



UMAA
ADVOCACY

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

NATIONAL SECURITY REPORT: SYRIA 2013

SECURITY REPORT

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

THE PLAYERS | THE STAKES | THE LOSSES

SEPTEMBER 2013

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March of 2011, Syria saw mass demonstrations across multiple cities. At the onset, demonstrations were peaceful and the Assad regime seemed to be willing to compromise with protestors, imposing modest reforms and ending almost 50 years of a so-called state of emergency. Still, protestors continued to demonstrate and the Assad regime began to deploy tanks and troops. Popular peaceful demonstrations continued. In July of 2011, defectors from the Syrian army announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in an effort to unite demonstrators into an organized rebellion. This marked a new phase for the situation in Syria, steering the nation away from mass demonstrations and into a full-fledged civil war.

On August 21, 2013, footage and video began to emerge of hospitals full of victims, children gasping for breath, and corpses without any sign of physical injuries. The rebels instantly claimed that the situation was due to a massive chemical weapons attack by the Assad government. The purported attack threatened to cross President Obama's red line on Syria. Within a week, the Obama Administration determined that there was indeed a chemical attack and that it was carried out by the regime against rebel forces. The President and administration officials cited classified intelligence reports, as well as an analysis of the type of rockets used, their origin, and their destination, to conclude that the source of the attack was the Assad government. The estimated number of fatalities from the attack was over 1,400. Nonetheless, the United Nations conducted an independent investigation into the matter. However, the results of the investigation have not been reported as of the date of this report.

Following this conclusion, President Obama began to advocate for direct US military intervention in the Syrian crisis. However, while emphasizing his belief that he has constitutional authority to commence a strike without Congressional approval, President Obama declared on August 31 that he will first seek Congressional authorization before any military attack. The main goal of such an attack would be to "hold the Assad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behavior, and degrade their capacity to carry it out." President Obama has been able to garner only limited international political support for any type of military action.

The international dialogue made a sudden turn on September 9th when Secretary of State John Kerry made apparently off-hand remarks in a press conference with Britain's Foreign Secretary William Hague. Secretary Kerry suggested that Bashar al-Assad could evade US military action if he acted quickly to surrender his entire chemical weapons stockpile to the international community – albeit that was a very improbable and maybe even impossible scenario. And although the idea seems to have been a point of debate between President Obama and President Putin for more than a year, Russia has used Secretary Kerry's comments as a start to public discussions about this particular diplomatic option. The Syrian government quickly jumped on the idea. In a televised statement to the nation, President Obama told the American people that he is willing to work with Russia to resolve the issue diplomatically and asked Congress to delay the vote on military action in Syria.

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Hesitation in supporting the armed rebels in Syria has been well founded. As the United States plans to become increasingly involved in the conflict, more and more information is surfacing about the identity and ideology of rebel groups. On September 5th, the New York Times front page featured an article highlighting the brutality of rebel forces, referencing footage that has recently surfaced of a heinous April 2012 execution of captured Syrian soldiers. The footage showed seven shirtless soldiers forced to lie on the ground at the rebels' feet, shot in the back of the head, then buried in an unmarked mass grave. Though the loyalties of this faction are not certain, sources have revealed that they've received arms from the Supreme Military Council (SMC) before. Earlier this year, another gruesome video showed a rebel eating the heart of a dead Syrian soldier, attracting much outrage. The soldier was identified as the leader of the Omar al-Farouq Brigade, a group working under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the SMC. Radicalization amongst rebel factions is very prevalent amongst rebel groups, the overwhelming majority of which are Islamist. As one observer proclaimed "Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of."

There is still much uncertainty as to the identity of the rebels. There is no leader, council, or faction that is decidedly in control. Instead, a plethora of militias and brigades are vying for control of Syria's future. It is in the United States' interest to seek to identify these rebels if the administration wishes to increase support or become directly involved in the conflict.

Minorities in Syria have been caught in the middle of this conflict and have been suffering countless losses. Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druze, and Shiites have been targeted, forced to leave their homes, kidnapped, tortured, and/or killed. The chants and hopes for democratic change the opposition originally advocated doesn't seem promising to the country's minorities as they continue to be subjugated to violence by the opposition's rebel groups. Al-Nusra Front, the proclaimed Al-Qaeda wing in Syria, the Free Syrian Army, and the rest of the military opposition have clearly expressed their sentiments toward Syria's minorities; the opposition is not encompassing of them and a future government comprised of the opposition's parties may not respect the rights, let alone the lives, of Syrian minorities. The conflict has been marked by numerous accounts of sectarian strife and ethno-religious discrimination, in which minorities have suffered gravely.

As the conflict continues between rebel forces and the Al-Assad regime, it is important to pay attention to the effects it has on the minorities of the country. Minority groups in Syria are implicated into the conflict even if they do not pledge allegiance to or affiliate with either the rebels or the Assad regime. Some of the opposition that is characteristic of ideological principles of ethnocentrism and hate, like the Salafists of the Nusra Front, target a specific minority group simply because of their religious or ethnic background, regardless of political affiliation.

Whatever the conclusion of these most recent overtures may be, the Syrian civil war will go down as one of the most atrocious humanitarian crises of the century. Back in July, the United Nations estimated that the death toll from the crisis rose to over 100,000 individuals, and as the civil war continues that number will undoubtedly increase. More than 1.7 million individuals were forced away from their homes and have become refugees in other countries. The presence of chemical weapons and their alleged use in the country increases the stakes for regional players, the international community, and for the Syrian people.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

DEMOGRAPHICS

Syria is a Middle Eastern country, bordering the Mediterranean Sea between Turkey and Lebanon. Syria also borders Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, and is home to more than 22,000,000 million residents. Syria has 14 governorates or provinces (muhafazat), with Homs being the largest geographically and Aleppo housing more than 23% of the total population. The capital Damascus is recognized as one of the world's oldest inhabited cities.¹

Syrians today are indigenous Levantine people that were Arabized when Muslim Arabs from the Arab Peninsula came and settled in the region.² Ethnically, 90.3% of the population is Arab; Kurds, Armenians, and others make up the remaining 9.7%. The vast majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims comprising 74% of the total population, while the other Muslim minorities such as Alawi, Shia, and Druze make up another 16% of the population. The remaining 10% are Christians.³

Today, over 85% of the Syrian population speaks Arabic, while a good segment of the population speaks French or English as a second language. The Kurds, who speak primarily Kurdish, make up 9% of the total population. They are concentrated in the northeastern part of Syria, in the region bordering neighboring Turkey and Iraq.⁴

GOVERNANCE

The contemporary history of Syrian governance tracks back to the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Syrian lands for over four centuries. Following WWI, France received a mandate to govern Syria from the League of Nations. France governed and dictated all facets of the Syrian atmosphere, facing continuous resentment and displeasure from Syrians due to its oppressive rule. In 1946, the French rule over Syria terminated per a resolution from the United Nations.⁵

The years following independence witnessed turmoil and instability as different political factions asserted their power. There were numerous military coups and recoups up until the rise of the Baath Party in 1963. The Baath Party, a secular, socialist, Arab nationalist political party, endured its own internal factionalism and divisions that culminated in a bloodless military coup lead by Hafiz Al-Assad. Hafiz Al-Assad established an authoritarian government where power was concentrated in his own hands and dissent was suppressed. Upon Hafiz Al-Assad's death in 2000, his son Bashar Al-Assad took control as head of state and continued to rule under a political "state of emergency."⁶

Modern day Syria is characterized today as a pseudo-republic with an authoritarian regime. The legal system is based predominantly on civil law, with Islamic law used in specific instances, predominantly in family courts. The government has three major branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The executive branch is headed by President Bashar Al-Assad, wielding

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full control and authority on all policy making in the country. He appoints the vice president, prime minister, and the cabinet. There are no elections but there is a referendum every seven years for the President, with no term limits. The last referendum was administered in 2007, where Al-Assad received 97% of the votes. The legislative arm of the government consists of a Unicameral People's Assembly, which is comprised of 250 members elected by popular vote to serve four year terms. Finally, the judicial branch consists of a multi-layer court system. The highest court is the Court of Cassation, which is organized into civil, criminal, religious, and military divisions, each administered by three judges.⁷

ECONOMY

Syria is a middle-income developing country with an economy based on agriculture, oil, industry, and tourism. With the escalation of recent turmoil in 2011, the economy has suffered enormously. The public sector, which has been characterized as too large, inefficient, and corrupt, has been one of the main problem areas in the Syrian economy. Another looming problem has been the declining rates of oil production and weak financial and capital markets. This has resulted in an increasing unemployment rate that is also connected with high population growth.⁸

Even more destabilizing for the Syrian economy has been the strong economic sanctions imposed by the U.S., the European Union, and other nations. The sanctions were imposed due to the international community's dissatisfaction with the Syrian government's oppressive response to the protests and calls for reform by the Syrian opposition. In the wake of the current political crisis, the two main economic pillars of the country, agriculture and oil, have struggled further. Severe droughts have added to the agriculture dilemma. Over the last 6 years, agriculture's share of the economy has declined by more than 3.5%. Similarly, the oil sector has witnessed its own share of problems with a decline in production due to international sanctions.⁹

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

On August 21, 2013, footage and video began to emerge of hospitals full of victims, children gasping for breath, and corpses without any sign of physical injuries. The rebels instantly claimed that the situation was due to a massive chemical weapons attack by the Assad government. The purported attack threatened to cross President Obama's red line on Syria.¹⁰ Within a week, the Obama Administration determined that there was indeed a chemical attack and that it was carried out by the regime against rebel forces. The President and administration officials cited classified intelligence reports, as well as an analysis of the type of rockets used, their origin, and their destination, to conclude that the source of the attack was the Assad government. The estimated number of fatalities from the attack was over 1,400.¹¹ Nonetheless, the United Nations conducted an independent investigation into the matter. However, the results of the investigation have not been reported as of the date of this report.¹²

Following this conclusion, President Obama began to advocate for direct US military intervention in the Syrian crisis. However, while emphasizing his belief that he has constitutional authority to commence a strike without Congressional approval, President Obama declared on August 31 that he will first seek Congressional authorization before any military attack. The President also emphasized that any punitive attack on Syria "is not time-sensitive; it will be effective tomorrow, or next week, or one month from now."¹³ He also stressed that any direct action against the Assad government would be "limited in duration and scope," and that it would not involve any American forces on the ground. The main goal of such an attack would be to "hold the Assad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behavior, and degrade their capacity to carry it out."¹⁴

British Prime Minister David Cameron was one of President Obama's strongest supporters in his stance to take military action against the Syrian government. However, after much debate and a vote in the House of Commons, British MPs decided to rule out a strike on the Assad regime.¹⁵ President François Hollande of France was also one of President Obama's strongest international supporters. However, after mounting political pressure domestically, he announced on September 6 that his nation will not decide on a course of action before the UN investigation's results are published.¹⁶

