

Armed Factions in Syria - Loyalists, Rebels and Jihadists

The Syrian conflict has seen a mass influx of foreign fighters from all around the globe. This may not be a new phenomenon, but it's happening on an unprecedented scale. High fragmentation of opposition or rebel groups in Syria is indirectly connected with the flood of foreign combatants. Although main destination for the majority of foreign fighters are various "opposition" groups we should keep in mind that some of them are joining the ranks of pro-government armed forces. The Syrian crisis can be worsened by further fragmentation of these groups (government or non-government). Decentralization of authority and warlordism are not only interconnected - one leads to the other, but are also two main consequences of the division between these groups. As the structure of these groups crumbles so does their ability to control their fighters and their actions. Decentralization of authority is evident in both government and non-government armed factions, though it's much more threatening for the government forces since it also suggests decentralization of state authority as well.¹ Decentralization further leads to warlordism. Absence of state or any other kind of authority may induce this behavior among militias or other groups. Rise of warlordism further stimulates criminal behavior and also complicates peace and reconciliation efforts.

The heaviest contributors of foreign fighters include regions such as Middle East, Maghreb, Former Soviet Republics and also Western Europe.² The flow of combatants is rather hard to control, especially in the Maghreb region. According to various reports Tunisians are the most common nationals in these radical groups. Among all other groups the Islamic State is still the most popular destination for Jihadists; the Soufan Group has calculated that around 30,000 people have traveled to Syria or Iraq to join the Islamic State.³ Beside these regions there are also particular "hotbeds of recruitment" which have been scattered across the globe. These places have well established incubators for extremist behavior and organized networks which allow combatants unobstructed passage to Middle East or any other region. Bizerte and Ben Gardane in Tunisia, Derna in Libya, the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, Molenbeek district in Brussels represent these hotbeds of extremist recruitment.⁴

Armed groups in Syria can be roughly classified into three different categories. Secularist groups which are separating religion from the state (government forces are a majority in this group). Islamist groups which are trying to establish an Islamic state but not through a total war and violence. And finally Salafi Jihadist groups which are closely linked to Al Qaeda and are

¹ The Carter Center, *Pro-Government Paramilitary Forces* p.3 November 5, 2013 (https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/pro-governmentparamilitaryforces.pdf)

² The Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters - An Updated Assessment of the Flow of the Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* p.5 December 2015 (http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf)

³ op cit p.4

⁴ op cit p.10

imposing strict Sharia law. Though many rebel groups are trying to classify themselves in the second category most of the time it's hard to distinguish them from the hard-core Jihadist since their actions and relations to the Jihadist groups are rather shady. The other classification that can be employed categorizes these groups into government or loyalist forces, moderate opposition or rebels, YPG and Islamic State.

Loyalist/Regime Forces:

The Syrian Armed Forces have around 180 000 active personnel deployed across Army, Navy and Air Force. Throughout the crisis the military has shown an impressive amount of resilience towards insurgencies, terrorist attacks and other various types of violence and guerrilla warfare. Although the West is quick to judge and accuse the Syrian military of war crimes and crimes against humanity the Syrian Arab Army still remains the most legitimate force on the ground in Syria. The military is also supported by the Russian Armed Forces. The SAA managed to modernize, upgrade and restore much of its military equipment thanks to the Russian aid. Despite the military successes the SAA usually relies on stand-off fire power, mainly on artillery and tanks, while close combat battles are carried out by Hezbollah or other paramilitary groups.

Al Qods Force is an elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps that has been established in the 1990. One of the main objectives of this unit was to export the Iranian revolution abroad using subversion and other similar tactics. Operatives of the Qods Forces are usually deployed at the Iranian embassies. The exact number of Qods Force personnel in Syria is unknown. Though they are an elite unit their main objective in Syria is to provide intelligence, training and strategic advice rather than to be employed in direct combat.

