

JUNE 2012

JOSEPH HOLLIDAY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 5

SYRIA'S MATURING INSURGENCY



Photo Credit: Edlib News Network Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/Edlib.News.Network>, posted June 4, 2012. Civilians inspect the wreckage of a destroyed regime T-72 in Ariha, Idlib Province, where rebels inflicted heavy losses on loyalist offensive.

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Published in 2012 in the United States of America by the Institute for the Study of War.

1400 16th Street NW, Suite 515 Washington, DC 20036.

<http://www.understandingwar.org>

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Elizabeth O'Bagy for her invaluable insight and Arabic language research. Asher Berman and Jeff Bolling were indispensable in this project, tracking the growth and activities of the Syrian insurgency through social media, and I could not have captured the opposition's video statements without ISW's Arabic linguist Omar Abdullah. Thoughtful editing from Marisa Sullivan, Jessica Lewis, and Tricia Miller as well as attractive formatting from Maggie Rackl, were essential in finalizing the report. Finally, I'd like to thank Barrett Brown at Praescient Analytics for helping the team use Palantir software to track and analyze Syria's maturing insurgency.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 5 | SYRIA'S MATURING INSURGENCY | JOSEPH HOLLIDAY | JUNE 2012

This report examines the increasing effectiveness of Syria's armed opposition, explains how responsible provincial-level military structures have emerged, and considers how uncoordinated external support could compound existing fractures within the opposition.

Syria's maturing insurgency has begun to carve out its own de facto safe zones around Homs city, in northern Hama, and in the Idlib countryside. The Assad regime seized key urban centers in Damascus, Homs, and Idlib during offensives in February and March 2012. However, the rebels successfully withdrew into the countryside, where they operate with impunity. As of June 2012, the opposition controls large swaths of Syria's northern and central countryside.

The Assad regime does not have the capacity to continue offensive operations while holding the key terrain it cleared in the spring. Currently, the regime is postured to hold Damascus, Homs, and Idlib, but not to defeat the insurgency that prospers in the countryside. In order to direct a new offensive against rebel strongholds outside of Homs city and in the Idlib countryside, the regime will have to consolidate forces for a large operation, which could compromise regime control of the urban areas. Increased direct military assistance from Russia or Iran could substantially mitigate this risk to the regime.

Syria's loyalist security forces will have to balance competing priorities in the summer of 2012. First, they must ensure that fighting does not spread further in northern Aleppo and coastal Latakia provinces. Second, they must regain control of rebel strongholds to the north and south of Homs city. Finally, they must disrupt de facto rebel safe zones in northern Hama and the Idlib countryside.

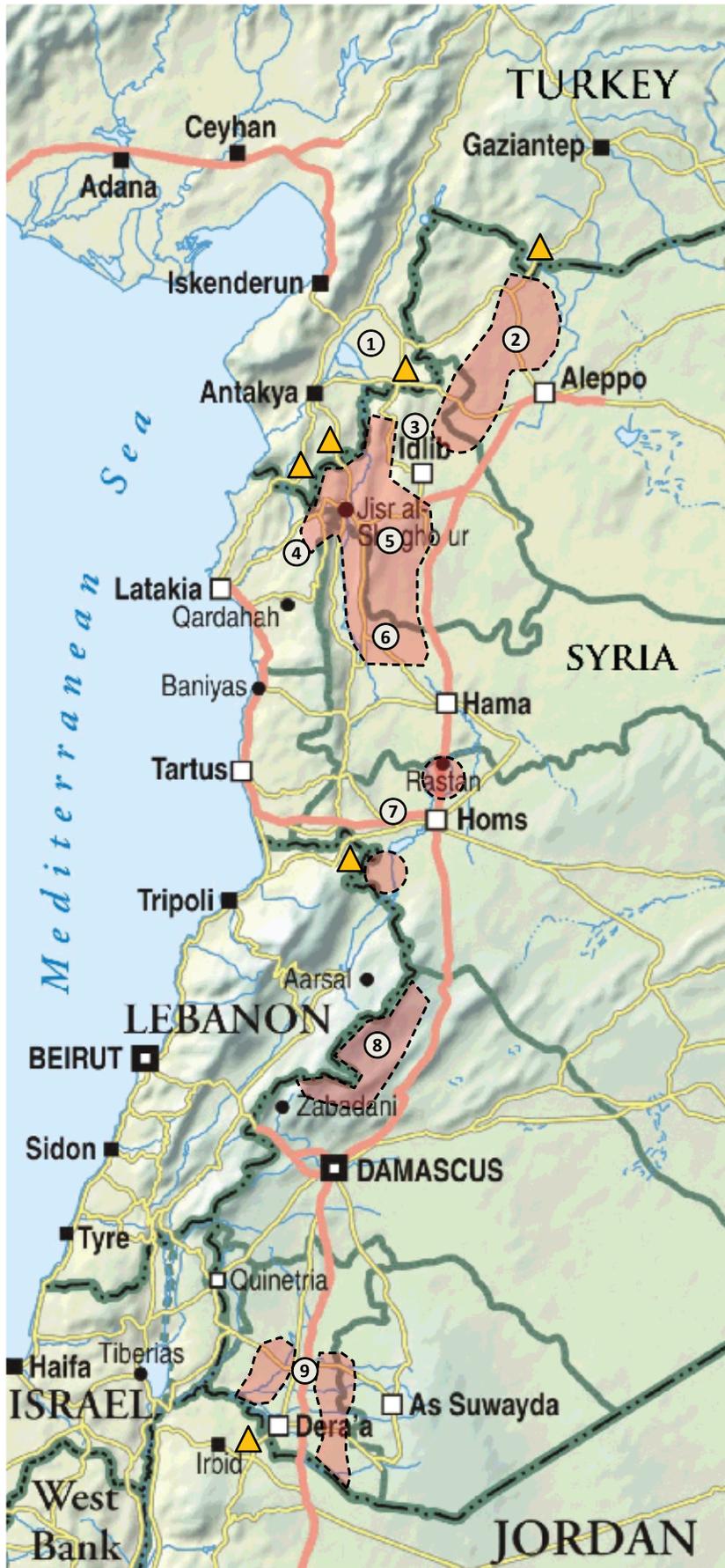
The insurgency has expanded to an estimated 40,000 men as of late May 2012. New local rebel groups continue to form, which presents a challenge to command and control. However, responsible operational-level structures have emerged in the form of provincial military councils that derive legitimacy from the local rebel groups operating under their command. The provincial military councils operate under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but make their own operational decisions.

Viable provincial military councils have formed in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Deraa, and Damascus. Each military council, or *majlis askeri*, represents a collection of effective, pre-existing FSA battalions. Each military council coordinates with their political opposition counterpart, the provincial revolutionary councils, or *majlis thawar*. Some powerful and established rebel organizations have not accepted their military council's leadership, but enough rebel units have backed the councils to give them legitimacy.

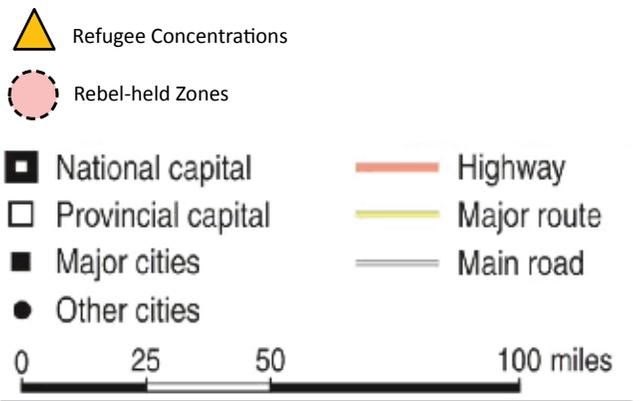
The conflict in Syria is approaching a tipping point at which the insurgency will control more territory than the regime. Neither the perpetuation nor the removal of Assad will guarantee Syria's future stability. In order to prevent Syrian state failure, the insurgency must mature into a professional armed force that can promote and protect a stable political opposition.

Increased external support for Syria's insurgency has contributed to its success on the battlefield, but the resulting competition for resources has encouraged radicalization and infighting. This ad hoc application of external support has undermined the professionalization of the opposition's ranks. Carefully managing this support could reinforce responsible organizations and bolster organic structures within the Syrian opposition.

The priority for U.S. policy on Syria should be to encourage the development of opposition structures that could one day establish a monopoly on the use of force. External support must flow into Syria in a way that reinforces the growth of legitimate and stable structures within the Syrian opposition movement. This will mitigate the regional threats of Syrian state failure and prolonged civil war.



- ① Refugee camps in Turkey's southern Antakya and Gaziantep provinces house tens of thousands of refugees and serve as headquarters for the umbrella rebel organization known as the Free Syrian Army.
- ② In March 2012, fighting erupted for the first time in northern Aleppo province. Fighting even spilled over the border into Turkey in May, and by the end of that month, the rebels could report effective control over most of the northern Aleppo countryside.
- ③ After the regime seized Idlib city in mid-March 2012, rebels fled north, where they opened new fronts against the regime along the Turkish border and west of Aleppo city.
- ④ Fighting spread to Latakia's mountainous Haffeh district, where rebels battled security forces throughout June. The insurgency's proximity to the coastal Alawite stronghold, threatens the regime close to home.
- ⑤ Idlib province's mountainous Jebal al-Zawiya region has been a center of rebel activity since the Fall of 2011. Rebels here overran a regime outpost in early June, and resisted regime incursions throughout April and May.
- ⑥ Rebels operating in the southern Hama countryside form the southern front of Syria's largest de facto safe zone. The insurgents here have begun to transition away from hit-and-run attacks, mounting large scale offensives against regime outposts.
- ⑦ The Assad regime has maintained control of Homs city since it seized the city in May 2012, but rebel strongholds remain to the city's north (Rastan) and southwest (al-Qusayr). Rebels in these towns have successfully defended against regime incursions, and suffer frequent artillery bombardment.
- ⑧ Despite increasingly frequent and effective rebel attacks, the regime security forces have maintained control of Damascus and its environs. However, in the remote valleys of the Qalamoun area that separates Damascus from Lebanon, the rebels have been able to operate with impunity.
- ⑨ In southern Deraa province, the rebels have not attempted to hold zones of influence, focusing instead on guerrilla raids and ambushes. Nevertheless, the rebels have maintained freedom of mobility among the rural towns and villages scattered across this agricultural plateau.



MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 5

SYRIA'S MATURING INSURGENCY

By Joseph Holliday

For a brief moment in the weeks following the UN-brokered ceasefire in Syria in mid-April, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad limited offensive operations and the civilian death toll decreased. Unarmed observers from the UN quickly deployed in an effort to solidify the fragile ceasefire, create breathing room for some form of political transition, and halt the country's descent into civil war.

This respite was short-lived. Fighting resumed in earnest by mid-May, shortly after UN monitors arrived in Syria. Violence escalated further in the following weeks, and the conflict assumed an increasingly sectarian tone. Pro-regime sectarian militias massacred over 100 Sunni civilians in the rural Houleh region near Homs in late May 2012. By early June, the Syrian security forces once again increased the scale and pace of their operations amid a renewed guerrilla offensive waged by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The violence cast doubt on the UN peace plan, and in mid-June the UN announced the suspension of the observer mission amidst escalating violence.¹ Calling for increased international involvement, Saudi diplomats urged the UN to establish a buffer zone in Syria and take steps toward "military and non-military measures to preserve international peace and security."²

Syria's maturing insurgency has not waited for stronger international action but instead has begun to carve out its own de facto safe zones. The Assad regime seized key urban centers during offensives in February and March, but the rebels successfully withdrew into the countryside, where they continue to operate with increasing impunity. As of June 2012, the opposition controls large swaths of Syria's northern and central countryside.

The Assad regime holds key cities but lacks the forces required to secure the whole country. It has failed to defeat the opposition decisively despite its best efforts, and government presence in the rural, central corridor does not extend beyond checkpoints and outposts. The rebels have demonstrated impressive resiliency and have increased the pace and lethality of guerilla raids and

ambushes throughout the country. Nevertheless, as a professional force, the FSA remains unable to dislodge concentrations of the regime's armored forces. If the conflict continues along its current trajectory, neither side will achieve victory in 2012. Assad does not have the forces required to regain control of the Syrian countryside, and the FSA will not be in a position to march on Damascus and overthrow the government.