President Obama has been able to garner only limited international political support for any type of military action. From the nations gathered at the G20 meeting concerning Syria, only France, Canada, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were clear supporters of military action. On the other hand, Russia, China, India, Indonesia, Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Germany, and South Africa all opposed military intervention. Russia, especially, has been a staunch opponent of President Obama's proposals, revealing skepticism about the Obama Administration's conclusions regarding the Assad regime's alleged use of chemical weapons.¹⁷

The international dialogue made a sudden turn on September 9th when Secretary of State John Kerry made apparently off-hand remarks in a press conference with Britain's Foreign Secretary William Hague. Secretary Kerry suggested that Bashar al-Assad could evade US military action if he acted quickly to surrender his entire chemical weapons stockpile to the international

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

community – albeit that was a very improbable and maybe even impossible scenario.¹⁸ And although the idea seems to have been a point of debate between President Obama and President Putin for more than a year, Russia has used Secretary Kerry's comments as a start to public discussions about this particular diplomatic option. The Syrian government quickly jumped on the idea. In a televised statement to the nation, President Obama told the American people that he is willing to work with Russia to resolve the issue diplomatically and asked Congress to delay the vote on military action in Syria.¹⁹

Although the Congressional vote on authorization of force in Syria will be delayed, the public discourse in the US remains crucial as to how action on the Syrian crisis will progress. For one, it is far from certain what the outcome of the most recent diplomatic overture will be. The Obama Administration has aired its skepticism regarding the extent of the measure and how the Syrian government's compliance will be measured.²⁰ Furthermore, Congress and the Administration may still hang the specter of an attack over President Assad's head to ensure quick and adequate compliance with any international agreement. Of course, a Congressional authorization seems less probable in this situation, especially since the majority of the House of Representatives were leaning towards a "no" vote, even before President Obama asked Congress for a delay.²¹

Whatever the conclusion of these most recent overtures may be, the Syrian civil war will go down as one of the most atrocious humanitarian crises of the century. Back in July, the United Nations estimated that the death toll from the crisis rose to over 100,000 individuals, and as the civil war continues that number will undoubtedly increase. More than 1.7 million individuals were forced away from their homes and have become refugees in other countries.²² The presence of chemical weapons and their alleged use in the country increases the stakes for regional players, the international community, and for the Syrian people.

PARTIES AND STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

PRO ASSAD PARTIES

The Assad regime

The Assad regime's roots go back to 1970, when Hafiz Al-Assad established an authoritarian government after a bloodless military coup. Hafiz Al-Assad asserted his power for 30 years, facing strong criticism for his brutal rule that suppressed any opposition and dissident, and an inefficient government that failed to transform the economy with effective reform.²³ Hafiz Al-Assad's ambitions for his rule to continue with his heirs took a big blow when his eldest son and vice president, Basil Al-Assad was killed in a devastating car accident in 1994. Following the death of the groomed military leader and heir-apparent, the attention was redirected to Bashar Al-Assad, who at the time was completing his postgraduate studies in Optometry after completing medical school and practicing as a physician in Syria.

In 2000, following the death of Hafiz Al-Assad, Bashar Al-Assad was appointed as the leader of the Ba'ath party and the Syrian army. He ran unopposed, garnering 97% of the votes and made his way to the presidency. Bashar Al-Assad instilled hope in the Syrians to bring the long awaited political and economic reforms that many aspired for. He initiated his presidency with positive reform initiatives that were well received by the Syrians. However, hopes died not too long afterwards, as he continued on the path of his father's authoritative governance that rejected any dissent and secured the interest of his loyalists.

Bashar's authoritative rule became more apparent in 2011, when protestors began taking to the streets across the country. When protests broke out in the southern city of Deraa, inspired by the Arab Spring that extended from Tunisia to Egypt, the regime's response was swift and brutal. The violent crackdown in Deraa triggered protests and dissidence that spread throughout the country, resulting in unrest and instability that has continued to this day. Nonetheless, Bashar Al-Assad attempted to absorb the unrest and comply with the calls for reform. He released some prisoners of war, made some political changes in his government, and ended the 48 year state of emergency.²⁴ The opposition was not satisfied and an insurgency began to grow with the establishment of organized militant rebel groups. These militant rebels received support from a segment of the Syrian population and had strong backing from regional countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. According to the Institute for the Study of War, during the first year of the conflict, Bashar Al-Assad relied on his father's counterinsurgency strategy. The strategy was three-fold, "Carefully selecting and deploying the most trusted military units, raising pro-regime militias, and using those forces to clear insurgents out of major urban areas and then hold them with a heavy garrison of troops."²⁵ However, Bashar has failed in defeating the insurgency. As rebel factions began to grow stronger with support from regional allies and the import of fighters from Islamic and Arab countries, the situation began escalating into a full-fledged civil war.

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The Assad regime is relying on its powerful, cohesive, and loyal army, which is led by a core of Alawites, the Islamic sect that the Assad family belongs to. The army has survived some major defections and has continued to place pressure on the rebels, by primarily protecting its bases in Damascus and Homs. In addition to the Army, the Assad regime has relied heavily on the militias to reinforce its power and fight the rebels. The leading pro-regime militia is the Alawite Shabiha, which is led by members of the Assad family. The Assad regime also relies on support and backing from its regional allies, Iran and Hezbollah, as well as its international ally, Russia, which has vetoed a UN resolution to condemn the Assad regime. Although the Assad regime has lost major cities to the rebel groups, it continues to have the upper hand in major parts of Damascus and Homs, hopeful that they can continue to weaken the rebel groups as the West remains reluctant to intervene militarily.

Shabiha

The Shabiha are known to be “gangs and thugs” that are staunch supporters of the Ba’ath party and the Assad regime. The Shabiha are believed to have been established in the 1980s by extended members of the Assad family to act on behalf of the government to repress any dissent and opposition during times of unrest and turmoil. The relationship between the government and the Shabiha has been bitter-sweet. However, following the uprising in 2011, they have received the blessings and support of the government to side by them against any dissent. They have transformed from “gangs and thugs” into organized and capable militias backed by the government.²⁶

Shabiha, which translates to ghosts in Arabic, are traditionally comprised of Alawites. However, following the uprising in 2011, there have been Sunni, Druze, and Christian recruits to the pro-government forces. The Shabiha are known for their brutality and barbaric nature in dealing with dissenters and members of opposition. Thus, they have assumed a leading role in the crackdown against the rebels fighting the Assad regime. The Shabiha are known for their physical strength, low education, and blind loyalty to the Assad regime.²⁷ Many of them are ex-cons, prisoners, and smugglers that base their profitable operations between Syria and Lebanon.²⁸

There are various incentives that draw recruits to the Shabiha groups. The majority of the Alawite recruits are raised and trained to think that their number one enemy are the Sunnis, under whom they were persecuted for centuries before they assumed leadership and power in the second half of the 20th century. This fear has been substantiated by the attacks of Sunni extremists rebel factions on Alawite targets, especially after the uprising in 2011. The Shabiha are seemingly fighting for survival, with a mindset that if the Alawite rule is dismantled and the Sunnis gain power, the Alawites will be repressed and persecuted once again. Therefore, many of the Shabiha Alawites have uncompromising and unequivocal support for the Assad regime, which they revere and view as protecting their long term interests in Syria. Many of the Alawite Shabiha, as with other recruits, are lured by money, as well as a level of power and authority that makes them “above the law.”²⁹

A large segment of Shabiha members join for economic motivations. Many of them come from poor socio-economic backgrounds and are unemployed. They exchange their loyalty to the regime for money and other privileges. The economic benefits have expanded the

demographics of the recruits to include Druze and Christians, who also fear the Islamic militants that can jeopardize their survival.³⁰

The Shabiha have played a major role in assisting the government and acting on their behalf to carry out various functions. The Shabiha groups have also been joined by government security members that operate in the traditional Shabiha civilian clothes to advance the agenda of the regime. They have manned checkpoints, interrogated and tortured dissenters, and provided security in government strongholds and regime facilities.³¹ They have also been criticized and condemned for carrying atrocious crimes and massacres against rebels.

Foreign Allies

IRAN

Since the uprising in the spring of 2011, Iran has remained as Syria's strongest ally in the region, supporting it militarily and economically. Iran is one of the major stakeholders in the Syrian crisis because of the geopolitical and economic interests that are safeguarded within the sustainability of the Assad regime. Iran is using Syria to project its power, advance its regional influence, and rival the United States and its regional allies.³²

On one level, Iran is using Syria to project and assert its power in the Middle East before the eyes of some of its rival Gulf countries, Israel, and opposing Western powers. The alliance between the Assad regime and the Iranian government has allowed Iran to extend its influence in the Arab region. There are three mutual interests that Iran and Syria's alliance is built on. First, is the support and backing of Hezbollah. Israel, which has firmly warned against Iran's nuclear project, is a shared rival for both Iran and Syria. Iran supports Hezbollah as one of its extended arms that may pose a significant security threat to Israel, especially in the case Israel entertains any notions of striking Iran in an attempt to halt its nuclear ambitions.³³ Second is the mutual support for Palestinian Islamic Groups, such as Hamas against the state of Israel. Syria and Iran have deployed money and weapons in the hands of such groups to combat the Israelis, who are amongst their fiercest rivals. The third political interest of concern to both countries is Iraq. The Saddam regime had been a rival and threat to both Iran and Syria for decades. Following the fall of Saddam in 2003, Iran and Syria have attempted to assert their power and influence in Iraq opposing the stronghold of the United States. Iran especially has been working closely with some of the Iraqi Shia groups to exert its influence in the country. This has come at the expense of the United States, which has established itself after dismantling the Saddam regime and contributing to the Iraqi transition to democracy.³⁴

Besides the geopolitical interest that Iran has in Syria, there are economic interests that are jeopardized if the Assad regime is jeopardized. Over the last few decades, Iran has invested a substantial amount of money, resources, and labor in Syria. Some of the major investments have been in transportation and infrastructure. Especially with the increase in sanctions championed by the United States and the European Union that has crippled both economies, the mutual trade agreements between Iran and Syria have never been more significant and needed. Just shy of the uprising in 2011, both countries signed a \$10 billion natural gas agreement, which obliges Iran to build a gas pipeline that would start in Iran and run through Syria, Lebanon, and the Mediterranean.³⁵ With the instability that has paralyzed the Syrian economy and the

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deteriorating humanitarian situation, Iran has been committed to providing support and aid to the Syrian government.

RUSSIA

Russia's support and backing has been instrumental in keeping the Assad regime afloat, perhaps most significantly by utilizing its veto power and partnering with China to thwart any efforts by the United Nations to condemn or take any measures against the regime. Russia's support of the Assad regime has been in the face of the United States and its allies, straining the two giants' relationship in the world arena as they compete for influence and to safeguard their long-term interests in the region. The Russian interest in Syria is significant enough such that over the last two and half years of unrest, it has shown no signs of retreating from its alliance with Assad. Russia has withstood fierce pressure by the West led by its historical rival, the United States.

