

MARCH 2012

JOSEPH HOLLIDAY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 3

SYRIA'S ARMED OPPOSITION



Photo Credit: Lieutenant Ibrahim Ayoub of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade's Hamza Battalion, after pushing back Assad regime troops in Rastan. YouTube <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjfBhfkEMa4&feature=youtu.be>>, posted January 28, 2012.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

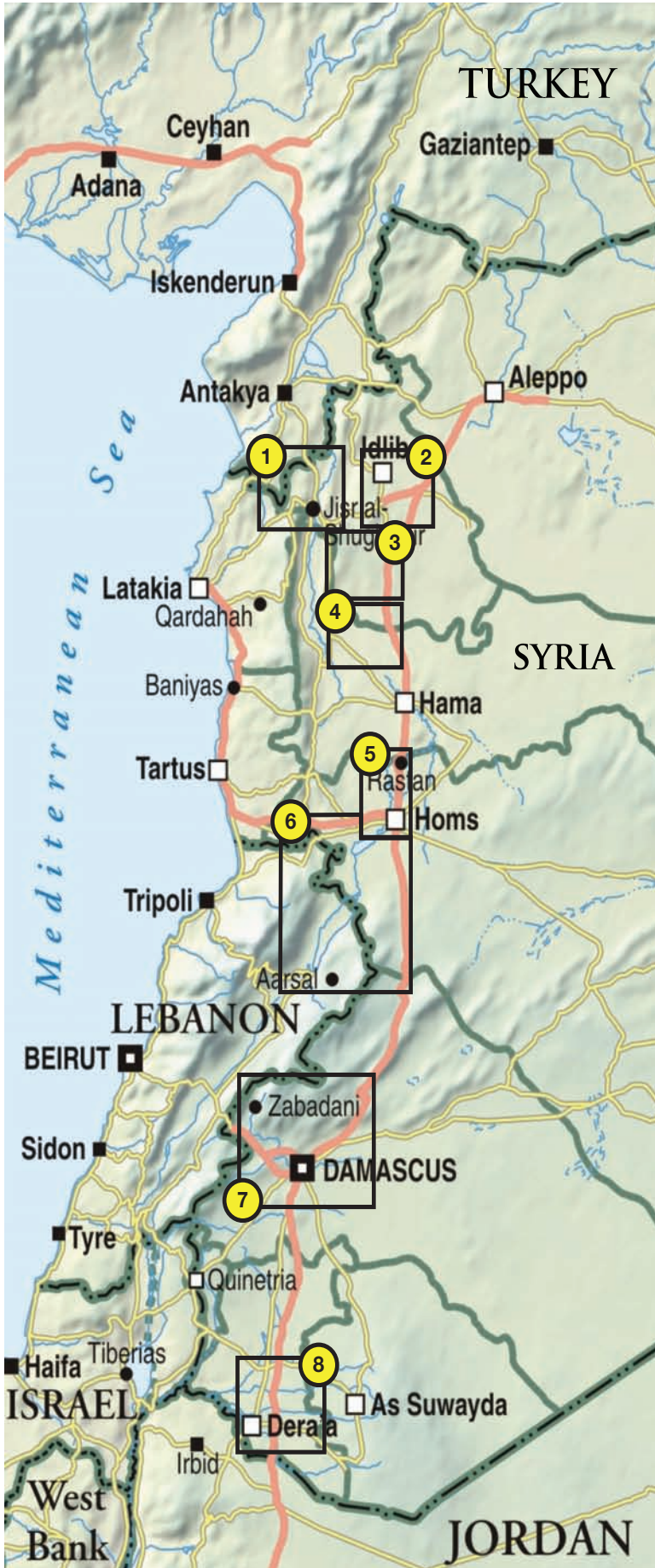
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- This report provides detailed information on Syria's armed opposition movement, highlighting where structure exists within the movement and where Syria's rebels lack organization. This report does not advocate for or against the policy of arming the Syrian opposition.
- Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 7, 2012 about issues that were restraining the United States from supporting the armed opposition in Syria. "It is not clear what constitutes the Syrian armed opposition – there has been no single unifying military alternative that can be recognized, appointed, or contacted," he said.
- The armed Syrian opposition is identifiable, organized, and capable, even if it is not unified. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), nominally headquartered in Turkey, thus functions more as an umbrella organization than a traditional military chain of command.
- Three of Syria's most effective militias maintain direct ties to the Free Syrian Army. They include The Khalid bin Walid Brigade near Homs; the Harmoush Battalion in the northern Jebel al-Zawiya mountains; and the Omari Battalion in the southern Hawran plain, the name used by locals for the agricultural plateau that comprises Syria's Dera'a province. Appendix 1 lists biographical details of the insurgent leaders affiliated with many effective fighting units. Appendix 2 provides an order of battle for the armed opposition groups by province.
- Other large and capable rebel groups do not maintain such a close relationship with the FSA headquarters in Turkey, but nevertheless refer to themselves as members of the Free Syrian Army.
- Despite the regime's assault on Homs in February 2012, the insurgency remains capable. The rebels who withdrew from the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs at the beginning of March 2012 have demonstrated the tactical wherewithal to retreat in order to preserve combat power.
- The Assad regime escalated attacks against the rebels after they defended Zabadani against the Army's offensive. The affront was probably significant in itself, and the Assad regime could not allow the rebels to hold terrain against the Army. But Zabadani is also vitally important to the regime and to Iran because the city serves as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force logistical hub for supplying Lebanese Hezbollah.
- The Assad regime is likely to continue its strategy of disproportionate force in an attempt to end the uprising as quickly as possible. Indiscriminate artillery fire allows the regime to raise cost of dissent while preserving its increasingly stretched maneuver force.
- The rebels' resiliency will make the Assad regime's endurance difficult, but the external support to his regime makes predictions of his imminent fall premature. The Syrian regime has not yet demonstrated the capacity to conduct enough large, simultaneous, or successive operations in multiple urban areas to suppress the insurgency. But it is possible that the technical and material support that Iran and Russia are providing will enable the regime to increase its span of control and its ability to fight insurgents in multiple locales without culminating.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- The rebels will have to rely on external lines of supply to replenish their arms and ammunition if they are to continue eroding the regime's control.
- The emergence of al-Qaeda-linked terrorist cells working against the regime poses risks to the United States and a challenge to those calling for material support of the armed opposition.
- As the militias continue to face overwhelming regime firepower the likelihood of their radicalization may increase. Moreover, the indigenous rebels may turn to al-Qaeda for high-end weaponry and spectacular tactics as the regime's escalation leaves the rebels with no proportionate response, as occurred in Iraq in 2005-2006. Developing relations with armed opposition leaders and recognizing specific rebel organizations may help to deter this dangerous trend.
- It is imperative that the United States distinguish between the expatriate political opposition and the armed opposition against the Assad regime on the ground in Syria.
- American objectives in Syria are to hasten the fall of the Assad regime; to contain the regional spillover generated by the ongoing conflict; and to gain influence over the state and armed forces that emerge in Assad's wake.
- Therefore, the United States must consider developing relations with critical elements of Syria's armed opposition movement in order to achieve shared objectives, and to manage the consequences should the Assad regime fall or the conflict protract.



1 Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib Province

Map & Discussion: Page 11

In June 2011, the first instance of armed rebellion against the Assad regime occurred in Jisr al-Shughour, when local militia and army defectors wiped out regime security forces before being quickly routed by regime reinforcements.

2 Idlib City, Idlib Province

Map & Discussion: Page 26

Rebels in Idlib city and its suburbs have conducted effective attacks since October, but their relationship with the Free Syrian Army headquarters is less clear than in nearby Jebel al-Zawiya.

3 Jebel al-Zawiya, Idlib Province

Map & Discussion: Page 12

Rebels in the mountainous Jebel al-Zawiya region suffered a major setback in December 2011 when security forces inflicted heavy casualties; however, Captain Yousif Yahya's Harmoush battalion continues to be effective there.

4 Hama Countryside, Hama, & Idlib Provinces

Map & Discussion: Page 29

In the northern Hama countryside, at the foothills of the Idlib plateau, the Abou al Fidaa and Osama bin Zaid Battalions have conducted raids and ambushes against loyalist patrols and checkpoints.

5 Homs & Rastan, Homs Province

Map & Discussion: Page 11

The powerful and organized Khalid bin Walid Brigade has fought the Assad regime in Homs and Rastan since September 2011; in early 2012, the Assad regime laid siege to Baba Amr neighborhood to root out the Farouq Battalion there.

6 Northeast Lebanon & al Qusayr, Homs Province

Map & Discussion: Page 30

Sunni majority enclaves in northeast Lebanon have received Syrian Army deserters and refugees, and have become key smuggling supply lines that bring limited amounts of small arms to the rebels around Homs.

7 Damascus Countryside

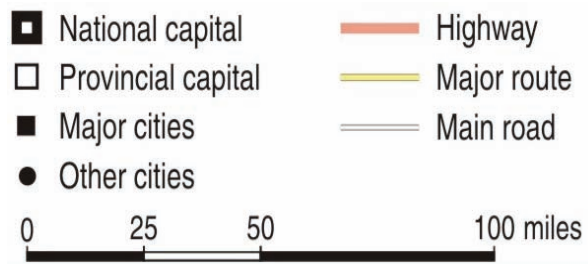
Map & Discussion: Page 12

Rebels in Zabadani forced a ceasefire when they repelled a regime offensive in January 2011. Coordinated rebel activity elsewhere diverted resources in January, but the regime took back the strategically important town mid-February.

8 Dera'a Province

Map & Discussion: Page 22

The Omari Battalion has disrupted regime freedom of movement with hit and run attacks throughout the central Hawran plain since October 2011; unlike rebels in Zabadani or Homs, they have declined to fight pitched battles.



MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 3

SYRIA'S ARMED OPPOSITION

By Joseph Holliday

In a late February 2012 interview with CNN, U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey explained the problems associated with providing weapons to Syria's armed opposition movement. It is "premature to take a decision to arm the opposition movement in Syria, because I would challenge anyone to clearly identify for me the opposition movement in Syria at this point," he said.¹ This report hopes to shed light on Syria's armed opposition movement, highlighting where structure exists within the movement and where Syria's rebels lack organization. Without advocating for or against the policy of arming the Syrian opposition, this report aims to provide detailed information about the rebel movement in order to help United States' leadership with this difficult policy decision.

The measurable increase of violence in Syria and the growing frustration about the lack of available policy options has led many to propose that the United States undertake to arm the Syrian opposition in early 2012. The sanctions regime imposed by a coalition of regional and international states has damaged the Syrian economy but has so far failed to achieve the desired political objectives of ending the violence and removing Assad from power. The tough stance Russia and China took in the United Nations Security Council has left little hope that united action will be possible. Meanwhile, diplomatic channels that the U.S. might have leveraged to develop a negotiated settlement evaporated with the call for Assad to step down and the subsequent closure of the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. As of early 2012, many observers believe the only remaining policy option to bring about change in Syria is through material support to the Syrian revolution.

Opponents of this course of action have argued that the armed opposition is as fragmented as its political counterparts, and arming the insurgency will only fuel the descent into chaos. Indeed, any decision to arm Syria's rebels must not be undertaken lightly, as this course would complete the transformation of Syria's unrest from a peaceful opposition movement to a long-term, multi-layered proxy conflict.

Ultimately, there are no easy solutions in Syria for U.S. policymakers; however, the difficulty of identifying Syria's armed opposition movement need not obscure a policy decision.

Regardless of whether U.S. leaders decide to arm Syria's rebels they must acknowledge the armed opposition movement's central role in the conflict. The future of the conflict in Syria will largely depend on the fate of its insurgent revolutionaries. The U.S. must develop relations with and a policy towards Syria's insurgent leadership, if only to maintain visibility of which rebel groups regional powers are arming. In the effort to develop a viable alternative to the Assad regime, the militia leaders on the ground must be accounted for. As Syria's political opposition stumbles, the leaders of the armed opposition will play a critical role in Syria's future.

The Assad regime may yet prevail by crushing the opposition with ever greater use of force, as it did in the infamous Hama Massacre of 1982. As a Syrian Defense Ministry official put it at the beginning of March 2012, "We've been preparing for the worst for forty years – since [Bashar] Assad's father. We've planned for this type of thing."² In February 2012, the regime demonstrated its willingness to escalate its use of force in order to root out the insurgency, leveling Homs' Baba Amr neighborhood during

a month-long siege of the rebel enclave. In early March loyalist troops forced the remaining rebel fighters to abandon their stronghold; however, the rebels withdrew in order to maintain combat power and continue the fight elsewhere. The regime regained control of terrain but did not defeat the insurgency.

The Assad regime's decision to destroy part of Hama in 1982 ended that uprising. Yet, the February 2012 escalation in Homs has so far had the opposite effect, accelerating the growth of the armed opposition movement. Syria's rebels have been able to control pockets of territory for increasing periods of time by stretching the loyalist security forces thin and forcing them to fight on multiple fronts at once.

Regarding concerns that Syria's armed opposition remains disorganized, it is important to distinguish between fragmentation and localized organization. The armed opposition has shown a propensity for organization at the local level. Insurgencies are inherently decentralized; finding a single leader who commands the allegiance of the grassroots resistance movement is not a reasonable expectation. Despite this natural constraint the, rebels across Syria have shown a willingness to share in the brand-name of the Free Syrian Army, even if this affiliation comes without meaningful logistical support or a chain of command.

After briefly covering the research methodology and offering an important caveat about the limited relationship between armed opposition and political opposition, this report will review the significant inflection points in the course of Syria's armed resistance movement, and examine some of the groups that comprise the insurgent movement against Assad, most of which fight under the flag of the Free Syrian Army. Finally, this report will consider the roles of arms smuggling and international jihadist groups linked to al-Qaeda in Syria.

Research Methodology

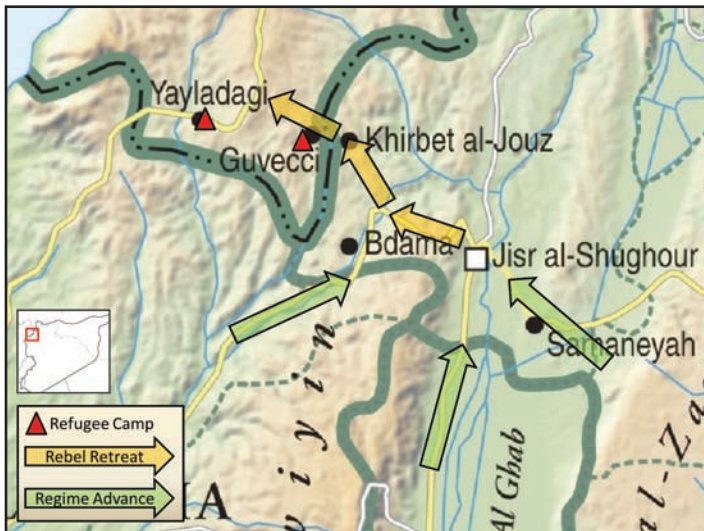
This research has been derived largely from the armed opposition's own reports on YouTube and from other opposition media outlets. The result is that those elements of the armed opposition that have not effectively communicated will not be accounted for here. In order to control for the lack of information about other groups, the report has overlaid this understanding of structured armed opposition with all the reported attacks and engagements between loyalist and rebel forces. This information derives from more sources and is often reported through a variety of channels that include Syrian state media and international news outlets. By matching up the elements of armed opposition with the attacks that have occurred, a picture emerges about the level of operational control these groups exercise in each region.