An increase in external support to the insurgency is one reason for the rebels' recent success. FSA leaders have said they now have access to ammunition and funding that had been in short supply earlier in the year.³ The resources flowing to Syria's insurgency come primarily from Gulf states, but the channels through which support reaches the armed opposition are not clear.⁴ The United States, on the other hand, has acknowledged Gulf states' eagerness to support the rebels while taking a more restrained approach. In late May, U.S. officials told the Associated Press that they would "vet members of the Free Syrian Army and other groups to determine whether they are suitable recipients of munitions to fight the Assad government and to ensure that weapons don't wind up in the hands of al-Qaeda-linked terrorists or other extremist groups."⁵ In mid-June, U.S. officials told the Wall Street Journal that efforts were under way to coordinate support for Syria's insurgency.⁶

The insurgency is maturing in such a way that it could become a capable and professional force, but significant challenges remain. One challenge is command and control. By the end of 2011, local rebel groups assumed a prominent role in the Syrian revolution begun by the FSA. On one hand, the emergence of provincial military

councils connecting local groups to the national FSA leadership represents a new level of operational coordination within Syria's armed opposition movement. On the other hand, fractures among local rebel groups have begun to threaten the insurgency's potential to become a responsible actor in Syria.

The military councils in Homs, Hama, Idlib, Deraa, and Damascus have experienced mixed success. They have not earned the support of every major rebel group operating in Syria, but they do command a critical mass of the rebel battalions operating under the umbrella of the FSA. Competition among FSA units has increased as organizations fight for resources, and organizational cohesion has suffered on occasions when short-term interests have diverged.

The insurgency's biggest challenge will be to maintain discipline and limit misconduct in the middle of an increasingly sectarian conflict. Every time the regime's sectarian *shabiha* paramilitaries massacre Sunni villagers, it will become harder for FSA leadership to control the rising tide of retaliatory extra-judicial killings. As of June 2012, the rebel groups had generally limited attacks to military targets. However, the military councils may not be able to maintain discipline and prevent attacks against Alawite populations as the conflict becomes more sectarian.

This report examines the increasing effectiveness of Syria's armed opposition, explains how responsible provincial-level insurgent structures have emerged, and considers how uncoordinated external support could compound existing fractures within the opposition. The first section examines the current military stalemate in Syria, in which the Assad regime controls important urban areas but the rebels have established de facto safe zones in the Syrian countryside. It details insurgent successes through the spring of 2012 and will examine the dynamics that shifted momentum in favor of the armed opposition by early summer.

The second section details the emergence of provincial military councils under the umbrella of the FSA. These insurgent structures are organizing military pressure on the Assad regime and have the potential to become responsible actors in Syria, should the Assad regime collapse or cede sections of the country to the opposition.

However, significant challenges remain. Rebel groups are competing for resources and struggling to maintain codes of conduct amid an increasingly sectarian conflict. The third section considers these dynamics of competition, disunity, and misconduct within the Syrian insurgency.

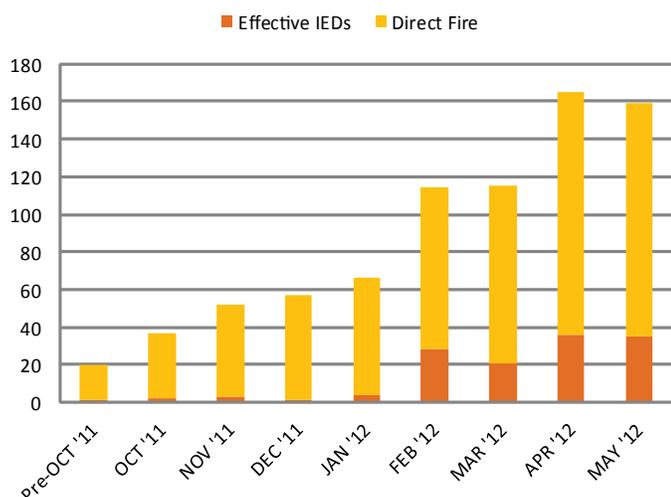
The final section analyzes external support for Syria's insurgency and its effects. By early summer 2012, disparate sources of funding and munitions contributed to the rebels' effectiveness but also compounded fractures within the opposition movement. If external support does not reach Syria in a way that supports responsible actors and encourages cohesion within the opposition, this material assistance could contribute to a failed state in the Levant and the proliferation of global jihadist movements. Properly coordinating and channeling material support to the operational-level command structure of the opposition should be a top policy priority for the United States and its allies.

THE URBAN-RURAL STALEMATE

The Assad regime's deliberate and sequential clearance operations in the first three months of 2012 did not defeat the insurgency. Syrian insurgents defended the cities of Zabadani, Homs, and Idlib and forced the regime to conduct a month-long siege in two of the three cases. Rebels in Zabadani defeated the regime's first attempt to retake the city in January, so Assad's forces returned with elements of three divisions in February. In Homs' Baba Amr neighborhood, rebel resistance was so strong that the regime was compelled to lay siege to the area, digging trench lines and shelling the neighborhood with artillery throughout February. In mid-March, rebels in Idlib offered stiff resistance but could not defeat the regime's tanks and the city fell in a matter of days.

Regime security forces' operations in early 2012 reestablished the regime's control of the three cities and forced insurgents into the countryside. The regime brought overwhelming force to bear against rebel strongholds when it chose to do so but could not mass effects everywhere at the same time. The rebels, therefore, were able to continue their fight.

Rebel Engagement Trends



As of June 2012, the Assad regime retains the capacity to clear wherever it chooses through the use of overwhelming firepower. It has also selectively applied the counterinsurgency construct of clear and hold, which it failed to do throughout 2011. In 2012, regime security forces appear committed to holding urban centers like Zabadani, Homs, and Idlib with a heavy garrison of troops rather than pursuing the insurgents into the countryside. Regime leaders learned that the security forces must hold the terrain they clear.

Regime security forces do not have the troops required to continue offensive operations against remaining rebel strongholds while holding all of the key terrain they have already cleared. While this strategy will allow the regime to hold Zabadani, Homs, and Idlib, it will prevent it from defeating the insurgency that prospers in the countryside. The Syrian insurgency has claimed rural support zones since its inception, and the spectacular urban battles fought over these cities in early 2012 were more the exception than the rule. Instead the rebels have learned the value of guerilla tactics against security forces' convoys and checkpoints.

By the time the UN-sponsored ceasefire went into effect on April 10, 2012, the conflict had reached a natural pause. Assad held key cities along Syria's primary north-south highway, while the opposition held the countryside. As one rebel commander interviewed in northern Syria put it:

“Assad’s forces have lost control of parts of Syria, particularly rural areas, like Jebel al-Zawiya, Rif Aleppo, Rif Idlib, Rif Hama, Homs, and Rif Dimashq, and some of the cities in Deraa, except for occasional raids of these regions with heavy mechanized armor and helicopters. The FSA does not defend but withdraws and returns to the area after the regime’s forces leave.”⁷

Neither side had the strength to defeat the other: The regime held its ground in key urban areas, while the rebels moved freely around the Syrian countryside. Both sides have since taken advantage of the ceasefire, the regime to reset and refit its formations and the rebels to consolidate and reorganize.

The ceasefire that went into effect in mid-April 2012 marked a reduction in major regime operations, but it did not slow the pace of rebel attacks. Guerrilla raids and ambushes more than doubled between January and April, and effective roadside bomb engagements increased nearly 100 percent over the same period.⁸ More armed opposition groups formed in February and March than in the first ten months of the uprising, effectively doubling the number of active insurgent groups.⁹ The regime’s casualty figures support this trend of increasing rebel activity. According to the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), nearly 1,000 police officers and soldiers have died since March, including 404 in May alone, and more than 200 loyalist troops were killed in first ten days of June.¹⁰ This increased rebel strength and lethality has encouraged the FSA to transition away from purely asymmetric guerrilla tactics and focus once more on gaining and holding ground.

The FSA repelled a number of deliberate regime assaults between March and June 2012, despite the regime’s ability to execute combined arms operations involving armored vehicles, artillery, and helicopter gunships. Rebels successfully defended against deliberate offensive operations in the towns of Rastan in Homs province, Ariha in Idlib province, and Atareb near Aleppo. At the same time, rebels have expanded their influence throughout the countryside, opening new battlefronts near the Turkish border and close to the Alawite stronghold of Latakia province. By June 2012, reporters on the ground described a de



facto rebel safe zone that stretched from the Turkish border in the north to the Hama countryside in the south, bounded east and west by the Aleppo-Damascus highway and the Alawite Mountains.¹¹ The next three sub-sections will describe the rebels' recent successes in detail.

Stalemate in Homs: April–June 2012

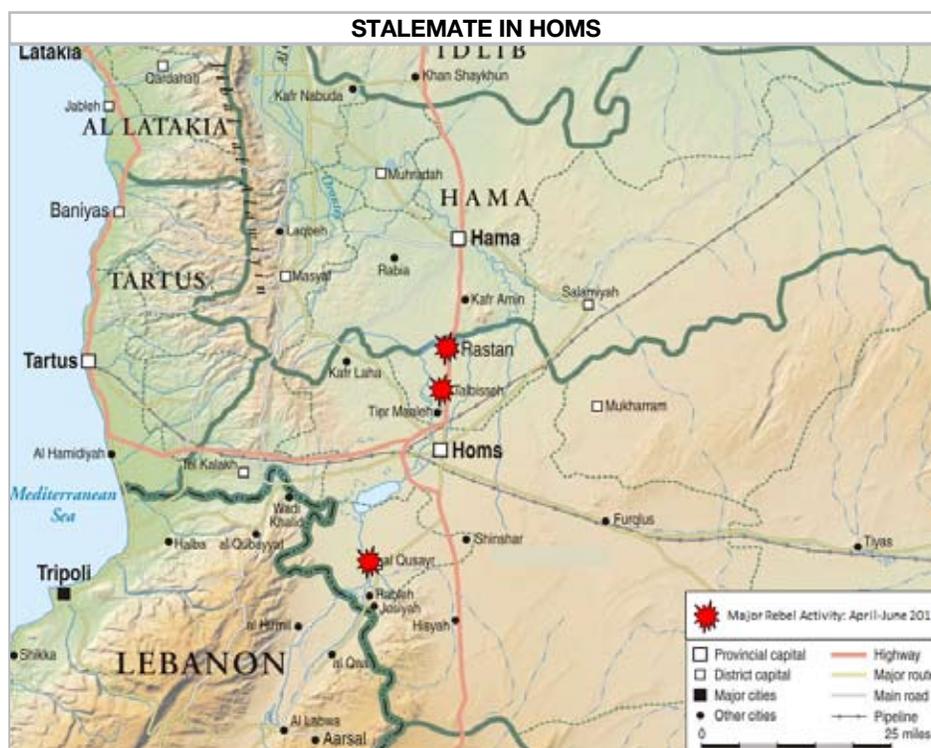
At the beginning of March, the Assad regime decisively seized Homs city, and regime security forces maintained control of most of the city through May. The southwestern Baba Amr and Inshaat neighborhoods offered the toughest resistance, prompting the regime to erect cement barriers and tightly control access to these neighborhoods. In the central and northern parts of the city, rebels continue to conduct harassing attacks, but they have not decisively challenged the regime since the end of February.