One of the grounds for Russia's persistent alliance with Syria is the cultural connections. Syria remains Russia's closest ally in an Arab region that has otherwise been much more committed to fostering its relationship with the United States. Over the last forty years, Russia has been a hub for Syrian students who aspire to study abroad and finish their postgraduate studies. On the other hand, Syria has benefited from Russian skilled labor and expertise in enhancing its manufacturing and industry. With the start of the uprising in 2011, more than 100,000 Russians were living in Syria, who have been an open target for rebels that are resentful towards Russia's support of the regime.³⁶

On another level, Russia has commercial interests that it fears could be jeopardized if the Assad regime were to fall. Syria is one of Russia's main weapons consumers; 78% of Syria's weaponry consumption is secured by Russia, which accounts to \$4.7 billion between the years 2007-2010.³⁷ This economic interest has heightened in the last few years as Russian economy has received a blow with losing \$13 billion due to international sanctions on Iran and \$4.5 billion in Libya due to the fall of the Gadhafi regime, who was another major weapons consumer in the region.³⁸

The scopes of Russia's pecuniary interest are beyond weaponry. At stake in Syria are more than \$20 billion in contracts that could be forfeited in the case of Assad's downfall at the hands of the rebels. On another level, the Russian government has outstanding loans that amount to billions of dollars that have kept the Syrian government afloat in the last few years.³⁹

Complementing the important commercial interest, Russia's alliance with Syria has strategic implications. Under President Putin's leadership, Russia is attempting to resurface as one of the world's great powers. One aspect to this reemergence is to revive and bolster its military fronts. Syria currently hosts Russia's only outside military base, a naval center in port Tartus. Russia's ambition to sustain this base in the Mediterranean region could be dissolved if Syria's Assad regime is defeated.⁴⁰ Beyond the naval base, Syria's geographical location bordering the Mediterranean, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq, are crucial for Russia, who is attempting to position itself as a counterweight to the United States in the region. Finally, some experts have emphasized that to restore its throne on the world stage, Russia's support of Assad and Iran is a key component. Both countries are opponents to the US, positioning Russia

as a counterweight to the United States externally and internally, to rally the Russians around a restored influential nationalist flag.⁴¹

CHINA

China has not taken the lead role in supporting Bashar Al-Assad, leaving Russia and Iran at the forefront, but its support has been significant enough to bolster Al-Assad's alliance in the face of the relentless rebellion. China's interest in supporting the Assad regime can be summarized in two points. Similar to Russia and Iran, China has been supporting the sustainability and continuity of the Assad regime by delivering \$500 million a month in oil and credit. Syria is in dire need of China's oil because its oil producing regions in the North and Northeast have been seized and controlled by the rebel strongholds, resulting in a reduction of the oil by 95%. The other primary reason for China's support for Al-Assad is that it fears that the international support for the rebellion based on human rights grounds can one day spillover to its own soil, which has been commonly criticized for human rights violations.⁴²

IRAQ

Iraq's attempt to maintain neutrality in regards to the Syrian conflict did not withstand with the rise of the extreme radical militants that pose threat to the Shia dominated government in Baghdad. The bilateral relations between Iraq and Syria were strained for several years after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of the elected government. With the rise of radical elements in Iraq, the government persistently accused the Syrian government of financing and training militants and insurgents that were imported from Arab countries. More so, the Iraqis accused Syria of intervening with its internal affairs and attempting to disrupt its rising democracy, which Syria feared to spill over especially with the expanding American influence in Iraq and the rest of the region. However, the bilateral relations between the two neighbors were turned around in 2010 due to the mutual geopolitical and economic interest, and the shared ally in Iran who backed Nouri Maliki's Shia coalition.⁴³

As the violence escalated in Syria from protests for reforms, which the Iraqi government initially supported as an advocate for democracy in the region, to insurgency and eventual civil war that has witnessed the rise of extremist and terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, the Iraqi government has been less hesitant to support the Assad regime. The Iraqi government fears that the rise of the radical Wahhabi groups in Syria will adversely affect the sectarian balance in Iraq. To this day Iraq is still terrorized by the daily car bombings that have killed thousands of civilians, especially escalating in the last few months as a spillover from the Syrian conflict. Iraq also fears that a Sunni government in Syria backed by the rival Gulf countries could threaten its Shia based governance and inspire the Sunni minority to reignite sectarian strife that would halt any advances that the country has made over the last few years. Additionally, the Iraqi government is keeping an eye out for the Kurds in the north that are aligning with Turkey, a regional opponent and powerful supporter of the rebel groups in Syria. Finally, the influx of the Syrian refugees is looming over Iraq, which has been struggling with unemployment and providing adequate service to its own citizens.⁴⁴

PARTIES AND STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

HEZBOLLAH

Lebanese based Hezbollah does not shy away from professing its direct role in aiding its bordering ally. It allegedly extended a combat role on the ground as the Assad regime attempts to reassert its power and cleanse major areas of the rebel forces. Hezbollah and Syria are committed to each other in a strategic relationship that is found on resiliency against a common enemy in Israel and unconditional alliance with Iran. Syria has been the major transport and means for Hezbollah to receive its supplies from Iran. Hezbollah fears that the supply routes will be jeopardized if there is a regime change, especially with the rise of the Sunni extremists who are backed by its rivals, the United States and the Gulf countries. Thus, they have continued their commitment to the Assad regime with logistical support, training, advising, and direct combat. However, Hezbollah's support has been calculated to ensure that it does not come at the cost of its presence in Lebanon.⁴⁵

It is noteworthy to mention here that besides Hezbollah, there are Iraqi Shia militants fighting in Syria on different fronts. It is alleged that these groups have been coordinating with Iran and Hezbollah to organize, train, and execute in support of the Assad regime. Some of the groups that have come to surface are Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.⁴⁶

ANTI-ASSAD PARTIES

The Syrian opposition in exile

SYRIAN NATIONAL COUNCIL

The Syrian National Council (SNC) was established in October of 2011 in Istanbul Turkey, seven months following the uprising against the Syrian regime. The SNC attempted to form an umbrella organization that combined the various opposition groups and blocks under one coalition that can coordinate a uniform strategy to support the revolt in Syria and replace the Assad regime with an elected democratic government. The SNC included groups such as the Damascus Declaration, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Damascus Spring, the National Block, Kurdish factions, representatives of the Alawi and Assyrian communities, and independents. In 2012, the SNC claimed to include 90% of the opposition, which was challenged by other groups such as the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, based in Syria. One year after the uprising, over 100 groups recognized the SNC as the major umbrella organization for the opposition.⁴⁷

The SNC made clear its commitment to the following principles;

- A democratic, pluralistic, and civil state, based on equal citizenship and rights, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and guaranteed rights for minorities
- Human rights as defined under international law, with basic freedoms of belief, opinion, assembly, and so on, without discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender
- National rights for the Kurdish and Assyrian peoples within the framework of the unity of Syrian territory and people
- Full rights for women

- The restoration of Syrian sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in accordance with international law and United Nations resolutions

The SNC faced many internal challenges that threatened its cohesiveness and deterred international support and recognition of the SNC as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian opposition. They were never able to resolve all the major differences between the major factions such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kurds. The Muslim Brotherhood was viewed by some as essentially an extreme Islamic group, although it tried to dismantle any notions that it aspired to establish an Islamic State and is committed to a civil constitutional government. The Kurds were also opposed internally by some major factions that rejected their aspirations for a federalist Syria where they can have independence and autonomy. Moreover, there was constant disagreement and bickering over the group's support to the rebels and the Free Syrian Army. The internal division and disagreement weakened the coalition and suppressed its desire to be referred to as the umbrella group for all of the opposition.⁴⁸

NATIONAL COORDINATION BODY FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE

The National Coordination Body for Democratic Change is an opposition coalition based in Syria that has called for political dialogue and reform. It was established in June 2011 and has committed to three principles;

- "No" to foreign military intervention
- "No" to religious and sectarian instigation
- "No" to violence and the militarization of the revolution.

This NCC has been at odds with the SNC because they have rejected violence or militarization of the revolution and have called for political dialogue and substantial reform to ensure a better quality of life for all Syrians. They have called for peaceful protests demanding an end to the state of emergency, government accountability, prosecuting criminals inciting violence, withdrawal of the military from cities, ending the Baath party monopoly of power, allowing other parties to freely compete for public office, and release of political prisoners. They have coordinated efforts with Russia, China, and Iran but have minute, if any, support from Gulf countries and Turkey who have backed the militant rebel forces.⁴⁹

NATIONAL COALITION FOR SYRIAN REVOLUTIONARY AND OPPOSING FORCES

Also known as the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), the SOC is the opposition group that is recognized by the United States and most of the international community as the political representative of the Syrian people. It was formed in November of 2012 in Doha, Qatar. SOC consists of 71 members that represent the large based Syrian National Council, the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, local coordination committees, local revolutionary councils, independent political leaders, and some Kurdish political activists.⁵⁰

The SOC is recognized as the official umbrella group for the opposition that is leading and coordinating the political movement of the opposition internally and externally and is preparing to facilitate a transition government after the downfall of the Assad regime. It is also the central authority that is used to channel funding for the rebels in Syria.⁵¹ The group is currently led by

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George Sabra, the former Christian communist and current leader of the Syrian National Council, who is acting as interim president following Moaz Al-Khatib's resignation due to internal disputes over the election of Ghassan Hitto, the American educated businessman, as prime minister.⁵² The SOC has been criticized by the Assad regime as being a puppet of Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, while some of the rebels undermine the credibility, viewing them as out of touch due to their exile in various countries.

