears within reach. But the Syrian resistance has been facing a deadly conundrum over the past year. Every increase in aid provided by Sunni Islamist sources in return for loyalty to some Islamist agenda has heightened fears among more Syrians concerning the outcome of the conflict and has led Russia and Iran to intensify and deepen their involvement on the side of the Assad regime.

It is vital for the future of Syria, but also for the survival of the ethnic and sectarian mosaic of the Middle East, to regain the ground controlled by the Jihadis. A democratic system that provides the space for effective local governance in areas where certain communities are concentrated is the only viable option. Either Syria becomes a democracy or it will cease to exist as a unified state within its current borders.

List of Acronyms

FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (*al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*)
JAN	Jabhat al-Nosra (*Jabhat al-Nosra Li-Ahl al-Sham)*
JAS	*Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya* (Front of the Freemen of Syria)
KWW	*Kataeb al-Wehda al-Wataniya* (National Unity Brigades)
SIF	Syrian Islamic Front (*al-Jabha al-Islamiya al-Sooriya*)
SILF	Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (*al-Jabha al-Islamiya li-Tahrir Sooria*)
SMC	Supreme Military Council
SNC	Syrian National Coalition (National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces)
UNSMIS	United Nation Supervision Mission in Syria

Glossary of Arabic military terms

Katibat / Kataeb	Battalion(s)
Liwa'/ Alwiya	Brigade(s)
Firqa / Firq	Division(s)
Jabhat	Front
Tajamuu	Grouping
al-Majless (al-thawri) al-Askari	(Revolutionary) Military Council

Appendix 1

Table of FSA groups identified as pro-democracy

JABHAT AHRAR SOORIYA[36]				
Name of the Groupings / Units	***Name of the Leader***[37]	***Province***	***Operating area***	***Estimated number of armed fighters***[38]
Tajamuu Kata'eb al-Wehda al-Wataniya	**Led by a committee**			**2 000**
Liwa' Shuhada' al-Jabal al-Wastani*[39]	Commandant Ahmad Khdairu	Idlib	Al-Jabal al-Wastani/Sahl al-Rooj	7 brigades
Liwa' al-Khalifa (Katibat Shuhada' al-Hurriya)*	Abdel-Rahman Abdallah (Abu Waheed)	Idlib	Kafr Nobol-Heesh-Khan Shaikhoon	500
Katibat Shuhada' al-Janudia*	Hader Sheikh al-Shebab	Idlib	Janoodia-North of Jisr al-Shughoor	//
Katibat al-Maham al-Khasa*	Yusef Haj Yusef	Idlib	Janoodia-North of Jisr al-Shughoor	//
Katibat Ahrar Bdama*	Ali Haj Hasan	Idlib-Latakia	Bdama	//
Liwa' Kuluna Sooriyoon*	Captain Mohamad Tabnaja	Latakia	Jabal al-Akrad	Includes 4 brigades
Liwa' Shuhahda' Dimashq*	Abu Mohamad al-Maydani	Damascus	Yarmook, Tadamun, Qadam (South Damascus)	//
Liwa' Shuhada' Madinat al-Salamiya*	//	Hama	Salamiya	//
Katibat al-Shahid Ahmad Muraiwed*	Mohamad al-Hashish	Deraa	Sahl Horan	//

[36] ***Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya*** announced on July 19th 2013 that it will re-organize its forces into military divisions (*firqa*).
[37] Some names cannot be disclosed for security reasons.
[38] Most units have lists with names of registered fighters. We only mentioned armed fighters. Units usually have registered fighters without weapons. We did not include those. Many civilians wish to join the fight if arms were available and register waiting to receive weapons.
[39] Units marked with * constitute the Kataeb al-Wehda al-Watania (see description page 16)

