

Syria's Armed Opposition

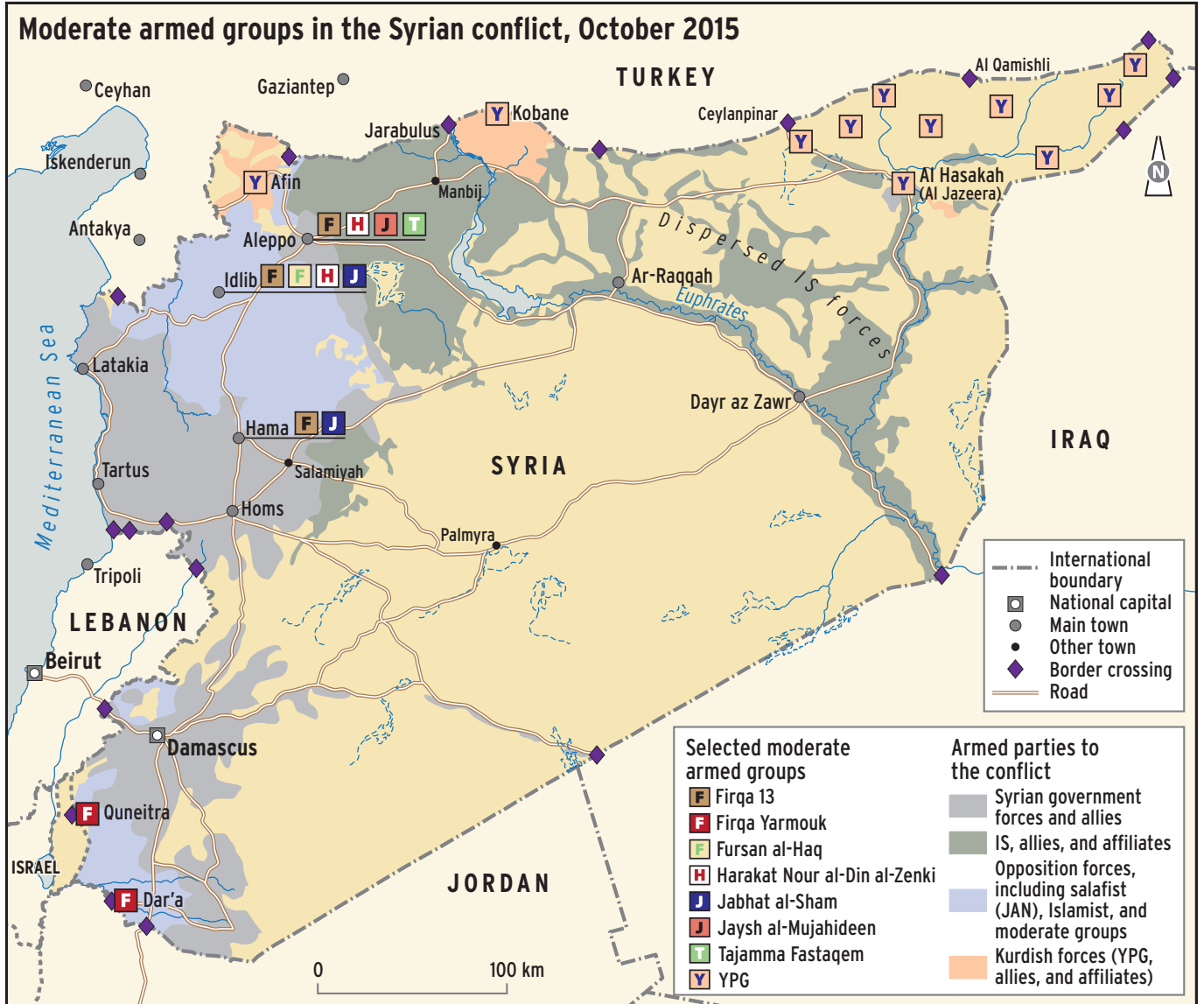
A Spotlight on the 'Moderates'



Security Assessment
in North Africa



a project of the small arms survey, geneva



Note: Location of armed parties based on Syrian Needs Analysis Project estimated areas of control and Small Arms Survey data.

Introduction

More than four years after the start of the Syrian uprising, the country is the stage of a protracted civil war with a perplexing multitude of armed opposition factions competing over territory with the regime and among each other. Well over 1,000 such groups are currently active in Syria (Carter Center, 2014a, p. 11). They range from relatively small local protection units with a few hundred fighters to large movements with a national reach, such as Ahrar al-Sham, which is estimated to number at least 10,000 fighters (Stanford University, 2014b).

In response to the declaration of a caliphate by the non-state armed group Islamic State (IS) in June 2014, an international coalition was formed to carry out air strikes on IS, while several countries committed to reinforcing support to Syria's so-called 'moderate' opposition forces (Drennan, 2014; MacAskill, 2015; Weisman, 2014).¹ Such support consists of the provision of small arms and light weapons, as well as military training and logistical assistance.

This Dispatch aims to add to the existing knowledge and understanding of these moderate opposition groups by investigating the types of organizations they have developed. It seeks to raise awareness of moderate armed groups' policies and practices in the areas of resource acquisition, military coordination, recruitment, and governance to help explain their current position in the Syrian context.