THE SUPREME JOINT MILITARY COMMAND

The Supreme Joint Military Command (SMC) was formed by rebel leaders in December of 2012 to act as the defense ministry of the SOC, although it maintains its own independence and autonomy. The SMC aims to unite all rebel fronts and armed groups on the ground into one cohesive and collaborative unit that can facilitate and coordinate its military efforts against the Assad regime. Part of its greater strategy is to lay the foundation for the post-Assad army and to marginalize the extremist militants that pose a threat to their long term strategy in Syria. Its composition consists of representatives of the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Liberation Front, the Syrian Islamic Front, independent brigades, military councils, and defectors from the Syrian army. It is currently headed by General Salim Idriss, a former general in the Syrian army and the current leader of the Free Syrian Army. The SMC is heavily funded with materials, finances, and weaponry by Western powers such as the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, in addition to regional states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.⁵³

Armed Rebel Forces

THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

The Free Syria Army (FSA) is not a typical, conventional army. It lacks a well-defined structure, clear membership, or solid command and control of its fighters. There are many rebel factions and groups with a variety of ideologies and leanings that refer to themselves as part of the FSA. The FSA, therefore, can be understood as a "sort of catch-all brand name referring to the Syrian armed opposition in general."⁵⁴ It is an attempt by defectors from the Syrian army to create a unified front for all the rebel factions on the ground to fight under. The FSA is the largest group within the armed rebel groups, estimated to include over 50,000 fighters. Although it has no real leadership structure, its membership and apparent leadership seem to overlap with the SMC. It is funded through the SMC via the previously mentioned Western and Arab states.⁵⁵

THE SYRIAN ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT

The Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) is the one of the largest organized coalition of armed rebels fighting in Syria. It has close to 20 brigades and battalions with over 37,000 fighters. The SILF is composed of numerous sub units that operate independently with great autonomy. The most notable and powerful brigade is the Suqor al-Sham. Their leadership is also incorporated to some degree into the SMC and considered ideologically moderate as opposed to other extremist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. The SILF is heavily funded by Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶

THE SYRIAN ISLAMIC FRONT

The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) is another powerful coalition of 11 brigades and an estimated 13,000 fighters. The SIF is characterized as conservative Salafists, who are more Islamically ideological but are distinguished as more moderate than Al-Qaeda affiliates. This group also consists of many independent subunits but has a more coherent and cohesive top-down hierarchical structure. The SIF is not under the SMC but has some coordination and links with officials in the Syrian Opposition Council. They are heavily financed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.⁵⁷

THE JABHAT AL-NUSRA (AL-QAEDA)

The Jabhat al-Nusra is an Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist group that also coordinates with Al-Qaeda affiliates in Iraq. They are estimated to have over 6,000 fighters, a significant portion of which are foreign fighters. Some of their foreign fighters are insurgents from Iraq, while others come from Arab and European countries. The Jabhat al-Nusra is described as ideologically extreme, opposing the minority Alawites and responsible for the killings and torture of civilians and soldiers alike. They have claimed responsibility for car bombs and other atrocious attacks that are characteristic of their terrorizing and brutal nature. The Jabhat al-Nusra has strained relations with other rebel forces who have attempted to distance themselves from the group but also has collaborated with some of the rebel groups in their common mission against the Assad regime.⁵⁸

Kurdish Groups

The Kurds are an ethnic minority that makes up 9% of the population. With the start of the uprising, they remained neutral for the most part and that supported neither the government nor the rebels. However, their role has been growing with the recent developments, especially in the northeastern areas where they are concentrated. The Kurds are more interested in an independent self-governed state, similar to that in Kurdistan, Iraq, and not too sympathetic to the national revolutionary agenda. They have had a bitter-sweet relationship with some of the rebel groups; most notable are confrontations with the Jabhat al-Nusra in the north.⁵⁹

Independent Groups

There are various independent groups that have also played a role in the armed rebellion against the Assad regime. One of the largest independent groups is Ahfad al-Rasul Brigade, which consists of 15,000 fighters and under the leadership of the SMC, heavily funded by Qatar. There are also other independent groups such as Syrian Martyrs Brigade, the Fajr al-Islam Battalion, some of which have a radical Islamic ideology.⁶⁰

Foreign allies

GULF COUNTRIES

The Gulf Cooperation Council, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates at the forefront, has been staunch supporters of the revolution in Syria to topple the Assad regime. On one level, they are trying to impose their influence and power in the region and counter Iran's growing role in the Middle East. The wealthy Gulf States would prefer for the rise of a

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favorable Sunni government in Syria as opposed to the Alawite government supported by Iran, in an effort to thwart Iran and Hezbollah's ambitions in the region and win over another major ally. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been two major supporters of both the non-armed rebels in exile and the armed rebels on Syrian soil. They have coordinated efforts to bring various anti-Assad political groups together to form a unified, cohesive, and capable coalition that can devise and implement a strategy to overhaul the current regime and establish a new government. Their efforts came to fruition when they were able to support the establishment of the Syrian Opposition Coalition in Doha in 2012. They also have provided heavy financing, materials, and weaponry to the rebel forces on the ground, most recently channeling their efforts through the SMC.⁶¹

TURKEY

Turkey has been a staunch supporter for the rebel movement by providing a premium package of support, which includes sheltering defectors from the Syrian army, hosting the opposition to the extent of establishing its headquarters in Ankara, providing military and financial aid to the rebel forces, and providing training bases for rebels. Turkey has viewed the conflict in Syria as a golden opportunity for it to play a significant role in the region and advance its power and influence. Its Sunni Islamist government is supporting the rise of the Sunni cause in Syria, to counter the emergence of the Shia government in Iraq and its longtime geopolitical rival Shia dominant Iran.⁶²

ISRAEL

Israel has found itself in a dilemma over the situation in Syria, with two potential unfavorable outcomes. The first option is the continuity of the Assad regime, which is backed up by Iran and Hezbollah, Israel's most threatening opponents in the region. The Iranian-Israeli hostility has escalated over the past few years with Iran advancing with its nuclear projects, which Israel views as threatening to its national security. Likewise, Hezbollah's imminent threat over Israel remains in the eyes of the Israelis as long as Hezbollah is armed and powerfully concentrated in Southern Lebanon. The continuity of Al-Assad regime furthers Iran's regional influence in the region and provides Iran with a route to channel its financial, military, and material support to Hezbollah. On the other hand, Israel is also concerned by the alternative to the Assad regime, which is the rise of the radical extremists Islamists that are reputable for their anti-Israel rhetoric. In the face of this dilemma, Israel seems to have chosen the "lesser of the two evils" by supporting the rebel movement, siding with the United States and the West, which goes to show Israel's focused strategy to undermine the power and influence of Iran and Hezbollah.⁶³

UNITED STATES AND THE WEST

The United States and its Western allies have vested interest in the Syrian conflict. The United States' interests are summarized into six points by the New American Foundation, a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington D.C. The six interests are: "(1) limiting civilian casualties; (2) preventing the development of terrorist safe havens on Syrian territory; (3) limiting Iranian influence; (4) minimizing the risk that chemical or biological weapons will be used; (5) minimizing the risk that chemical or biological weapons will proliferate; and (6) limiting the spread of instability in the region."⁶⁴ The underlying theme for all of these vested interests is for

the United States to spread its influence and power by containing its major opponents in Iran and its affiliates, Syria and Hezbollah, and ensure stability in the region by containing the risk of the use of dangerous biological and chemical weapons. This has translated most recently in a push by President Obama and his administration to use a limited and focused military attack to punish the Assad regime for its alleged responsibility for launching chemical weapons that have killed close to 1,400 Syrians. The United States wants to send a message to the Assad regime and its allies that the use of chemical weapons is in no shape, form, or way acceptable and will implicate severe punishment because it violates international laws and norms. In addition, the United States is concerned that the use of chemical weapons in the region could extend to threaten its longtime ally Israel or any other allies, if it goes unpunished. These sentiments are shared by other Western powers such as Great Britain and France. However, this proposed attack could be averted with the latest diplomatic developments spearheaded by Russia.⁶⁵

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OVERVIEW

In March of 2011, Syria began to see mass demonstrations across multiple cities. At the outset, demonstrations were peaceful and the Assad regime seemed to be willing to compromise with protestors, imposing modest reforms and ending almost 50 years of a so-called state of emergency. Still, protestors continued to demonstrate and the Assad regime began to deploy tanks and troops.⁶⁶ Popular peaceful demonstrations continued. In July of 2011, defectors from the Syrian army announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in an effort to unite demonstrators into an organized rebellion. This marked a new phase for the situation in Syria, steering the nation away from mass demonstrations and into a full-fledged civil war.⁶⁷

In December of 2012, after a three day conference in Turkey, Syrian rebels announced the establishment of the Supreme Military Command (SMC), a new attempt at unifying the plethora of rebel groups and forming a clear command structure within the ranks of the armed rebellion that emerged since the creation of the FSA⁶⁸. Creation of the SMC came as an attempt to fix the flaws of its precursors, namely the Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Council and the Five Fronts Command⁶⁹. These earlier attempts at unification were largely unsuccessful. Earlier councils could not establish a command structure that would unify rebel groups under a legitimate banner. Neither were moderates able to use these forums to marginalize extremist elements within the armed rebellion⁷⁰. The SMC's precursors could not shake off their radical image when their high profile supporters and patrons remained dedicated to extremist ideologies⁷¹. Most notably, a staunch cleric supporter of the rebels, Sheikh Adnan al-Arour, threatened Syria's Alawites that he will grind their flesh and "feed it to the dogs."⁷² Despite rebels' inability to escape extremist ties, the United States and Western powers seem more and more willing to put their support behind them.

In February, US Secretary of State John Kerry Announced that the United States was planning on providing aid – characterized as non-lethal aid, which would include food, medical supplies, and military training – to the rebels through the SMC. The amount of aid was estimated at \$60 million at that time.⁷³ In April Secretary Kerry announced that the amount of aid would be increased to more than \$120 million. The announcement came as part of a meeting of Western and Middle Eastern Foreign Ministers, where increased support of the Syrian Rebels was discussed. The increased support came with a pledge that all official state aid to the rebels in Syria would be directed through the SMC, as an attempt to marginalize other, more radical organizations.⁷⁴ In June, the White House announced that it was willing to provide arms to the rebels and tasked the CIA with delivering the weapons to moderate rebel groups in Syria.⁷⁵ However, the announcement was met with opposition from members of the House and Senate intelligence committees after briefings on the issue. The Congressmen believed that the plans discussed were insufficient to stop any US arms from falling into the hands of extremist groups.⁷⁶ The plans lost momentum and no arms were delivered to the SMC.⁷⁷

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Hesitation in supporting the armed rebels in Syria is well founded. As the United States plans to be increasingly involved in the conflict, more and more information is surfacing about the identity and ideology of rebel groups. On September 5th, the New York Times front page featured an article highlighting the brutality of rebel forces, referencing footage that has recently surfaced of a heinous April 2012 execution of captured Syrian soldiers. The footage showed seven shirtless soldiers forced to lie on the ground at the rebels' feet, shot in the back of the head, then buried in an unmarked mass grave. Though the loyalties of this faction are not certain, sources have revealed that they've received arms from the SMC before.⁷⁸ Earlier this year, another gruesome video showed a rebel eating the heart of a dead Syrian soldier, attracting much outrage.⁷⁹ The soldier was identified as the leader of the Omar al-Farouq Brigade⁸⁰, a group working under the umbrella of the FSA and the SMC.⁸¹ Radicalization amongst rebel factions is very prevalent amongst rebel groups, the overwhelming majority of which are Islamist. As one observer proclaimed "Nowhere in rebel-controlled Syria is there a secular fighting force to speak of."⁸²

There is still much uncertainty as to the identity of the rebels. There is no leader, council, or faction that is decidedly in control. Instead, a plethora of militias and brigades are vying for control of Syria's future. It is in the United States' interest to seek to identify these rebels if the administration wishes to increase support or become directly involved in the conflict.