Relations with Political Opposition

It is important to understand how the growth of armed resistance will shape Syria's security in the future. Much of this will depend on whether these armed groups work with the opposition's political leadership. However, the failure of the political opposition to present a united and viable alternative to the Assad regime has largely precluded meaningful cooperation between armed resistance and political opposition above the local level. While this is an issue that merits further examination in future reports, it is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses specifically on the armed opposition groups operating in Syria.

ARMED OPPOSITION AND THE FIGHT FOR SANCTUARY

Over the last six months, armed opposition groups in Syria have struggled to hold their ground and establish a sanctuary from which to organize and stage operations. While they have succeeded in wresting small pockets of control from the regime for short periods, they remain



MAP 1 | REBELS RETREAT FROM REGIME OFFENSIVE IN JISR AL-SHUGHOUR IN JUNE 2011.

outgunned and outmanned by the mechanized, elite security force units. The rebels have been forced to abandon gains time and again in places such as Jisr al-Shughour, Rastan, and Zabadani. The Assad regime clearly demonstrated its desire and its capability to prevent the armed opposition from holding terrain throughout 2011. But by early 2012, the insurgents demonstrated increasing effectiveness, and were able to maintain control of key terrain near Damascus and central Homs for weeks at a time, despite the regime's efforts. The rebels have achieved these victories by forcing the regime to fight in many places at once, stretching the security forces thin. In February 2012, for example, when the regime focused on defeating pockets of armed resistance in Homs, it lost the capability to address an accelerating insurgency in the Idlib countryside in north Syria.

The armed opposition's increased effectiveness in 2012 has fueled the rebels' growth, but it also forced the Assad regime to increase its use of force. In places like Homs, Assad's forces have decided to besieged and shell neighborhoods ahead of ground clearance operations. This increased use of artillery in 2012 represents an important departure from the Assad regime's strategy of selective brutality in 2011. It also confirms the worst fears of those Syrians who lived through the 1982 Hama Massacre, and has allowed proposals to arm Syria's rebels to gain traction.

June 2011: Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib

The first instance of armed rebellion during the 2011 uprising came in June, when local militiamen, probably in concert with Syrian army defectors, killed a large number of regime security forces in Jisr al-Shughour, an isolated northern town at the foothills of the mountainous Turkish border. On June 4, 2011, regime security forces fired at an unruly demonstration, leading angry mourners to sack a local police station, seize weapons, and kill local security forces. When army units accompanied by secret police and intelligence officers arrived on the scene the next day, a portion of the army unit refused to assault the town and defected. Shortly afterward, twenty soldiers were killed in an ambush en route to reinforce beleaguered security forces in the city, and the local security headquarters was overrun. Reports on the final body count vary, but in the end the regime had to contend with its first armed resistance.³

The regime responded to this insurrection decisively, converging on the town from three directions with formations of hundreds of armored vehicles. The rebels abandoned the town in the face of this onslaught, escaping into the mountainous terrain along the Turkish border along with as many as 10,000 of Jisr al-Shughour's residents. The security forces continued in pursuit, and by the end of June they had forced the insurgents and civilian population alike into neighboring Antakya province in Turkey where refugee camps were quickly established.⁴

September 2011: Rastan, Homs

The next significant instance of armed resistance against the regime occurred in late September 2011 in Rastan, a key town north of Homs that controls Syria's primary North-South MI highway. By September 2011, Rastan and its surrounding towns had become the center of armed resistance against the regime where army defectors reinforced by local militants had formed the Khalid bin Walid Brigade and



REBELS DEMONSTRATE IN JEBEL AL-ZAWIYA, DECEMBER 2011.

conducted a number of lethal raids and ambushes in the area.⁵

Starting on September 27, 2011, security forces besieged and recaptured Rastan in an operation that again required hundreds of armored vehicles. Yet, unlike in Jisr al-Shughour in June, the insurgents were able to resist the security forces' assault for four days, utilizing the urban terrain to control key choke points. After days of tough resistance, the Khalid bin Walid Brigade fled the area but managed to retain a significant degree of its combat power, despite losing control of Rastan.⁶

December 2011: Jebel al-Zawiya, Idlib

Starting in late October 2011, a capable rebel group conducted a series of effective ambushes and raids along the roads and highways that bordered the mountainous Jebel al-Zawiya region of northern Idlib province.⁷ By the end of November, rebels operating out of the isolated mountain range averaged an attack each day, descending from their high ground to conduct raids and ambushes near Syria's primary north-south highway and near the key east-west highway that connects Aleppo to Syria's coast. In December, a series of videos showed increasingly large and confident groups of armed men demonstrating in towns that seemed entirely beyond the regime's reach.⁸

On December 20, 2011 the rebels fled their defensive positions when an armored column from the regime security forces headed towards the cluster of mountain towns around Kansafra. According to one survivor, more than 100 rebels

and locals entered a narrow valley to the west of the village to hide from the government troops, but they were caught and subjected to six hours of direct fire from heavy weapons. Security forces captured the few rebels who survived the assault and executed them on the spot. This operation resulted in the loss of seventy opposition fighters and highlighted the inability of the armed opposition to hold its ground against the security forces for extended periods of time.⁹

January 2012: Zabadani, Damascus Countryside

On January 18, 2012, after months of failing to hold its ground against regime offensive operations, the armed opposition scored a significant victory in the mountainous valley town of Zabadani, just thirty kilometers northwest of Damascus. The rebels destroyed a couple of tanks in the canalized terrain, stopping the armored offensive and forcing the regime to negotiate a temporary ceasefire in the mountain town.¹⁰ This victory emboldened insurgents to seize pockets of terrain in the string of towns that make up Damascus' eastern suburbs during the last week of January.

While the regime regained control of these areas in a series of uncontested sweeps at the end of January, this armed defiance so close to downtown Damascus distracted the regime from regrouping to redress its setback in Zabadani.¹¹ Meanwhile, as the security forces struggled to contain the crisis around Damascus, elements of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade began a renewed offensive in Rastan, destroying a number of armored vehicles and gaining control of the city's



A SYRIAN REGIIME T-55 DESTROYED BY REBELS IN ZABADANI, JANUARY 2012.

western neighborhoods.¹² These simultaneous actions helped to prevent the regime from returning to Zabadani with the necessary combat power for nearly a month. Finally on February 11, 2012, after a week of heavy bombardment, loyalist forces re-entered Zabadani.¹³

February 2012: Baba Amr, Homs

Syrian security forces tried to quell the uprising through selective brutality throughout 2011, careful not to trigger foreign intervention or the loss of critical support from Iran and Russia. However, the growth of the armed opposition movement in 2012 stretched the security forces thin, allowing the rebels defend pockets of control for increasing periods of time. These twin factors have led the Assad regime to increase its use of artillery against resistance, most notably in rebel-held neighborhoods of Homs.¹⁴

Homs' southwest Sunni-majority neighborhood Baba Amr has been a thorn in the regime's side since at least late October 2011, when rebels from the Khalid bin Walid Brigade who fled Rastan in late September repeatedly ambushed security forces attempting to patrol the restive neighborhood.¹⁵ By the end of 2011 the rebels in Baba Amr controlled entrances to the neighborhood, skirmishing with security forces from fighting positions fortified by sandbags and armed with medium machine guns and rocket propelled grenades, or RPGs.¹⁶

By early February 2012, the security forces abandoned their efforts to take back Baba Amr through a ground assault alone. Cutting off all roads leading into the neighborhood and shelling it with heavy artillery fire, the security forces laid siege to Baba Amr through the end of the month. The indiscriminate use of force in Baba Amr resulted in a humanitarian crisis with thousands of civilians killed and wounded and many more displaced. After twenty-six days of the siege, Assad's security forces mounted a ground offensive that finally forced the rebels to retreat on March 1, 2012.¹⁷



REBEL FIGHTING POSITION IN HOM'S BABA ARM NEIGHBORHOOD, FEBRUARY 2012.

The Assad regime may have defeated the rebels in Zabadani and Baba Amr in February 2012, but these victories have been costly. International calls for arming the opposition have increased, and the proliferation of rebel militias in places like Idlib and the Hama countryside has accelerated. The regime has used extreme force to defeat key centers of resistance, but in so doing it has generated pockets of rebel control that will stretch security forces thinner still. As Assad's armed opposition grows, so too will his regime's use of force.

Elements of the Armed Opposition

Before examining some of the groups that make up the armed opposition, it will be useful to consider the character of these rebel groups. Opposition media frequently attributes armed engagements with loyalist forces to defectors, even though a large percentage of the rebels are not defectors. As one journalist who met many armed opposition fighters put it, the majority of them are "civilians who have taken up arms." The rebels are "not armed gangs," the journalist continued, but rather "a popular armed struggle or insurgency, [who] use the term *muqawama* or 'resistance' to describe themselves."¹⁸

The rebels themselves have acknowledged that the majority of their numbers come from the civilian population, but defectors have constituted an important organizing force within the opposition. According to another journalist who travelled through northern Syria

to learn about the armed opposition, “The Free Syrian Army is much more organized than the rebel fighters in Libya. Because of the growing number of defectors, there’s a stock of able, trained soldiers and officers mounting in Syria.”¹⁹ However, the regime has effectively prevented defections above the individual and small unit level, and the cost of defecting remains high. As one interviewed Syrian Army soldier put it in an interview, “I would defect tomorrow if you could protect my family, but if I defected they would arrest my father and my brothers and the whole family would have no income. The regime is still in control.”²⁰

The armed opposition is overwhelmingly Sunni, raising concerns that the insurgency is potentially sectarian and radical. According to one journalist, “It’s worth noting that all the fighters I met – in the provinces of Homs, Idlib, Hama, Dera’a, and the Damascus suburbs – were Sunni Muslims, and most were pious.” Yet the opposition is not, as the Assad regime has been eager to portray it, all “Salafis, Jihadists, Muslim Brotherhood supporters, al-Qaeda, and terrorists.” “They are not fighting for Islam but they are inspired by it. Some drink alcohol, which is forbidden in Islam, and do not pray. And their brothers in arms do not force them to pray...”²¹ And yet there is cause for concern that the longer violence continues, the more sectarian it will become. As one young revolutionary put it in an early 2012 interview, “If this continues for another three months, we will have something worse than al-Qaeda to deal with. The drunks, the womanizers, they’re not only devout now, they’re becoming extremists. Won’t that scare Western capitals into helping us?”²²

The Emergence of a Free Syrian Army ‘Headquarters’

On June 10, 2011, as regime security forces closed in on the rebellious Jisr al-Shughour, a Syrian Army lieutenant colonel named Hussein Harmoush publicly announced his defection in a video statement. Activists said that the officer had defected during an operation in Bdama, ten kilometers west of Jisr al-Shughour, and took 150

of his soldiers with him across the border into Turkey.²³

In his video statement, Harmoush presented his name, rank and position, and held up his identification card for the camera in order to establish his credentials as a Syrian Army officer. He said that his mission after his defection was fundamentally defensive rather than offensive: “Our current aim is the protection of the protestors who are asking for freedom and democracy.” Furthermore, he framed his message around secular themes, assuring the “great people of Syria and all its diverse sects and groups” that his objectives were “freedom and democracy” and emphasizing, “Peace, peace, no divisions. One, one, one, the people of Syria are all one.” He told “all people [who have been] misled by the regime” that the “Syrian people will forgive you all,” but followed with the measured warning: “if you don’t join, you and the tyrant Bashar will be subject to a fair trial.”²⁴

Harmoush’s defection and video statement started what quickly became known as the Free Officers Movement. The manner, tone, and message of his statement have been copied time and again by other defecting officers, and Harmoush’s defection was an important marker in the progression of the armed opposition movement, and continues to hold an important place in the opposition’s discourse as of March 2012.²⁵

Throughout June and July 2011, a series of similar video statements emerged from Syrian Army officers from across the country. In most cases, these officers began the statement by presenting their name, rank, position and ID card, as Harmoush did, and each of them stated their intent to join some form of free militia unit to protect demonstrators.²⁶

At the end of July, Colonel Riad Asaad, along with six other Syrian army officers who had defected, announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from a refugee camp in Antakya province, Turkey. Rather than state his mission to protect the defectors as Harmoush had done, Colonel Asaad warned, “Starting from this moment, we

Unit Name	Area of Ops	Commander	Unit Name	Area of Ops	Commander
<p>These four rebel groups have both fought regime forces and demonstrated their affiliation with the Free Syrian Army headquarters.</p>			<p>These five groups are close to the Free Syrian Army headquarters but have not engaged security forces as frequently or effectively.</p>		
Khalid bin Walid	Homs	Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali	Houriyeh	Aleppo	Ibrahim Majbour
Harmoush	Jebel al-Zawiya	Yousif Yahya	Ababeel	Aleppo	Ammar al-Wawi
Omari	Dera'a	Qais Qataneh	Salahdin al-Ayoubi	Jisr al-Shughour	Ala'adin
Abou al-Fidaa	Hama	-----	Moawiyah bin Sufian	Damascus	Maher Rahman Nueimi
<p>There is little evidence that these six units are effective, despite the fact that they claim to operate in places where attacks have been frequent. Other rebel groups are more likely to be responsible for this activity.</p>			<p>There is little evidence that these seven groups are effective, because they claim to operate in areas with little to no reported rebel engagements.</p>		
Hamza	Idlib city	Abdul Sattar Yunsu	al-Suqur	Latakia	Mohammed Ousso
Qashoush	Hama	Ahyam al-Kurdi	al-Qassam	Jableh, Latakia	Mazen Ezzein
Saad bin Moaz	Al-Ghab, Hama	-----	Samer Nunu	Baniyas, Tartous	Riyad Ahmad
Omar	Al-Qusayr, Homs	-----	Sultan Pasha Atrash	As-Suwayda	-----
Moaz al-Raqad	Deir ez-Zor	-----	Odai al-Tayi	Al-Hasakah	-----
Allah Akhbar	Abu Kamal	-----	Mishaal Tammo	Qamishli	-----
			Ahmad Nayif Sukhni	Ar-Raqqah	-----

CHART 1 | THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY'S OCTOBER 12, 2011 VIDEO STATEMENT COUNTED 22 SUBORDINATE UNITS, RANGING IN EFFECTIVENESS & CREDIBILITY.

will consider any member of the Assad security forces that kill our people a target to our rifles.” The group went on to outline a structure for the organization, and each participant in the video stated their positions and the militia “battalions” they claimed to command.²⁷

Colonel Asaad also claimed that four other officers (including Lieutenant Ahmed Khalaf, a defector in Homs, and Captain Qais Qataneh, a defector in Dera'a) were part of the Free Syrian Army, despite the fact that those officers were not in the video. It is hard to know whether these officers were consulted prior to their by-name inclusion in the organization, despite the fact that Asaad claimed umbrella leadership over them. In another video statement just days later on August 3, Qataneh seemed to think of himself differently, as the commander of the “Southern Sector of the Free Officer’s Movement,” not the Free Syrian Army.²⁸ Regardless whether the FSA had control of the components they claimed, the scarcity of reported engagements between Syrian security forces and armed opposition suggests that none of these militia units were an effective fighting force in the late summer of 2011.