When the regime re-took Baba Amr at the beginning of March, it failed to defeat the Farouq Battalion that held it. Large elements of the Farouq Battalion, including its charismatic leader Lieutenant Abdul Razaq Tlass, managed to escape the regime's cordon and withdraw from the siege when they ran out of ammunition. Farouq Battalion elements have since resurfaced in al-Qusayr and in Rastan, where they continue to fight

against other Assad regime units.¹²

The city of al-Qusayr, which lies 30 kilometers southwest of Homs along the Lebanese border, is a critical node in rebel supply lines that links the predominantly Sunni areas of Lebanon's northern Bekaa valley. Rebels had been fighting loyalist troops in the border town long before the survivors of Farouq Battalion arrived, but in the second half of March, fighting in al-Qusayr picked up and major firefights erupted roughly twice a week. Rebels and loyalist troops had reached an uneasy stalemate in the city by the time the ceasefire went into effect in mid-April, since neither side had been able to expel the other from the town, but by the end of May, the pace of fighting had picked up again and gun battles raged two out of every three days in al-Qusayr.¹³

Rastan, twenty kilometers north of Homs, continued to be one of the most important centers of armed resistance to the regime as of June 2012. It became the first city to resist the regime with organized, armed opposition in September 2011. By late January 2012, as security forces reeled from their initial defeat in Zabadani and began to lay siege to Homs, the Khalid bin Walid and Rijal Allah Battalions in Rastan, along with their numerous component battalions, pushed



the security forces out of Rastan and established control of the city. After the capitulation of Baba Amr at the beginning of March, rebels in Rastan decided to withdraw from the city rather than force the regime into another siege that would destroy much of the city and cause undue hardship for the civilian population there. In a March 5 statement, Captain Ammar al-Wawi explained the withdrawal from Rastan. “We don’t want to give the regime any excuse to kill more civilians,” he said. “It was a tactical withdrawal in order to create better circumstances and to get ready for the next step.”¹⁴

By the time the UN ceasefire went into effect in April, the Khalid bin Walid and Rijal Allah Battalions had re-established control of the city under the unified leadership of the Rastan Military Council, a development examined in detail later in this report. The rebels in Rastan were strong enough to fend off a regime offensive in mid-May. After twelve hours of indirect fire to soften rebel positions, elite security forces assaulted Rastan in armored vehicles. The rebels destroyed three armored vehicles, including a main battle tank, and killed over twenty regime troops. The rebels had their own losses, including a long-standing leader within Khalid bin Walid and its affiliated units, Lieutenant Ahmad Ayoub.¹⁵ The regime called off the assault and retreated to the perimeter to shell

the city with rockets through the following day.¹⁶ Ten days later security forces attempted another combined arms assault on the rebel stronghold, failed again, and took similar heavy losses.¹⁷

Standoff in Idlib: April-June 2012

During February and March, the regime focused on retaking rebel-held urban centers. After the FSA’s withdrawal from Homs in late February, the regime turned its attention to Idlib city in northwestern Syria. Two weeks after the fall of Homs, the regime’s offensive pushed rebels out of the city and into the countryside, just as the fighters did in Homs, resulting in new battle fronts and reinforcing old ones. Idlib’s surrounding countryside has remained beyond the government’s reach.

Some of the rebels who escaped Idlib and its suburbs opened new fronts north and west of the provincial capital, fighting back against the regime in places where rebel activity had been limited prior to the regime’s operation in March. A year ago in June 2011, the Assad regime had decisively defeated the first instance of armed insurrection in the western border town of Jisr al-Shughour, successfully limiting rebel activity there. But by the end of March 2012, just days after the rebel defeat in Idlib, a series of clashes signaled the

insurgency's return to Jisr al-Shughour. Rebels even tried to cut off regime reinforcements by blockading the eastern highway that connects the border town to Idlib city.¹⁸

The movements of rebel commander Lieutenant Bilal Khabir offer a rare insight into the migration of rebel fighters to the north and west of Idlib city. In February 2012, a Western journalist met Khabir, a former Syrian Air Force officer, in the town of Sarmin, a southern suburb of Idlib that endured heavy fighting until the city's mid-March capitulation.¹⁹ By early May, Khabir appeared in a video claiming responsibility for an attack on a military outpost in Dalbiyah, thirty kilometers northwest of Idlib city on the border with Turkey.²⁰ This rebel commander responded to increased regime pressure around the provincial capital by withdrawing, opening a new front, and forcing the regime to fight in more locations.

By late May 2012, the Syrian military began to lose control of the Turkish border region north of Jisr al-Shughour. Activists reported that rebels bought off the commander of the Bab Hawa border crossing and seized control of the post's weapons, prompting the remainder of the unit to defect en masse.²¹ When nearby loyalist troops engaged the rebels at the crossing, Turkish authorities temporarily closed it, ostensibly to avoid a cross-border incident.²² The rebels abandoned the post after a few days, possibly at the urging of Turkish authorities.

The Assad regime mounted unsuccessful offensives against the nearby town of Atareb, which sits on the road between Aleppo and the border crossing, possibly because it was losing control along the Turkish border. Atareb is on the northeastern edge of the farmland surrounding Idlib city, and it became a rebel stronghold when fighters took to the countryside after the battle for Idlib.

Two days after rebels closed the Bab Hawa border crossing in May, regime security forces assaulted Atareb with tanks and helicopters, but they quickly lost momentum when the rebels destroyed several tanks and armored personnel carriers. Fighting in the Atareb region continued for a week, as rebels continued to destroy the regime's armored vehicles.²³ There is no immediately evident explanation for rebel anti-armor capabilities in Atareb, and there is no evidence to suggest

that the opposition received advanced anti-tank weaponry. Roadside bombs have increased in size and effectiveness throughout northern Syria, and using them in terrain that limits tank mobility may account for this recent success.

Rebels fleeing Idlib reinforced traditional rebel strongholds to the south of the provincial capital. Syrian army checkpoints around Ariha, just fifteen kilometers to the south of the city, are so isolated that armored vehicles bring in even the soldiers' food. "We just stay here," one regime soldier manning a checkpoint said in early May. "Today there was an attack on the checkpoints around us – if we go inside Ariha they will slice us up."²⁴

Another soldier interviewed in Ariha around the same time confirmed the regime's defensive posture there. "For six months we have not been able to enter Ariha," he said. "Today there was an attack on every checkpoint here."²⁵ The security forces entered Ariha in mid-May and suffered heavy losses in the assault. One video from May 16 shows rebels badly damaging a T-72 tank and destroying a BMP-1 armored troop carrier with a pair of roadside bombs.²⁶ The regime continued to mount limited assaults in the town through early June that met the same fate. A picture posted on an opposition Facebook page in early June (and featured on the cover of this report) showed a T-72 main battle tank in Ariha so completely destroyed that the entire turret was removed from the body of the vehicle.²⁷

Immediately south of Ariha in the Jebal al-Zawiya region, rebel forces are on the offensive as of June 2012. A twenty-three-minute long video posted in early June 2012 showed over 50 rebel fighters massing in a staging area in the early afternoon before surrounding a regime outpost and overrunning it. The video demonstrated impressive discipline and capability among the rebel troops. An anti-aircraft heavy machine gun mounted on a pickup truck suppressed the outpost to allow squad-sized elements to maneuver into attack by fire positions to fire well-aimed rocket propelled grenade (RPG) volleys into the base. By nightfall, the rebels cleared the outpost and captured stockpiles of ammunition, as well as a T-55 tank and a ZSU-23-4 tracked anti-aircraft vehicle.²⁸ This was not the first time rebels have captured armored vehicles, but they have yet to



put them to effective use in combat operations. Another video showed rebels trying to remove the anti-aircraft guns from the same captured vehicle, probably to mount them on pickup trucks or use in fixed defensive positions.²⁹

Farther south in the northern Hama countryside town of Kafr Zeita, an early June battle demonstrated both the capabilities and the limitations of the rebels. Regime artillery began to bombard sections of the town following a visit from the UN observer team. The FSA responded by surrounding a regime outpost in the center of town and fighting toe to toe with regime forces for four days. The rebels called in reinforcements from the surrounding area, reaching a reported total strength of 500 fighters. Civilians in the town provided the fighters with food and water and let them use their homes as fighting positions. The rebels' volleys of RPGs prevented security forces from using armored vehicles to break out of the position. The opposition forces also prevented a column of regime reinforcements from reaching the beleaguered outpost by destroying an armored troop carrier with a roadside bomb. The rebels used a truck packed with 660 pounds of explosives in an attempt to breach the command post wall but were unable to breach the compound with infantry.

When the regime sent helicopters to support the outpost, the rebels were able to engage them with truck-mounted heavy machine guns.³⁰

Ultimately, the rebels were unable to capitalize on their successes. Tactically, they failed because of their inability to breach the compound. Operationally, they failed because they lacked a chain of command that could keep the reinforcing FSA units engaged in the fight. FSA fighters from surrounding towns began to return home and ultimately the rebels in Kafr Zeita decided to withdraw from the engagement after seeding the area with roadside bombs.³¹ However, the sustained offensive represented increasing rebel capability and demonstrated their willingness to transition away from asymmetric warfare to traditional offensive operations.

New Fronts in Aleppo and Latakia: May and June 2012

Aleppo meaningfully joined the insurgency in February 2012, a development that should gravely concern the Assad regime. Aleppo is Syria's second biggest city after the capital, and the Sunni business community there was relatively supportive of the Assad regime for the first year of the uprising. Rebel engagements in the city tripled between February and March 2012 and nearly

doubled again by April.³² To the north of Aleppo city, rebels seized swaths of territory along the road that connects Syria to Turkey's Gaziantep province. At the beginning of March, a pair of explosions targeted two security buildings in Azzaz, a town that straddles the Aleppo-Kilis highway, just four kilometers south of the Turkish border.³³ Fighting continued around Azzaz for weeks. By the end of the month, the rebels had established checkpoints blockading the road to Aleppo, forcing the regime to send a column north to open up this critical line of communication.³⁴

The regime's attempt to defeat the insurrection in Azzaz resulted in open conflict between rebels and regime security forces in key towns along the road that runs north from Aleppo to the border. Rebels attacked loyalist troops in Anadan, Herytan, Salama, and Tal Rifaat in the first week of May 2012.³⁵ By late May, a rebel commander in Aleppo reported effective control of 90 percent of the province's countryside but conceded that "you can still find regime security forces at checkpoints in the outskirts of cities."³⁶ Violence in this region triggered Turkish concern, as gunfire spilled across the border for a number of days in mid-May.³⁷ Later that month, Turkish authorities reported that camps at Kilis had received more than 10,000 refugees since March.³⁸

Fighting erupted in the remote Jebal Akrad area in Latakia's northern mountains in late May. Helicopter gunships strafed rebel positions there for two days, supporting a column of loyalist troops that were attempting to breach the mountain towns.³⁹ By the beginning of June, the fighting had spread to the district capital of Haffeh, where rebels destroyed a number of armored vehicles and inflicted dozens of casualties.⁴⁰ This Sunni-majority enclave within the Alawite-majority province has supported the revolution but avoided open conflict for fear of overwhelming retaliation from a regime eager to protect the Alawite coastal stronghold.⁴¹ However, after the first two weeks of fighting there, rebels seemed to have gained the upper hand, as large numbers of ambulances filled with wounded regime soldiers rushed to hospitals in Latakia city.⁴² The regime's reliance on helicopter gunships to engage rebels in Latakia's mountains suggests that it lacked the ground forces required to address this threat effectively.

The Conflict's Next Phase

Syria's armed opposition put the Assad regime in the position of having to prioritize an increasingly long list of threats, and in the second week of June the regime began to address a number of them. Smaller simultaneous operations in Latakia and northern Aleppo dislodged rebels there with no reported rebel casualties, probably because rebels withdrew once the regime massed sufficient forces.⁴³ Regardless of whether the rebels are able to reconstitute in these places, they forced the regime to commit already-stretched resources to new fronts. Farther south, the security forces increased their pressure on Rastan but did not dislodge the rebels in these initial attempts.⁴⁴

A few threats stand out as priorities for regime security forces in the coming months. First, the regime must ensure that fighting does not spread farther into Latakia and Aleppo. Second, the security forces will have to address remaining rebel strongholds in Homs province, namely Rastan and al-Qusayr. Third, the regime must find the available maneuver forces to disrupt rebel activity in the Idlib and Hama countrysides.

If the Assad regime decides that it must take back these rebel-held towns or that it cannot accept opposition control of the Syrian countryside, security forces will have to determine how to mass enough combat power to face strong rebel units without sacrificing control of key cities such as Homs and Idlib. The Assad regime could consolidate forces from across central Syria to retake Rastan, for example, but such a victory could come at the cost of losing control of Homs city. The regime will also have to keep these forces in the field for the foreseeable future if it hopes to maintain this limited control. This is a major logistical undertaking, and a strategy that is likely to undermine the morale of its remaining loyal troops.

Syria's insurgency should not be underestimated, and as of June 2012 the rebels have the initiative. One reporter inside Syria recounted his conversation with loyalist troops in early May:

"The soldiers described their rebel enemies as capable, able to ambush Syrian army units, maneuver in relatively large groups and plot coordinated attacks, despite the lack of heavy weaponry. The rebels have been effective

enough in inflicting casualties in close combat that government forces frequently resort to shelling urban areas from the edges as they seek to dislodge armed opponents.⁴⁵

The Assad regime's decision to use artillery against opposition strongholds is a telling indicator of the rebels' effectiveness. Throughout 2011, the regime relied on selective brutality, careful not to trigger undue international or domestic backlash, but in 2012 it decided that the cost of retaking terrain with maneuver forces alone would be too high. Rather than isolate a rebel stronghold and clear the area of opposition, the regime stayed on the periphery and used indiscriminate shelling to force the opposition to capitulate. In this way, the regime's use of artillery demonstrates its strength but also exposes its weakness. Artillery has become the regime's primary tool for maintaining an economy of force. When it lacks the necessary ground forces to defeat the rebels, it relies on indirect fire to suppress them.