THE FSA AND THE SMC

Background and History

The Free Syria Army (FSA) is not a typical, conventional army. It lacks a well-defined structure, clear membership, or solid command and control of its fighters. There are many rebel factions and groups with a variety of ideologies and leanings that refer to themselves as part of the FSA. The FSA, therefore, can be understood as a "sort of catch-all brand name referring to the Syrian armed opposition in general."⁸³ It is an attempt by defectors from the Syrian army to create a unified front for all the rebel factions on the ground to fight under. There have been a number of endeavors by rebel commanders to bring the plethora of opposition groups into a unified front through meetings in Qatar and Turkey. However, most of these endeavors have been largely unsuccessful.⁸⁴ The success of the most recent of these meeting in late 2012, which formed the Supreme Military Council (SMC), is yet to be seen.

The creation of the FSA was announced by General Riad al-Asaad via video in July of 2011. Gen. al-Asaad defected from the Syrian Air Force early in July and fled to Turkey, where he announced the creation of the new front a few weeks later. He retained the post of chief commander of the FSA until he was effectively replaced by General Salim Idriss with the creation of the SMC in late December 2012. (In March of 2013, Al-Asaad survived an assassination attempt and does not seem to have been involved in the conflict since.)⁸⁵

Rebel commanders met in Turkey in December of 2012 in renewed efforts to revitalize the unification and collaboration between rebel groups. More than 260 rebel commanders⁸⁶ were invited to the meeting, with the exception of a few of the most extreme groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, not being invited. This does not mean that the attendees were all liberal democrats.

Many of the delegates at the meeting had Islamist leanings, and some were blatant radicals (such as representatives of the Tawheed Brigade and Suqour al-Sham, discussed in more detail below).⁸⁷

The rebel commanders present elected members to the SMC, a 30-member council intended to solidify command and control of the various rebel groups and factions.⁸⁸ The SMC announced three major objectives behind its creation: “to unite forces on the ground to prevent anarchy; to sideline external elements and reduce their influence over the fate of the Syrian people; and to prevent extremist elements from taking over centers of power in the country.”⁸⁹ Although these are the stated objectives of the council, the reality seems to be different. The SMC was created under Saudi and Qatari pressure⁹⁰ and with promises of heavy weaponry⁹¹, it is unlikely that its creation will do much to sideline external elements. Extremist factions remain to operate under the command of the FSA and the SMC, as will be discussed below.

During the meeting in Turkey, General Salim Idriss was elected the Chief of Staff of the SMC.⁹² He had served as a Brigadier General in the Syrian Army and taught at The Academy of Military Engineering in Aleppo for 20 years before defecting from the government in July, 2012.⁹³ Gen. Idriss is seen to be a moderate leader of the armed rebels⁹⁴, as he was able to convince brigade leaders acting under the umbrella of the FSA to sign on to a proclamation of principles that includes notions of liberty and democracy.⁹⁵

The SMC exercises its authority through a number of Military Councils in distinct parts of the country. Each of these Military Councils has seen some success in establishing a chain of command within their area. However, the Military Councils do not exercise complete and direct control over rebels in their areas. They act more as means of coordination between the rebel factions, each of which has a degree of independence.⁹⁶

The limited success of the Military Councils has not translated into a national military structure. According to Elizabeth O’Bagy of the Institute for the Study of War, there are two main reasons for this. For one, each of the Military Councils attempted to incorporate brigades and structures established in their geographic area. This resulted in a great degree of variance in the structure of each of the five fronts. Moreover, each sub-unit and brigade within the scope of a Military Council retains its own structure of command and authority, and fighters in each of these sub-units pledge loyalty to their direct commander rather than to the national coalition. Due to these factors, the SMC has not been able to establish a national command and control structure.⁹⁷

Furthermore, the level of authority for each group within the Military Council has not been streamlined. In each of the Military Councils, rebel leaders and groups have differing levels of authority and influence. Each member exercises authority according to the number of ground troops he can muster or the value of resources he can provide.⁹⁸ This can be a very volatile mix, as it provides great incentives for internal fighting amongst rebel groups. It also degrades the level of command that can be exercised through Military Councils.

Ideology and Affiliations

The FSA is often cited as a moderate collective of rebels that the US and other Western states can back up and rely on in the Syrian conflict. Often cited are General Idriss’s Proclamation of

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Principles that espouses democratic principles and that all rebel commanders are expected to abide by. Also oft cited is the incident of the 21 UN observers who were detained by rebel forces and were later released at Gen. Idriss's behest.⁹⁹ Although these instances provide hope in a number of moderate rebel groups, they are not dispositive. There is much skepticism about who these rebels really are and hesitation to back them up fully. This skepticism and hesitation is understandable, especially in light of the wide spectrum of factions that claim to be part of the FSA.

Regardless of ideological affiliation, the overwhelming majority of rebels within the FSA are Sunni Arabs. And although the leadership of the FSA has steered clear of using any Islamist rhetoric, most brigades that belong to the FSA have not had such an aversion. In fact, numerous rebel factions that align with the FSA are Islamist in ideology and some have clear extremist salafi-jihadist tendencies. Even groups that do not identify themselves as Islamists have adopted Islamist rhetoric and they see no contradiction between nationalist and Islamist rhetoric.¹⁰⁰

General Idriss has personally said that he is ready to work with any of the Islamist groups within Syria, with the exception of the al-Qaida aligned Jabhat al-Nusra. Although he personally admitted that Islamists make up a large section of rebel forces, Jabhat al-Nusra is the only one that he sees to be radical in nature. Nevertheless, he admits that Jabhat al-Nusra has been helpful in the struggle against the regime.¹⁰¹

The FSA has shown its willingness to work with radical and extremist groups in their struggle against the Assad regime. The FSA is known to include brigades that also pledge their allegiance to the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) and the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). It has also worked directly with salafi and jihadi groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Fajr al-Islam.¹⁰² The close relationships between the FSA and these radical groups are a cause of concern on the further radicalization of rebel groups within Syria.

The internal ranks of the FSA have proven to be a battleground for regional actors. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are both avid supporters of the armed rebels in Syria. However, they are both vying for control and influence in war-torn and post-war Syria. By selecting who to fund and how to allocate arms and resources, each has been trying to increase its own influence and limit that of the other. The lack of uniformity and centralization in the flow of financial resources was a major reason for the faltering of the Joint Command, a precursor to the SMC, because of the inability to establish command and control through the control of resources.¹⁰³

After the creation of the SMC, interested parties seem to have made strides in centralizing the flow of resources. In April of 2013, foreign ministers from Western and Middle Eastern nations pledged to funnel all their financial support through the SMC.¹⁰⁴ Saudi Arabia, in particular, has been keen to channel all official financial support through the SMC and outlawing support sent by private donors through other means.¹⁰⁵ This, however, has not stopped the flow of funds to extremist groups in Syria. Private donors from Gulf States are still supporting the radical and jihadist groups in Syria, and these groups remain better armed and funded than any of the more moderate rebels.¹⁰⁶ In a recent turn of events, four front commanders of the SMC's five Military Councils threatened to resign from the SMC if their demands were not met. The four men that occupy the highest positions within the SMC structure demanded greater flexibility in being able to deal with extremist factions, as well as more weapons and supplies. The announcement

came in a video with the FSA flag draped alongside a jihadi style Islamist flag behind the officers, and with a salafi scholar present.¹⁰⁷ Incidents such as this highlight the extremist tendencies of rebel factions and the SMC's apparent inability to control these tendencies.

Notable Sub-Entities

SYRIAN ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT (SILF)

The Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), also referred to as the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF), was formed in September 2012 and is one of the largest rebel organizations working under the umbrella of the SMC.¹⁰⁸ It is made up of a large number of Islamist groups and factions and has operated as an overtly Islamist organization. The SILF's platform adopts "sharia law is the point of reference" for the group. Many rebel groups bear allegiance to the SILF and the FSA, such as the Farouq and Tawhid Brigades discussed below.¹⁰⁹ And although the SILF has refused to give full support to the SMC¹¹⁰, it is still considered by some experts to operate under its banner¹¹¹ since many of its member groups also bear allegiance to the FSA, which in turn operates under the SMC.

Leaders in the SILF have openly defended more extreme factions within the armed rebels, specifically the Al-Qaida linked Jabhat al-Nusra. The SILF's leader, Ahmad Issa al-Shaykh, has described them as a legitimate part of the opposition to the current regime.¹¹² Even though the group released a statement earlier denouncing Jabhat al-Nusra's alliance with al-Qaida as "not the right time to declare states, or to unify a state with another state,"¹¹³ al-Shaykh has been adamant in defending them as a legitimate part of the opposition despite ideological differences.¹¹⁴

SUQOUR AL-SHAM BRIGADE

Suqour al-Sham is a prominent group within the SILF, with its leader Ahmad Issa al-Shaykh also acting as the leader of the SILF. The group maintains strategic presence in northern Syria and is amongst the most powerful brigades on the ground, with an alleged 6,000 fighters. It is one of a number of groups within Syria that have resorted to the use of suicide bombings against regime targets. The group may be one of the more nationalistic brigades, although it does often use Islamist rhetoric. One expert describes the group as a "homegrown Islamist militant group" as opposed to the large ideologically driven groups such as al-Qaeda.¹¹⁵

FAROUQ BRIGADES

At its inception in 2011, the Farouq Brigades was a group of apparently nationalist Syrian army defectors. As 2011 came to a close, the image and rhetoric of the group began to change. Leaders of the brigade began growing long salafi style beards. The group's emblem was changed to the black shield on crossed swords that is characteristic of jihadist organizations. Still, the group remains loyal to the FSA and the SMC.¹¹⁶

The Farouq Brigades came under the spotlight in one of the more horrific documented incidents of brutality of the Syrian civil war. Earlier this year, a gruesome video emerged showing a rebel commander tearing out the heart of a dead Syrian soldier and attempting to eat it, attracting much outrage. As he was parading around the desecrated body, the soldier

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was chanting in sectarian language and threatening the country's Alawites.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸ The soldier was identified as Abu Sakkar, the leader of the Omar al-Farouq Brigade¹¹⁹, a sub-unit within the larger Farouq Brigades.¹²⁰

Abu Sakkar also made headlines last April. He led the Omar al-Farouq battalion in the offensive against Shia villages in Lebanon, launching rockets indiscriminately across the border.¹²¹ Abu Sakkar's actions as a leader of a battalion within an FSA backed group is only indicative of the rising wave of radicalization within the armed rebellion in Syria. His willingness to draw the conflict outside Syrian borders is indicative of what a rebel victory may hold for the region. And although opposition leaders condemned the mutilation incident and promised that Abu Sakkar would be put on trial for his actions, there have been no apparent consequences since then.¹²²