This Dispatch is based on a review of relevant literature and a total of 19 author interviews: five expert interviews held via Skype between 27 February and 16 April 2015 and a series of interviews conducted in the Turkish cities of Antakya, Gaziantep, Reyhanlı, and Şanlıurfa from 26 April to 7 May 2015. Nine of the interviewees were experts on the Syrian opposition—scholars, researchers, and journalists—and ten were members of as many different Syrian armed groups, active in Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib governorates.² Key findings of the Dispatch include:

- What started as an unpoliticized civil uprising developed into a highly fragmented armed opposition to the Syrian regime in which armed factions have come to gravitate around three core strains of political positioning:
 - secularism (marked by the desire to separate religion from the state);
 - Islamism (which entails the ambition to establish an Islamic state in Syria, though not necessarily through violence); and
 - Salafi jihadism (which is marked by imperialist Islamist ambitions and *takfirism*, as practised by Al-Qaeda).³
- Armed groups fighting under the flag of the Free Syrian Army have generally been unable to secure the resources necessary to develop sufficient organizational capacity to attract and retain fighters and effectively govern the areas under their control. Partially as a result of these shortcomings, they have lost considerable ground to better-funded extremist groups.
- In the Kurdish areas, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Defence Units (YPG), have been able to develop a sustainable political–military organization and an effective system of governance, but they will need a significant increase in military assistance to defend themselves from the ongoing IS offensive. The Turkish offensive against Kurdish groups in Turkey and Iraq forms another threat to the PYD/YPG.

Moderation in context

While it is common for policy-makers and observers to refer to 'moderate' armed groups, there is no agreed definition of 'moderate'. From the perspective of Western policy-makers, the label tends to be reserved for groups that show commitment to Western-style liberal democracy. Yet, although such a definition captures the dominant narrative of the popular uprising at its onset, Syrian political realities have shifted dramatically since then. This section provides a short discussion of the militarization and politicization of the Syrian uprising and offers a working definition of 'moderate' for this Dispatch.

Background to the Syrian rebellion

From peaceful protest to armed rebellion

In 2011, Syrians massively took to the streets to demand democratic reforms as part of the Arab Spring. By March 2011, mass protests had become a regular event in Damascus, Dar-a, Hama, and Homs and were increasingly spreading to rural areas (Hokayem, 2013, pp. 43–46). Protests initially centred on democratic reform, the release of political prisoners, the abolition of the emergency law, and the fight against corruption. During the month of April, the regime's response to the protests became more aggressive and protestors increasingly demanded the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad, who has ruled Syria since July 2000.

The following months saw increasing defections of Syrian army officers, which eventually led to the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), under the command of defected Col. Riad al-Asaad in Antakya, Turkey, in July 2011. Although numerous armed factions that were active across Syria soon adopted the name 'Free Syrian Army', there was no unified organization. Rather, the FSA worked as a label used by independent armed opposition groups that were operating with little coordination among them (Holiday, 2012; O'Bagy, 2013, pp. 10–11).

The organizational development of the armed opposition groups has to be understood in the context of this factionalized reality in which insurgent groups emerged from the popular protests. With virtually no military organization, protest groups had initially started to acquire weapons for the sheer purpose of protection. As an affiliate of an armed group in Aleppo explains:

In the beginning of the revolution nothing was organized. [...] When the security forces began to shoot at people, some people started carrying weapons to protect themselves. In the beginning we mainly had sticks, [later] we got weapons from people in the regime who were selling their weapons.⁴

Compulsory military service in Syria ensured that young men were generally trained in the use of weapons; in addition, the growing involvement of defected officers increased the tactical capacity of opposition groups. Through the capture of police stations and weapons depots, these groups secured what interviewees referred to as 'heavier' weaponry, and some quickly managed to develop into quasi-military brigades.⁵ Nevertheless, the brigades remained scattered across the country and highly localized in their organization and reach.

Attempts to build a national movement

Several attempts have been made to enhance the coordination among the armed groups and to form one national armed movement. These efforts started in earnest with the establishment of a Joint Command for the Revolution's Military Council by the FSA leadership in mid-2012. Through provincial-level military councils, the FSA aimed to systematize and coordinate its factions on the ground. While the initiative worked for a while, competition over influence by FSA donors largely caused it to lose impact. By late 2012, the initiative had crumbled (O'Bagy, 2013, pp. 11–14).

In November 2012, a renewed attempt to unify the armed opposition was made through the establishment of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), which could initially count on the commitment of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and several Western donors, which had by then joined forces as 'Friends of Syria'.⁶

Under the leadership of Salim Idriss, the SMC established significant authority by including field commanders in the council and by setting up an operations room inside Syria (O'Bagy, 2013, p. 23). In the course of the SMC's operations, however, donors increasingly earmarked their contributions for specific units operating in Syria, either through the SMC or by bypassing the SMC altogether and providing direct funding (Kodmani and Legrand, 2013, p. 14).⁷ In this way, the donors significantly undermined the SMC's effectiveness in terms of coordinating military tactics on the ground; as a result of its inability to provide supplies, the SMC leadership lost legitimacy in the eyes of the armed factions in Syria (Legrand, 2014, p. 7).