The regime's decision to expand its use of helicopter gunships is another example of this dynamic. The first pair of credible reports about helicopters firing on ground targets emerged in early April 2012 in northern Aleppo province.⁴⁶ Unable to commit ground forces to the threat, the regime relied on helicopters to suppress FSA activity along the Turkish border. Two months later, in late May, when the FSA increased offensive operations across Syria, regime helicopters engaged rebels on eight separate occasions across five provinces, quadrupling in just two weeks the total number of helicopter gunship strikes since the beginning of the uprising.⁴⁷ The Assad regime avoided using helicopters for the first year of the uprising in order to minimize international calls for a no-fly zone, but the FSA's increasing capabilities required the regime to commit their helicopters to the fight.

The Assad regime is likely to attempt another major offensive at some point during the summer of 2012, but loyalist security forces are unlikely to enjoy a repeat of their victories in February and March, despite their comparative advantage in terms of weaponry. The FSA does not need to match the security forces' numbers or firepower because the rebels can force the regime to fight everywhere at once, taking advantage of their superior mobility and flexibility to mount effective raids and

ambushes where and when it suits them. For this reason, comparing the strength of Syria's armed opposition directly to Assad's loyalist arsenal is misleading.

Conceptually, asymmetric warfare typically involves lightly-armed insurgents who avoid pitched battles and instead engage superior forces where and when the balance of force favors them. During the early 1980s uprising, just 4,000 Syrian Muslim Brotherhood commandos fought the regime for three years before capitulating in the wake of the 1982 Hama Massacre.⁴⁸ Therefore, it should not be surprising that 40,000 insurgents have successfully resisted the Assad regime's roughly 200,000 loyalist security forces and militiamen.⁴⁹

Since the beginning of the uprising, the regime has never been capable of major simultaneous operations. Consolidating forces to mount a countrywide, sequential campaign like it did in February and March could come at an unacceptable cost. For example, deploying regime protection units from Damascus to the Idlib countryside would risk the regime's increasingly tenuous grip on the national capital region, where opposition forces increased the pace of raids on regime checkpoints and coordinated a general strike in early June.⁵⁰

The conflict in Syria is approaching a tipping point at which the insurgency will control more territory than the regime. At this point, neither the perpetuation nor the removal of Assad will guarantee Syria's future stability. In order to prevent Syrian state failure, the insurgency must mature into a professional armed force that can promote and protect a stable opposition structure. Mature civil-military organizational structures are already emerging, but significant challenges remain.

MATURING INSURGENT STRUCTURES

One outcome of the Assad regime's early 2012 offensive has been the simultaneous expansion and de-centralization of the Syrian insurgency. Most of the key rebel groups that rose to prominence between September 2011 and January 2012 have survived and even thrived, and more rebel groups formed in both February and March than in the first ten months of the uprising.⁵¹ By the end of

May 2012, the overall strength of the insurgency had reached approximately 40,000 men under arms.⁵²

The expansion of the insurgency has created new opportunities, such as the development of regional commands, and new challenges, such as competition among rebel groups. The emergence of regional commands demonstrates the capacity for opposition organization above the local level. This provincial-level leadership has far greater potential for effective command and control than the exiled Free Syrian Army leadership that operates out of refugee camps in Antakya, Turkey; however, growing competition and disunity among rebel groups threatens to undermine the development of responsible, mature opposition forces in Syria. Disparate sources of external support to various opposition groups have exacerbated this dangerous dynamic. Some revenue sources, such as fringe Gulf state financiers, favor hard line sectarian elements within the opposition. Competition over these resources could radicalize the opposition as a whole. An increase in isolated instances of support could make things worse unless it is channeled to the Free Syrian Army's provincial military councils.

The makeup of the Syrian insurgency also became far more convoluted between February and May 2012. By the end of May 2012, more than 35 distinct rebel units used the same name as at least one other rebel organization. For example, at least ten distinct units called themselves "Special Tasks" battalions or companies, and at least six different units each used variations of "Abu Bakr," "Salah ad-Din," and "Hamza."⁵³ In this complicated milieu, determining the effectiveness of individual rebel groups has become dramatically more difficult and reinforced the importance of operational-level structures to tie together so many groups.

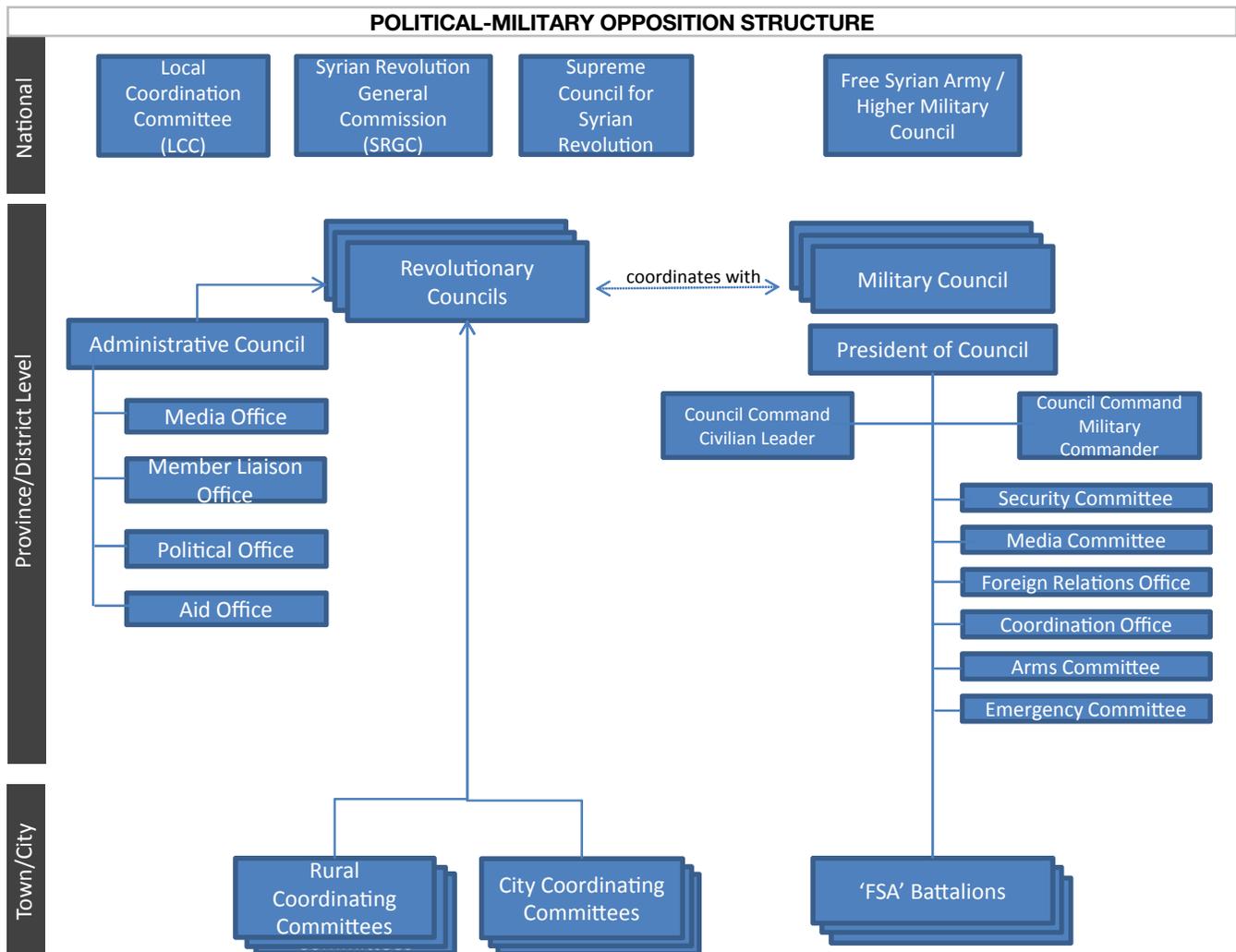
Many rebels still identify with individual leaders, rather than with unit names or military councils. Some leaders have been quick to form or work with different unit names over time. For example, Lieutenant Ayman Hallaq has been the leader of at least three different rebel units, all of which operated around Kafr Nabuda in the northern Hama countryside.⁵⁴ In this way, Syria's opposition is still made up of personal networks, even as they have begun to form institutions.

Military Councils in Concept and Practice

The armed opposition's effort to develop an operational command has had mixed success in different parts of Syria. In most cases this level of leadership has centered on the formation of military councils, or *majlis askeri*. This development has taken place in concert with the growth of revolutionary councils, or *majlis thawar*, that have begun to coordinate the activities of local activists organizing protests throughout Syria. In concept, the *majlis askeri* work with the *majlis thawar* to coordinate political and military arms of the rebellion inside Syria. These joint military and revolutionary bodies are known as revolutionary command councils, or *majlis qeyda a thawra*. Because of this direct connection between the *majlis askeri* and the *majlis qeyda a thawra* in each province, it is difficult to draw clear distinctions between the leadership of each. This report will not distinguish between the two and will use the terms military council or *majlis askeri* to refer to provincial-level military leadership.

The military councils in each province drive combat operations inside Syria. These councils fall under the umbrella of the FSA headquarters, based in refugee camps in Turkey's Antakya province, but the headquarters does not exercise operational control over the councils. The power struggle between FSA leader Colonel Riad Asaad and General Mustafa Sheikh has undermined the perception of unity within this external headquarters. General Sheikh's Higher Revolutionary Council has attempted to distinguish itself from the Free Syrian Army, and many of the military councils have preferred to associate themselves with the Higher Revolutionary Council rather than with Riad Asaad's Free Syrian Army. The distinction may be irrelevant because both of these closely linked umbrella groups lack operational relevance. As of June 2012 these two organizations were indistinguishable from one another in practical terms, but uneven external logistical support from Turkey could ultimately favor one group.

In a late March video statement, Colonel Qassim Suad al-Din, a senior Air Force defector from Homs, announced the formation of a Joint Command of the Free Syrian Army inside Syria comprised of provincial military councils throughout the country.⁵⁵ Suad al-Din refers to himself as the leader of the military council for Homs and its



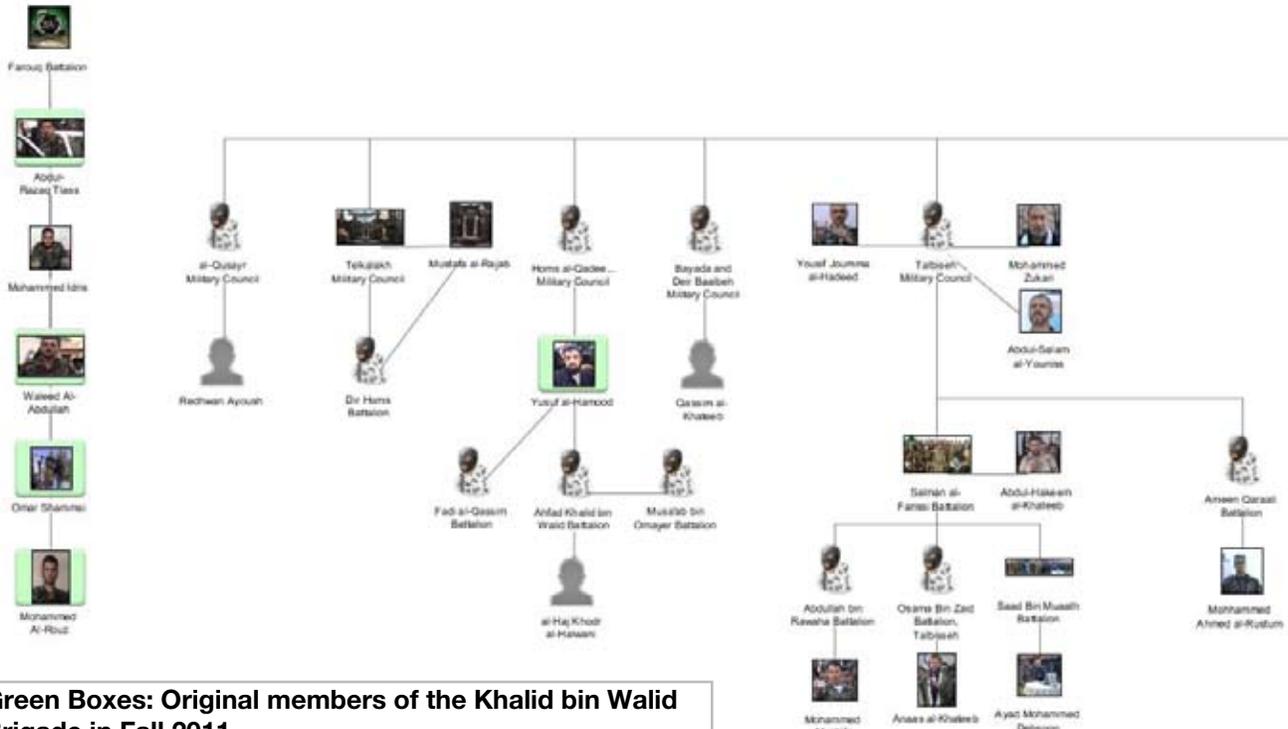
countryside and as the spokesman for the broader organization. In reality, this group is not a unified, national-level organization but a collection of provincial-level organizations that conduct operations and organize logistics independently of one another. The FSA's provincial commands may begin to coordinate more effectively in the future, but their focus in the summer of 2012 will be to gain the cooperation of active rebel groups within the more limited geographic scope of their areas of operation.