JABHAT AHRAR SOORIYA (continued)				
Tajamuu al-Kifah al-Musallah	Musaab Abu al-Shabab	Idlib	Khan Shaykhoon	1 290
Tajamuu Ahrar Deir Ezzor	Colonel Ziad Obeid	Deir Ezzor	Deir Ezzor City and countryside	2 500
Al-Tajamuu al-Askary al-Thawri fi Halab al-Janoobi	Brigadier General Mohamad Khaluf Mohamad	Aleppo	South Aleppo province	300
Liwa' Himayat al-Madanyin wal-Munsha'at[40]	Colonel Zyad Haj Obeid	Aleppo	Aleppo city and countryside	300
Liwa' Majd al-Islam	//	Idlib	Idlib-Southern countryside	286
Liwa' al-Habib al-Mustafa	Habib Abu Ghuraib	Idlib	Idlib-Southern countryside	??
Liwa' al-Aadala	Ibrahim Dukhan	Idlib	Idlib-Southern countryside	??
Liwa' Shuhada' al-Hurriya	Colonel Moosa al Akl	Idlib	Idlib-Southern countryside	300
Liwa' al-Nasr	Colonel Moosa al-Ali	Idlib	Idlib-Southern countryside	460
Liwa' Noor al-Haq	Colonel Abdallah Moosa	Idlib	Idlib-Southern countryside	346
Liwa' Qasem Mohamad	Aawad Abu Ali	Idlib	Sajra	165
Liwa' Ahfad Othman	//	Homs	Al-Hoola al-Aaqrab	410
Katibat Abdallah Ben Masood	//	Homs	Homs-Old city	//
Katibat Fursan al-Izza	Abu Jamil	Homs	Northern countryside of Homs	70
Katibat Abu Baker al-Saddiq	Mohamad Ahmad Sheikh	Homs	Homs-Northern countryside	//
Katibat al-Saddiq	Mohamad Ahmad Sheikh	Homs	Homs-Northern countryside	//
Liwa' Suqoor al-Qadisiya	Mahdi Mohamad	Hama	Jabal Shahshabo	700
Liwa' Seif al-Islam	Colonel Ibrahim al-Masri	Hama	Hama-Western countryside	280

[40] The Brigade of the protection of civilians and infrastructures is in charge of the protection of dozens of factories, public and private property.

JABHAT AHRAR SOORIYA (continued)				
Liwa' al-Muutaz billah	Abu Fatah al-Mustafa	Hama	Hama Countryside	550
Katibat Ahrar Taybet al-Imam	Mohamad Khaled al-Sagheer	Hama	Hama-Northern Countryside	70
Liwa' Shuhada' Taybet al-Imam	Dr Hazem Khattab	Hama	Hama-Northern Countryside	220
Katibat al-Qaddis Jorjos	Amjad al-Haddad	Hama	Jabal Shahshabo (from al Sqaylbiya)	120
Liwa' Ansar al-Umma	Commandant Fawwaz al-Ali	Hama	Eastern countryside of Hama	//
Liwa' Khat al-Nar	Mohamad Jasem	Hama	Western countryside of Hama	170
Liwa' al-Muutasem	Sheikh Abu Mondher	Hama	Hama city and countryside	450
Liwa' al-Shahid al-Naqeeb Ali al-Hasan	Captain Iyad al-Saleh	Hama	Kafr Zita	//
Liwa' Rijal al-Haq	Lieutenant Hassan Abud	Hasaka	Al-Shadidi	//
Liwa' Shaalan	//	Hasaka	Al-Shadidi	//

AUTONOMOUS FSA UNITS				
Name of the Groupings / Units	***Name of the Leader[41]***	***Province***	***Operating area***	***Estimated number of armed fighters[42]***
Jabhat Ahrar Halab	**General Abdel-Nasser Farzat**	**Aleppo**	**Aleppo Province**	**//**
Liwa' Shararat al-Shamal**[43]	Abu al-Tayeb	Aleppo	Azaz	200
Kataeb al-Booraq**	Hasan Mohamad	Aleppo	Azaz	105
Liwa' Jabhat al-Enqadh**	Zyad Abu Zaid	Aleppo	Aasan (South Aleppo province)	78
Liwa' Suqoor al-Shahba'**	General Abdel-Nasser Farzat	Aleppo	South Aleppo province	//
Liwa' al-Adel**	General Abdel-Nasser Farzat	Aleppo	South Aleppo province	//
Katibat al-Shahid Muhanad Farzat**	Ahmad Farzat	Aleppo	South Aleppo province	//
Liwa' Ansar al-Haq**	Abu al-Tayeb	Aleppo	South Aleppo province	205
Tajamuu Alwyat al-Muutasim billah	**General Ahmad al-Faj**	**Aleppo**	**Atareb**	**1 500 – 2 000**
Liwa' Shuhada' Atareb[44]***	Nizar Barakat	Aleppo	Atareb	270
Liwa' Ain Jaloot**	General Ahmad al-Faj	Aleppo	Atareb	//
Liwa' Saqr al-Quraish**	Amar Batabihi	Aleppo	Atareb	//
Liwa' Tareq Ben Zyad**	Captain Abdallah Ibrahim (Abu Djana)	Aleppo	Atareb	//
Liwa' Majd al-Islam**	//	Aleppo	Atareb	700