TAWHID BRIGADE

The Tawhid Brigade was created in 2012 by a number of rebel factions aligned with the FSA. It has since become one of the largest armed brigades in Syria. The brigade is a part of the FSA, albeit quasi-independent. It does not reject the command of FSA leadership, but seems to act independently when it comes to operations.¹²³

Although the Tawhid Brigade has not actively called for the establishment of an Islamist state, its rhetoric remains clearly Islamist. For one, the name of the group (al-Tawhid meaning monotheism) is derived from one of the fundamental tenants of the Islamic faith. And although the name is derived from a mainstream Islamic belief, use of the word as the name for an organization is common of extremist salafi groups.¹²⁴ In a statement made on November 18, 2012, its commander Abdel Qader Saleh affirmed the brigade's commitment to "a civil state where the basis of legislation is the Islamic faith, with consideration for all the [minority] groups of Syria."¹²⁵ He has also been a vocal advocate of Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaida affiliated rebel group in Syria.¹²⁶

The brigade's clear Islamist leanings can be seen from the list of names of groups that had originally united to form the new Tawhid Brigade. Amongst the groups is the Ibn Taimiya Brigade, a central figure of salafism from the 13th century.¹²⁷ The Tawhid Brigade has also been reportedly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, from which it allegedly receives its funding.¹²⁸¹²⁹

ISLAM BRIGADE

The Islam Brigade is the largest of the FSA-SMC brigades in Damascus. It allegedly controlled the sites of the chemical attacks in August. Back in July, the group's leader, Zahran Alush, published a video message in which he conveyed his sectarian sentiments and called for "jihadists from Iraq' and elsewhere" to join the civil war in Syria.¹³⁰ The brigade has since then set up its own Sharia Commission in Damascus.¹³¹

THE BATTALION OF ABDUL SAMAD ISSA

On September 5th, the New York Times front page featured an article highlighting the brutality of rebel forces, referencing footage that has recently surfaced of a heinous April 2012 execution of captured Syrian soldiers. The footage showed seven shirtless soldiers lying on the ground at the rebels' feet, shot in the back of the head, then buried in an unmarked mass grave.

Though the loyalties of this faction are not certain, the leader in the video is known to be Abdul Samad Issa, and sources have revealed that they've received arms from the SMC in 2013.¹³²

The footage of the incident has no indication as to who this rebel group belongs to. The video was smuggled out of Syria by a former aide to Abdul Samad Issa, who also told the New York Times about the group's connection to the SMC.¹³³ Advocates on behalf of the Syrian rebels have denied that the group has any links to the SMC. Instead, they claim that the group is part of a radical group called Jund al-Sham.¹³⁴ Prior to the New York Times report, there has been little information about the group in Syria, with multiple organizations in the region taking the same name. The few reports on the creation of a group named Jund al-Sham in Syria referred to Abu Suleiman al Muhajir as the leader with no mention of Abdul Samad Issa.¹³⁵ If anything, this incident should serve as a reminder that the rebels in Syria are still unknown, with a proven tendency for brutality and extremism among their ranks.

SYRIAN ISLAMIC FRONT (SIF)

The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) may turn out to be one of the most influential groups in the Syrian opposition. Created in December, 2012, the SIF takes an ideological middle ground between the Islamists of the FSA and SMC and the radical Jabhat al-Nusra. Because of its position between the two factions, it can become the kingmaker between the FSA and more extreme jihadi rebels.¹³⁶

At its creation, the SIF proclaimed its commitment to a number of goals and tenets. Its primary objective is the overthrow of the government of Bashar al-Assad and establish an Islamic state. Although it does not mention Salafism, the movement is decidedly salafi, adhering to the most stringent interpretations of Islam. One of its founding objectives is to build an Islamic society and establish the rule of sharia law in Syria. Almost all the rebel groups that make up the SIF characterize themselves as salafi.¹³⁷

The main goal of the SIF is to establish a Sunni Theocracy in Syria.¹³⁸ To that affect, the SIF has outlined the following six goals in its charter:

- To overthrow the regime and extend security on the soil of beloved Syria.
- To work to consolidate the faith of the individual, of society, and of the state.
- To preserve the Islamic identity of society, and to build a complete Islamic personality.
- To rebuild Syria on a sound foundation of justice, independence and solidarity, in correspondence with Islamic principles.
- Real participation in the development of society.
- To prepare scholarly leaders in the various fields of life.¹³⁹

The SIF appears to be unwilling to compromise on its goal of imposing Sharia law. When asked whether they will use force to establish such a system in a post-Assad Syria, leaders of the SIF simply state that the revolution in Syria began as an Islamic revolution and will continue to be so. SIF leaders also reject any notion of democracy in a post-Assad Syria, as the "Islamic Sharia cannot be put to a vote."¹⁴⁰

As a salafi-jihadi movement, the SIF reflects the sectarian tendencies of global extremist movements. They consider Shia Muslims, Alawites, and Druze as apostates who can be lawfully

THE REBEL GROUPS

murdered and plundered. Christians living in a post-Assad Syria would be allowed to live as second class citizens in a subservient position to the dominant Sunni Islam.¹⁴¹

On September 5, 2013, the SIF released a Facebook statement protesting any possible US military intervention in the Syrian conflict, calling such intervention another offensive on Muslim land.

Notable Sub-Entities

AHRAR AL-SHAM BRIGADES

Ahrar al-Sham was formed in late 2011 by a number of prisoners that were set free in the amnesty granted by the Assad regime in May of that year. The group has clear salafist tendencies, as rank-and-file members are often seen wearing black turbans and sporting long beards. They operate mostly in Northern provinces, including Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama.¹⁴² The group operated against government targets and was largely successful for their size. However, most victories came away from the spotlight that was centered on Jabhat al-Nusra and the FSA.¹⁴³

The group catapulted itself into public and political discourse when it spearheaded the effort to create the SIF in late 2012. Not much is known about their finances, but they are widely believed to be supported by Islamist charities in the Gulf.¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵ Ideologically, Ahrar al-Sham put the cornerstones for the SIF. The group is actively calling for the creation of an Islamic state and the implementation of sharia law in Syria. And although it shares many of the ideological tenants of salafi-jihadist groups, its focus remains on Syria alone and it has not adopted the modern transnational jihadi thought.¹⁴⁶ The Ahrar al-Sham Brigades have fought alongside both the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra and has participated in most major rebel victories. It is also one of the best armed brigades involved in the Syrian civil war.¹⁴⁷

AL-HAQQ BRIGADE

The al-Haqq Brigade was created by a number of Islamist rebel factions in the central city of Homs in August of 2012. The brigade has been growing over time, boosted by donations from private sources and Islamist charities in the Gulf. It is the only group among the SIF that does not identify itself as salafi. Instead, it brings together fighters from many different ideologies and schools of thought, from salafi-jihadis to members of local Sufi orders. However, the group is by no means liberal. The diversity ideologies within the group all remain fairly conservative and the end goals are similar to those of other groups in the SIF.¹⁴⁸

AL-QAIDA, JABHAT AL-NUSRA, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND AL-SHAM

Jabhat al-Nusra can trace its origins back to at least the beginning of the century and its roots are intertwined with the growth of al-Qaida as an international terrorist organization. Some of the current leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra worked directly under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. After the US invasion of Iraq, many of these leaders relocated to Syria and Lebanon, where they began to recruit and train jihadi extremists and shipped them

across the Syrian border into Iraq. The Syrian regime turned a blind eye for as long as its interests aligned with the interests of al-Zarqawi and his men. When, in 2007, this alignment began to change and Syrian forces began to assassinate high level al-Qaeda leaders within its territory, the remaining members of the group escaped into Iraq.¹⁴⁹

In 2011, when the situation in Syria began to destabilize, jihadi rebels that had fought under the banner of al-Qaeda and the leadership of al-Zarqawi began to flow back into Syria. They brought with them expertise on conducting an insurgency and guerrilla warfare, as well as the support of seasoned extremists from Iraq.¹⁵⁰

Jabhat al-Nusra has also been able to attract radicalized youth from across the globe. In July, Dutch authorities arrested a young activist accused of recruiting young Muslims to participate in the Syrian civil war amongst the ranks of the Jabhat al-Nusra. More than a hundred fighters have been recruited from the Netherlands alone, Dutch officials stated. Analysts believe that, with the proliferation of Jabhat al-Nusra, "Syria has become what Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Iraq were to earlier generations of jihadists: the epicenter of the global jihad."¹⁵¹

Jabhat al-Nusra is by no means Syria's largest or most powerful rebel group. However, in the international dialogue regarding Syria, it has become one of the most prominent. Its infamy comes from the range of suicide bombings, for which it has claimed responsibility, in urban centers throughout Syria. The group has also been involved in kidnappings and executions throughout the country, and has carried out specific assassination missions against regime personnel.¹⁵²

Considered to be the most extremist rebel group in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra has claimed a place for itself on the United States' list of terrorist organizations. It has blatantly proclaimed its alliance with al-Qaeda and continues to establish its strict interpretation of Sharia law in areas it controls.¹⁵³ Yet even with its blatant extremism, the group has become very popular amongst rebel groups in Syria. When news broke in late 2012 that the United States was looking to blacklist Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization, a large swath of Syrian rebels rose in opposition. Twenty nine different opposition groups signed a petition of solidarity with Jabhat al-Nusra, refusing the United States' action as unwanted intervention.¹⁵⁴ Although the Obama Administration has sought to marginalize Jabhat al-Nusra, such efforts seem to have been unsuccessful, especially with the wide popularity of the group with rebel factions on the ground. The willingness of rebel groups to work with and defend Jabhat al-Nusra and the high regard in which they hold the group is a point of concern for many in the United States and other Western powers.

SYRIA'S MINORITIES: SUBJUGATED TO VIOLENCE

OVERVIEW

Minorities in Syria have been caught in the middle of this conflict and have been suffering countless losses. Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druze, and Shiites have been targeted, forced to leave their homes, kidnapped, tortured, and/or killed. The chants and hopes for democratic change the opposition originally advocated doesn't seem promising to the country's minorities as they continue to be subjugated to violence by the opposition's rebel groups. Al-Nusra Front, the proclaimed Al-Qaeda wing in Syria, the Free Syrian Army, and the rest of the military opposition have clearly expressed their sentiments toward Syria's minorities; the opposition is not encompassing of them and a future government comprised of the opposition's parties may not respect the rights, let alone the lives, of Syrian minorities. The conflict has been marked by numerous accounts of sectarian strife and ethno-religious discrimination, in which minorities have suffered gravely.