The most recent attempt to unify Syrian rebel groups led to the formation of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) at the end of 2014. The RCC aims to form a centralized armed force among the participating armed groups, in addition to developing a uniform system for civil and judicial management of the rebel-controlled areas (Carter Center, 2015a, pp. 12–13). While it is too soon to assess the RCC's effectiveness, none of the FSA affiliates interviewed for this report mentioned effects of this initiative on their current military operations. Overall, the FSA still represents a pool of armed factions that generally share a secularist political outlook—although many of their leaders and members are devout Muslims—and an ambition to form the future army of post-conflict Syria.

The emergence of extremist groups

The scattered nature of the shift from protests to an armed insurgency carries implications for the ideological development of the opposition groups. With a repressive dictatorship having been in place for decades, the basis for ideologically driven armed movements was thin at best. People who initially joined the armed groups were mainly motivated by their anger over the regime's aggression towards the protestors and by the immediate need for protection. A wide variety of people were drawn into the ranks of the insurgencies, which were themselves still building their military capacities. The political glue holding these diverse ranks together did not consist of much more than the desire to topple the regime.⁸ In the course of the armed conflict, however, the calls for the toppling of the regime that initially unified the opposition gave rise way to an ideologically divided opposition, partly in response to the rapid proliferation of extremist groups.

It is worth noting that the armed resistance in Syria has been predominantly Sunni from its onset, which is a direct effect of the regime's sectarian security strategy in response to the protests. From the beginning of the revolution, the regime portrayed the protests as the prelude to a Sunni armed uprising, thereby gaining the support of minority groups that tied their destiny to the regime's survival (Hokayem, 2013, pp. 47–53). It is thus unsurprising that Sunni religious ideologies were the first to become mixed into the revolutionary discourse, a process in which the Muslim Brotherhood initially played an important role.⁹

Having been banned from Syria since 1980, Syrian members of the Brotherhood had organized themselves in exile (Lund, 2013). These transnational networks proved crucial to the quick mobilization of political and military capital when the revolution developed into an armed struggle (Carnegie Endowment, n.d.).¹⁰ A network of clerics in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates who were linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and supportive of the Syrian revolution channelled their funds through their Syrian members.¹¹ This approach placed figures with access to these networks in a strong position to develop their armed groups and created space for Islamist political agendas to gain prominence.

Islamism was not the only ideology that enabled links to political and military capital; Salafi jihadism also connected rebel entrepreneurs to the resources required to build a military organization, the largest ones being IS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), also known as the al-Nusra Front or al-Qaeda in Syria. Through the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda, groups that adhered to this ideology had access to funds and weapons to draw in fighters and develop military capacity (Stanford University, 2014a). JAN and the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (which would later become known as the Islamic State) were able to expand through the support channelled through these networks, although IS has largely operated independently from al-Qaeda and was formally separated from it in 2013 (ICG, 2014a, pp. 4–5).

‘Moderation’ in the current context

What started as an unpoliticized mass civil uprising has thus developed into a highly fragmented armed opposition to the Syrian regime, in which armed factions have come to gravitate around roughly three core strains of political positioning:

- secularism (marked by the desire to separate religion from the state);
- Islamism (which entails the ambition to establish an Islamic state in Syria, though not necessarily through violence); and
- Salafi jihadism (which refers to the particular ideology of al-Qaeda, marked by imperialist Islamist ambitions and *takfirism*).

Although this broad categorization does not capture the complexities of Islamic political ideology, it suffices as a basic continuum along which Syrian armed groups can be positioned politically. How can ‘moderate’ groups be defined in relation to this continuum?

From the perspective of Western policy-makers who decide on the provision of support to Syrian armed groups, the application of the term ‘moderate’ has come to be restricted to groups with a secular outlook. To obtain Western support, armed groups go through an extensive vetting process managed by the Military Operations Command (MOC) offices in Jordan and Turkey (Al Jazeera, 2015a; ICG, 2014a). The MOC has representatives from each state backer and aims to vet rebel factions to identify reliable, non-extremist recipients (ICG, 2015b). The vetting process is mainly designed to exclude opposition leaders who have ties to IS, al-Qaeda, or other terrorist groups (Al Jazeera, 2015a). The process has also largely excluded Islamist groups, which indicates that in order to obtain Western support through the MOC, a group is required to have a secular position.¹² Apart from the Kurdish PYD/YPG, most groups that receive MOC support fight under the FSA flag.

To allow for an understanding of the particular organizational challenges associated with this cluster of armed groups given their specific support system, this Dispatch uses the following, narrow definition of ‘moderate’:

secular (endorsing a separation of the state from religion), with no ties to terrorist groups, and eligible for support through the MOC (whether received or not).

Table 1 lists some examples of groups to which this definition applies. It should be noted that the use of this definition does not imply that any group that is not labelled ‘moderate’ should be considered extremist by default; such a binary approach would only lead to an oversimplified assessment of Syrian political realities.