[41] Some names cannot be disclosed for security reasons.
[42] Most units have lists with names of registered fighters. We only mentioned armed fighters. Units usually have registered fighters without weapons. We did not include those. Many civilians wish to join the fight if arms were available and register waiting to receive weapons.
[43] Units marked with ** constitute the *Jabhat Ahrar Halab* (see description page 19)

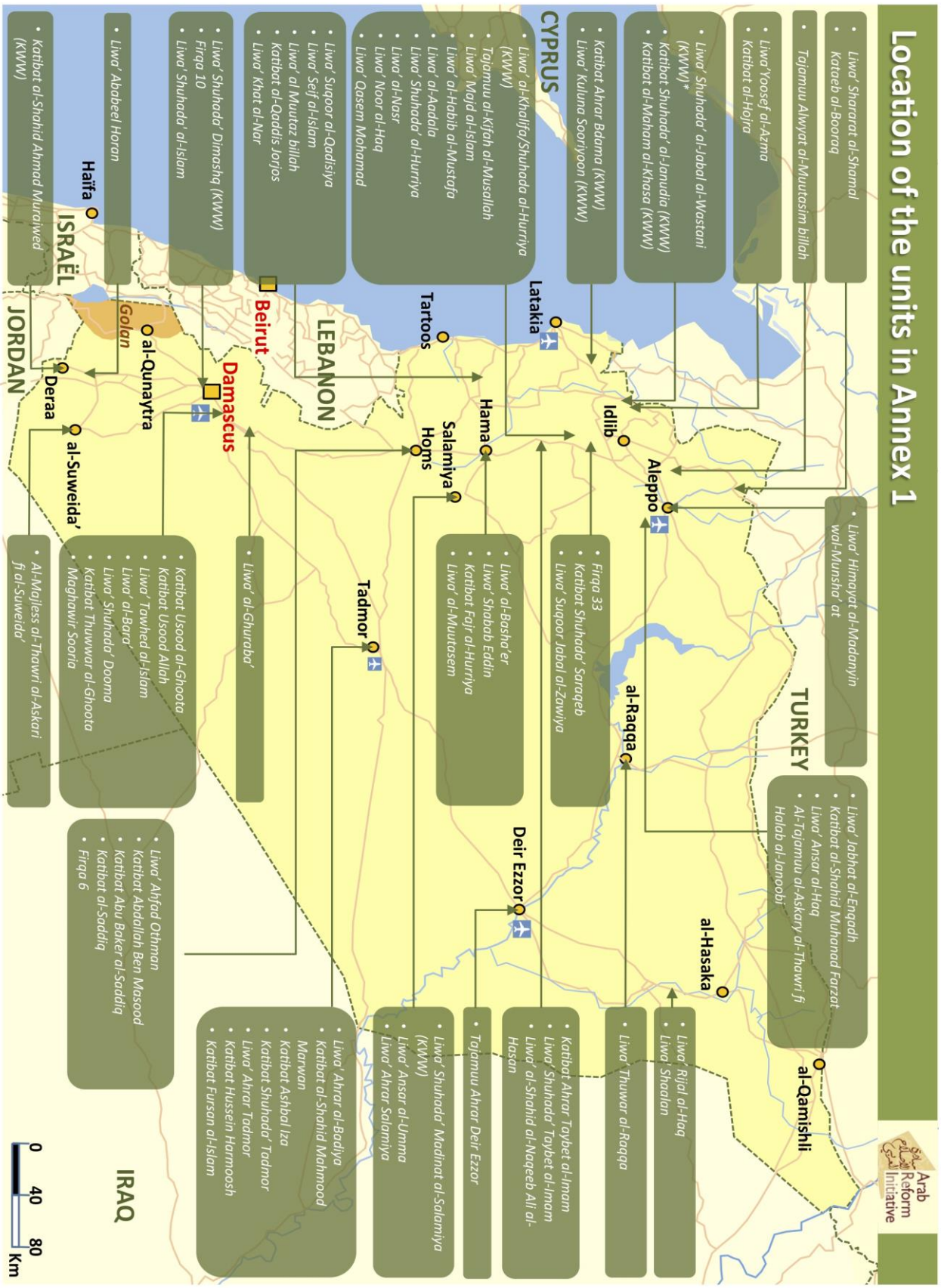
[44] Units marked with *** constitute the *Tajamuu Alwyat al-Muutasim billah* (see description page 19)