By early September, reports emerged that Harmoush had disappeared somewhere near his sanctuary in southern Turkey. In an interview, Captain Qataneh said Harmoush disappeared shortly after a meeting with a Turkish security official, but he did not blame Turkey for the

disappearance.²⁹ The most notable aspect of this interview is the fact that Qataneh, who operated in Dera'a province in southern Syria, appeared to be apprised of events in Turkey, suggesting a high degree of communication at this early stage in the development of the armed opposition movement, if not command-and-control.

In fact, Syrian security forces had custody of Harmoush. Syrian state media aired an interview in mid-September in which Harmoush recanted his previous statements, saying that the opposition was indeed “armed gangs” murdering people. He went on to say that the first people to contact him after his defection were the Muslim Brotherhood and exiled former Syrian vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam, both statements that bolstered the regime’s argument that a foreign conspiracy was responsible for unrest in Syria.³⁰ The consensus among political and armed opposition members was that Harmoush was responding to threats or torture, and he was revered as a hero despite this damaging interview. Harmoush was sentenced to death and executed in January 2012.³¹

With Harmoush in Syrian state custody in late September 2011, Asaad announced the unification of the Free Officer’s Movement and the Free Syrian Army.³² The video statement included two new officers who had previously referred to themselves as members of the Free Officer’s Movement, Ammar al-Wawi and Yousif al-Din Yahya.³³ By

mid-October, the FSA leadership felt comfortable announcing an expanded formal structure.³⁴ Notably, the structure included Qais Qataneh as the commander of the Omari Battalion in Dera'a province and Major Abdurrahman Sheikh Ali as commander of the newly consolidated Khalid bin Walid Battalion in Homs (these groups will be discussed at length below). The constraints represented by regime security forces and sheer distance limit meaningful logistical or operational relationships between the FSA 'headquarters' and these key militia groups in the field, but both parties remained associated.

Many units claimed by the Free Syrian Army have demonstrated little or minimal effectiveness, while other units have not demonstrated clear links back to Turkey. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that the rebel groups who later fought security forces in Syria's eastern Deir ez-

Zor province have any relationship with the FSA. Of the twenty-two subordinate units listed in the video statement, only five or six have been both effective and aligned with the FSA leadership. Seven of the groups listed have stated operational areas in which very few engagements between loyalist and rebel forces have been reported.

Despite some challenges to Colonel Riad Asaad's leadership of the umbrella organization, the headquarters has remained relatively cohesive. Without coordinating with Colonel Asaad, senior defectors published a February 2012 video and written statement that announced: "The Free Officer's Movement and the Free Syrian Army have decided to create the Higher Revolutionary Military Council to unite ranks under the leadership of Mustafa al-Sheikh."³⁵ Notably the statement referenced Maher al-Nuemi, who had become an important liason and spokesman for

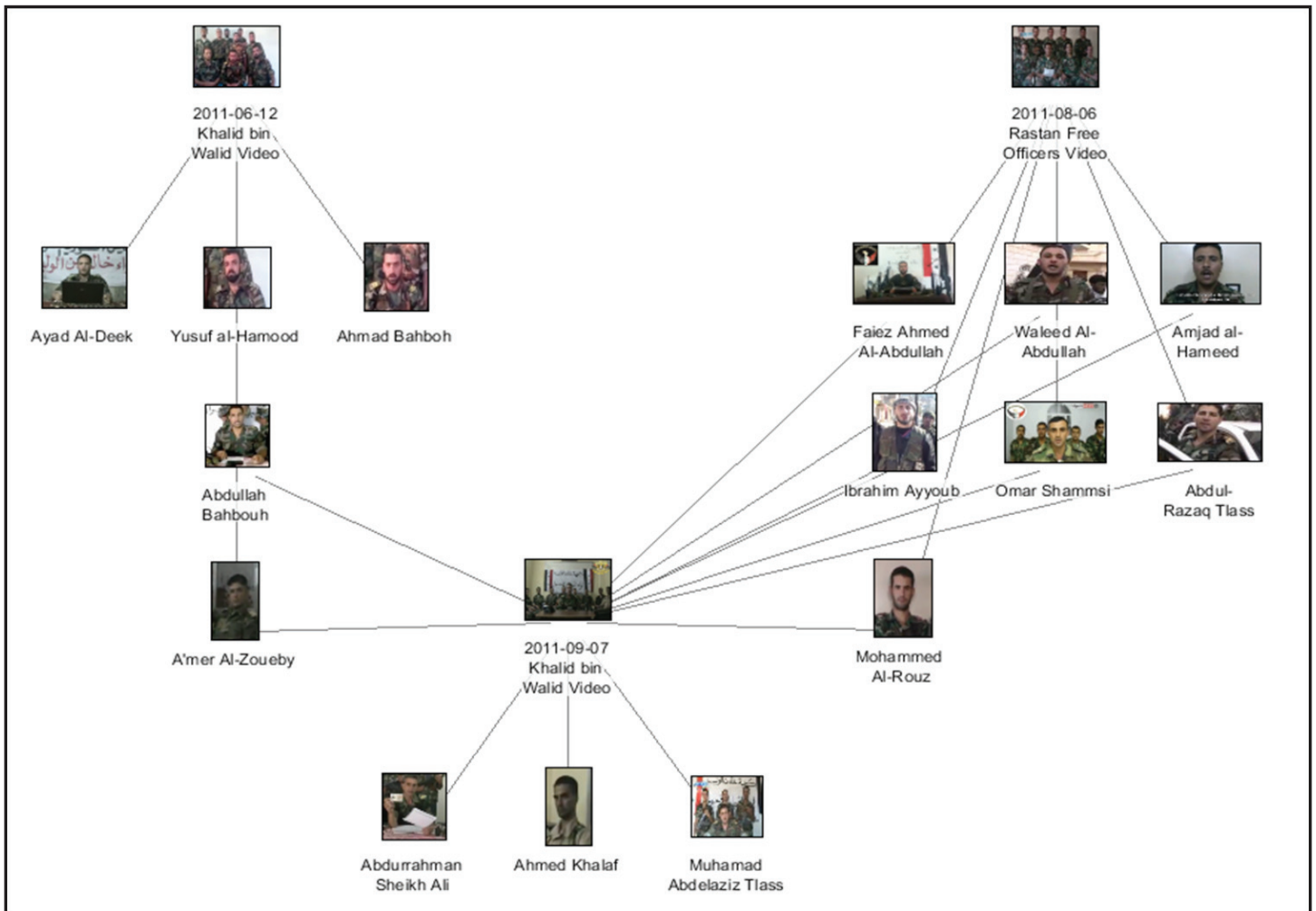


CHART 2 | KHALID BIN WALID FORMATION

the FSA in late 2011 and early 2012, as the new organization's spokesman. Later in the month, another statement clarified the roles of these new senior defectors by explaining that the Free Syrian Army had joined with the Higher Revolution Military Council, which would include Riad Asaad, Mustafa al-Sheikh, Maher al-Nueimi and Ammar al-Wawi.³⁶

While it was encouraging to see the rebel leadership overcome their differences in February 2012, many rebels in Syria complain that the FSA headquarters is not helping the fight, and are bitter about the groups' detachment and safety in Turkey's refugee camps. One interviewed defector claimed that after he escaped to Turkey, "We did nothing there, just sat in our tents and watched TV and sometimes gave press interviews. I told them I hadn't defected to sit in a tent, I wanted to fight."^[1] A Syrian expatriate and rebel advisor in Turkey put it more harshly, if hypocritically: "The Free Syrian Army in Turkey is a game, a façade to tell the world that there is a command."^[2] These are valid criticisms, as the FSA headquarters does not appear to exercise command over the autonomous groups that fight in its name; however, many of the most important groups who are fighting the regime acknowledge the FSA's leadership, inasmuch as they are able to do so. Insurgencies are inherently decentralized, and expecting the headquarters to maintain direct operational control over all the rebels in Syria is unrealistic. The fact that the leadership, however distant, remained unified in February 2012 came at an important turning point in the conflict, as the embattled Khalid bin Walid Brigade fought Assad's security forces around Homs that month.

Homs: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

The Khalid bin Walid Brigade emerged between June and September 2011 when a dozen officers who had defected from the regime coalesced in Rastan under the leadership of Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali. By 2012, Khalid bin Walid could boast as many as six subordinate rebel units, each of which was actively engaged in fighting loyalist forces. The development and

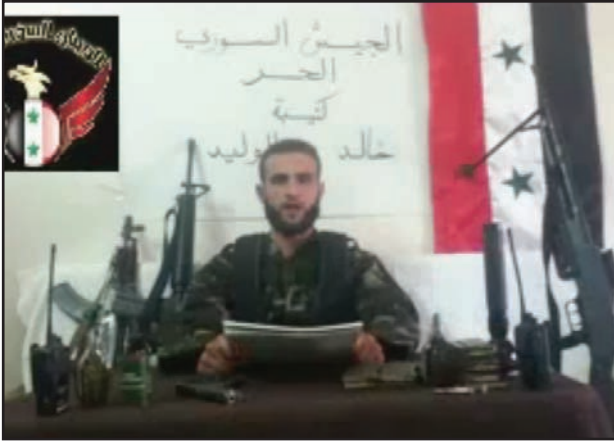
organization of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade suggests that insurgent groups in Homs and Rastan coordinated their actions through at least mid-February 2012.

A militia unit named Khalid bin Walid appeared first in a video statement in mid-June 2011.³⁹ The name presumably derives from the first Arab conqueror of Syria, who was an associate of the Prophet Mohammed and whose shrine is in a mosque in Homs city. In early August, nine lieutenants, a number of whom had individually and publicly defected from the Syrian Army in June and July, appeared together in a video statement as members of the Free Officer's movement in Rastan, twenty kilometers north of Homs city.⁴⁰

During this formative period for the Khalid bin Walid Brigade, there were only a handful of engagements between the nascent insurgency and the Syrian regime's forces in the Homs and Rastan area. One prominent Khalid bin Walid defector claimed that his militia began engaging regime security forces when they attacked protestors as early as June 2011. A number of armed clashes occurred in July and August in neighborhoods in Homs and Rastan. Rebels conducted an ambush against a bus carrying regime security forces on the road between the two cities and derailed a train just west of Homs.⁴¹

In early September, Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali, who had defected in late August,⁴² sat with fourteen defected junior officers to announce the formation of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade in Rastan under his command.⁴³ This video represents a high degree of cooperation. The participants included two officers from the original mid-June video and seven from the early August Free Officer's statement.⁴⁴ In addition to these eight individuals, two other lieutenants who had previously defected and operated on their own appeared in the video.⁴⁵

Of the fifteen defectors, there was only one major, one captain and thirteen lieutenants, reflecting few senior officer defections. A number of these officers' defection videos indicated that they were



LIEUTENANT FAIZ AL-ABDULLAH DESCRIBES KHALID BIN WALIDS'S WITHDRAWAL FROM RASTAN, SEPTEMBER 2011.

Rastan natives who had served in faraway provinces such as Dera'a at the outset of unrest.⁴⁶ In this sense, even though defected Syrian Army officers formed the leadership of the armed opposition units, they had the character of militias, as young men fighting in their own hometown.

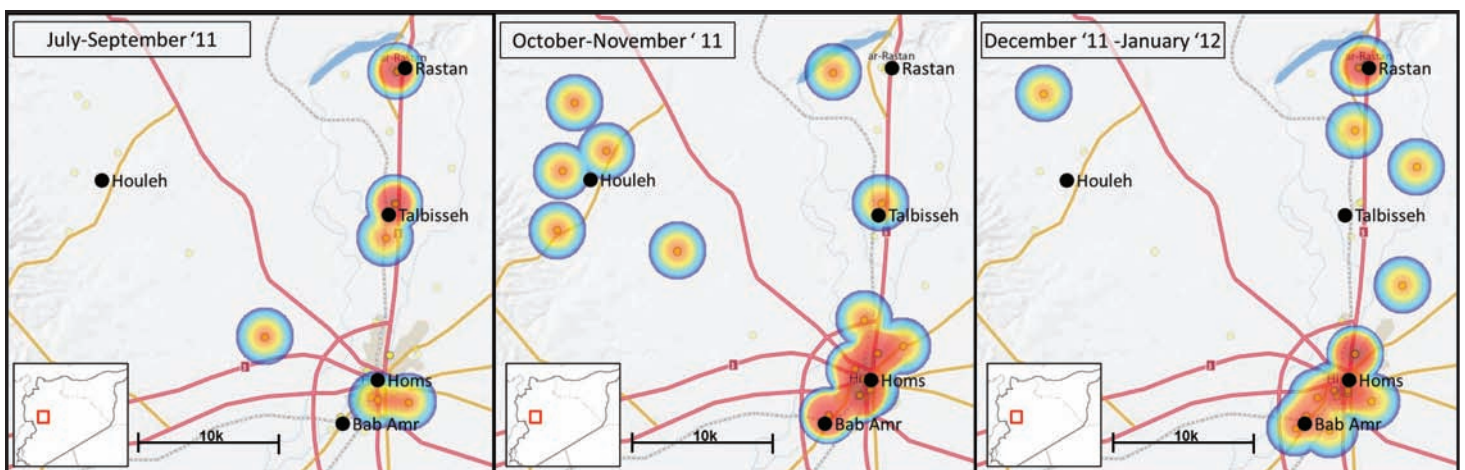
By the end of September, Rastan had become the center of the maturing armed resistance against the Assad regime. Insurgents conducted a pair of lethal ambushes on the Rastan-Homs road. They overran the home of Rastan's intelligence chief and captured a Syrian Army colonel from Qardahah, Assad's home town.⁴⁷ By the end of September, Rastan had become the center of the maturing armed resistance against the Assad regime.