Table 1 Selected ‘moderate’ armed opposition groups operating in Syria

Group name (translation; original)	Leader	Main areas of operation	External support	Details
Firqa 13 (Battalion 13)	Lt. Ahmed al-Saoud	Aleppo, Hama, Idlib	Friends of Syria	Primarily active in Idlib and Hama provinces, this group supports the establishment of a civil state in Syria (Legrand, 2014; see Photo 2).
Firqa Yarmouk (Yarmouk Battalion)	Bachar al-Zoubi	Dar-a, Quneitra	No verified external support	One of the strongest rebel factions in southern Syria, this group is led by a member of the al-Zoubi tribe (Legrand, 2014).
Fursan al-Haq (Knights of the Truth)	Lt. Faris Bayush	Idlib	Friends of Syria	This group supports the establishment of a civil state in Syria.
Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki (Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement)	Sheikh Tawfiq Shahab Eddin	Aleppo, Idlib	Friends of Syria	
Jabhat al-Sham (Al-Sham Front)	Lt. Mohamed Al-Ghabi	Hama, Idlib	Friends of Syria	This group is allegedly composed primarily of defectors of the Syrian military and characterized by a pragmatism regarding alliances. The group supports the establishment of a civil state in Syria (Gutman and Alhamadee, 2015).
Jaysh al-Mujahideen (Army of the Mujahideen)	Mohammed Shakerdi	Aleppo	Friends of Syria	Affiliated with the FSA, this Islamist group was founded at the beginning of 2014 in Aleppo, in opposition to the IS presence in that city (Carter Center, 2015a; Legrand, 2014; see Photo 1).
Tajamma Fastaqem (Gather Then Become Righteous)	Abu Kutayba	Aleppo	Friends of Syria	Founded in and around Aleppo, this group has long been involved in rebel attempts to push government forces from the area. Over the course of its existence, it has affiliated itself with a variety of other groups (Heras, 2015).
YPG (People’s Defence Units)	Sipan Hemo	Afrin, Kobane, Al-Hasakah	No verified external support	This group is the armed wing of the PYD, the leading Kurdish political organization in so-called Syrian Kurdistan. ¹³ It predates the beginning of the Syrian conflict and is secular and leftist in its political orientation (ICG, 2014b).

Many interviewees pointed out that the ways in which Islamist armed groups concretize their ideology varies greatly.¹³ Some groups adopt Islamism and envision an Islamic state in Syria, but they may also adhere to democratic values and respect minority rights. According to the definition used in this Dispatch, groups such as Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, both of which control significant territory in Syria, may be considered moderate in the current Syrian context.¹⁴ Some observers even argue that JAN’s profile and practices vary from area to area, and that some of their units could be considered moderate.¹⁵ As this report adopts a relatively strict definition of what constitutes ‘moderate’, these nuances should be kept in mind.

Organizational aspects of moderate armed groups

As the Syrian uprising developed into a protracted civil war, the prominence of moderate armed groups waned compared to both Islamist and extremist groups. IS currently controls most of Syria’s al Hasakah, Dayr az Zawr, and ar-Raqqa governorates and parts of Aleppo province’s eastern countryside (Carter Center, 2015a, p. 27). Of the moderate forces, the Kurdish PYD/YPG controls significant parts of Afrin, al Hasakah, and Kobane provinces. Other moderate forces, including those fighting under the FSA flag, control limited territory, mainly in Aleppo, Hama, and Idlib provinces.

Moderation and access to resources

For Syrian armed groups, political positioning is not only a matter of ideology, but also an indicator of which types of foreign investors may be willing to provide financial support. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have reportedly been the most important suppliers of weapons to the Syrian opposition throughout the conflict (Chivers and Schmitt, 2013; Mazzetti, Chivers, and Schmitt, 2013); the two states have reportedly provided support to armed groups across the political spectrum. According to the Carter Center, the United States provided arms in secret before publicly committing to supporting the Syrian opposition through arms supplies in June 2013 (Carter Center, 2014a, pp. 22–24). As mentioned, Western support is limited to moderate armed groups in the strict definition.

In addition to organizing training in camps in Jordan and Qatar, the United States has reportedly funded limited deliveries of light weapons systems (Carter Center, 2014a, pp. 23–24).¹⁶ Other Western countries have largely limited their support to non-lethal aid, such as communications equipment, night-vision goggles, and bullet-proof vests, as well as the provision of training to rebels (Bayoumy and Bakr, 2013). The UK contribution of non-lethal support has reportedly also included non-combat armoured vehicles and body armour (BBC, 2013).

Interviews conducted for this Dispatch point to major discrepancies between the assistance that is promised by Western donors and the support that actually reaches the armed groups. The gap between what is delivered and what would probably be needed to fight IS and the regime effectively is said to be even greater. In this context, many interviewees expressed the desire for anti-aircraft weapons to protect civilian areas from the regime's aerial bombardments.¹⁷

While many of the moderate armed groups' affiliates interviewed for this report complained about the unreliability of donor support, whether through the MOC or other sources, few were open about other income-generating activities they employed. The war economy that has emerged in Syria over the course of the conflict, however, provides a number of economic opportunities to armed groups and their individual members (Al-Abdeh, 2013; Yazigi, 2014).