AUTONOMOUS FSA UNITS (continued)				
Quwat al-Maghawir	//	Damascus-Deraa	Eastern Ghoota – South Damascus	//
Firqa 10	Abu Yaseen al-Maydani/ Captain Rami Tlass	Damascus	South Damascus/ Eastern Ghoota	1 200
Liwa' al-Ghuraba'	Defected Major (anonymous)	Damascus	Qalamoon, al-Tal	400
Liwa' Ababeel Horan	Abu Tawfiq al-Soori	Damascus-Deraa	South Damascus-Deraa province	//
Katibat Usood al-Ghootha	Abu Khaled al-Ajwa	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	1 300
Katibat Usood Allah	Ammar Saab	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	200
Liwa' Tawheed al-Islam	Abu Maaroof al-Haja	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	850
Liwa' al-Bara'	Abu Nasser Shamir	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	//
Liwa' Shuhada' Dooma	Ahmad Taha	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	1 200
Katibat Thuwwar al-Ghoota	Abu Said Rajab	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	250
Maghawir Sooriya	Abu Mohamad al Mahshi	Damascus	Dooma/Ghoota Sharqiya	300
Liwa' Shuhada' al-Islam	Captain Abu Jamal	Damascus	Daraya	6 battalions
Al-Majless al-Thawri al-Askari fi Suweida'[45]	Colonel Marwan al-Hamad	Suweida'-Deraa	Suweida'-Deraa-Damascus-Aleppo	700
Liwa' Dera al-Thawra	Captain Fares al-Jawza	Deir Ezzor	Deir Ezzor City	140
Liwa' al-Basha'er	//	Hama	Hama city	160
Liwa' Shabab Eddin	Abu Mahmood	Hama	Hama countryside	350
Liwa' Ahrar Salamiya	Aaziz al-Mir Asaad	Hama	Salamiya	350
Liwa' Ahrar al-Badiya	Colonel Walid Mohamad Aaffar	Homs	Tadmor	333
Katibat al-Shahid Mahmood Marwan Qassem	Bader Aabad al-Rabaa	Homs	North of Tadmor	88
Katibat Ashbal Iza	Sofian al-Naimi	Homs	Tadmor	58

[45] Revolutionary Military council of Suweida'

AUTONOMOUS FSA UNITS (continued)				
Katibat Shuhada' Tadmor	Mohamad Fayz al-Mahimid	Homs	Eastern Ghoota of Tadmor	88
Liwa' Ahrar Tadmor	Lieutenant Iz Eddin al-Asaad	Homs	Tadmor	213
Katibat Hussein Harmoosh	Issa Qassem al-Qasrini	Homs	South of Tadmor	88
Katibat Fursan al-Islam	Captain Khaled al-Mutlaq	Homs	Tadmor	68
Katibat Shuhada' Saraqeb	//	Idlib	Saraqeb	//
Liwa' Yoosef al-Azma	Anas al-Zeer	Idlib	South of Salqeen	700
Firqa 33	Aammar Dayoob	Idlib	Idlib province	1 654
Liwa' Suqoor Jabal al-Zawiya	Captain Hasan al-Khalil	Idlib-Homs-Latakia	Homs and Idlib countryside- Jabal Akrad in Latakia	300
Katibat al-Hojra	Captain Mohamad Rahal	Latakia	Jabal al-Akrad	1 500
Liwa' thuwwar al-Raqqa	Abu Eissa	Raqqa	Raqqa city	//

Appendix 2



*Kataeb al-Wehda al-Wataniya

ARI, Sept 2013