Rebel activity, including the response to the Houleh massacre, demonstrated that provincial military councils, not the leadership in Turkey, made operational decisions for the FSA as of early summer 2012. On May 25, pro-regime sectarian militias slaughtered over 100 civilians in Houleh, a collection of rural villages in the Homs countryside, in what quickly became termed the Houleh Massacre. The following day, Colonel

Afeef Suleiman, leader of the Idlib Military Council, declared that the massacre marked an end to the UN-brokered ceasefire and stated that his rebels would resume attacks against the loyalist forces.⁵⁶ Four days later Colonel Qassim Suad al-Din followed suit, giving Assad 48 hours to implement the peace plan fully before ending his commitment to the ceasefire.⁵⁷

FSA rebels backed up their leaders' threats with major offensives across the country. In late May, rebels in Jebal al-Zawiya overran a regime outpost, capturing ammunition stockpiles and armored vehicles.⁵⁸ Days later, rebels across the northern Hama countryside converged on a regime outpost in Kafr Zeita, where they battled the regime to a stalemate over four days of fighting.⁵⁹ On June 6 alone, rebels in Damascus attacked ten checkpoints across the city's suburbs and targeted regime convoys with roadside bombs in two different neighborhoods.⁶⁰

HOMS MILITARY COUNCIL AND FAROUQ BATTALION



Green Boxes: Original members of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade in Fall 2011.

Red Boxes: Original members who have been killed in the conflict.

FSA leaders in Turkey initially rejected the ultimatums of provincial leaders to break the ceasefire, but they followed suit after rebel units began the offensive. When Colonel Suleiman first announced the end of the ceasefire in Idlib, Riad Asaad disputed the statement, telling reporters that “there is no deadline, but we want Kofi Annan to issue a declaration announcing the failure of this plan.”⁶¹ Reversing the position days later, a spokesman for the FSA in Turkey announced that the regime had one week to implement the Annan plan fully “or face consequences.”⁶² In this way the FSA headquarters responded to operations planned and executed by leadership inside Syria, not the other way around.

The maturing provincial-level insurgent structure within the FSA has improved the rebels’ prospects for toppling the Assad regime. More importantly, these provincial commands could establish a modicum of order if the Assad regime were to suddenly crumble. This organic, ground-up opposition structure stands in stark contrast to the external opposition groups that have garnered so much media attention throughout the Syrian revolution, including the Syrian National Council

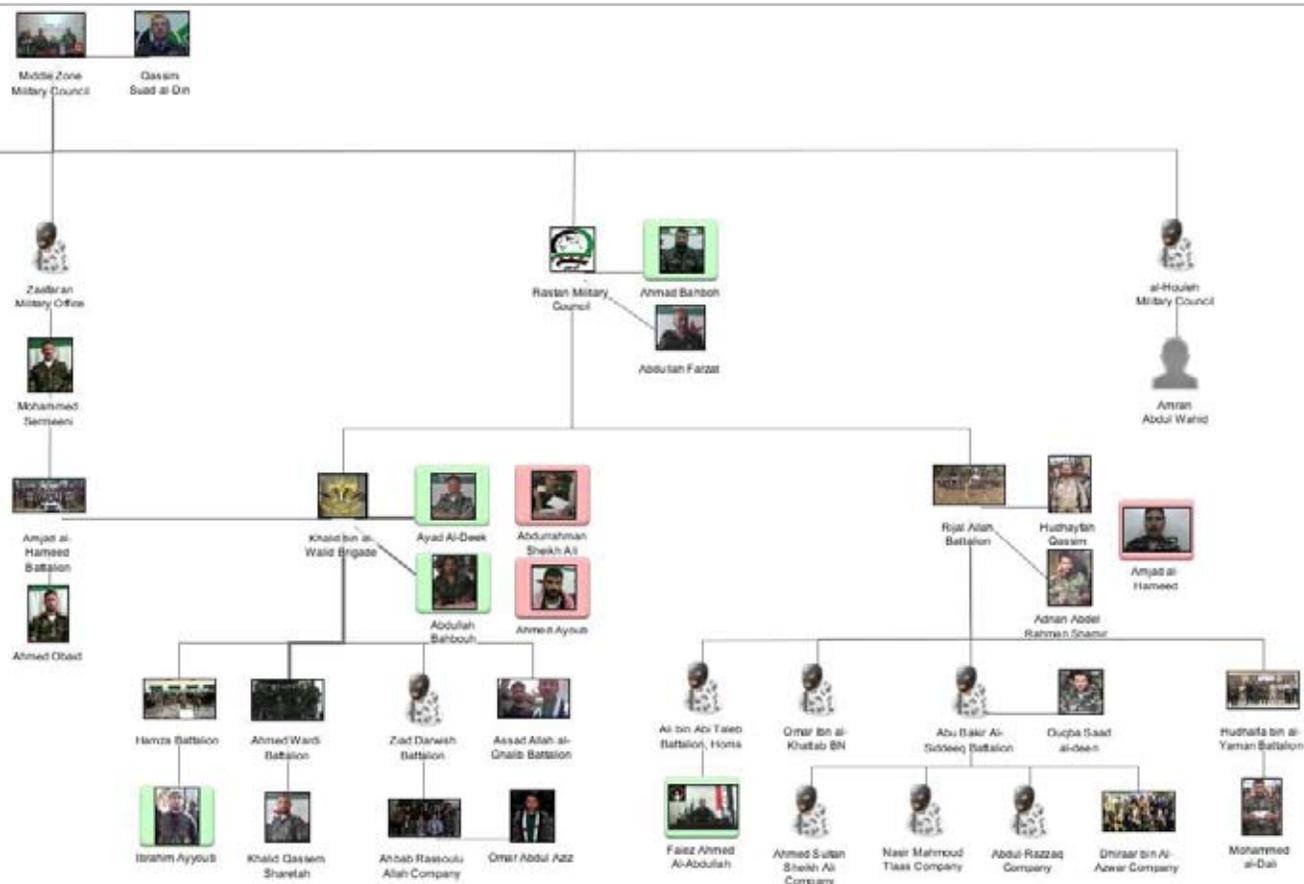
(SNC) and even the FSA headquarters in Turkey. The development of regional-level opposition structures came at a time when the opposition on the ground had become increasingly frustrated with their external opposition counterparts.

Homs Military Council

The rebel groups around Homs who once formed the Khalid bin Walid Brigade have largely reorganized under the military council framework, but key elements of the Homs rebel movement have resisted integration. Colonel Qassem Suad al-Din, who first announced the establishment of military councils across Syria, acts as the commander of the Homs military council, formed in early February 2012. By the end of the month, Captain Amjad al-Hamid’s powerful Rijal Allah Battalion stood in formation in Rastan to announce allegiance to the provincial-level council, which goes by the title “Middle Zone Military Council,” using the same terminology as the regime’s military regions.⁶³

At the end of March, the Rijal Allah Battalion and the Khalid bin Walid Brigade came together to announce the formation of the Rastan Military

HOMS MILITARY COUNCIL AND FAROUQ BATTALION



Council, which would operate under the umbrella of Colonel Suad al-Din's provincial council for all of Homs province. Khalid bin Walid's charismatic commander, Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali, died in fighting against the regime in February or March, but the majority of the brigade's leaders participated in the announcement.⁶⁴ The participation of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade and the Rijal Allah Battalion in the Homs Military Council structure accounts for a significant portion of the rebel formations and capabilities in Homs province and is fundamental to the legitimacy of the organization.

In mid-April, Suad al-Din announced the establishment of seven additional local military councils that would operate under the provincial military council in many of Homs' active conflict areas and designated the leaders of each local council.⁶⁵ To the north of Homs, the Rastan, Talbisseh, and Zaafaran local councils account for the majority of rebel units in those areas. Colonel Suad al-Din designated Captain Yusuf Hamood as the leader of the local council in the central neighborhoods of Homs city.⁶⁶ An early and active

member of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade, Captain Hamood has fought with a number of rebel units in downtown Homs, and is a credible leader for the organization.

Establishing local councils across Homs province did not necessarily mean that Suad al-Din could claim the allegiance of a majority of rebel units in every area. For example, the local councils in al-Qusayr and Telkalakh near the Lebanese border do not have credible ties to the most active rebel units operating in that area. Homs city's southwest Baba Amr neighborhood was notably absent from the list of subordinate military councils, reflecting the limitations of Homs Military Council's influence. One explanation for this oversight was the fact that regime security forces maintained effective control over the restive neighborhood since their victory at the beginning of March.

The lack of a local council in Baba Amr also probably reflects the fact that the Farouq Battalion had stronger influence there. The Farouq Battalion grew out of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade in early 2012 to become the largest single

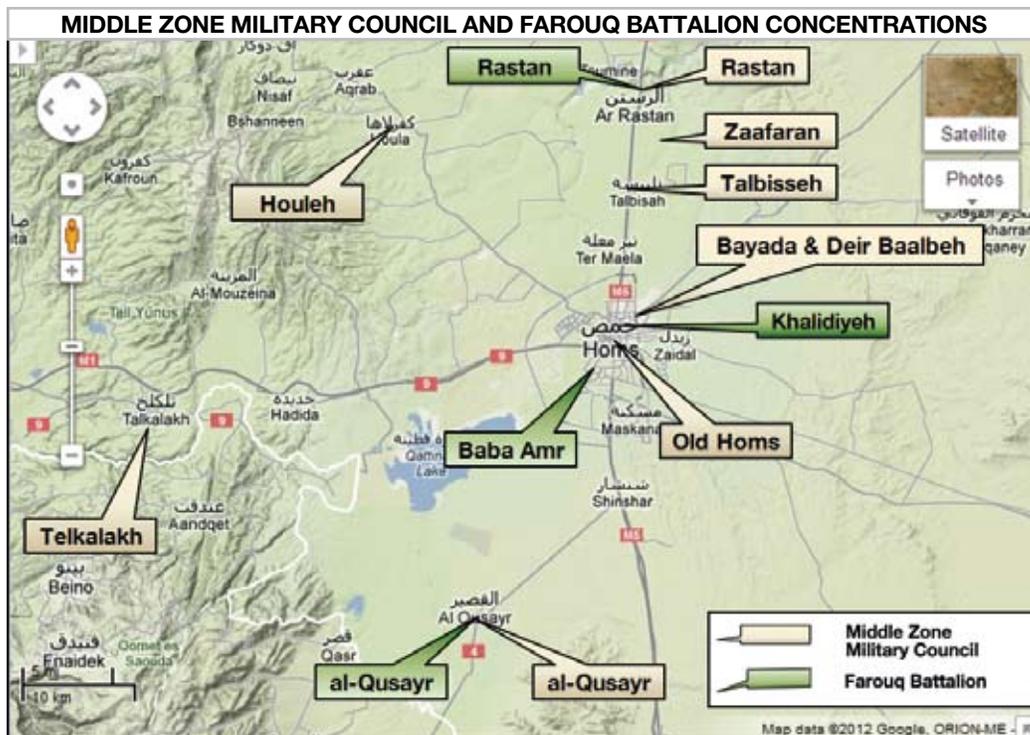
rebel group up to that point in the Syrian conflict. But Farouq has not officially aligned itself with the Homs Military Council. The battalion quickly dominated other Homs neighborhoods such as Khalidiyeh and later became a key player in the Lebanese border area, unlike the Homs Military Council.⁶⁷ In May 2012, the Farouq Battalion even had forces in Rastan, where the provincial military council is headquartered, including the unit's prominent leader, Lieutenant Abdul Razaq Tlass.⁶⁸

Tlass regularly reaffirms his allegiance to the FSA headquarters in Turkey. In this way, Farouq represents a parallel council-like organization within Homs province. Colonel Suad al-Din's military council and the Farouq Battalion compete with one another for resources and prestige in Homs. An opposition member in contact with Homs rebels explained that Lieutenant Tlass and Colonel Suad al-Din do not like one another but coordinate activities and resolve disputes.⁶⁹ A leaked email from a rebel commander to SNC President Burhan Ghalioun revealed deep frustration with certain members of the Farouq Battalion for refusing to cooperate with other rebel units in Homs city.⁷⁰ Lieutenant Tlass continues to rely on the allegiance of a few peers who were also early members of the Khalid bin Walid, and it is likely that he has a closer relationship with

the current leadership of Khalid bin Walid than with Colonel Suad al-Din himself. Therefore, avenues for coordination between the competing organizations are likely to remain open, despite ongoing competition between them.