An important source of income is oil, which is mainly extracted in Syria's Dayr az Zawr and al Hasakah provinces (Butter, 2015). The involvement of armed groups in the production and trade of the produce of these oil fields has been documented (Al-Abdeh, 2013); they have been estimated to generate USD 50 million per month through trade on the domestic market as well as illicit exports to Turkey (Butter, 2015). Many of the fields in Dayr az Zawr came under the control of IS after its offensive in mid-2014. Some oil fields in al Qamishli are under the control of Kurdish groups, which report that this oil is sold on the domestic market at a low price and not to any party to the conflict.¹⁸

An affiliate of a rebel group in the coastal area indicated that agriculture was a potential source of income for armed groups, but that agricultural activity had become severely hampered by the regime's aerial bombardments.¹⁹ Some rebel groups set up small businesses, such as Internet centres, to generate additional income.²⁰ Smuggling and black-market trade also form important sources of income; rebels may engage directly in these activities or derive income indirectly by guaranteeing protection for traders.²¹ With regard to the black market for arms and ammunition, rebel groups are major players and engage in speculation to maximize profits.²²

Moreover, taxation of trade at checkpoints and border crossings provides significant income to rebel groups.²³ Along the Turkish–Syrian border, any truck that passed the Bab al-Salam crossing was charged up to USD 500, including those carrying humanitarian aid, and was under control of the Levant Front

(al-Jabha al-Shamiya), until the group dissolved in late April 2015.²⁴ Bab al-Hawa, another important border crossing with Turkey, is controlled by Ahrar al-Sham, which opened a civilian-run department for migration and passport control in April 2015 (Syria Direct, 2015).

With oil production largely in the hands of extremist groups and few alternatives available for systematic income generation, armed groups depend heavily on external support (Yazigi, 2014). While moderates are well positioned to attract the support of Western donors, their access to some of the channels available to Islamist and Salafist jihadi groups is irregular. In the overall picture of the armed opposition, Western support is becoming increasingly irrelevant, placing moderate groups in a relatively weak position to obtain resources.

Coordination among opposition groups

While attempts to unify the multitude of armed opposition groups under a single command structure remain largely unsuccessful, coordination and cooperation among the factions on the ground is common. They regularly join forces by forming temporary coalitions. For each battle, operations rooms (*ghurfat amaliyat*) are established and manned by military officers from the participating groups that have decided to work together in that particular battle. The operations room develops a joint military strategy, which is then translated into orders to the different field commanders in a battle (Kodmani and Legrand, 2013, p. 25).²⁵ While operations rooms are dissolved after a battle has been concluded, the alliances created through them sometimes consolidate into longer-term cooperation in the form of coalitions that commit to a common charter.

The capture of Idlib city is a case in point: the seven groups that cooperated in this battle—including JAN, Ahrar al-Sham, and several small, moderate Islamist factions—formed an operations room called Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) (Ghanem, 2015). The leader of Ahrar al-Sham, Hashim al-Sheikh, commented that this cooperation could continue into the future, depending on the interests of the participating groups (Al Jazeera, 2015b). One observer expected that the success of Jaish al-Fatah in Idlib would lead it to spread: ‘We will see groups in other areas merging and adopting this name.’²⁶ The recent establishment of the Jaish an-Nasr (Army of Victory) operations room in Hama shows that the Jaysh al-Fatah model is indeed spreading to other regions (Syrian Observer, 2015).²⁷

Nevertheless, the configuration of such coalitions tends to undergo rapid changes and frequent relabeling. From its formation in December 2014 until its dissolution four months later, the Levant Front was seen as a promising coalition of moderate groups in Aleppo (Lund, 2015).²⁸ A new coalition called Thuwar al-Sham (Levant Revolutionaries) has absorbed most of the factions that were part of the dissolved coalition.²⁹ One affiliate of an Aleppo-based FSA unit explains that:

*these changes [...] are due to agreements between leaders, funding, and the changing situation of the war. For example, the 16th Division in Aleppo had its leader murdered; the armed group then merged with another.*³⁰

Another important factor in the shifting of alliances is the funding provided by donors. When a leader of a particular group has access to donor support, other groups may associate themselves with this group for strategic reasons. When the funding stops, for example because a particular individual or group in the coalition becomes controversial to the donor, factions realign themselves to regain access to the funding.³¹

In the formation of strategic alliances, moderate armed groups face restrictions due to their reliance on Western donors. As they cannot formally participate in coalitions that include controversial groups such as JAN, moderate armed groups have limited opportunities to increase their military effectiveness through coordination with other armed groups.³² Yet, with every military success of coalitions in which the FSA does not have a visible role, such as the takeover of Idlib city, the image of moderate factions as a weakening force is reinforced, making them less attractive to potential recruits.



Photo 1: Video image of Jaysh al-Mujahideen's 'session 14' recruits taking part in a 'training exercise' at an undisclosed location in Syria. Source: Jaysh al-Mujahideen/YouTube.