Syrian security forces besieged and captured Rastan in an operation on September 27 that required 250 armored vehicles and lasted four

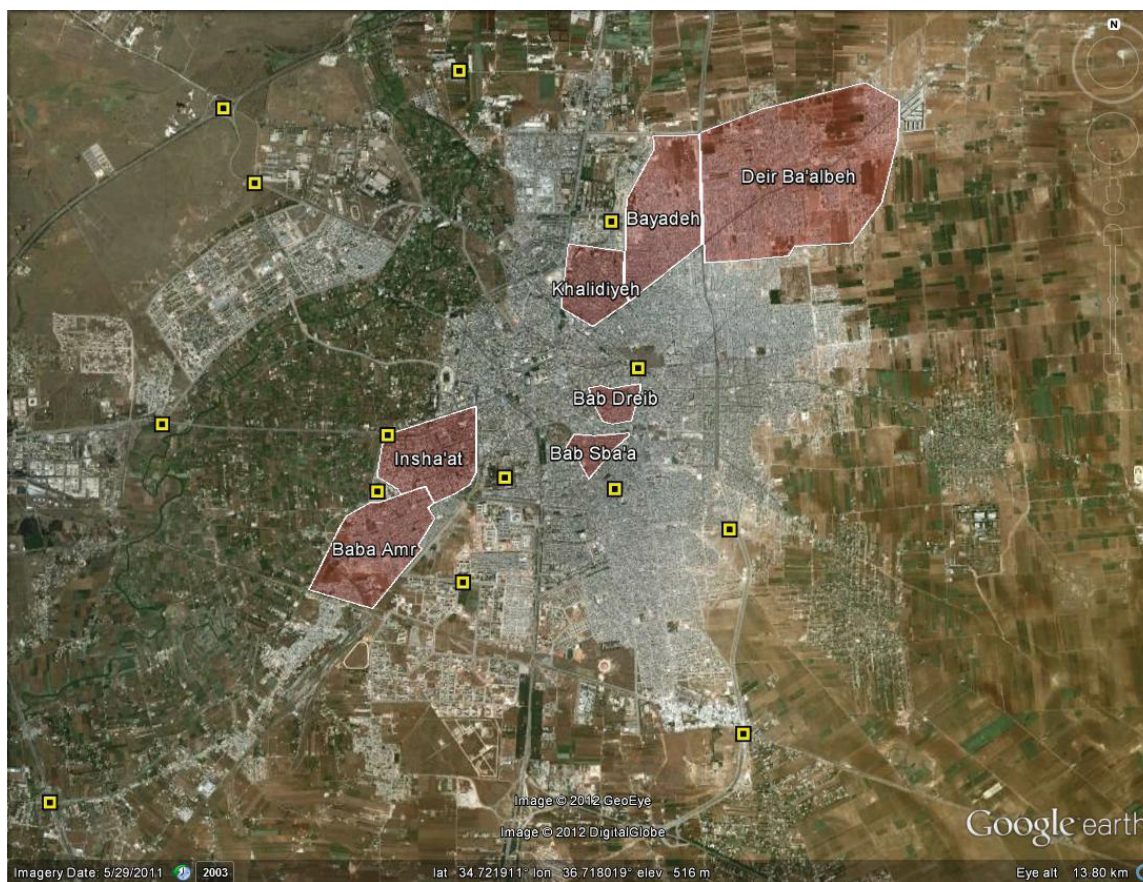
days. According to one activist, the resistance forces in Rastan numbered approximately 100 defectors and 600 other men under arms.⁴⁸ Regime military spokesmen stated that the seven soldiers and police were killed and more than thirty were injured during the operation, but despite this heavy resistance, the security forces retook the city by October 1.⁴⁹ According to an opposition source who spoke with Reuters, Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali played a leading role in the fight: "He proved to be astute on the battlefield. The defectors in Turkey are playing little role."⁵⁰

Days later, on October 6, Lieutenant Faiez Ahmed al-Abdullah appeared in his third video statement, this time explaining the Khalid bin Walid Brigade's withdrawal from Rastan. He described himself as the leader of the Ali bin Abi Talib Company of the Khalid bin Walid Battalion of the Free Syrian Army. Lieutenant al-Abdullah said "We decided to retreat following a well-studied withdrawal plan that preserves our capabilities and equipment," and made the likely exaggerated claim that "we killed more than 1000 of Assad Army personnel and shabiha, destroyed around forty-two armored vehicles and gained a lot of weapons and ammunition." He finished by announcing the death of Lieutenant Ahmed Khalaf, one of the earliest defectors and militia leaders, and referring to Major Sheikh Ali as "the leader of our battalion."⁵¹

The Ali bin Abi Talib Company withdrew to the rural Houleh region, approximately twenty kilometers west of Rastan. The day after regime



MAP 2 | REBEL ENGAGEMENTS AROUND HOMS



MAP 3 | REGIME STRONGPOINTS AND REBEL-HELD NEIGHBORHOODS IN HOMS, FEBRUARY 2012.

security forces retook Rastan, an unnamed activist reported that insurgents from Ali bin Abi Talib escaped across the Orontes river and killed six loyalist soldiers in Houleh.⁵² Four additional effective attacks against loyalist forces were conducted in the Houleh region in October and November alone, suggesting the continued presence of an organized opposition force.⁵³

Homs City: Farouq Battalion

Members of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade also moved to Homs city after fleeing Rastan in late September. In particular, the Farouq Battalion, led by Lieutenant Abdul Razaq Tlass and operating as a component of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade, proved to be extremely effective in defending the Homs' Baba Amr neighborhood in late October and early November. Over a series of engagements between October 28 and November 5, the Farouq Battalion reportedly killed over thirty-five loyalists and repelled regime forces' repeated attempts to enter the neighborhood.⁵⁴

Lieutenant Abdul Razaq Tlass earned a popular following in November and December 2011. According to a CNN news clip filmed with the Farouq Battalion in Baba Amr, Tlass was the nephew of the long-time Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, a close Sunni confidant of Hafez al-Assad, also from Rastan.⁵⁵ A pair of videos in early November showed Tlass and his deputy Lieutenant Walid al-Abdullah carried on the shoulders of a crowd in Baba Amr, alongside a pickup truck full of men under arms.⁵⁶ In February 2012 a French television station even did a feature on Tlass, calling him "The Heart of the Free Army."⁵⁷

Tlass and the Farouq Battalion continued their activities through December. The Farouq Battalion launched attacks on the security forces' armored vehicles, publishing several videos showing burning armored troop carriers in Baba Amr.⁵⁸ In another video, the Farouq Battalion filmed their assault of a regime strongpoint, taking down the Syrian Ba'ath Party Flag on the



LIEUTENANT ABDUL RAZAQ TLASS IN BABA AMR, NOVEMBER 2011.

building's roof and replacing with the traditional Syrian flag amid heavy gunfire.⁵⁹ A December CNN clip showed Tlass inspecting heavily sandbagged positions on intersections and rooftops in Baba Amr, each of which included a mix of assault rifles, medium machine guns and RPGs.⁶⁰ During January, different groups of fighters published a series of video statements pledging to join the Farouq Battalion.⁶¹

In one late January incident that received international media attention, the Farouq Battalion reported capturing seven Iranians in Homs who, they said, were members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force working with Syrian security forces in the city. Shortly afterwards, the FSA published a number of videos showing the captives, their Iranian passports, and a confession in Farsi from one of the captives in which he said he was "a member of the Revolutionary Guards of the Iranian armed forces. I am a member of the team in charge of cracking down on protestors in Syria, and we received our orders directly from the security division of the Syrian Air Force in Homs."⁶² Iranian state news had announced the capture of electrical engineers in Homs just days prior, including a photograph of some of the same men who appeared in the confession video.⁶³ It is difficult to confirm the affiliations of these men through open source reporting.

The capability of the Farouq Battalion and its apparent success in repelling regime offensives in Baba Amr contributed to the Assad regime's decision to use heavy and indiscriminate artillery fire against the Baba Amr neighborhood in February 2012. While the regime has not shied away from using violence throughout the Syrian

unrest, they did previously demonstrate sensitivity to such overwhelming and indiscriminate force in an effort to minimize backlash at home and abroad. However, the situation in Baba Amr by the end of January encouraged the regime to shift away from its tactic of selective brutality to a tactic of overwhelming firepower in order to root out this stubborn pocket of resistance.

After days of unrelenting artillery barrages in Baba Amr, Syrian and Iranian state media reported Tlass' death on February 9.⁶⁴ The opposition has not disputed these reports. At the beginning of March, after weeks of siege and artillery fire, the Farouq Battalion announced its "tactical withdrawal" from Baba Amr in the face of an overwhelming ground assault.⁶⁵ The rebels also cited the plight of the neighborhoods remaining 4,000 who were trapped during the siege as a reason for their withdrawal.⁶⁶

As Baba Amr's remaining rebel forces withdrew into central Homs, they may have joined other Khalid bin Walid units operating in the city. For example, the Fadi al Qassim Battalion, led by Captain Yousef Hamood, took a leading role in the fighting in central Homs around the Bab Dreib neighborhood in January and February 2012.⁶⁷ After storming loyalist strongpoints and destroying armored vehicles, Hamood contributed to liberating key sections of Homs in February 2012.⁶⁸ While it remains to be seen whether Homs' remaining rebels will continue to resist the regime's onslaught in March 2012, FSA leadership has indicated its intent to withdraw from other neighborhoods in Homs rather than force another round of siege.⁶⁹ Just as the Khalid bin Walid Brigade withdrew from Rastan in September 2011, the rebels are likely to pull back from the rest of Homs in an effort to retain enough capability to continue hit-and-run ambushes in the Homs countryside.

Rastan: Hamza Battalion

In late January 2012, as the Farouq Battalion fought off regime attempts to break into Baba Amr, a third battalion of the Khalid bin Walid

Brigade, the Hamza Battalion mounted a renewed offensive in Rastan. In a January 29 video statement, Lieutenant Ibrahim Mohammed Ayoub, surrounded by battle-scarred streets and sandbagged fighting positions manned by men with medium machine guns and RPGs said that the Hamza Battalion had routed regime forces from Rastan's western neighborhoods.⁷⁰ The next day, Major Ali Mohammed Ayoub of the Hamza Battalion confirmed in a phone interview that "the Assad army is on the defensive now. They are stranded in a few pockets."⁷¹ Earlier that week, both Ayoub brothers appeared in a video statement, announcing the Hamza Battalion's intentions as they stood in formation.⁷² While this was the first appearance of Major Ali Ayoub, Lieutenant Ibrahim Ayoub appeared in most of the key videos that emerged with the formation of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade.⁷³ The Hamza Battalion consolidated its control of Rastan and continued to resist regime offensives throughout February 2012.

The Hamza Battalion was not the only Khalid bin Walid unit fighting in Rastan. Major Ahmed Bahboh, the first leader of Khalid bin Walid, was also active in Rastan in early 2012. A series of videos in February showed both Ahmed Bahboh and his brother, Captain Abdullah Bahboh, fighting against regime security forces in the streets of Rastan.⁷⁴ If Ahmed Bahboh leads a named unit within Khalid bin Walid, its name is unknown. However, Captain Abdullah Bahboh stayed close to Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali throughout Khalid bin Walid's formative period, suggesting that the Bahboh brothers maintained close relations with Khalid bin Walid's leadership.⁷⁵

Days after security forces recaptured Baba Amr in nearby Homs, the rebels in Rastan decided to withdraw in early March after controlling much of the city throughout February 2012. The Khalid bin Walid units in Rastan faced considerable regime pressure, to include shelling, throughout February, although not to the same extent as Baba Amr. However, they feared that the regime would repeat its strategy in Rastan and destroy sections of the city. Speaking from the FSA headquarters

in Turkey, Captain Ammar al-Wawi announced the strategic withdrawal from Rastan to prevent a repeated humanitarian crisis. "We don't want to give the regime an excuse to kill more civilians," al-Wawi said. "It was a tactical withdrawal in order to create better circumstances and to get ready for the next step." He went on to explain that "the Free Syrian Army moved our operations to the offensive phase in defense of the Syrian people," presumably referring to rebel plans to conduct hit-and-run raids and ambushes in the Homs countryside.⁷⁶

Another significant militia group with stated ties to the Khalid bin Walid Brigade is Captain Rawad Ahmed al-Aksah's Special Tasks Battalion. Captain al-Aksah announced the unit's formation in early January. Although he has not appeared in video statements with other prominent leaders within Khalid bin Walid, he nevertheless explicitly stated that he planned to operate under the Brigade's leadership.⁷⁷ While the Special Tasks Battalion appeared to operate between Homs and Rastan, conducting ambushes and sabotaging pipelines in the area, the unit's effectiveness is not as clear others linked to Khalid bin Walid, despite the approximately fifty individuals who appear in formation during the announcement video.⁷⁸

Despite the depth, capability, and apparent structure of the various militia groups with links to the Khalid bin Walid Brigade, as many as half of the armed engagements between rebels and loyalists around Homs were unlikely to be tied to Khalid bin Walid. In particular, no Khalid bin Walid units appeared to operate in Homs' northeast neighborhoods, namely Hay Ashera, Bayadeh, and Dier Baalbeh, all of which have witnessed ferocious fighting. Units like the Nourain Battalion have appeared in multiple videos, even while fighting with regime security forces; however, no one from this militia has indicated it has any relationship with Khalid bin Walid.⁷⁹

Similarly, at least nine significant armed engagements between rebels and regime forces around al-Qusayr between October 2011 and



CAPTAIN QAIS QATANEH ANNOUNCES HIS DEFECTION FROM THE SYRIAN ARMY, JULY 2011.

January 2012, were not directly tied to the Khalid bin Walid Brigade's activities.⁸⁰ This fighting has collectively killed at least twenty-five loyalist soldiers in al-Qusayr, which lies approximately twenty-five kilometers southwest of Homs. These relatively modest attack numbers may belie the actual scale of the armed resistance movement in al-Qusayr. A series of images CNN posted in February showed streets full of rebel fighters with an array of weapons, including a recoilless rifle mounted on a pickup trucks.⁸¹ When regime forces recaptured Homs' Baba Amr neighborhood in early March 2012, a defected junior officer who identified himself as a member of the Free Syrian Army told one reporter that he feared the regime would turn its guns on al-Qusayr next. While these rebels maintained their defensive posture in the mostly abandoned town, they did not plan to defend al-Qusayr in the face of a determined assault. Despite the significance of al-Qusayr's role as an arms smuggling hub close to the Lebanese border, the rebels there had only small arms and felt they could not withstand an assault.⁸² (The role of smuggling routes from northeast Lebanon will be discussed at greater length below.)