Hama Military Council

In mid-March 2012, Major Ali Mohammed Ayoub announced the formation of the Hama Military Council, listing the council's first six subordinate battalions and their commanders.⁷¹ Ayoub had previously commanded the Hamza Battalion of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade before their temporary withdrawal from Rastan, twenty kilometers south of Hama city.⁷² Still, Major Ayoub's influence remains in doubt, both due to the fact that the listed subordinate battalions did not represent large rebel groupings like the Osama bin Zaid Battalion and the fact that Colonel Qassim Suad al-Din later identified Colonel Abdel Hamid al-Shawi as the commander of the Hama Military Council.⁷³ Activists in contact with the Hama council confirmed in early June that Colonel al-Shawi led the council and that Major Ayoub had recognized his leadership.⁷⁴ More rebel units have pledged their allegiance to the Hama Military Council since its formation. By early June, the Hama council could count at least twelve explicitly subordinate battalions, though corroborating



evidence to support these units' credibility has emerged for only seven of these rebel units.

The geography of active rebel areas in Hama province complicates coordination between rebel groups; the active insurgent networks in Hama city are not the same as those in the northern Hama countryside. Since the emergence of armed engagements in Hama in the fall of 2011, the northern countryside has been more consistently active than the provincial capital. The networks that conduct rebel operations in northern Hama sit astride the border with Idlib province, stretching to the town of Khan Sheykhun. However, these networks do not extend south to Hama city, probably due to the lack of opposition activity in the city's immediate northern suburbs. This geographical separation limits the Hama Military Council's reach.

The Hama Military Council's link to the formidable northern networks is the Abu al-Fidaa Battalion. This battalion, together with the Osama bin Zaid Battalion, represents a majority of FSA networks active in northern Hama. The leaders of this loose collection of rebels sometimes refer to themselves as members of different units, but they continue to appear together in video statements. During the early June 2012 four-day battle with regime security forces in Kafr Zeita discussed earlier, the

rebels managed to mass as many as 500 fighters in an effort to overrun a regime base there.⁷⁵ Kafr Zeita is located at the center of a number of rebel strongholds, and while the rebels did not succeed in overrunning the base, their ability to mass such a force demonstrates the extent of the mutually reinforcing network. It is difficult to attribute this coordination to the Hama Military Council because the extent of its influence over Abu al-Fidaa and Osama bin Zaid is not clear.

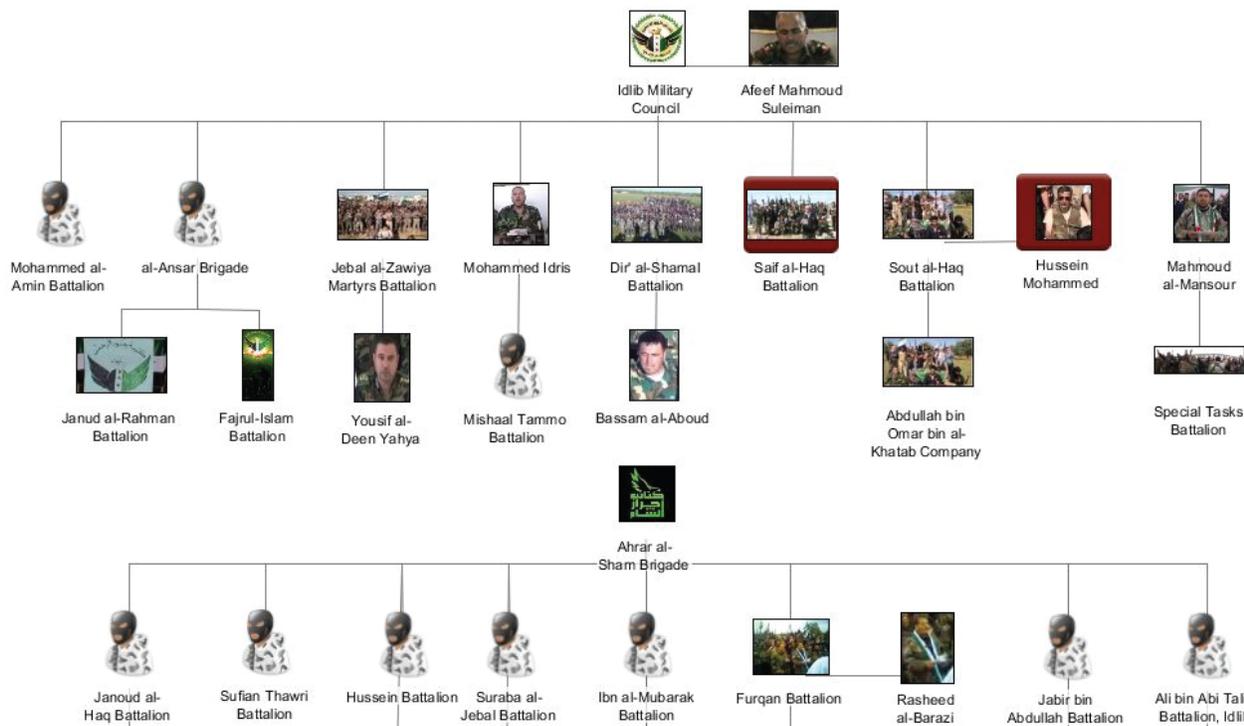
The Hama council does have strong links with other rebel groups in northern Hama, such as the Suqour al-Ghab Battalion in the Qalat al-Madiq area.⁷⁶ A Western journalist who visited the town described nearby Syrian military forces who occupied the citadel that overlooked the town but never ventured outside the compound. Rebels ousted local regime authorities in September 2011, and the military's repeated attempts to install new police officers have proven unsuccessful. Meanwhile, the Suqour al-Ghab Battalion has taken on some responsibilities of local government, such as distributing precious cooking gas.⁷⁷

The Suqour al-Ghab Battalion is the largest rebel unit in Qalat al-Madiq, but it is not the only one. Rebels aligned with the Ahrar al-Sham Battalions, a collection of more conservative Salafi rebel units, live and fight in Qalat al-Madiq alongside

HAMA MILITARY COUNCIL



IDLIB MILITARY COUNCIL AND AHRAR AL-SHAM BATTALIONS



the FSA-aligned Suqour al-Ghab.⁷⁸ In Hama city, the Salah al-Din Battalion claims dual allegiance to both the Hama Military Council and to Ahrar al-Sham.⁷⁹ A journalist in Hama noted that the Ahrar al-Sham Battalions had a conservative Salafi outlook, as opposed to the more secular military council, and the language used in statements posted on Ahrar al-Sham's Facebook page lend further credibility to the group's conservative orientation.⁸⁰ Cooperation between conservative and secular opposition elements is encouraging for the development of stable opposition structures in Syria, but this commitment to cooperation has not been tested. Ahrar al-Sham and the Hama Military Council might work well together when presented with the common enemy of the Assad regime, but cooperation may decrease if pressure from regime security forces subsides.

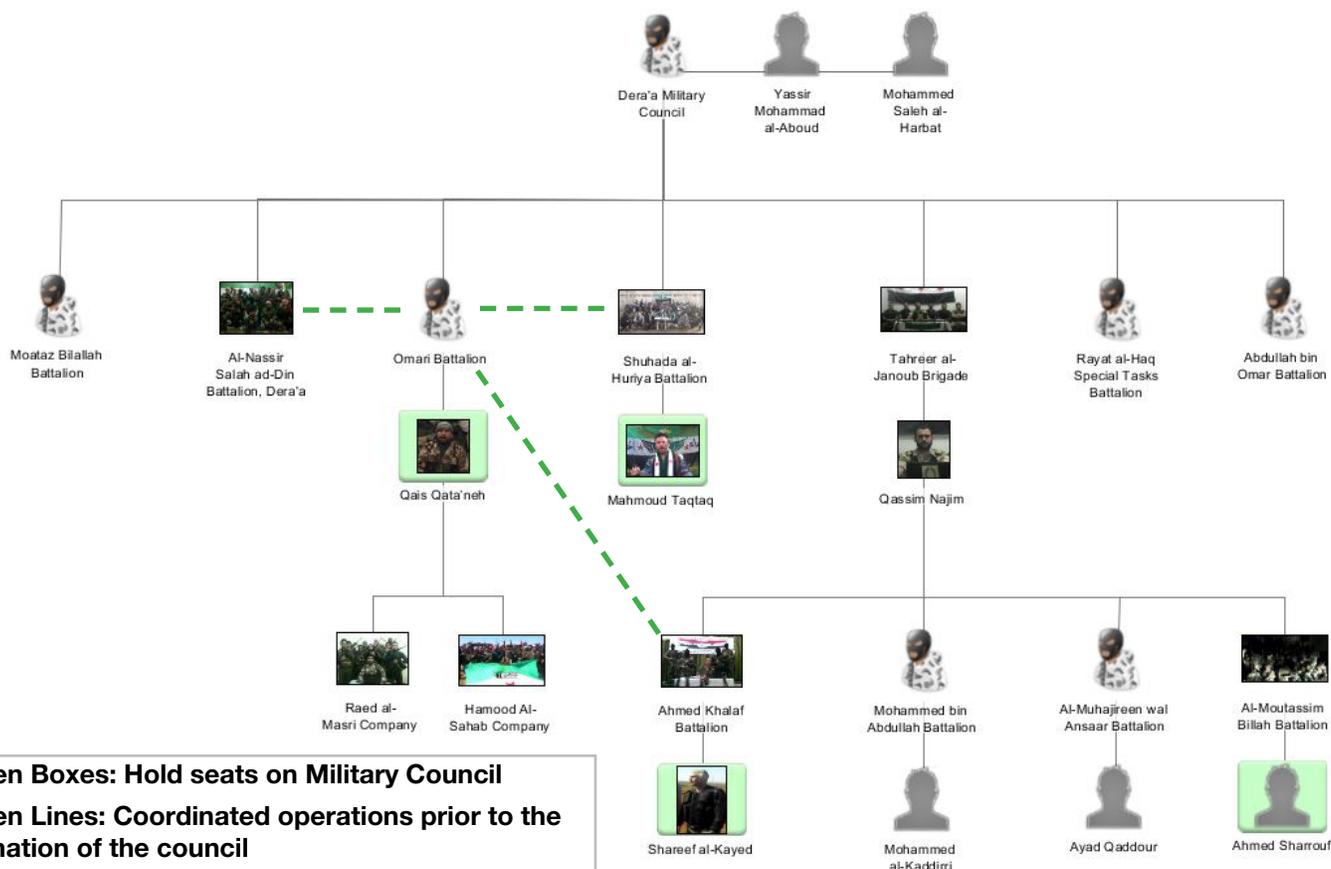
Inside Hama city, a number of the council's subordinate battalions have coalesced under the leadership of Captain Mohammed Khalid al-Battal's al-Majed Brigade. The al-Majed Brigade has been able to coordinate disruptive raids across the city targeting regime checkpoints and security forces' outposts, but their ability to inflict casualties on loyalist troops pales in comparison to their rural counterparts.⁸¹