Recruitment, training, and the retention of fighters

While IS is known to attract large numbers of foreign fighters (Vinatier, 2014), moderate armed groups generally recruit their members locally. The abundance of armed groups provides current fighters and potential recruits with a large range of options and individual fighters tend to change their alliances frequently. In determining which faction to join or whether to shift allegiances, potential and current fighters consider a group's level of military organization and the availability of weapons and ammunition; in this respect, the successes of IS and JAN have reportedly drawn many fighters into their ranks.³³

The latter groups have also been able to offer substantial salaries to their recruits, as well as services for the families of fighters (Solomon, 2014; 2015).³⁴ In response, moderate groups started offering salaries to their fighters in the course of 2014, partially with financial support supplied via the MOC (Hubbard, 2014).³⁵ However, these salaries are said to pale in comparison to what the better-funded extremist groups offer.³⁶

None of the FSA factions interviewed for this report had any form of targeted recruitment or political mobilization strategy in place. The lack of politicization could be seen as a principled decision, as suggested by a commander of a secular FSA faction in Idlib: ‘We believe that military officers should not do politics: we want to separate the military from the other aspects of the society.’³⁷ Indeed, the entanglement of the regime’s security apparatus with the Baath party is one of the grievances that evoked the revolution. At the same time, however, the rise of Islamist and jihadi groups has created awareness among the more moderate groups that some political profiling is necessary to prevent fighters from defecting to competing groups. This shift has led to the issuance of political statements by some coalitions of armed groups.³⁸

In response to the ideological appeal of the extremist groups, some FSA units have started to integrate political education into their training. As one affiliate of an FSA unit in Aleppo province commented: ‘We [now] also [include] a programme on political affairs. The main purpose of that programme is to make recruits move away from extremist ideology.’³⁹ An observer noted that ideological motivation is key to expanding a movement’s deployment options, since:

*the more ideologically driven forces are able to [deploy] fighters beyond their home areas. The majority of fighters stay in their own districts rather than fighting in other provinces. Unless someone is paying them to do so or unless they are ideologically driven.*⁴⁰

Of the moderate armed groups interviewed for this report, only the Kurdish PYD/YPG fully integrates political and military activities. The Syrian PYD/YPG has adopted the agenda of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which seeks to establish a Kurdish state (Rojava) and has gained territory through a complex form of symbiosis with the regime (ICG, 2014b, pp. 1–5).⁴¹ The Kurdish political-military movement has the structure of a traditional liberation movement and has a fully developed political mobilization strategy. Military training includes a significant political education component, since the leaders judge that ‘without ideology they will never fight, because [the fighter] is not a professional soldier in an army and there is no salary’.⁴²

Civil-military relations and governance

While the presence of a large number of armed groups in most parts of Syria represents a challenge to the various factions, as they must try to retain trained fighters, it simultaneously places individual fighters in a position of relative power vis-à-vis their leaders. This dynamic has implications for armed groups’ management of discipline within their ranks, as one retired FSA officer explained: ‘Loyalty is not complete in the armed groups. [...] When fighters don’t like the orders they are given, he is free to leave, especially since his weapon is his own [property].’⁴³

Most armed groups in Syria have no formal code of conduct by which soldiers have to abide, although there are informal rules on how to interact with civilians, which are sometimes addressed during the military training.⁴⁴ Some groups have also officially endorsed human rights and principles of international humanitarian law, and sometimes they address these principles through training.⁴⁵

Moderate armed groups generally rely on civilian-administered courts to handle incidents in which fighters violate the rights of civilians. Theoretically, the courts are able to investigate cases against members of armed groups and enforce their judgements on the armed groups that have committed themselves to the court system.⁴⁶ In practice, however, the enforcement of court decisions is weak

because of the relative freedom individual fighters enjoy to join another armed group if they are unhappy with a decision.⁴⁷ The Kurdish defence forces have a detailed written code of conduct for their fighters, the enforcement of which is managed internally.⁴⁸

In areas where the FSA maintains a presence, a system of governance has developed in the form of so-called 'local councils' that manage the aforementioned courts. In addition, local councils manage projects that pertain to the reconstruction and running of public facilities, such as the delivery of water, electricity, medical care, education, and policing (NCS, n.d.; Glasman, 2014).⁴⁹ Funding for these projects

comes from donors and from fees that are charged for some of the services.⁵⁰

Each province has its own local council that technically falls under the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which is based in Turkey (NCS, n.d.). However, the actual impact of the coalition on the local councils has been limited and has mainly materialized through the channelling of humanitarian aid through its



Photo 2: Firqa 13 provides drinking water to the civilian population of Maarat al-Numaan, Syria, November 2015. Source: Firqa 13/YouTube

Assistance Coordination Unit, which has suffered from corruption and overall ineffectiveness (Glasman, 2014, p. 20). Depending on the needs in a particular context, councils also exist at the levels of neighbourhoods, towns, villages and cities.

Although the performance of local councils varies across locations, these institutions are generally weak. This is partially due to the lack of importance given to governance at the onset of the armed conflict. It was mainly in response to the relatively strong institutions developed by JAN and IS that moderate groups stepped up their efforts regarding governance and service delivery.⁵¹ In general, moderate Islamist and jihadist groups also provide services through their own humanitarian organizations, which increases their popularity among the people.⁵² Bakeries, medical facilities, schools, and other services often outperform those delivered by the local councils.