Dera'a: Omari Battalion

From mid-October 2011 through February 2012, the Omari Battalion was the most effective rebel force operating in the Hawran, the name used by locals for the agricultural plateau that comprises Syria's Dera'a province. The plateau consists of

a patchwork of farms dotted with small towns that radiate from intersections between the roads and dirt tracks that crisscross the terrain. Unlike many rebel groups operating in Syria, this force has not attempted to hold ground against regime security forces. Instead it has conducted hit-and-run ambushes and raids throughout a belt of villages across the center of the Hawran, a high percentage of which have generated meaningful loyalist casualties. In this way, the Omari Battalion has effectively disrupted loyalist troop movements and forced the regime to commit forces to the region, but it has not meaningfully limited the regime's freedom of movement. The long distance between Dera'a province and the FSA headquarters in Turkey made it highly unlikely that the Omari Battalion received material support or tactical guidance from this distant leadership; however, the Omari Battalion has deliberately aligned itself with the Free Syrian Army since October 2011.

Captain Qais Qataneh was one of the first Syrian Army Officers to publicize his defection in a July 10, 2011 video in which he stated that had left the Syrian Army to join a new "battalion," explaining that he had seen many civilians killed and pledging his loyalty to the Syrian people and their freedom.⁸³ At the beginning of August, Qataneh appeared again, this time with thirteen compatriots as the "commander of the southern sector" of the Free Officer's Movement.⁸⁴ Just a month later, the rebel group became affiliated with the Free Syrian Army when they announced the expanded structure of the FSA and cited Captain Qais Qataneh as commander of the Omari Battalion in Dera'a, presumably named after the mosque in Dera'a city where the protest movement began at the end of March 2011.⁸⁵

Around the same time, a pair of engagements between security forces and the armed opposition forces occurred near Harak, a small village in the center of the Hawran. Two separate clashes in Harak in the third week of October left six loyalist soldiers and six rebels dead.⁸⁶ Given the proximity between Harak and the location of Omari Battalion attacks later in November,

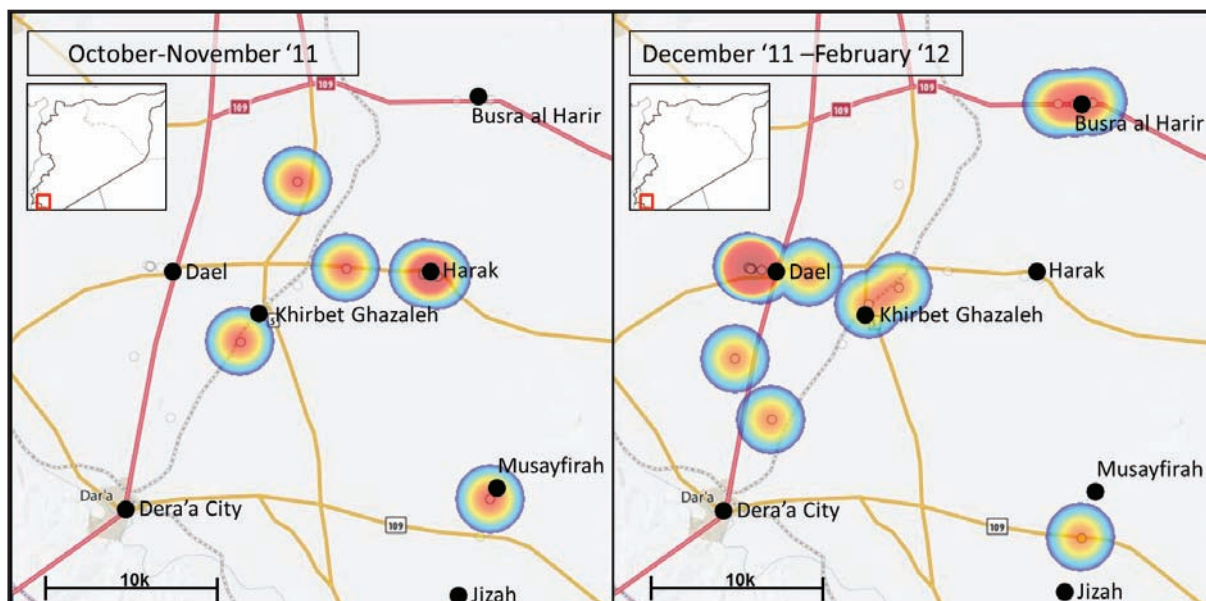
it is probable that the same group of rebels were responsible for this pair of engagements.

In mid-November, a bearded and battle-ready Qataneh appeared in a succession of videos in which he claimed responsibility for a series of operations as the commander of the Omari Battalion. Qataneh claimed that a pair of engagements November 13 and 14 near Khirbet-Ghazaleh claimed the lives of as many as forty loyalist soldiers, five members of the Omari Battalion, and more than twenty civilians who were presumably caught in the crossfire.⁸⁷ One of these engagements was also filmed.⁸⁸ Two days later on November 16, Qataneh claimed responsibility for yet another attack in nearby Namir village “to avenge the twenty-five innocents killed on November 14.” He claimed to have killed “more than ten *shabiha*,” or pro-regime paramilitary fighters, during the engagement.⁸⁹

At the end of November, a firefight near the town of Dael, fifteen kilometers north of Dera’a city along the main highway, demonstrated the increasing effectiveness of the armed opposition in Dera’a. Fragmentary reports suggest that armored vehicles moving north towards Dael were ambushed along the road. Hours later, two explosions targeted busses carrying security forces as they moved into Dael to conduct clearance operations in the restive town.⁹⁰

Although the Omari Battalion never claimed responsibility for these coordinated attacks, Dael is approximately eight kilometers west of Khirbet Ghazaleh, where the Omari Battalion took responsibility for a string of attacks earlier in November.

The Omari Battalion did not claim responsibility for any attacks in December, but armed engagements continued throughout that month and into January around Dael, Khirbet Ghazaleh, and Busra al-Harir. This level of activity indicates that Qataneh continued to lead the most effective rebel organization in the Hawran. The attacks near Dael and those near Busra al Harir, just twenty kilometers to the northeast, occurred at evenly spaced intervals, suggesting that the Omari Battalion relied on hit-and-run tactics to evade security forces. For example, on December 5, 2011, rebels fought regime security forces trying to assault Dael, killing three of the loyalist troops.⁹¹ Less than one week later, rebels clashed with troops in Busra al-Harir, setting fire to three armored vehicles.⁹² Back in Dael the next day on December 12, rebels again clashed with security forces at entrances to the town.⁹³ This pattern continued through the end of December, as the rebels executed five more effective raids and ambushes by moving back and forth between the Dael area and Busra al-Harir.⁹⁴



MAP 4 | REBEL ENGAGEMENTS IN DERA'A

The fact that the attacks around Dael and Busra al-Harir took place in one to three-day intervals suggests close coordination. Because none of the attacks happened at the same day and because the two towns are less than twenty kilometers from one another over flat but isolated farmland, one may plausibly conclude that these attacks were conducted by the same organization. By moving fifteen to twenty kilometers away from the scene of their last attack, the group may have hoped to avoid the flood of security forces that followed each engagement.

In January and February 2012, the attacks around Dael continued but at wider intervals, suggesting that the Omari Battalion faced increased pressure from regime security forces. On four occasions in January and February the rebels clashed with loyalist troops around Dael and Khirbet Ghazaleh.⁹⁵ In a video released in mid-February, Qataneh described establishing an ambush for security forces in the Leja, a terrain feature that lies just north of Busra al-Harir: “We are waiting for them here. We planted some explosives and established some ambushes for them. God willing, their end will be here.” Qataneh begged forgiveness of the people of Homs for not being there to defend them from the shelling that began in early February. “In Dera’a the Assad army is flanking us with three divisions of infantry and another number of air defense units,” he explained⁹⁶

This video not only reinforces the assessment that the Omari Battalion was under increased pressure in January and February, but it also strengthens the assessment that the rebel group had a hand in the Busra al-Harir attacks in December, given the proximity between the Leja and the town of Busra al-Harir. A video posted on February 14 in which Qatanah interviews two captured loyalist soldiers in Busra al-Harir provides further evidence.⁹⁷

Captain Qataneh’s Omari Battalion does not account for all the rebel activity in Dera’a province. For example, no direct evidence links the Omari Battalion to sporadic fighting in Dera’a city itself from October 2011 through early 2012, no more than twenty kilometers

from the Omari Battalion’s area of operation.⁹⁸ However, Qataneh has worked to coordinate with other rebel groups operating in the Hawran. In mid-November, as Qataneh led raids around Dael, a pair of clashes between rebels and loyalists erupted thirty kilometers to the north near the village of Sanamein.⁹⁹ Qataneh met with these resistance elements, appearing in a November 23 video with a group of rebels in Sanamein.¹⁰⁰ Two days later fifteen rebels made a video statement that announced the formation of the Nasir Salah al-Din Battalion, as part of the Free Syrian Army in the Hawran.¹⁰¹ Shortly afterwards, the new unit began to claim responsibility for attacks in the Sanamein area.¹⁰²

Similarly, Qataneh has coordinated with rebel units to the south of his operational area. In a late November video, Qataneh stated that the Omari Battalion cooperated with the Ahmed Khalaf Battalion and that the two rebel groups had “stopped Assad’s forces in Dera’a.”¹⁰³ In the statement, Qataneh referred to the efforts of the Omari Battalion around Dael in mid-November, but he also referred to a November 11 attack in Musayfirah, twenty kilometers east of Dera’a city. In the Musayfirah attack, the Ahmad Khalaf and Shuhadaa al Hurria Battalions claimed joint responsibility for killing fifteen loyalists.¹⁰⁴ A little more than a month later, more than twenty-five loyalist troops were killed in a coordinated assault on a checkpoint that controlled the intersection of roads between Musayfirah, Jizah and Dera’a city, which lies in both the Ahmed Khalaf and Shuhadaa al-Hurria Battalions’ areas of operation.¹⁰⁵

This type of coordination between the Omari Battalion and the other rebel units operating in the Hawran demonstrates the armed opposition’s propensity for organization at the local level. Unlike armed opposition groups around Homs and Damascus, these rebels have preferred to conduct guerilla raids and ambushes. While Dera’a province’s rebels have declined pitched engagements with the security forces, they have disrupted security forces’ freedom of movement and forced the regime to commit additional forces to the region.

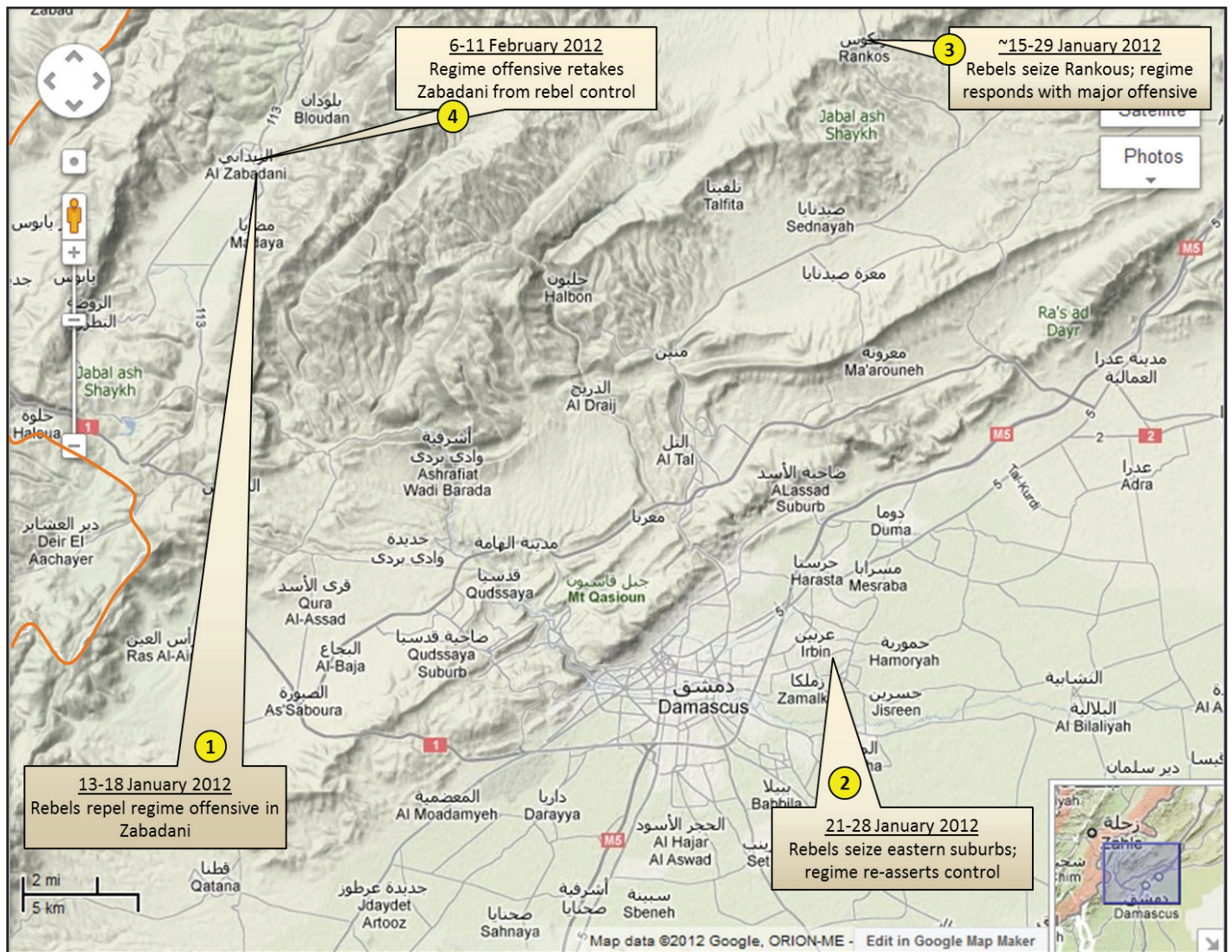
Damascus

The insurgency in Damascus matured more slowly than elsewhere in Syria. The late November 2011 attack on an Air Force Intelligence compound in the northern suburb of Harasta demonstrated surprising capability for a force operating in an area saturated with security forces, showcasing the growing reach of the Free Syrian Army, which claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁰⁶ Yet the raid in Harasta was overshadowed by the unexpected January 2012 rebel victory against a regime assault in Zabadani, a valley thirty kilometers northwest of downtown Damascus.

Zabadani is a strategically important piece of terrain due to its proximity to Damascus and Lebanon. The Assad regime maintained one of

its three Corps Headquarters in the valley; the Syrian 2nd Corps commanded three armored and two mechanized divisions as of 2006.¹⁰⁷ Local militias and defectors skirmished with security forces in Zabadani, in the fall and winter of 2011, but rebel capabilities in the valley appeared to be scant in comparison to rebel strongholds like Rastan.¹⁰⁸ However, the Assad regime lost its grip in the valley in January 2012.