At first, chants and slogans of opposition protests included statements such as "We are all one people of one country!"¹⁵⁵ It wasn't long before chants and graffiti messages spread through opposition grounds reading "The Christians to Beirut, the Alawites to the grave."¹⁵⁶ A U.N. Report at the end of 2012 warned against the growing elements of sectarianism in the conflict in Syria, and the subjugation of minorities to violence. The report stated in part, "In recent months, there has been a clear shift" in the nature of the conflict, with an increasing number of fighters and civilians on both sides attributing ethnic and/or religious terms to the conflict.¹⁵⁷ "Feeling threatened and under attack, ethnic and religious minority groups have increasingly aligned themselves with parties to the conflict, deepening sectarian divides."¹⁵⁸

As the conflict continues between the opposition's rebels and the Al-Assad regime, it is important to pay attention to the effects it has on the minorities of the country. Minority groups in Syria are implicated into the conflict even if they do not pledge allegiance or affiliation with either the rebels or the Assad regime. Some of the opposition that is characteristic of ideological principles of ethnocentrism and hate, like the Salafists of the Nusra Front, will target a specific minority group simply because of their religious or ethnic background, regardless of political affiliation. This section of the report will focus on the following major minority groups in Syria: the Alawites, the Christians, the Kurds, the Shia¹⁵⁹, and the Druze¹⁶⁰. Depending on the identity of the minority group, its geographic location, and its relationship to the regime and the opposition, inferences can be made to the status and future of that particular group.

Geography: Religious Group Distribution

The majority of the 22 million residents of Syria belong to the Sunni sect of Islam, at an approximate 70%. This includes both Arab Sunnis and Kurdish Sunnis. Kurdish Sunnis make up an approximate 9% of the total population, being the largest ethnic minority group in the country.¹⁶¹ The Kurds primarily reside in the northeastern province of Al-Hasakah. There are

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some Kurdish concentrations in the northern parts of the Aleppo province as well. Approximately 13% of the population identify as Alawite, being the largest and strongest religious minority in the country.¹⁶² The Alawites are heavily concentrated in the Latakia and Tartus provinces, the coastal governorates of Syria.¹⁶³ Christians closely follow as the second largest religious minority group in Syria, making up an approximate 10% of the total Syrian population.¹⁶⁴ The other significant minorities of Syria, the Druze and the Shia, each hold approximately 3% of the population. Most of Syria's Druze live in the southern province of Sweida. The Shia minority population is dispersed across Western Syria, bordering Lebanon. These areas include Latakia, Tartus, Homs, Hama, Idlib and the suburbs of Damascus.

THE ALAWITES

The Alawites are the largest religious minority group in Syria. The group has often been attributed as being an esoteric offshoot of Twelver Shia Islam. The central characteristic of the faith is the belief in the divinity of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (the successor of the Prophet Muhammad).¹⁶⁵ Mainstream Shia Islam views Imam Ali as the greatest individual to walk the Earth, second only to the Prophet Muhammad himself, but that he is still a human. The Alawite faith views Ali as the manifestation of God himself, not simply an apostle or saint. Nonetheless, under the Assad regime the Alawite identity has been promulgated more or less as a cultural identity rather than a religious ideology.

Alawites in Syria primarily reside in the provinces of Latakia and Tartus, forming the outright majority in the two Syrian governorates.¹⁶⁶ The two Alawite provinces have reportedly been peaceful during the conflict in Syria, which is likely due to the heavy presence of government forces protecting its borders. Still Alawites have faced persecution and killings in different areas throughout the country.

Undisguised legitimization of targeted attacks and persecution of Alawites dates back to the 11th century, when the prominent Sunni scholar Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali stated that Alawites "[are to be considered apostates] in matters of blood, money, marriage, and butchering, so it is a duty to kill them."¹⁶⁷ The 14th century Sunni scholar, Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, declared the Alawites as "greater infidels than Christians, Jews or idolaters," authorizing jihad against them.¹⁶⁸ Present-day Salafists apparently use this authorization, along with the calls of current Sunni clerics, in their persecution of the Alawites.¹⁶⁹ The infamous Syrian preacher Adnan Al-Arour announced on television, "Alawites that who supported the regime [will be] chopped up and fed to the dogs."¹⁷⁰ As the initial opposition protests transformed into violent rebel attacks and military force was used against the regime, the Alawites became a primary target of attack. Alawites make up approximately 13% of the country's population but are overrepresented in government offices and public positions.

Resentment to the Alawites existed even before the uprisings against the Assad regime.¹⁷¹ As one prominent observer put it: "In my journeys in Syria, members of Sunni communities have told me they came to resent Alawites - a heterodox sect which practices elements of Shia Islam - after the rise of the Alawite Assad dynasty. Some of this was due to prejudice against Alawites and some due to urban prejudice against those from rural backgrounds. Many among the Sunni

in Syria also believe that Alawites are disproportionately represented in the security forces, as well as in various government positions, especially the most sensitive ones."¹⁷²

Given the regime's power has been mostly based in the hands of Alawites, enfranchising the group from its once repressed status in colonial and Ottoman times; it has utilized its forces to protect this minority from the attacks of rebel opposition. Nonetheless, defenseless Alawite civilians continue to be targeted on roadways and checkpoints throughout northern Syria and are either kidnapped or killed on point.¹⁷³

THE SHIA

The Shia minority has been quite involved and targeted in the conflict in Syria, especially the mainstream Twelver Shiites. Ismaili Shiites do exist in Syria, residing primarily in the city of Al-Salamiyah (under regime control). However, they have played a very minimal role and there are very few reports relaying any significant active presence in the conflict. Nonetheless, Ismailis have suffered casualties. One report, from the Syrian state-run news agency SANA in August, "that rebels shelled the central town of Salamiyah, killing at least 11 people and wounding 20 others."¹⁷⁴

The Twelver Shiite community has been threatened and attacked on a number of occasions. One incident is reported from Reuters regarding a video of extremist rebels burning a Shiite mosque. "Dozens of fighters dressed in camouflage gear with Sunni-style beards are shown in the footage congratulating and kissing each other outside the burning Shi'ite 'Husseiniya' mosque. They also burned flags they said were Shi'ite. A fighter holding a rifle says the rebel group is destroying the 'dens of the Shi'ites and Rafida,' a derogatory term meaning 'deserters,' which is used against Shi'ites."¹⁷⁵

'Apostate rejectionists'

The rebels have coined a term for the Shia in Syria – "Apostate Rejectionists." In the small village of Hatla, which rests in the heart of the Sunni-dominated Deir al-Zour province, a number of Shia families reside. Like other Shia families across the war stricken country, the Shia of Hatla continue to live in fear of persecution, kidnapping, and execution. One particular incident took place in June of this year, which became known as the Hatla Massacre. Rebels surrounded and overran Hatla and its residents, 'slaughtering' a toll of Shia in the town.¹⁷⁶ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that 60 Shia residents were killed in this single attack. The London-based Syrian Network of Human Rights (SNHR) confirmed the same report.¹⁷⁷

Thaer al-Deiry, an activist from Deir al-Zour, told the Associated Press that the rebel attack was in retaliation to a previous raid. "The situation in the village is quiet and the Free Syrian Army is in full control." Videos of the attack on Hatla were posted to YouTube and other internet outlets, showing dozens of gunmen raising black Salafi flags as they fired their weapons in the streets of the small town.¹⁷⁸ "We have raised the banner [saying] 'There is no God but God' above the houses of the apostate rejectionists, the Shia, and the holy warriors are celebrating," a statement made by one of the rebels' cameramen, according to Reuters.¹⁷⁹ "This is a Sunni

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area. It does not belong to other groups," one fighter shouts in the video. That particular video titled "The Storming and Cleansing of Hatla."¹⁸⁰

Reports have shown that the majority of those killed in the massacre were innocent women and children. Amongst those killed in the Hatla massacre were Shia clerics, their wives and children. Hatla is an example of the sectarian cleansing that has taken place by the extremist elements of the Syrian opposition.

Shia Defend the Shrines

After the increased violence and bloodshed surrounding the city of Damascus, Shiites worldwide became even more alarmed at the danger culminating around the shrine of the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, Sayyida Zeinab. Young Shiites from Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon joined what became known as the Abu Fadl Al-Abbas Brigade, a militia of thousands of Shia with the sole purpose of protecting the revered Shia sites.¹⁸¹

A young man from Iraq, Ammar Sadiq, described his sentiment upon hearing the threat to the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab. "It was like a thunderbolt hit me," said Ammar. "My friend was telling me that *Wahhabis* from Saudi and Afghanistan were trying to destroy the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab. I did not wait even to tell my parents. All I was thinking of is to go to Syria and protect the shrine, though I have not used a weapon in my life."¹⁸²

Reports and interviews with both current and former members of the Al-Abbas brigade show that more than 10,000 volunteers have come to join the brigade in defense of the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab. "The group's *raison d'être* is to be custodian of Shia holy sites, especially Sayyida Zeinab, a golden-domed Damascus landmark, but its role has taken it to most corners of Syria's war. It is now a direct battlefield rival, both in numbers and power, for Jabhat al-Nusra, the jihadist group that takes a prominent role among opposition fighting groups."¹⁸³

Al-Abbas Brigade has become even more prominent in recent months, more so than it has been since its operations began in March of 2012. "Its increased role on the battlefields has come at the same time as Hezbollah has publicly stepped up its involvement, particularly in leading the attack on the border town of Qusair. Over the same period a weary Syrian army has had a boost in both morale and energy."¹⁸⁴ The support and fortification from these two Shia entities has tipped the scales against the rebels and made Syria more formidable. Al-Abbas Brigade has protected the shrines and the minority groups surrounding the shrines against the advances of rebel groups for over a year now, giving confidence to locals that are under the Shia brigade's protection.

"There is no major fight anywhere, except the far north and east where Abu Fadl al-Abbas isn't deployed," stated a Syrian local near Damascus. "Its influence is very important and growing."¹⁸⁵

The brigade is increasingly organized in coordinating efforts to bring in volunteer fighters. Interested young men initially register with a local office of a group like the Mukhtar Army and Iraqi Hezbollah. The volunteers are then sent to a 45-day training camp in Iran for military training. From Iran, the volunteers are sent to join the brigade in Syria. Volunteers are sent between defending the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus and the shrine of Sayyida Sukayna (the daughter of Imam Hussain, the third Imam of the Shiites) in Darayya, south-east of Damascus.

"There is no need for the Syrian army in Sayyida Zeinab. The brigade's fighters are protecting everything from the airport to the capital to Sweida [a Druze town near the Golan Heights], including residential areas, hospitals, government buildings, police stations, schools, mosques and hospitals."

"Since last July till today, we are fighting with them every day," stated a leader of the FSA by the name of Abu Ahmad. The Nusra Front, "which includes large numbers of foreign fighters in its ranks," share similar sentiment and are more vocal about their hatred toward the Shia and willingness to attack their shrines.¹⁸⁶

Support from Lebanon

Shia in Lebanon have been concerned with the situation in Syria from its inception. The most vocal and powerful Shia group in Lebanon is the Islamic militia and political party Hezbollah. As a close ally of Syria, Hezbollah's leadership has sworn to defend the Assad regime from the start and has since become very involved in the conflict.