In the Kurdish areas, a relatively well-developed system of self-governance has been established by the PYD, based on a constitution-like social contract that lays down the principles for governance of the semi-autonomous areas (HRW, 2014b). The social contract endorses democratic values and allows for political opposition within the Kurdish areas, although the influence of other political parties has been limited (Glasman, 2014; ICG, 2014b). The three Kurdish provinces each have their own legislative assembly and government, while people's councils govern service delivery at the local level. The Kurdish administration generates income through taxation of local residents.⁵³

Conclusion

Four years after the start of the Syrian uprising, the country is the stage of a protracted civil war marked by a multitude of armed factions fighting against the regime and competing over territorial control among each other. Simultaneous processes of militarization and politicization have created a highly complex and violent politico-military playing field characterized by rapid proliferation of armed opposition groups and ever-shifting alliances among them.

Of the moderate opposition groups, only the Kurdish forces articulate a clear ideological position and have a systematic approach to recruitment, political mobilization, and discipline within their ranks. They have also developed functioning governance structures in the areas under their control. They complement donor support by generating income through taxation and oil production. Their advanced organizational development is largely due to their long history of underground activism in Syria prior to the revolution. Their links to the highly experienced PKK have also provided access to organizational principles for developing a liberation movement. Finally, they have a long ideological tradition on which to build.

Moderate groups fighting under the umbrella of the FSA have struggled to develop a political agenda that goes beyond rejection of the regime. Their predominantly Sunni constituency has become divided with the proliferation of extremist groups. Although the FSA is still relatively strong in the south of Syria, its units elsewhere generally lack the resources and the organizational capacity to compete with the extremists. With limited opportunities for self-financing, they rely on donor support, which has been unpredictable and barely sufficient for military survival, let alone expansion or the development of political and administrative institutions. Cooperation with Western donors further places restrictions on the formation of coalitions and the participation in operations rooms.

While the Kurdish forces have developed significant organizational strength, they will continue to need external support to defend themselves from ongoing IS attacks in the Kurdish provinces. The Turkish offensive against the PKK in Turkey and its Kurdish affiliates in northern Iraq poses a further threat. The planned buffer zone along the Syrian border would separate the Kurdish-controlled areas in Afrin from those in Kobane and al Hasakah, presenting an obstacle to PYD expansion.

Moderate groups in other areas will need a significant increase in resources to develop the military and institutional capacities required if they are to become viable alternatives to extremist groups. For Western support to be effective in this respect, it will have to become more substantial, more reliable, and more sensitive to realities on the ground. In relation to the latter, it is questionable if sticking to a rather strict definition of 'moderate' is realistic in Syria's radicalizing opposition context.

Abbreviations

FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State
JAN	Jabhat al-Nusra
MOC	Military Operations Command
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council
SMC	Supreme Military Council
TEV-DEM	Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk (Democratic Society Movement)
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Defence Units)

Notes

¹ Although Western governments, predominantly the United States and the United Kingdom, committed to increasing support to moderate groups, several interviewees in this research indicated that no such increase was visible on the ground.

² The interviews were carried out with the assistance of a translator, except for the expert interviews, as the interviewees spoke English. The interviews were done in a systematic manner, utilizing a checklist of topics and questions. The statements made by interviewees were checked against relevant sources whenever possible; given the limited amount of available research, this report relies primarily on the data collected through the fieldwork.

³ Takfirism is the practice by which a Muslim pronounces another Muslim an apostate; the concept is rejected as a 'doctrinal deviation' by mainstream Muslims and Islamist groups (OISO, n.d.).

⁴ Author interview with a political officer of an FSA brigade, Gaziantep, 3 May 2015.

⁵ Author interview with a political officer of an FSA unit, Gaziantep, 7 May 2015.

⁶ The Friends of Syria group is a loose alliance of countries that formed in February 2012 with the purpose of developing a coherent international response to Syria's escalating conflict. The composition of the group has changed over time and has included France, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK, and the United States (Irish, 2012).

⁷ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 19 March 2015.

⁸ Author interview with a political officer of an FSA unit, Reyhanlı, 6 May 2015.

⁹ For extensive background on sectarian politics in Syria, see van Dam (2011). For a detailed history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, see Lefèvre (2013). Hokayem (2013) provides an accessible political analysis of the first year of the Syrian uprising.

¹⁰ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 7 April 2015.

¹¹ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 7 April 2015.

¹² Author interviews with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 19 March 2015, and with a consultant to the MOC, Antakya, 29 April 2015.

¹³ The PYD operates under the umbrella of the Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM); author interview with a political officer of TEV-DEM, Şanlıurfa, 5 May 2015.

¹⁴ Author interviews with experts on the Syrian opposition, Skype, February–April 2015.

¹⁵ Author interviews with an expert on Syrian politics, Skype, 16 April 2015, and with an expert on the Syrian armed opposition, Skype, 9 March 2015.

¹⁶ One former FSA soldier in Aleppo argued that JAN can be considered moderate in Aleppo, as the group does not enforce Islamic rules on the population; author interview, Gaziantep, 28 April 2015. An affiliate of a secular armed group in the coastal area described JAN as moderate in that area; author interview with the former leader of an armed group in Latakia, Antakya, 29 April 2015.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the types of weapons systems found in the Syrian conflict, see Rigual (2014) and Schroeder (2014).

¹⁸ Author interviews with journalists, military analysts, and affiliates of FSA units in Antakya, Gaziantep, and Reyhanlı, April–May 2015.

¹⁹ Author interview with a political officer of TEV-DEM, Şanlıurfa, 5 May 2015.

²⁰ Author interview with a former leader of an armed group in Latakia, Antakya, 29 April 2015.