Zabadani is also strategically significant for Iran because it was home to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' main support facility for Hezbollah as of June 2011. Rumors circulated that month that Qods force's third-ranking leader Brigadier General Mohsen Chirazi, was in Syria to help manage Iranian interests there.¹⁰⁹ During the first or second week of January 2012, Qasem



MAP 5 | REGIME OPERATIONS AROUND DAMASCUS IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 2012.

Soleimani, head of the Qods force, visited Damascus, according to U.S. officials.¹¹⁰ Days later on January 13, regime security forces mounted their offensive against the mountain town. While the details of the visit are not known, it is plausible that Soleimani urged the Assad regime to firmly reestablish control in the valley. Despite the significance of the objective in Zabadani, the rebels forced loyalist troops to negotiate a ceasefire and withdraw after five days of fighting.¹¹¹ This marked the first time in the Syrian uprising that rebels repelled a major regime offensive.

While the regime probably planned to regroup and assault Zabadani with a larger force as soon as possible, rebels seized a string of towns in Damascus' eastern suburbs, often referred to collectively as the Ghoutta: Douma, Harasta, Irbin, Saqba, and Hammouriyah. This forced the regime to focus on this problem closer to the capital, and a large number of security forces cleared these towns in succession at the end of January.¹¹² The rebels did suffer some losses in these engagements, and they did not offer any meaningful resistance against the regime's operation. However, these actions did help to buy time for the Zabadani rebels.

During the regime's unsuccessful attempt to take Zabadani in mid-January, rebels seized control Rankous, a small village that sits in a mountain pass just fifteen kilometers from the northern reaches of Damascus and fifteen kilometers from the Lebanese border. The border town offered stiff resistance against regime attempts to retake it at the end of January, and many of its inhabitants fled ahead of heavy shelling by regime forces.¹¹³ The resistance in Rankous and the Ghoutta combined with the renewed rebel offensive around Homs in January drew the regime's attention away from Zabadani until mid-February. Not until February 6, nearly a month after the rebels repelled them, could the regime mount an assault on Zabadani. The rebels held out through five days of fighting, finally surrendering the town on February 11, escaping into the mountains that divide Syria and Lebanon.¹¹⁴

The rebels in Zabadani, Rankous and the Ghoutta did not use specific unit names, though they referred to themselves as members of the Free Syrian Army. But this relationship with the headquarters in Turkey was nominal, as these fighters were not taking orders from any higher headquarters.¹¹⁵ The two Damascus units explicitly operating under the FSA have been the Abu Obeidah bin al-Jarrah Battalion and the Muawiyah bin Abi Sufyan Battalion. The latter organization's leader, Major Maher Rahman al-Nuemi, became an important personality within the armed opposition, and he travelled to Turkey to link up with the FSA headquarters and appear in the October video statement in which the FSA announced a formal structure for the first time.¹¹⁶ When the FSA took responsibility for the assault on the Air Force Intelligence compound in November, it claimed that the two battalions had conducted the attack jointly.¹¹⁷ In one November video statement, a group of rebels claimed to form a new Abi al-Walid Company within the Abu Obaiedah al-Jarrah Battalion.¹¹⁸ Despite these links, the majority of the effective armed opposition in the Damascus area appears to be related to the Free Syrian Army in name only.

Idlib: Jebel al-Zawiya and the Harmoush Battalion

In mid-August 2011, two officers published a pair of video statements from a mountainous region of northern Syria's Idlib province known as Jebel al-Zawiya. Captain Yousif al-Din Yahya and Captain Ammar al-Wawi announced their defection from a Syrian Army reconnaissance unit and declared their affiliation with Harmoush's Free Officers



CAPTAIN AMMAR AL-WAWI & CAPTAIN YOUSIF YAHYA AT THE FSA HEADQUARTERS, SEPTEMBER 2011.



HARMOUSH BATTALION STANDS IN FORMATION IN JEBEL AL-ZAWIYA, DECEMBER 2011.

Movement.¹¹⁹ In a second video the next day, Captain Yahya claimed responsibility for combat action against loyalist forces in the Jebel al-Zawiya area.¹²⁰

The next time these two officers reappeared was in the late September video with Colonel Riad Asaad in which they jointly announced the merging of the Free Syrian Army and the Free Officer's Movement.¹²¹ Just days later, Yahya and al-Wawi announced a pair of successful ambushes in Ariha, to the north of Jebel al-Zawiya and elsewhere on the road to Aleppo International Airport. This video announcement was made from the same video booth in Turkey they had shared with Riad Asaad days earlier. In their statement they declared solidarity with the rebels fighting in Rastan and claimed that the attacks were in response to the "brutal assault" against this pocket of resistance.¹²²

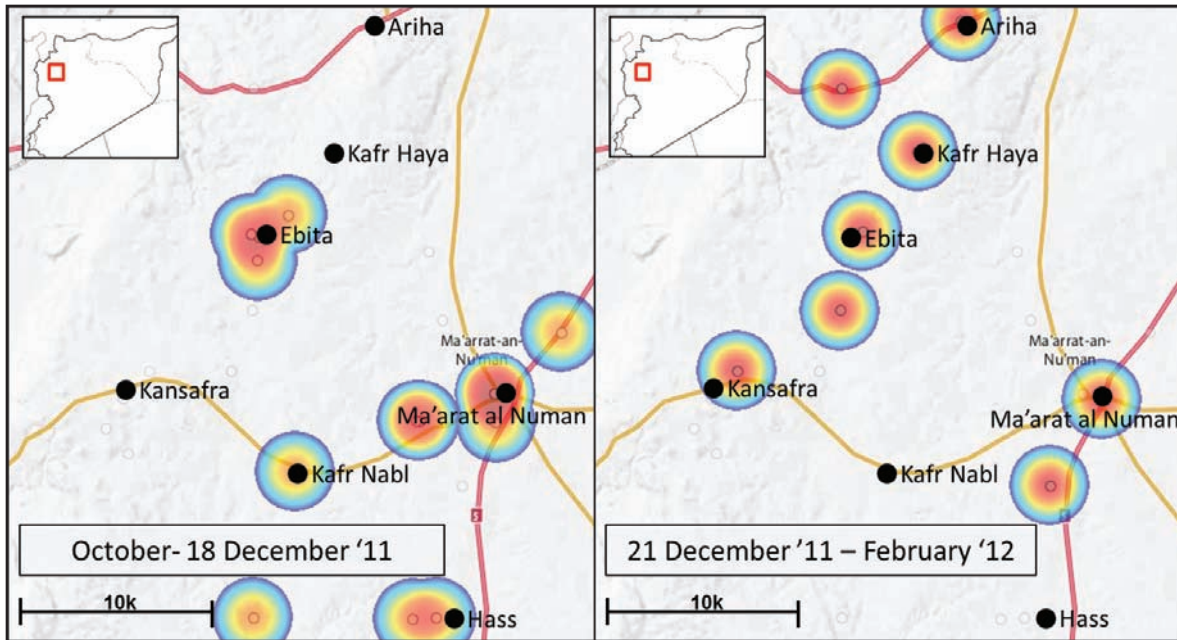
Despite these early skirmishes in August and September, the insurgency in Jebel al-Zawiya did not become meaningful until October. When leaders of the FSA announced a formal structure for the first time in mid-October, they placed Yahya in command of the Harmoush Battalion in Jebel al-Zawiya, presumably named after Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush. Days later rebels in that mountainous region conducted a roadside bomb ambush against regime forces entering from the north near Ehssem and simultaneously executed a raid against a checkpoint near the primary north-south MI highway in Hass.¹²³ Over the next week, Jebel al-Zawiya rebels hit regime

security forces two more times in Ma'arat Horma and Ma'arat al-Numan.¹²⁴

The Jebel al-Zawiya rebels continued to pressure loyalist forces in November with nine engagements centered around the town of Ma'arat al-Numan, which sits on the critical north-south MI highway.¹²⁵ The rebels also felt increasingly secure in their mountain hideout around Kansafra, and by late November they broadcast large demonstrations bristling with hundreds of men under arms.¹²⁶ Captain Yahya sat at the head of approximately 150 armed men on December 15, flanked by pickup trucks and mortars, and he announced a new name for the rebel group, the Jebel al-Zawiya Battalion.¹²⁷

While these large demonstrations showcased the rebels' growing numbers, the significant decrease in armed engagements in early December suggests that regime security forces increased the pressure on the rebels around Jebel al-Zawiya. In mid-December, rebels skirmished with security forces at the northern entrances to Jebel al-Zawiya around Ebita. The Associated Press caught one engagement that shows Captain Yahya in charge of a small group exchanging fire with loyalists.¹²⁸

The Harmoush Battalion was not able to hold off the regime for long. The security forces assaulted this rebel holdout around Kansafra with a column of armored vehicles, causing the militiamen to flee their positions there on December 20. Attempting to evade the security forces, a large group of rebels were caught in a narrow valley to the west of the village. They were pinned down



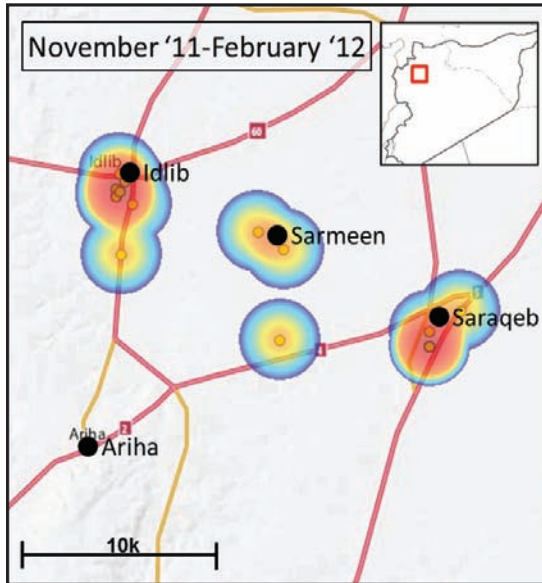
MAP 6 | REBEL ENGAGEMENTS AROUND JEBEL AL-ZAWIYAH

and subjected to hours of heavy fire from machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons that killed seventy rebels. Loyalist troops executed the few rebels who did surrender.¹²⁹

Despite this decisive tactical defeat, the insurgents in Jebel al-Zawiya demonstrated some resiliency. In the days that followed the slaughter, the rebels who escaped mounted a few ambushes on the main roads surrounding Jebel al-Zawiya.¹³⁰ The rest of December and the first half of January saw no armed resistance in the area. But in mid-January, Yahya conducted a raid against a regime strongpoint in Kafr Haya on the northern approaches to Jebel al-Zawiya that secured much needed weapons and ammunition, including dozens of machine guns and RPGs.¹³¹ This mission report video appears to have been filmed inside Syria in the same room as his original defection video back in August 2011. Days later he filmed an interview with an amateur reporter in which he explained his role as the commander of the Free Syrian Army's Harmoush Battalion in Jebel al-Zawiya.¹³² Sporadic fighting continued near Jebel al-Zawiya in January 2012, but the rebels were not able to conduct raids and ambushes along major roads.¹³³

The Free Syrian Army claimed to lead a series of fighting units elsewhere in Idlib province, but there are other units operating around Idlib city whose relationship with the FSA headquarters in Turkey is less clear. For example, the FSA has claimed that Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Sattar Yunsu's Hamza Battalion is responsible for operations in Idlib city and its surrounding villages, a little more than thirty-five kilometers to the north of Jebel al-Zawiya.¹³⁴ The reality is more complicated. From October to January there were fifteen effective engagements along the short arc from Idlib to Saraqeb, none of which could be directly attributed to the Hamza Battalion.¹³⁵ Other groups, such as the Abu Bakr al-Sideeq Battalion, claimed to operate in the area and had no discernable ties to the FSA headquarters.¹³⁶ On February 14, 2012 hundreds of fighters stood in the streets of Saraqeb, rifles raised, announcing the formation of the Moua'aweya Battalion.¹³⁷ Journalists who met with the rebels in Saraqeb spoke of them as part of the Free Syrian Army and noted their level of organization.¹³⁸

The security forces' manpower-intensive and ruthless siege in Homs in February 2012 probably contributed to the insurgency's growth in Idlib by encouraging young men to join the armed opposition movement and giving them the space



MAP 7 | REBEL ENGAGEMENTS NEAR IDLIB CITY

to move and organize. The opposition does not have unrestricted control over the area, as the security forces maintain checkpoints along major roads; however local rebels' familiarity with the back roads around their villages provide them with considerable freedom of movement. A journalist traveling in the area described how rebels navigated small, unguarded roads to circumvent regime checkpoints, describing passible roads as "clean."¹³⁹ A video posted in mid-February shows a convoy of five pickup trucks filled with rebels traveling down a paved road for over six minutes straight, which goes to show the degree of mobility these rebels enjoyed.¹⁴⁰

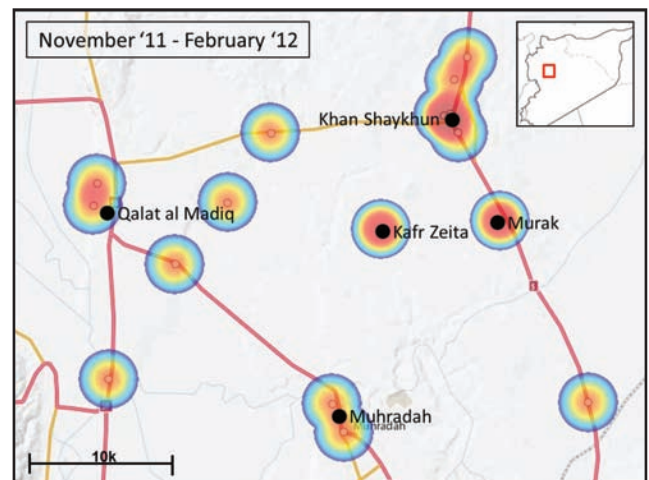
Hama Countryside: Abou al-Fidaa & Osama bin Zaid Battalions

The relationship between the Free Syrian Army headquarters and the rebel groups operating along the seam between Hama and Idlib provinces has been similarly complicated. However, these groups have sought to associate themselves with the FSA and have focused on engaging legitimate military targets. As of early March 2012, rebels had conducted more than twenty effective engagements against regime security forces in this agricultural plain at the foothills of the Idlib plateau north of Hama city, mostly in November and December 2011.¹⁴¹ Elements of the Abou

al-Fidaa and Osama bin Zaid Battalions were connected to this string of attacks, but their areas of operation seemed to overlap. Furthermore, their leadership overlapped. For example, Captain Zuhair al Sheikh appeared alternately as a leader within the Abou al-Fidaa Battalion and as the commander of the Osama bin Zaid Battalion.¹⁴² Other statements seem to refer to the two groups as one and the same.¹⁴³