Idlib Military Council

The Idlib Military Council is one of the largest insurgent conglomerates in Syria, but it faces significant challenges in unifying the many rebel organizations in the country's most consistently volatile province. Colonel Afeef Suleiman, leader of the Idlib council, first surfaced in January 2012 as the commander of the Abu al-Fidaa Battalion that operates along the seam between Hama and Idlib province.⁸² Like Major Ali Ayoub, he moved north and established the Idlib Military Council in mid-April 2012, probably around the rebel stronghold of Maarat al-Numan.⁸³

The Idlib council enjoys the support of key FSA units in the province, including the Jebal al-Zawiya Martyrs and the Dir al-Sham Battalions. This gives the council credibility in Idlib. An activist in contact with Idlib rebels estimated that 70 percent of the battalions have united under the *majlis askeri* and the remaining 30 percent were still "in negotiations" as of early April.⁸⁴ As in Hama province, geography has been a limiting factor in the council's influence. An organizational chart published on the council's Facebook page in early May showed geographically organized sub-commands that indicated much greater influence in Idlib's southeast Maarat al-Numan area than

DERAA MILITARY COUNCIL



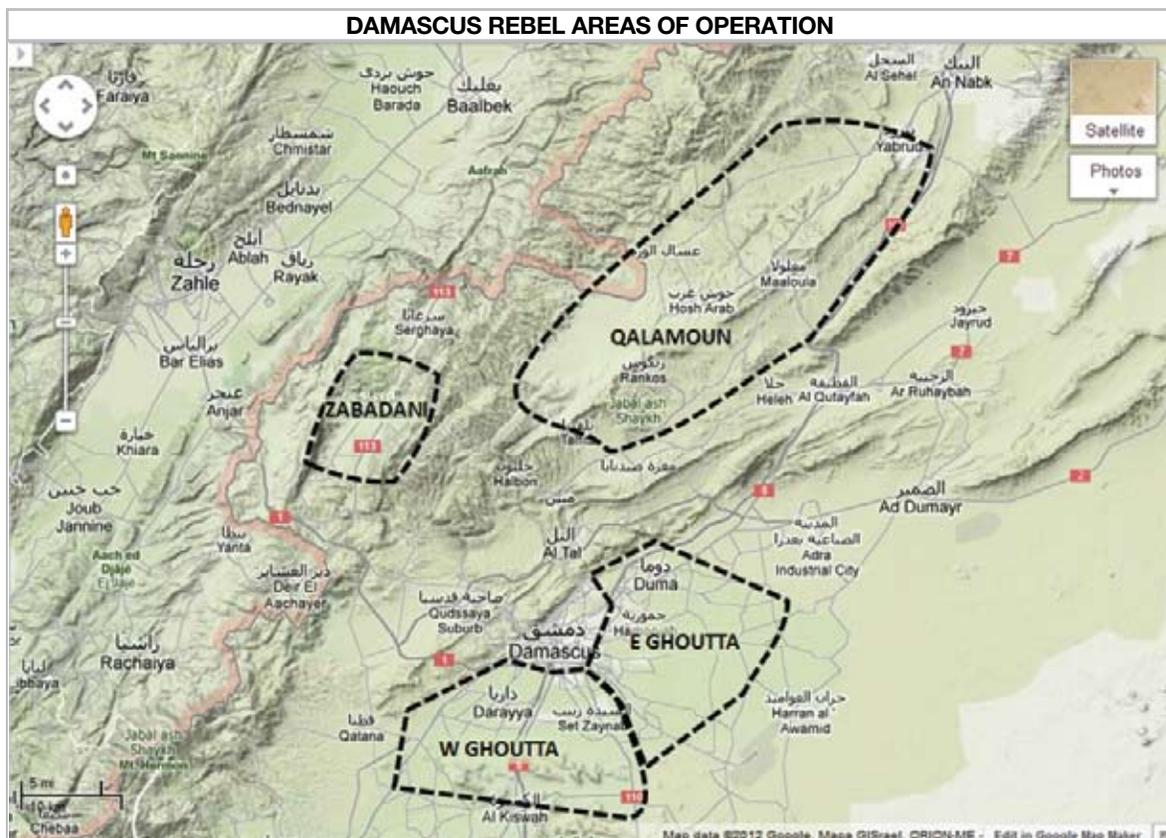
anywhere else in the province, and no influence in key rebel centers like Jisr al-Shughour on the Turkish border.⁸⁵ The council's geographic gaps are an important reason the council is linked to less than 70 percent of active rebel groups in Idlib.

The council also faces the challenge of working with other large and active rebel groupings in Idlib that do not share the FSA's secular outlook. Units affiliated with the conservative Sunni Ahrar al-Sham Battalions, the loose arrangement of rebel units discussed in the Hama section above, were so prevalent that one Western journalist who visited northern Syria in June 2012 commented, "I can't swing a cat around here without hitting someone from Ahrar al-Sham."⁸⁶ These rebel units probably cooperated under the unified goal of defeating the Assad regime, but unlike Ahrar al-Sham's relationship with the Hama Military Council, no direct evidence indicates cooperation between the secular Idlib Military Council and the Salafi Ahrar al-Sham. Just as in Hama, if pressure from the Assad regime subsides and interests diverge, fractures between these rebel groupings may emerge.

Deraa Military Council

The late March announcement forming the joint FSA council inside Syria did not include a military council for Deraa province, though rebels there had already established a military council that mirrored their compatriots' across the country. In late February 2012, prominent rebel leaders in Deraa announced the formation of a council that included nine rebel units operating across the Hawran plain.⁸⁷ The members of the council were the commanders of the most effective rebel units in the province.

The Deraa Military Council represents a higher proportion of active rebel groups in their province than almost any other provincial military council. Captain Qais Qataneh and Lieutenant Sharif Kayed, the commanders of the Omari and Ahmed Khalaf Battalions, respectively, both participated in announcing the formation of the Deraa Military Council.⁸⁸ These two rebel units are the longest-standing and the most effective insurgent organizations in Deraa province, so their participation lends a great degree of credibility to the organization overall. Furthermore, both



Ahmad Khalaf and Omari had worked directly with other rebel units included in the council, conducting joint operations against the Assad regime.

In testament to the legitimacy of the organization, when the Tahrir al-Janoub Brigade announced its formation in March, its commander, Major Qassim Najim, explicitly stated that he had sought and received the permission of the Deraa Military Council to form his brigade.⁸⁹ Furthermore, the brigade incorporated some battalions that were already working with the council. Two of the commanders who make up Tahrir al-Janoub's subordinate battalions continue to hold seats on the provincial military council.

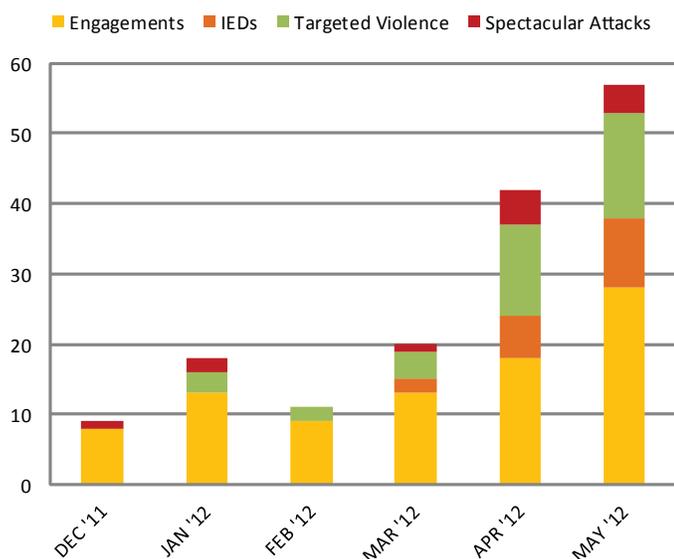
Damascus Military Council

The insurgent networks in and around Damascus are less transparent than most Syrian rebel networks because the opposition hesitates to provide the names of their units and leaders in video statements. The Assad regime continues to maintain a higher proportion of its intelligence and security capability close to the capital, and the security forces have had more success targeting rebel leadership here. For example, security

forces killed or captured two key leaders in the Damascus resistance, Ghayyath Kana'an and Lieutenant Abdullah Abu Walid, in April and May.⁹⁰ Therefore, the Damascus rebels' reluctance to reveal the details of their network's structure and their own identities is not surprising.

The insurgent network around Damascus has roughly aligned under the Damascus Military Council, but meaningful coordination between groups predated the establishment of the council. According to one member of the resistance in Zabadani, rebels there maintained close coordination with rebels in nearby Qalamoun area as early as late 2011. The former rebel, who has maintained contact with leaders on the ground, claimed that approximately 60 percent of the rebels in Damascus province have coalesced under the *majlis askeri*, but he also conceded that problems remained, particularly in Damascus' eastern suburbs, where rebels have been less willing to cooperate closely with the council. Furthermore, rebels in Zabadani worked with the council but did not fully support the council's leader, Lieutenant Colonel Khalid Hubus, after the regime arrested the younger Lieutenant Abdullah Abu Walid, who had been Hubus' deputy. Walid had been a more

Damascus Rebel Engagements



effective leader of the majority-youth rebel fighters, while Hubus had not yet proven himself.⁹¹

Rebel activity in Damascus province has demonstrated increasing capability in recent months, despite the relative lack of clarity about structures and personalities behind the groups conducting these operations. After rebels seized control of the Zabadani valley and sections of Damascus' eastern suburbs in January, the security forces conducted a series of operations that reestablished regime control of these areas by late February. This resulted in an overall decrease in attacks that month.⁹²

But by May 2012, direct fire and roadside bomb engagements had substantially increased. In particular, rebel use of roadside bombs in Damascus province increased from none reported in February to ten in May. Assassinations and kidnappings also increased during that time. This type of targeted violence, in which rebels attack security forces on their way to work or outside their homes, is less morally palatable than direct fire engagements against regime security forces, but these tactics have damaged the Assad regime security forces' morale and capabilities. One late May operation involved poisoning the inner circle of military advisors close to Assad, including the defense minister, interior minister, and intelligence chiefs. Prompt medical treatment saved these men, but the mission threatened the Assad regime's leaders

and provided a clear example of the opposition's growing reach.⁹³

COMPETITION, DISUNITY, AND MISCONDUCT IN THE INSURGENCY

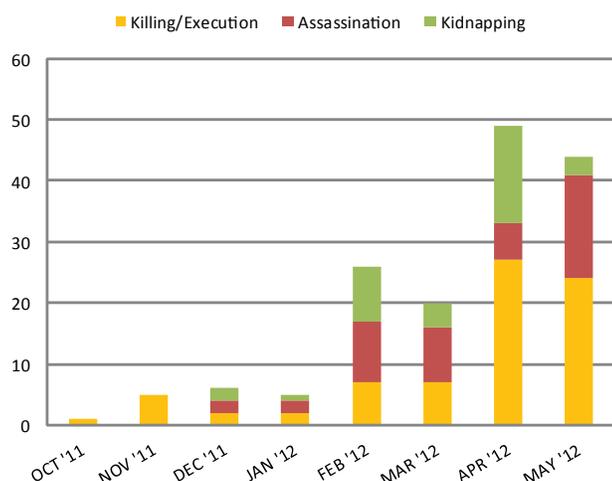
Syria's insurgency has faced the challenge of maintaining a code of conduct among the various armed opposition groups, and the regime has eagerly exploited the narrative of unruly "armed gangs." In early April, accusations emerged that the Farouq Battalion was collecting *Jizyah*, or taxes imposed on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule, in Christian areas of Homs province.⁹⁴ The same report claimed, less credibly, that fundamentalist Pakistani fighters had arrived in Homs. The accusation is likely from the Assad regime, but it represents the fear of lawlessness and religious conservatism that binds so much of the Syrian population to the regime. Every day, state-run news agencies recount criminal acts Syria's insurgents have allegedly committed.

This perception of lawlessness among the Syrian insurgency is not baseless; it has been difficult for the opposition to enforce an acceptable code of conduct among the many armed opposition groups. Monthly instances of assassinations, executions, and kidnappings by rebels skyrocketed in February 2012 and doubled again between March and April.⁹⁵ Determining the legitimacy of these killings is particularly difficult when armed conflict can combine with sectarian enmity.