National Defense Forces (NDF) have been formed in the early 2013 with Iran's guidance. Main objective of the NDF was to support the Syrian Army who suffered significant losses during the first year of the Syrian conflict. NDF numbers around 100 000 personnel coming from various backgrounds. Though the NDF has sophisticated weaponry they are usually deployed as an auxiliary force under the command of the SAA or Hezbollah.⁵

Hezbollah involvement in Syria begins in 2011 at the start of the crisis. In 2013 the Hezbollah fighters were openly seen supporting and operating side by side with the Syrian Army. The group's support was essential in recapturing Homs, Damascus and even Aleppo from the militant groups. Hezbollah fighters have been well trained in urban warfare and are able to complement the regime forces with reconnaissance abilities as well as with sniper fire. Hezbollah forces are often better equipped and better prepared for combat situations than the regular infantry forces. This gives them the edge when fighting in closed off urban areas or difficult

⁵ The Syrian Institute, *National Defense Forces* (http://syriainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/NDF-Cheat-Sheet_Secure.pdf)

terrain.⁶ Hezbollah involvement in Syria is essential for Iranian interests. The group is usually seen as a guardian or protector of the Shia community not only in Lebanon but in the whole region as well.

Opposition/Rebel Forces

Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) has been established in 2012 and includes the following factions: Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al Haqq, Harakat al Fajr al Islamiya, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya, Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir, Jaish al-Tawhid, Kataeb Suqour al-Islam, Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila, Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa, Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb. This is a Sunni Salafi orientated group which strives to establish some kind of Islamic state in Syria. Most of its members are recruited domestically with varying levels of ideological and religious sophistication.⁷ The group has a rather aggressive stance towards the government and usually rejects agreements or deals offered by the Assad regime. Though the group is Islamist-orientated and tends to establish an Islamic state, the Jihadi rhetoric and especially suicide bombings are not so common among the members of SIF. However, the group's charter and their overall ideology are allegedly influenced by two prominent Salafi Jihadist theologians - Abu Basir al Tartusi a Syrian Salafi cleric and Iyad Quneibi a Jordanian Salafist. The exact numbers of SIF fighters are relatively unknown but it is presumed that the group has around 30,000 members. As for funding the leaders of the group usually claim that it comes from donations or war booty, although it is suspected that some Gulf Monarchies are directly supporting this group.⁸

Jabhat Al-Nusra or Jabhat Al-Sham has been formed out of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in order to hijack the Syrian revolution and take advantage of the power vacuum in Syria as stated by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The group dates back to 2011 with most of its activity situated in the Idlib province. Although the group has managed to embed itself as an opposition force it has clear goals of establishing an Islamic state with a strict Sharia rule. Terrorist tactics employed by this group are very similar to Al Qaeda's overall strategies and warfare (most common are suicide attacks, hostage missions, lone wolfs attacks etc.). Al-Nusra's doctrine is strictly Salafist Jihadism though it is a lighter version of the same that the Islamic State employs. The support that Al-Nusra gets from the local population is mainly because of this "lenient" attitude.⁹ The group has around 5, 000 official members but real numbers are probably much higher. The group's structure consists of military (askariya), security (amniya) and Consultative Council

⁶ Institute for the Study of War, Marisa Sullivan, Hezbollah in Syria p.4 April 2014 (http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf)

⁷ Most of the SIF members are conservative Sunni men.

⁸ UI Occasional Paper published by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front*, March 2013 (<http://www.ui.se/eng/upl/files/86861.pdf>)

⁹ Counter Extremism Project, *Nusra Front (Jabhat Fateh al-Sham)*, ([http://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Nusra%20Front%20\(Jabhat%20Fateh%20al-Sham\)-09112016.pdf](http://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/threat_pdf/Nusra%20Front%20(Jabhat%20Fateh%20al-Sham)-09112016.pdf))

(Majlis Al-Shura).¹⁰ The funding of Jabhat Al-Nusra is done via ransoms, taxation, fines, international donations, oil sales, looting and smuggling.

Free Syrian Army is a secularist opposition group with a clear goal of removing the current regime from power. FSA has been founded in the summer of 2011 with affiliated groups such as Supreme Military Council, Syrian Revolutionary Front, Euphrates Islamic Revolutionary Front etc. The bulk of the FSA forces were former SAA soldiers¹¹ who opposed the regime, sadly as the revolution moved forward the FSA was gradually plagued by Islamist and other radicals who were pouring into the country. Free Syrian Army has received a generous amount of resources and military aid from some Western governments, which contributed to the early successes of the FSA against the regime forces.¹² Dispersion of the opposition forces and inconsistent support from the governments who wanted a regime change in Syria had quickly put FSA between a rock and a hard place. Although the Western governments endorsed the secularist opposition it is highly questionable if the Gulf States wanted a secularist regime change. Secularist opposition forces have quickly started to deteriorate and lose ground when Hezbollah and Islamic State entered the fray.