²¹ Author interview with a Syrian military analyst, Gaziantep, 28 April 2015.

²² Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 7 April 2015.

²³ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 7 April 2015.

- ²⁴ Author interviews with a Syrian military analyst, Gaziantep, 28 April 2015, and with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 7 April 2015.
- ²⁵ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 7 April 2015.
- ²⁶ Author interview with a Syrian military analyst, Gaziantep, 28 April 2015.
- ²⁷ Author interview with a Syrian journalist, Gaziantep, 26 April 2015.
- ²⁸ The Jaysh an-Nasr operations room consists of 16 armed factions, including several moderates, most notably the al-Sham Front. For the announcement of the operations room, see Jaysh al-Nasr (2015).
- ²⁹ Author interviews with affiliates of Aleppo-based armed groups, Gaziantep, May 2015.
- ³⁰ Author interview with a political officer of Thuwar al-Sham, Gaziantep, 1 May 2015.
- ³¹ Author interview with a political officer of an FSA unit in Aleppo, Gaziantep, 3 May 2015.
- ³² Author interview with a political officer of an FSA unit, Reyhanlı, 6 May 2015.
- ³³ Although formal cooperation with JAN is problematic, informal coordination seems possible. In the capture of the city of Idlib, for example, FSA units provided support to the operation without formally belonging to the operations room.
- ³⁴ Author interviews with experts on the Syrian opposition and affiliates of Syrian armed groups, Gaziantep, April–May 2015.
- ³⁵ Author interview with a former administrator in Idlib, Gaziantep, 4 May 2015.
- ³⁶ Author interviews with affiliates of FSA units that receive MOC support, Gaziantep and Reyhanlı, May 2015.
- ³⁷ The Obama administration has reportedly funded monthly salaries of at least USD 100 for affiliates of secular groups, although a commander of a moderate group stated that his fighters could only be offered USD 60 per month on the basis of MOC support (Hubbard, 2014; author interview with a political officer in an FSA unit, Gaziantep, 3 May 2015). According to Solomon (2015), IS offers salaries of up to USD 1,000 per month, although this amount relates to foreign fighters and Syrian fighters are said to earn less. Based on Human Rights Watch interviews with Syrian children who were affiliated with IS, JAN, and Ahrar al-Sham, children earned monthly salaries of between USD 47 and USD 135; one interviewee commented that adult Syrian fighters in IS earned USD 200 per month (HRW, 2014a). In some areas, fighters in YPG suits received salaries of USD 150 per month (ICG, 2014b).
- ³⁸ Author interview with a leader of an FSA unit in Idlib, Reyhanlı, 6 May 2015.
- ³⁹ The revolutionary honour charter is an example; it consists of a list of 11 points to which the signees commit. The Islamic Front, an alliance of Islamist rebel groups, issued a statement outlining its principles, as did some other groups.
- ⁴⁰ Author interview with a political officer of an FSA unit, Gaziantep, 7 May 2015.
- ⁴¹ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 9 March 2015.
- ⁴² Some armed groups that are active in Kurdish areas fight outside or alongside the PYD/YPG. These include the peshmerga as well as several FSA units that fight alongside the PYD in the Euphrates Volcano operations room. This Dispatch focuses on the PYD/YPG, however, given that ‘the YPG has kept almost exclusive control over Syria’s Kurdish areas’ (ICG, 2015a, p. 26).
- ⁴³ Author interview with a political officer of TEV-DEM, Şanlıurfa, 5 May 2015. See also ICG (2014b, pp. 13–14).
- ⁴⁴ Author interview with a former member of the Aleppo Military Council, Gaziantep, 4 May 2015.
- ⁴⁵ Author interviews with experts on the Syrian opposition, Skype, February–April 2014, and with a military analyst, Gaziantep, 28 April 2015.
- ⁴⁶ The group Jaysh al-Mujahideen, for example, officially endorsed human rights in its charter; some armed groups have also cooperated with international non-governmental organizations that run trainings and awareness campaigns for Syrian armed groups. Author interviews with an expert on the Syrian opposition and a political officer in an FSA unit, Gaziantep, May 2015. Geneva Call has worked on international humanitarian law issues with the Syrian opposition, mainly Harakat Hazzm, which recently dissolved (Geneva Call, n.d.).
- ⁴⁷ Author interview with a military analyst, Gaziantep, 28 April 2015. In Aleppo city, for example, all armed groups have subscribed to the court, except JAN, which runs its own courts.
- ⁴⁸ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 27 February 2015.
- ⁴⁹ Author interview with a political officer of TEV-DEM, Şanlıurfa, 5 May 2015. For details on the internal rules and regulations of the Kurdish security forces, see HRW (2014b).
- ⁵⁰ Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 19 March 2015.
- ⁵¹ Author interview with a former administrator in Idlib, Gaziantep, 4 May 2015.
- ⁵² Author interview with an expert on the Syrian opposition, Skype, 19 March 2015.
- ⁵³ Author interviews with a former administrator in Idlib, Gaziantep, 4 May 2015, and with a consultant to the MOC, Antakya, 29 April 2015.
- ⁵⁴ Author interview with a political officer of TEV-DEM, Şanlıurfa, 5 May 2015.

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