The Secretary General of Hezbollah, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, stated that there was "no need to call for Jihad," alluding to the fatwas of Sunni clerics supporting the opposition. Instead, he expressed the eagerness and readiness of tens of thousands of Hezbollah fighters to defend their fronts.¹⁸⁷ On May 25th of this year, the anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon (celebrated by Lebanon's Shia as "The Day of Resistance and Liberation"), Nasrallah made a public televised appearance proclaiming Hezbollah's formidable fighting presence in Syria.¹⁸⁸

Hezbollah proved extremely vital in taking back what became the rebel controlled city of al-Qusair. Alongside the Syrian army, its forces were able to defeat the rebel militants and take back the city and its surrounding villages.¹⁸⁹ The Qusair region is "crucial to supply routes for both sides."¹⁹⁰ Moreover, the takeover of Qusair helped Hezbollah protect its fundamental interest of securing the Lebanese border. In addition, controlling the Qusair region could provide a secured route between Damascus and the coast of the Mediterranean, the concentration of Alawites – home of regime loyalists.

Nasrallah "pledged that his group will not allow Syrian rebels to control areas that border Lebanon."¹⁹¹ Hezbollah's justification for its heavy presence in the Syrian conflict is twofold, assisting its backbone ally, the Assad regime, and protecting the security interests of their Lebanese constituents. For them, the latter is ensured by the former.

THE CHRISTIANS

Syrian Christians account for about 10% of the total population and enjoy full protection under the 1973 Constitution of Syria. Provisions of the constitution guarantees Christians religious freedom and the ability to operate schools, churches and other public and private institutions.¹⁹²

Christians have generally been in support of the Assad regime throughout the unrest in Syria. A report by CBS expressed that Christians in Syria have remained aligned with the government because they find that their presence as a community is contingent on the presence of the

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Assad regime.¹⁹³ The Christian community has fared well under the Assad regime for decades, enjoying equal protection and freedom of religion and practice. There is deep speculation that the rise of an extremist Islamist government would permit the Christians the same rights. On the contra, reports have shown that Christians fear that the extremist elements in the opposition will manifest themselves in a post-Assad government that will oppress Christians similar to other Arab Spring nations like Egypt.¹⁹⁴ Such fears have been expressed since the beginning of the uprisings. Still, some Christians did join the opposition at its outset through protest and demonstrations. Christian support soon weaned away as Salafi slogans were proclaimed and became the general opposition norm.¹⁹⁵

In March of 2012, Agenzia Fides, the Vatican's news agency, received reports that the Farouq Brigade of the Free Syrian Army expelled more than 90% of the Christians of Homs from their homes.¹⁹⁶ A town that was home to more than 80,000 Christians now has less than 400 Christian residents.¹⁹⁷ The Farouq Brigade is one of the many units of the Free Syrian Army named after particular historical Sunni figures that were notable for abusing and persecuting minorities including Christians and Shiites.

"The hit-and-run attacks on the ancient village of Maaloula, one of the few places in the world where residents still speak Aramaic, the original language of Christ, highlighted fears among Syria's religious minorities about the growing role of extremists among those fighting in the civil war to topple President Bashar al-Assad's regime."¹⁹⁸

Maaloula was a major tourist attraction before the advent of the civil war, given its historical heritage and religious significance for Christians. The village's inhabitants are almost entirely Melkite Greek Catholics and Orthodox Christians. "The fighting in Maaloula, a scenic village of about 3,300 perched high in the mountains, began early Wednesday when militants from Jabhat al-Nusra stormed in after a suicide bomber struck an army checkpoint guarding the entrance."¹⁹⁹ The suicide bombing and consequent attacks terrorized the inhabitants of Maaloula, which is home to "two of the oldest surviving monasteries in Syria – Mar Sarkis and Mar Takla."²⁰⁰

Other reports show that while the rebel groups fired and attacked Christian villages, the regime protected Christians. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) commented on the Assad government and said that it "has protected Christians for a number of decades," while the "rebels have been attacking Christians" and are affiliates of Al-Qaeda.²⁰¹

The village of Maaloula is listed on UNESCO as one of the tentative world heritage sites.²⁰² A nun from the Mar Takla monastery spoke to the Associated Press on the condition that she remains anonymous for fear of any sort of retaliation for speaking. She expressed people's worry and fear stating, "We don't know if the rebels have left or not, nobody dares go out."²⁰³ The nun further expressed reports of the militant rebels threatening residents of the village with execution if they didn't convert to their beliefs. This 'convert-or-die' approach used by the militants has been seen with other minority groups as well; the usual outcome is death regardless.²⁰⁴ This expressed intolerance for minorities by the opposition has moved more Christians, and other minority groups, to not even consider supporting the alternative to the Assad regime.

THE KURDS

The Kurds in Syria are an ethnic group living in the Northern parts of Syria, and primarily adhere to the faith of Sunni Islam. Thus, they belong to the greater Sunni community, yet are still marginalized by the Arab Sunni majority for their non-Arab Kurdish ethnic identity. The Kurds are generally not aligned with the government. They were able to stage “their own anti-Assad protests after the Syria conflict began in 2011 and their areas have been run by Kurdish local councils and militia since government forces withdrew last year.”²⁰⁵ Still, Kurds have been targeted by groups of the rebel opposition just as other minority groups have. One report says that the rebel militias and “Kurdish militias are fighting a war within a war in Syria that is not just creating tens of thousands of new refugees,” it’s increasing the nature of sectarian/ethnic-based conflict in the country.²⁰⁶ Northern Syria has become a battlefield not between the government and anti-Assad opposition, rather between Kurdish militias and extremist rebel groups like the Nusra Front (both being anti-Assad).

In the month of August alone, tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees crossed the border into Iraq to escape the violence and bloodshed.²⁰⁷ Reports from refugees state that rebel groups like the Nusra Front regard attacking and killing of Kurds as “halal” – religiously acceptable. One Kurdish refugee stated, “There is violence and killing and kidnapping in the Kurdish areas. They made Kurdish blood ‘halal.’”²⁰⁸ A young Kurdish woman reported that she witnessed killings in her town of Qamishli. “We had no problems, we had our house, and my father and brother were working. We had no problems,” she said. “But because of the situation, the killings and beheadings [we fled]. We saw a massacre with our own eyes in Qamishli.”²⁰⁹ The reports show that the kidnapping and beheadings being carried out against the Kurds in an effort to terrorize the Kurds and scare them into leaving or submitting to the authority of the Nusra Front. Observing some of the more apparent geographical characteristics of the conflict, economic undertones come to surface over what may seem as strict ethnic violence.

Syria’s north has an expansive border with Turkey, which is the main route of supplies coming to the opposition. In addition, the north is rich in natural resources such as oil and gas. Not to belittle the atrocious declarations of the Nusra Front to kill people simply based on their religious or ethnic identity, but it is significant to observe other underlying motivations for conflict between the two anti-Assad groups. For the most part, the north has become under control of the Democratic Union Party, the country’s most powerful Kurdish party. The regime’s forces withdrew from the north to allocate military resources in Syria’s larger cities in southern and central Syria. This left a power vacuum which was filled by the Kurdish forces that soon created their own governments and councils to run the affairs of the North. Clashes with the Nusra Front are more common in the northern areas with mixed populations.²¹⁰

Nonetheless, the ethnic undertones are present and surprisingly have some positive effect for the groups wanting to organize and garner influence and power. Speaking in ethnic terms can help Kurdish groups mobilize more supporters reaching out through the sentiment of protecting Kurdish identity and interests. This can work in the same way for Arab groups like the Nusra Front, creating alliances with other Arab rebel groups. Still, if the ethnic card was not used with such marginalization and violence, opposition groups from different ethnicities could possibly form coalitions to strengthen their cause. This is apparently working for the regime in

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attracting minority groups, even among Christians and Kurds. Choosing between the regime and the spiteful Nusra Front, minorities would tend to stick with the former.

THE DRUZE

The Druze are an ethno-religious community that reside mostly between Syria and Lebanon. Originating as an offshoot of Islam, they call themselves "Al-Muwahhidun" or Unitarians. A minority within the total population of Syria, approximately 700,000 of Syrians identify as Druze, a rough 3% of the population.²¹¹ They are primarily concentrated in the southern province of Sweida, where they are the majority. The Syrian Druze community has been generally divided on which side to take in the civil war.²¹²

Early this year, reports showed Druze increasing in number on the side of the opposition. With declarations and public statements by Druze leadership from both Syria and Lebanon, followers of the Druze faith began to defect in greater numbers toward the opposition. One report showed that several dozen Druze clerics from Sweida called upon their followers to desert the regime's military and even gave "blessing" to kill the "murderers" in the regime.²¹³ Walid Jumblatt, Lebanese Druze leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, has similarly urged fellow Druze to support the opposition.²¹⁴ One report claimed that "dozens of Druze fighters joined a rebel assault on a radar base... in [the] Sweida province."²¹⁵

Nonetheless, there remains Druze that do not support the opposition and instead remain pro-regime. The opposition rebel groups have targeted this minority group for its alignment with the regime on numerous occasions. Last year, in pro-regime areas around Damascus, over four car bombings took place killing scores of Druze and Christians.²¹⁶ Anti-Assad Druze leaders have responded to these alleged rebel attacks on Druze by shifting the blame on the regime itself, claiming that such attacks were staged to push the Druze community against the opposition.²¹⁷

Other than the majority of Druze living in the southern Sweida province, a community of 23,000 Syrian Druze live in the territories of the Golan Heights currently under Israeli control. Like their fellow Druze in the Sweida province, the Druze of the Golan Heights are divided over the conflict. "Fierce fighting between forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and opposition militias has steadily drifted closer to the Israeli-controlled border at the Golan Heights, causing concern among Israeli decision-makers and local residents."²¹⁸

Golan Heights Druze have expressed their pain and empathy with their fellow Syrians and are torn in the conflict altogether. Worrying for relatives and the future of Syria is prevalent amongst the Druze of Golan. "I wish I was there to act alongside the Syrian people," said Nazm Khater, a 64-year-old teacher and apple farmer. "I am Syrian, and I want to share the weight and the pain."²¹⁹

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NOTES

ABOUT UMAA-ADVOCACY

We are an organization established to support the rights of Shia Muslims nationally and globally. We do this through influencing government and society so they can act in support and favors of the rights of Shia Muslims nationally and globally. We hope to become the authoritative resource on all that pertains to Shia Muslims rights' nationally and globally, and a single source of events and incidents.

Our Publications

1. The Situation in Bahrain
2. Indonesia: The Plight of Religious Minorities
3. The Situation in Malaysia
4. The Crisis in Iraq
5. A Crisis in Pakistan
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