Kurdish YPG and Islamic State

The YPG or the People's Protection Units have been established in 2004 as a branch of the PYD (Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party). Before the revolution the Syrian government managed to suppress the YPG and their aspirations towards autonomy, but since 2012 the Kurdish forces have proven themselves a great ally against the Islamic State. It is estimated that the YPG has between 30 000 and 50 000 fighters including the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). In October 2015 the YPG joined the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).¹³

The Kurdish forces may become a victim of machinations of regional powers since they represent a serious threat not only to Turkey but to the regional powers, which have an extensive Kurdish minority, as well. However, recent alliance with the US and deteriorating relations between the US and Turkey may favor the Kurds. The US air strikes on IS positions in Syria has also helped they YPG and SDF push out the terrorist and recapture some of the Syrian territory previously conquered by the Islamic State. The US Special Forces have also managed to embed themselves within the Kurdish territory thus allowing the US government to have some kind of ground presence in Syria. Though these political moves and alliances may seem marginal at the moment they will have a major impact in Syria and its future.

¹⁰ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, *Jabhat Al-Nusra a Strategic Briefing*, p.6-7, Quilliam Foundation (<https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>)

¹¹ Defections in the SAA were estimated at tens of thousands at the beginning of the revolution.

¹² Elliot Freidland, Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi and Dr. Joshua Landis, *Who's Who in the Syrian Civil War* p. 12, (<https://www.clarionproject.org/sites/default/files/Clarion%20Project%20Syrian%20Civil%20War%20Factsheet.pdf>)

¹³ The Syria Institute, People's Protection Units (YPG), August 2016 (<http://syriainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/YPG-Cheat-Sheet-Secure.pdf>)

The Islamic State can be described as an accident in history. This rouge terrorist state managed to exploit highly destabilized situation in Iraq and later in Syria to spread its influence and gain territory. Although the Islamic State is trying to draw its legitimacy from religion, their main tool for maintaining law and order is brutal and morbid implementation of the Sharia. There are no exact numbers of fighters or personnel that this "State" has, nevertheless there is no doubt that IS's combatants have an impressive experience and skill in various types of warfare. There are a couple of reasons behind this. Firstly some of the Iraqi military officers who were made jobless after the fall of Saddam Hussein saw their opportunity in various extremist and radical groups in the region including the Islamic State. Secondly the Islamic State has a great recruitment potential, mainly because of their ideology and early successes in Iraq and Syria. Also the Islamic State is a very attractive destination for various radicals throughout the world. Finally, combat capabilities of the IS are heavily boosted by wide sources of funding and an impressive arsenal, which makes them capable of providing military training courses for all of their combatants. Islamic State's funding is very wide and includes: bank looting, extortion, kidnapping, oil smuggling, smuggling of historical artifacts, foreign donations etc. Foreign donations and oil smuggling are probably the most important and lucrative sources of funding and also the most problematic ones. These sources of funding involve individuals or corporations who directly support this terrorist organization.¹⁴ Corporative, individual and even some foreign State interests intertwined with the Islamic State further prolong its life. This is one of the main reasons why Islamic State can't be completely suppressed, even when the Syrian crisis is resolved.

Conclusion

Further fragmentation of the factions involved in the Syrian conflict will inevitably complicate any kind of peace process and give possibility to the rise of warlordism. On the other hand, fragmentation of the opposition forces or moderate rebels indicates that these groups have no clear objectives, strategies, nor the support which is needed in order to legitimize their actions. These are of course good news for the government forces, nonetheless increasing numbers of smaller insurgency groups also means increasing criminal activity and less control of the overall situation.

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¹⁴ FATF Report, *Financing of the Terrorist organization Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL)*, p. 12-24 February 2015