Despite this confusion, the rebels in the northern Hama countryside were well organized and often associated themselves with the Free Syrian Army. Nine separate named rebel groups operated under the umbrella of the Osama bin Zaid Battalion.¹⁴⁴ When Colonel Adnan Halaq defected to join the Abou al Fidaa Battalion, he explicitly stated that he was now "part of the Free Syrian Army under the leadership of Riad Asaad."¹⁴⁵

The February capture and release of Iranian pilgrims by the Hama rebels provides another indication of their ties to leadership in Turkey. Eleven Iranian pilgrims were kidnapped when their bus was pulled over in Hama province on February 1. The unknown gunmen abducted all of the male passengers and left the females. One week later, Lieutenant Ayman Hallaq, leader of one of the companies of the Abou al-Fidaa Battalion, made a video statement as he sat in front of the eleven hostages. He explained that the hostages would be released through mediations with Turkey, in which Turkey promised to give support to Syrian refugees on



MAP 8 | REBEL ENGAGEMENTS IN HAMA COUNTRYSIDE AND SOUTH IDLIB PROVINCE

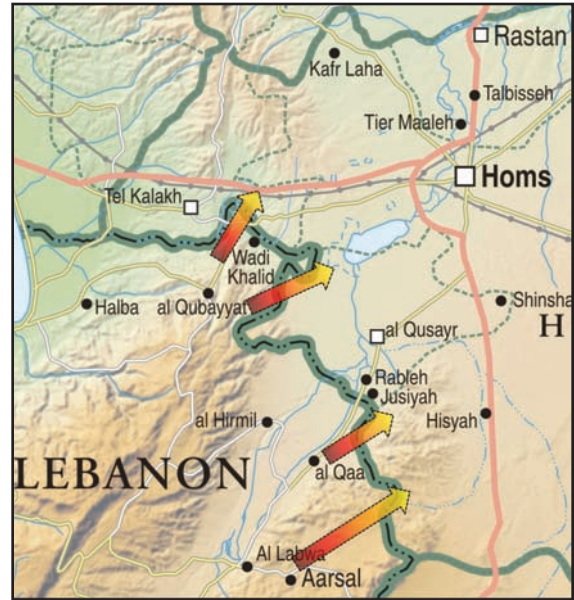
the Turkish border in exchange for the prisoners, who would be repatriated to Iran. “We were able to have successful negotiations because we are only fighting on behalf of the Syrian people and are not against the Iranian people,” Hallaq said.¹⁴⁶ Two days later on February 9, Iran’s deputy foreign minister announced that these eleven hostages were indeed released.¹⁴⁷

ARMS TRAFFICKING, FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THE ROLE OF AL-QAEDA

Arms Trafficking

The Syrian insurgency’s ability to generate weapons and ammunition will be critical to its success against the well-armed Syrian security forces. A significant portion of the rebels’ small arms have come from inside Syria. They have arrived with defectors, been purchased from sympathetic (or corrupt) members of the security forces, or been seized during raids.¹⁴⁸ Still continued resistance is unlikely to be successful without a steady flow of arms from neighboring countries. During his meetings with Syrian rebels, one reporter observed that “the Syrian insurgency is not well-armed or well-funded. Fighters purchase their weapons locally on the black market, from arms dealers and smugglers who are profiting from the violence in Syria. I have been with insurgents purchasing weapons and seen how they arrange to do so via smugglers from Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey.”¹⁴⁹

Arms smuggling from Lebanon is the most significant for the insurgency, given its proximity to centers of conflict in Homs and the Damascus countryside. In particular, arms flow from the predominantly Sunni areas of northern Lebanon toward Homs. Syrian military incursions into the Lebanese villages of Aarsal and al-Qaa as early as October 2011 suggest that the threat presented by this supply line was worth cross-border action.¹⁵⁰ According to one report, the predominantly Sunni Aarsal and Greek Catholic al-Qaa are important nodes in this smuggling route.¹⁵¹ The village of Wadi Khalid, which sits on the border



MAP 9 | SMUGGLING ROUTES VIA LEBANON

in the far northwest tip of Lebanon, became a hub for Syrian rebels and refugees and was also reportedly involved in smuggling activity.¹⁵² Smugglers may even have used small boats on the Mediterranean Sea to ferry supplies across the border. Syrian forces killed a Lebanese fisherman when they seized a boat suspected of smuggling off the Lebanese-Syrian coast in late January 2012.¹⁵³

A large number of defectors who fled to northern Lebanon reportedly lead smuggling and rebel activity there. According to one defector in Akkar, Lebanon, there have been as many as 500 defectors in the area.¹⁵⁴ These rebels may maintain communications with FSA leadership. In November 2011, British Channel 4 News filmed a patrol with rebels crossing the border into Syria, probably from the Wadi Khalid area. At one point the team’s leader makes a phone call and then explains to the camera, “I informed the Free Syrian Army headquarters in Jisr al-Shughour about the mission we are on now. We took permission to start moving and now we are on the front line, face to face with the [Syrian regime] soldiers.”¹⁵⁵

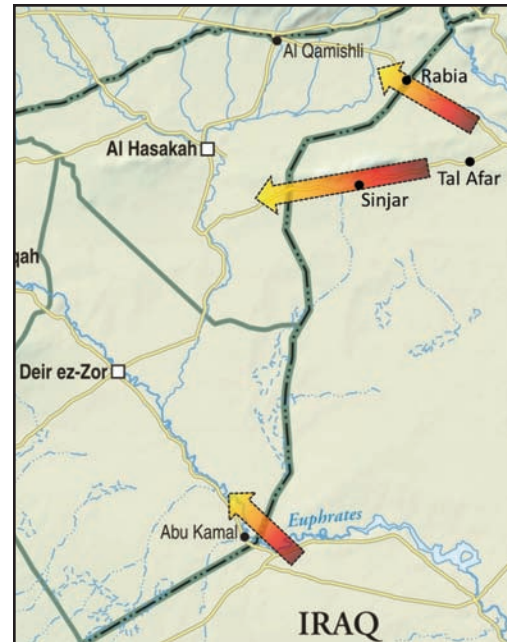
Arms have also been smuggled through Iraq. In an interview Iraqi Deputy Interior Minister Adnan al-Asadi said, “The weapons are transported from Baghdad to Nineveh...The weapons are

being smuggled from Mosul through the Rabia crossing to Syria, as members of the same families live on both sides of the border...There is some smuggling through a crossing near Abu Kamal.”¹⁵⁶ Corroborating these statements, Syrian state news reported that regime forces seized multiple shipments of weapons along the road from Iraq towards centers of unrest in western Syria in December 2011 and January 2012.¹⁵⁷

While smugglers in Lebanon and Iraq provide the lion's share of weapons crossing into Syria, there have also been numerous reports about smuggling from Turkey.¹⁵⁸ Yet the Turkish government has not allowed large-scale smuggling activity, and the Syrian military has been mostly effective in disrupting smuggling routes from Turkey.¹⁵⁹

One insightful report provides a sense of the smuggling routes that bring arms into Syria. A reporter with *The Guardian* followed one group of rebels who bought pistols and ammunition from Turkish smugglers, handing good across the barbed wire that divides the two countries. Shortly afterwards, the same rebels met with an Iraqi Shammar tribesman who sold them assault rifles, RPGs, and a medium machine gun. One of the smugglers explained the high weapons prices. “We have emptied Mosul; no more guns there,” he said.¹⁶⁰ The fact that this smuggler was able to bring these weapons from Mosul to a remote village in northern Idlib province is a testament to the effectiveness of these smuggling networks.

Black market economics help to explain the nature of regional arms flows into Syria. In January 2012, a Beirut-based journalist noted that the price of a quality Russian AK-47 assault rifle had doubled since March 2011, from around \$1,000 to \$2,100. RPGs, essential for damaging the Syrian regime's armored vehicles, similarly doubled in cost: the price of launchers grew from \$900 to \$2,000, while the price of each grenade grew from \$100 to \$500.¹⁶¹ Similarly, the price of an AK-47 in Mosul rose from \$100-\$200 in March 2011 to \$1,000-\$1,500 in February 2012.¹⁶²



MAP 10 | SMUGGLING ROUTES VIA IRAQ

This increase in weapons prices in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq demonstrated the fact that weapons were flowing into Syria. It explained the economic incentive smugglers had in bringing the weapons into the country. However, the fact that weapons prices rose so dramatically also indicated that the Syrian opposition was not receiving enough external weapons shipments to offset the growing need. As one opposition source recently put it, “We are bringing in defensive and offensive weapons. ... It is coming from everywhere, including Western countries, and it is not difficult to get anything through the borders.”¹⁶³

While the black market has been the primary driver of arms flows through early 2012, indicators suggest that regional support will increase. In a statement on February 12, the Arab League urged the U.N. Security Council to issue a resolution setting up a U.N.-Arab peacekeeping force and called for offering all forms of “political and material support” for the Syrian opposition.¹⁶⁴ Later in February, Saudi Foreign Minister Said al-Faisal told U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton that he thought arming the rebels was “an excellent idea.”¹⁶⁵ Regional decisions to arm elements of Syria's rebel movement have dangerous

implications for instability in the Levant. As Senator John McCain said in early March 2012, “Increasingly, the question for U.S. policy is not whether foreign forces will intervene militarily in Syria. We can be confident that Syria’s neighbors will do so eventually, if they have not already.” The danger, he continued is that these neighbors “will try to pick the winners, and this will not always be to our liking or in our interest.”¹⁶⁶

Foreign Fighters

The transit of foreign fighters into Syria to work with the Syrian insurgency is closely related to the flow of weapons. Foreign fighters may help the insurgency by offering technical expertise and combat experience, but they can also bring radical ideology and problematic sponsorship in a way that will probably do more to harm to Syria’s insurgent movement over the long term.

Iraqis probably represent the bulk of foreign fighter participation in Syria, although many of these “foreign fighters” are in reality Syrians who fought in Iraq with Sunni Arab insurgent groups and returned to their native Syria at the beginning of unrest. As early as September 2011, Iraqi observers began to note that “Syrian insurgents are returning to their country to help topple the Assad regime.”¹⁶⁷ According to one analyst, “Almost since the outset [of Syrian unrest], Syrians who fought with [former al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab] Zarqawi in Iraq have been involved.”¹⁶⁸ Iraqi Deputy Interior Minister Adnan al-Asadi asserted that “we have intelligence information that a number of Iraqi jihadists went to Syria.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, the cross-border networks Syrian and Iraqi militants developed during their fight against U.S. forces in Iraq may now be reversed, facilitating the flow of experienced fighters from Iraq into Syria.

The Sunni Arab tribes of western Iraq would benefit from the Assad regime’s fall, especially as they move to resist Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s consolidation of power in Iraq. As one journalist who interviewed Sunni Arab tribesmen on the Syrian border put it, “The pitch, they say,

is simple: The collapse of the Assad regime would be a blow to Iran, which they see as a common enemy. Iran strongly supports the Syrian regime, as well as what these tribal groups often perceive as an increasingly autocratic and Shiite-dominated Iraqi government.”¹⁷⁰

Amid increased attacks against Iraqi security forces in western Anbar province in late November 2011, Sunni Arab militants claimed responsibility for attacking Iraqi Shia militias that were purportedly on their way to assist the Assad regime’s security operations.¹⁷¹ Whether or not these Shia militia groups were indeed on their way into Syria, these statements represent the solidarity between Iraqi and Syrian militants in resisting their respective governments.

A February interview with an Iraqi militant fighting with Syrian insurgents demonstrates the extent to which Iraqis have travelled in Syria. Sadoun al-Husseini, a 36-year-old engineer from Ramadi, a veteran of combat against U.S. forces in Iraq and a member of the Anbar Awakening, was interviewed in Idlib province near the Turkish border, far from the tribal belt in Syria’s eastern Deir ez-Zor province. He was careful to distance himself from al-Qaeda inspired militancy: “I have heard all this talk of al-Qa’ida doing things in Syria. But that does not have the support of true Iraqis. ... This is propaganda, spread inside Iraq by people who want to damage solidarity with Syria.”¹⁷²

Nevertheless, the extent of Iraqi involvement outside of weapons smuggling is difficult to gauge. One might expect that tribal solidarity extending along the Euphrates on both sides of the border may encourage Iraqi tribesmen to join the fight against Assad, but the relatively limited degree of armed conflict in Syria’s eastern Deir ez-Zor province suggests otherwise. In late February, two Iraqi militant groups announced they would provide moral but not material support to the opposition in Syria. The groups expressed concern that sending weapons and fighters might exacerbate the situation in Syria by handing Assad the pretext for an ever greater use of force. The statements rejected al-Qaeda chief Ayman

al-Zawahiri's February 2012 call to aid Syrian rebels, stating that the international jihadist movement was trying to "steal the revolution."¹⁷³ This tension is representative of the growing divergence between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the collection of other Islamic militant groups in Iraq that have more nationalist objectives. Recent interviews underscore the tension among tribal leaders near the Syrian border who "share family ties, tribal bonds, and sympathies with opposition fighters just over the border in Syria," but "worry that an expanding cross-border arms trade here is re-energizing... al-Qaeda in Iraq."¹⁷⁴

Sunni Arabs are not the only Iraqi group to become entangled in Syrian unrest. While there have been no credible reports of armed clashes in Syria's Kurdish-dominated northeast region, evidence suggests an increase in cross-border activity. In late January 2012, Syrian border guards detained two members of the Kurdish Peshmerga defense forces.¹⁷⁵ The next month, Peshmerga fighters stormed a border police station and seized a Syrian Kurd who had been arrested near the Iraqi border as he tried to enter Iraq.¹⁷⁶ While Syria's Kurds had refrained from joining the revolt against Assad in early 2012, the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq may be eager to strengthen ties with its Syrian neighbors as the Assad regime's influence in this distant corner of Syria wanes.

Despite the central role of Iraqi foreign fighters, reports have suggested that a wide range of other foreign fighters have become involved in Syria. Reports surfaced in December 2011 that the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and its commander Abdel Hakim Belhaj, who has ties to al-Qaeda, were supporting the Syrian insurgency with fighters and weapons. One report suggested that Qatar was assisting this effort. The credibility of the sources are questionable, and on balance this relationship is unlikely because one would expect that the Libyan group has been more eager to consolidate its own position in Libya. Furthermore, the Turkish government has been unwilling to allow third party access through the routes the reports suggested.¹⁷⁷

While reports about foreign fighters from Syria's other neighbors have been limited, the possibility of militants coming to Syria from neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, and even Saudi Arabia remains. In February 2012, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood appeared to reverse its long-standing support for the Assad regime's resistance stance against Israel, calling for "jihad" against the Assad regime and urging support for Syria's rebels as "an Islamic duty."¹⁷⁸ Also in February, fighting broke out between Sunni and Alawite enclaves in Lebanon's northern Tripoli.¹⁷⁹ While there are no indicators of Saudi fighters in Syria as of March 2012, the Kingdom has demonstrated its willingness to encourage militants to travel to foreign theatres in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Chechnya and Bosnia over recent decades.