The Assad regime's sectarian *shabiha* paramilitaries have been responsible for a vast number of killings, which has made it more difficult for insurgents to resist the urge to act in reprisal. One insurgent explained that his unit executed ten of 35 captured loyalist soldiers and militiamen after the security forces refused a prisoner exchange. He personally shot three of the loyalists, two Sunnis and one Alawite. "Don't ask the reason," he said. "It's not vengeance — it's our right."⁹⁶

Mistrust has also fueled this type of violence among Syrian rebels. The suspicion of "fleas," Syrian slang for regime spies, has contributed to the growth of extra-judicial killings in Syria. One Damascus-based rebel explicitly rejected sectarian motivations by explaining that all 30 of the suspected informants killed in his neighborhood have been Sunnis.⁹⁷

Rebel Targeted Violence Trends



Some rebel leaders have attempted to impose order on their units with mixed results. In mid-March, Captain Amjad al-Hamid, one of the founding members of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade and the leader of the Rijal Allah Battalion, gave a speech in Rastan denouncing a spate of muggings and kidnappings perpetrated by insurgent groups in the area. “We have armed men among our civilians that are a burden to our revolution. They are just thieves ... no different from Bashar al-Assad.” He also distanced himself from conservative Islamists in the speech.⁹⁸ Unknown assailants killed Hamid the next day. In the following weeks, the spokesperson for the Rijal Allah Brigade accused a rival Salafi group of the murder.⁹⁹ Whether or not this accusation is justified, it raises concerns about armed confrontations between rebel groups.

Anecdotes of infighting between Syrian insurgent groups surfaced more consistently by April 2012. “There are a lot of groups on the ground working alone and not all of them are good guys,” said a rebel commander in northern Syria.¹⁰⁰ Another rebel interviewed in Idlib province stated that rebels in the town of Ariha killed some of their colleagues for refusing to execute captured loyalist troops. He went on to explain that a core group of fighters did not trust new members and rarely allowed them to go on raids, leading a large number of rebels to split off and form their own group.¹⁰¹ Farther south in Hama, rebel groups that worked together during a four-day battle against security forces in the town of Kafr Zeita ultimately withdrew from the town, not because Assad’s

forces were stronger, but because arguments broke out between group commanders about who had borne unequal burdens in the fighting.¹⁰² These incidents demonstrate the challenges of discipline and cohesion that any military organization must take seriously. Coordination between rebel groups has allowed them to become formidable enemies to the Assad regime, but coordination alone will not suffice for a chain of command capable of enforcing discipline.

The Farouq Battalion in Homs province has been a particularly polarizing rebel group, due in large part to its success. Political opposition groups and rival rebel units have accused the Farouq Battalion of refusing to cooperate and of becoming religious radicals. Even the Assad regime has singled out Farouq as a target for its propaganda.¹⁰³ It is difficult to determine whether these accusations derive from Farouq’s success or its actions. For example, many criticisms have focused on the beard styles of Farouq’s leaders as incontrovertible evidence of their Salafi beliefs.¹⁰⁴

Friction with the Farouq Battalion has undermined rebel cohesion in Homs, regardless of the causes. One of the most useful windows into this frustration was a leaked late March email from a Homs rebel commander to SNC President Ghalioun. The commander, who uses the nom de guerre Abu Majid, complains that, of the twenty-five rebel units operating in Homs city, “the only group that is not part of this coordination is the al-Farouq Battalion, especially in the al-Khalidiyeh neighborhood.” He refrains from condemning the whole al-Farouq organization, explaining that “the problem today lies in a few people in Homs and not even in all the members of al-Farouq Battalion who are cooperating with each other.”¹⁰⁵

Abu Majid’s correspondence makes it clear that al-Farouq Battalion has been disruptive in Homs, even if only a few of the group’s members are at fault. He alludes to violence committed against “other anti-regime groups that are not subsumed under the rubric of al-Farouq.” Abu Majid also condemned violence committed against pro-regime civilian populations and blamed “the language of violence popularized by al-Farouq Battalion” for its negative influence on “younger men making decisions on their own.” Interestingly, Abu Majid explains that this influence was “made possible through generous external financial support.”¹⁰⁶

EXTERNAL SUPPORT FOR THE INSURGENCY AND ITS CHALLENGES

Competition for military assistance from outside parties has compounded mistrust among rebel groups and risks threatening broader organizational unity of the Syrian opposition. As one rebel put it in an interview, "When it comes to getting weapons, every group knows they are on their own. It's a fight for resources."¹⁰⁷ External sponsorship can prompt opposition groups to coalesce. "We felt forced into aligning with the Free Syrian Army because it is the most widely known. If it gets recognized, we'll get foreign aid," one Idlib rebel explained.¹⁰⁸ But unequal distribution and competing lines of funding have also created the opposite effect, and many interviewed rebels have voiced their frustration over the way assistance has reached the insurgency. "Deserving people are not being funded," one said, "and all the money goes to people who do not deserve it."¹⁰⁹

Many opposition sources have complained that Islamist groups, and in particular the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, have financed rebel battalions that share their religious outlook. Opposition sources report that the Brotherhood has representatives in the Antakya refugee camps ready to meet interested rebel groups.¹¹⁰ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has not denied these accusations, telling the Washington Post in mid-May that it had "opened its own supply channels to the rebels, using resources from wealthy private individuals and money from Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar."¹¹¹ The Muslim Brotherhood is also likely to have drawn on money from the SNC to support this effort, made possible through their control of the SNC's relief committee.¹¹² Leaked emails from March revealed that the SNC transferred \$1 million from its bank account in Qatar to its Istanbul account as frequently as once every three days¹¹³

Evidence suggests that other external Syrian opposition leaders and wealthy expatriates are working together to counter the Brotherhood's influence by funding their own groups working through personal connections on the ground. One interviewed rebel described buying weapons from corrupt regime officials with \$35,000 from wealthy Syrians living abroad.¹¹⁴ One reporter who visited the refugee camps in Antakya reported

meeting a Syrian expatriate who hinted he was there to finance rebel groups, joking, "I've come to help buy the boys their fruits and vegetables."¹¹⁵

Money remains the most common form of external support, but support has also begun to flow in the form of weapons. A rebel who does logistics work for the FSA in Turkey said money is not the problem - "plenty pours in from Syrians in exile"- but cited the logistical challenge of smuggling larger weapons across the relatively well-guarded Syrian border.¹¹⁶ The funds that reach Syrian insurgent groups undoubtedly go towards purchasing weapons, either from corrupt and sympathetic regime officials or from smugglers bringing weapons in from Syria's neighbors.¹¹⁷ The availability of weapons in Iraq and Lebanon in particular has contributed to black market purchases in Syria.¹¹⁸

There is mounting evidence that weapons and ammunition are making it to the Syrian opposition in greater quantity, despite the fact that funds have been a more prevalent form of support. In late April and again in early May, Lebanese authorities seized vessels in the port of Tripoli that contained shipments of weapons and ammunition.¹¹⁹ Libyan weapons packed in shipping containers and ammunition smuggled inside cars from Egypt likely represent only a small portion of the amount of materiel that has made it to the Syrian insurgency. "Large shipments have got through. Some areas are loaded with weapons," said one opposition figure in May.¹²⁰ "We have good supplies of ammunition now and rich sources for money," said another opposition leader in Hama in early June.¹²¹

Competing and disparate streams of income and arms have injured opposition unity in Syria. One of the most damning pieces of evidence once again comes from the email of Abu Majid in Homs:

"The basis of the crisis in the city today is groups receiving uneven amounts of money from direct sources in Saudi Arabia, some of whom are urging the targeting of loyalist neighborhoods and sectarian escalation. ... They are not national, unifying sources of support. On the contrary, mature field leaders have noted that receiving aid from them [Saudi Arabia] entails implicit conditions like working in ways other than the desired direction."¹²²

Increased monetary and logistical support for the Syrian insurgency has improved rebel effectiveness and thus contributed to the creation of de facto safe zones that have challenged the Assad regime's control of Syria. Yet this support has not fostered the emergence a responsible opposition that can promote and protect the political opposition. Furthermore, the proliferation of money and weapons has not been aligned in a way that will bolster responsible opposition structures forming inside Syria. If these disparate sources of support do not become organized more responsibly, they may help defeat Assad but destroy Syria in the process.

CONCLUSION

The international community must prepare for protracted civil war in Syria, but the extent of regional destabilization could depend on whether the opposition develops into an alternative government or descends into chaos and competition among warring factions. If the conflict continues along its current trajectory, Syria's maturing insurgency will be able to challenge the Syrian state's authority over large portions of the country. However, it will not be able to overthrow the Assad regime for the foreseeable future. The regime can continue to count on the loyalty of a critical mass of its military formations, and the lightly-armed and locally-oriented rebels will not be able to march on Damascus to oust the government. Because of this, Assad is likely to hold the capital for the remainder of 2012. The sectarian and security structures that underpin the regime can hold the coastal areas of Latakia and Tartous provinces for much longer. Conversely, the regime does not have the forces required to hold all of Syria, and its control is steadily eroding across the country. If the Syrian opposition becomes strong enough, or the security forces become stretched enough, the Assad regime will lose its monopoly on the use of force in the northern, eastern, and even central parts of Syria.

During the summer of 2012, Assad will have to choose between consolidating forces for a major offensive or effectively ceding parts of Syria to the opposition. He is likely to choose the first option, because the regime will not accept de facto secession unless it absolutely must. The regime will likely focus this offensive against the rebel-held areas in the Homs countryside. Homs is key

terrain for the regime because it links Damascus to the coast and to Aleppo. If Assad's security forces retake rebel strongholds in the Homs countryside, they may be able to continue the offensive in the northern Hama province and Idlib, especially if Russia or Iran increases their military assistance to the regime.

If Assad's international backers fail to provide more support for ground operations against the insurgency, the upcoming offensive is unlikely to reestablish control over the entire Syrian state. The operations will likely culminate before regaining control over the countryside in Hama and Idlib. The regime could maintain control in southern, central, and coastal Syria, while losing the ability to influence northern and eastern reaches of the state. Over a longer period, the Alawite regime's control could shrink down to its coastal strongholds. In this way, the Assad regime could survive even as the state ultimately collapses.

The regional destabilization caused by Syrian state failure must not be underestimated. If neither the regime nor the opposition can secure the Syrian countryside, these areas could plunge into lawlessness and become safe havens for global jihadists linked to al-Qaeda, as well as platforms for Salafist groups with jihadist mindsets and regional ambitions. Extremist groups could exploit the resulting power vacuum, an exceptionally dangerous outcome given the Assad regime's stockpiles of chemical weapons, man-portable air defense missiles, and medium-range ballistic missiles. Spillover would almost certainly embroil Lebanon, contribute to growing Sunni-Shia unrest in Iraq, and destabilize the Jordanian monarchy. Recent events indicate that this process has already begun. In early June, the Lebanese Armed Forces withdrew from the northwestern border with Syria after clashes between Lebanese gunmen and the Syrian army.¹²³ Fighting erupted in Tripoli between Sunni and Alawite militias in May and June.¹²⁴

The question is whether the opposition will be able to provide security where the Assad regime cannot. To avoid a power vacuum in rebel-held areas, Syria's opposition must also establish a system of governance within these de facto safe zones that offers a responsible alternative to the Assad regime. International support, carefully applied, could both hasten the fall of the Assad regime and reduce the

likelihood of a descent into chaos. The opposition has not yet achieved the requisite level of control, and if it does, it will be through the emergence of organic provincial-level organizations built by Syrians working inside the country. Despite the best efforts of the international community, a stable, representative opposition government cannot be forged in Istanbul and injected into the conflict. Syria's exile opposition groups lack legitimacy, cohesion, and grassroots support in Syria, in contrast to the existing organic opposition movement. As analyst Elizabeth O'Bagy wrote, the evolving grassroots political opposition "offers greater potential for the ultimate success of the revolution."¹²⁵ Working in conjunction with these grassroots political structures, provincial military councils stand the greatest chance of achieving this difficult objective of securing and governing Syria.

The priority of U.S. policy on Syria should be to encourage the development of opposition structures that could one day establish a monopoly on the use of force. This is necessary to mitigate the regional destabilizing effects of Syrian state failure and prolonged civil war. The policy debate in Washington about whether or not to arm the Syrian opposition has been overtaken by events: external actors are funding Syria's insurgency, and these resources are contributing to rebel successes on the battlefield. But haphazard support is also endangering Syria's future stability. External support must flow into Syria in a way that reinforces responsible organizations and bolsters structure within the Syrian opposition movement. U.S. objectives should be to channel existing support in constructive ways, namely to the provincial military councils. U.S. policymakers must further recognize that the opposition structures emerging on a province-by-province basis are far more likely to establish this modicum of control than a national-level expatriate opposition organization.

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