The Role of Al-Qaeda

The series of car bombs that struck Damascus and Aleppo from December to February raised concerns about the potential role of al-Qaeda in Syria's armed resistance movement. There are a number of ways to interpret the level of al-Qaeda involvement within Syria's broader insurgent movement, and they are not necessarily contradictory. While observers viewed these attacks as the work of an al-Qaeda affiliate, the opposition has argued that the regime engineered these car bombs to discredit the opposition. In late February, a group calling itself the al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant claimed responsibility for the attacks in a jihadist video with symbols and language that demonstrated its affiliation with al-Qaeda. The Assad regime may have been partially complicit in the attacks, allowing al-Qaeda-linked groups to radicalize the opposition in order to shore up domestic support and complicate foreign involvement.

U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on February 16 that the bombings "bore the earmarks" of al-Qaeda in Iraq, confirming that intelligence officials believed the attacks were indeed conducted by the al-Qaeda affiliate.¹⁸⁰ The public assessment came just days

after al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared in an eight-minute video entitled “Onward, Lions of Syria,” in which he backed the Syria’s armed opposition.¹⁸¹ Zawahiri’s statement did not mention the car bombs or reference to recent events, and may even have been taped in the fall of 2011.¹⁸² It appears that al-Qaeda released the video immediately after the car bombs for maximum media impact.

The presence of al-Qaeda-linked militants is visible in Syria. On February 26, the al-Nusra Front to Protect the Levant published a heavily produced and edited forty-five-minute video taking credit for the deadly car bombs in Aleppo and Damascus. The video centered on the story of a woman in Homs who was raped and whose son was murdered by a group of shabiha. The video also featured the suicide bomber who executed the January Damascus attack. The group’s “general secretary,” Al-Faith Abu Mohammed al-Golani, a *nom de guerre* apparently taken in a nod to Syria’s occupied Golan Heights, states that the attacks were undertaken to “in revenge for the people of Homs.” Later in the video approximately twenty-five men from Damascus and Aleppo appear in statements of support for the al-Nusra Front. One man used distinctly Iraqi words, and two of the statements featured prominent al-Qaeda flags in the background.¹⁸³

In early February 2012 reports circulated within the jihadist internet community about the release of Abu Musab al-Suri from prison in Syria. Al-Suri, a native Syrian and significant player in al-Qaeda, emerged as one of the movement’s leading strategic thinkers in 2004, authoring a 1600-page manifesto entitled “The Global Islamic Resistance Call.” His work has been credited with developing the strategy of ‘leaderless resistance’ the late Anwar al-Awlaki championed. Not seen in public since his arrest in the Pakistani city of Quetta in 2005, al-Suri was widely believed to be incarcerated in Syria.¹⁸⁴

The Assad regime might well have released a militant jihadist in the middle of this crisis to complicate foreign intervention. Assad might also have done so in order to rally support at



THE AL-NUSRA FRONT

home. The Syrian intelligence services have long maintained ties with jihadists in order to manage risk to the regime while projecting proxies in neighboring states, as it did in Iraq from 2003 to 2007. This is not to suggest that al-Suri himself played a role in the attacks. Rather he is representative of the significant number of trained al-Qaeda operatives in Syria, many of whom saw combat in Iraq under al-Qaeda chief Zarqawi. Indeed, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency’s Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess also told Congress that “the al-Qaeda-like attacks” may have been conducted by al-Qaeda-linked militants already inside Syria.¹⁸⁵

The al-Qaeda affiliates who once maintained relations with Syrian intelligence may have turned on their former allies early in the Syrian unrest. On the other hand, the Assad regime may have allowed the opposition’s radicalization to some degree. Regardless, these jihadist elements will complicate future settlements as they try to benefit from chaos in the heart of the Levant.

Events in Syria have been driven by the armed popular resistance, despite evidence of al-Qaeda’s involvement and despite the Assad regime’s repeated protests to the contrary. The majority of evidence through early March 2012 indicated that while Syria’s insurgents may be inspired by Islam, they are not radical jihadists. However, the longer Syria’s overmatched insurgents face a well-armed military, the more tempted they may be to align themselves with experienced jihadists.

As of March 2012, the majority of evidence

indicates that Syria's armed opposition has maintained its independence from radical jihadist elements, but al-Qaeda's presence, even in small numbers, will be a major security concern due to the significant proliferation risks represented by the potential collapse of the Syrian government. In February 2012 a number of U.S. security officials and defense analysts underscored the risk posed by Syria's large caches of nerve and mustard gases, along with thousands of shoulder-fired shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles.¹⁸⁶ If the Assad regime collapses, the security forces guarding these critical weapons stockpiles will likely have been degraded to the point where it would be easy for a small team of jihadists with money to acquire these weapons.

CONCLUSION

Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 7, 2012, about issues that were restraining the United States from supporting the armed opposition in Syria. "It is not clear what constitutes the Syrian armed opposition – there has been no single unifying military alternative that can be recognized, appointed, or contacted," he said.¹⁸⁷ General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also noted that over one hundred armed opposition groups have been identified in Syria.¹⁸⁸ Panetta then explained that because of the number of groups, it would be difficult to find a single leader to unify them. "We faced somewhat the same situation in Libya, and heading up the intelligence operation there it was one of the first orders of business was to try to figure out who the opposition was and where they were located and what they were doing and what kind of coordination they had. Here you've got triple the problems because there are so many diverse groups that are involved. Whether or not they can find that one leader, whether they can find that one effort to try to bring them together in some kind of council – there are efforts to try to make that happen, but frankly they have not been successful."¹⁸⁹

This report has sought to explain the ways the armed Syrian opposition is identifiable, organized, and capable, even if it is not unified. Insurgencies are inherently decentralized, and Syria's rebels must remain this way in order to continue to evade and engage the Assad regime's forces. The Free Syrian Army, nominally headquartered in Turkey, thus functions more as an umbrella organization than a traditional military chain of command. The FSA may not issue direct orders to the units fighting under its banner, but many of the most effective militia units operating in Syria have stated their allegiance to the movement and identified themselves as part of a national insurgency. Furthermore, many of the names, faces, operating areas, and activities of the insurgent leaders affiliated with effective fighting units are available in the open source. These biographical details are included in Appendix I of this paper. Armed opposition groups are listed by province in Appendix 2.

Three of Syria's most effective militias maintain direct ties to the Free Syrian Army. They are highlighted here because of their major contributions to the opposition and their connection with the FSA. The first militia, the Khalid bin Walid Brigade, which operates near Homs, mounted the first concerted defense against a regime offensive in Rastan in September 2011. The unit withdrew from Rastan to continue fighting the regime in the dense urban enclaves of Homs in November and December 2011. In March 2012, the Khalid bin Walid Brigade withdrew from Homs and Rastan after regime forces conducted a full month of unrestricted siege warfare. Still, the opposition forces managed to preserve their combat power to continue the fight elsewhere.

A second important unit, the Harmoush Battalion in the northern Jebel al-Zawiya mountains, has disrupted the Assad regime's freedom of movement along its primary north-south line of communication and demonstrated surprising resiliency. After the Harmoush Battalion defied the regime from its mountain sanctuary in the fall of 2011, the Assad security

forces inflicted heavy losses on this rebel group at the end of the year. However, Jebel al-Zawiya's rebels continued to conduct raids and ambushes against the security forces in early 2012.

A third effective unit, the Omari Battalion in southern Hawran plain, consistently executed hit-and-run attacks against security forces from October 2011 through early 2012, forcing the regime to commit precious combat power in an unsuccessful attempt to defeat the rebel group. These disruptive attacks have forced the regime to fight on multiple fronts at once and stretched thin Assad's reach.

Other large and capable rebel groups do not maintain such a close relationship with the FSA headquarters in Turkey but nevertheless refer to themselves as members of the Free Syrian Army. For example, the rebels in Zabadani, just thirty kilometers from Syria's capital, became the first group to force the Assad regime to abandon a major offensive operation, compelling the security forces to negotiate a ceasefire there in mid-January. This victory emboldened the Khalid bin Walid Brigade to launch a new offensive against regime strong-points in Homs and Rastan. The two groups support one another through shared intent and complementary operations, even if they do not respond to the same command and control structure. Many other groups refer to themselves as part of the Free Syrian Army but do not recognize Colonel Riad Asaad as its commander.

Despite the regime's assault on Homs in February 2012, the insurgency remains capable. The rebels who withdrew from the Baba Amr neighborhood of Homs at the beginning of March 2012 have demonstrated the tactical wherewithal to retreat in order to preserve combat power. The operations the regime has conducted in Homs and Zabadani have driven insurgents out into the countryside but have not destroyed the fighting units. Rebels from Zabadani are regrouping in the mountains between Lebanon and Syria, conducting significant attacks, and coordinating with other fighting units from Homs and Damascus.¹⁹⁰ The regime's escalation of force has also encouraged others to join the armed opposition, particularly

in Idlib and Hama provinces.

The Assad regime escalated attacks against the rebels after they defended Zabadani against the Army's offensive. The affront was probably significant in itself, and the Assad regime could not allow the rebels to hold terrain against the Army. But Zabadani is also vitally important to the regime and to Iran because the city serves as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force logistical hub for supplying Lebanese Hezbollah. The Army's offensive into Zabadani shortly followed Qassem Soleimani's visit to Damascus in January and was consistent with Qods Force interests even if it was not directed by Qods Force leadership.¹⁹¹

Iranian mentorship may also have contributed to the Assad regime's decision to retake Homs in February. In late January, Soleimani gave a speech to an internal Iranian audience in which he stated that "the mass movement in Syria has not been in the cities but rather they have been in the villages and continues to be. ... Therefore Syria's illness is not an illness that will destroy the government."¹⁹² But the conflict was indeed escalating in urban areas. Soleimani is said to have appeared in Damascus again in early February, days before the Assad regime escalated its use of force and launched an unrestricted siege on the rebel-held towns, forcing Zabadani's capitulation in mid-February and that of Homs by the end of that month.¹⁹³ The Assad regime is likely to continue its strategy of disproportionate force in an attempt to end the uprising as quickly as possible. Indiscriminate artillery fire allows the regime to raise cost of dissent while preserving its increasingly stretched maneuver force.

The rebels' resiliency will make the Assad regime's endurance difficult, but the external support to his regime makes predictions of his imminent fall premature. The Syrian regime has not yet demonstrated the capacity to conduct enough large, simultaneous, or successive operations in multiple urban areas to suppress the insurgency. But it is possible that the technical and material support that Iran and Russia provide will enable the regime to increase its span of control and its ability to fight insurgents in multiple locales

without culminating. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dempsey noted, Assad effectively retains a relationship of “foreign military sales” with two countries, implicitly Iran and Russia.¹⁹⁴ General James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, testified on March 6, 2012, that Iran was sending advisor teams to improve Assad’s intelligence and surveillance capabilities against the rebel groups.¹⁹⁵ Dempsey also noted that the Iranians were providing the Assad regime with weapons to fight the insurgents.¹⁹⁶

Assad’s “foreign military sales” have not only allowed the regime to buttress its capabilities against the rebels, but have also effectively reduced the threat of direct military intervention against the regime. According to Mattis, the Russians have been providing the Assad regime “very advanced integrated air defense capabilities—missiles, radars, that sort of thing.”¹⁹⁷ Syrian air defense and anti-ship capabilities have presented a credible deterrence to NATO military action, and Assad’s Russian backers plan to ensure that this deterrence remains in place.¹⁹⁸

The rebels will have to rely on external lines of supply to replenish their arms and ammunition if they are to continue eroding the regime’s control. As of early 2012 that external support had been limited to small arms smuggled in through Syria’s neighbors. The insurgency also replenishes itself through the seizure of the regime’s supplies and equipment, as at Zabadani.

Given the foreign assistance the regime has received, the rebels must find a way to secure access to more advanced weaponry and technology, such as anti-tank weapons and encrypted communications, in order to degrade the Assad regime’s capabilities further. The regime’s uninhibited use of artillery and tanks inside cities raises the minimum capabilities that the armed opposition will need to survive and succeed.

The emergence of al-Qaeda-linked terrorist cells working against the regime complicates the legitimacy of Syria’s insurgency, which otherwise presents itself as indigenous. It also

poses risks to the United States and a challenge to those calling for material support of the armed opposition. But those armed opposition groups that have demonstrated relations with the FSA headquarters have explicitly secular motivations, which may make their relationship with al-Qaeda unlikely for now. Journalists on the ground have noted that the armed opposition is fundamentally a popular resistance movement. But as the militias continue to face overwhelming regime firepower the likelihood of their radicalization may increase.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the indigenous rebels may turn to al-Qaeda for high-end weaponry and spectacular tactics as the regime’s escalation leaves the rebels with no proportionate response, as occurred in Iraq in 2005-2006. Developing relations with armed opposition leaders and recognizing specific rebel organizations may help to deter this dangerous trend.

It is imperative that the United States distinguish between the expatriate political opposition and the armed opposition against the Assad regime on the ground in Syria. The draft resolution proposed during the February Friends of Syria conference in Tunisia contains language would recognize the Syrian National Council (SNC) as “a legitimate representative of Syrians” and designate it to receive “practical” support for opposition groups.²⁰⁰ The SNC is not a coherent or cohesive political movement, nor does it represent any active armed opposition group. Even though the rebels work with local demonstrators, Free Syrian Army leader Riad Asaad did not recognize the SNC’s early March attempt to establish a military council.²⁰¹ The Syrian National Council’s pronouncements do not drive the actions of the armed opposition movement.

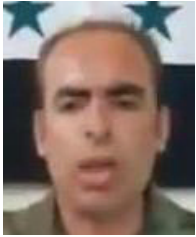
The armed insurgents also do not form a single cohesive body—a fact that is true in most insurgencies. Even the sum of the armed insurgent groups may not comprise a body that could stand as a legitimate alternative to the Alawite regime. But revolutions proceed in phases rather than all at once, and delaying policy decisions before the opposition has coalesced around a viable

alternative government is tantamount to insisting that the revolution succeed fully before it receives practical or military assistance.

With the Assad regime's own escalation in early 2012, the crisis in Syria may have reached the point where de-escalation and negotiated settlement is no longer possible. American objectives in Syria are to hasten the fall of the Assad regime; to contain the regional spillover generated by the ongoing conflict; and to gain influence over the state and armed forces that emerge in Assad's wake. Therefore, the United States must consider developing relations with critical elements of Syria's armed opposition movement in order to achieve shared objectives, and to manage the consequences should the Assad regime fall or the conflict protract.

APPENDIX I: ARMED OPPOSITION LEADERSHIP

FREE SYRIAN ARMY LEADERSHIP IN TURKEY



Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush

Affiliated With: Free Officers Movement

Area of Operations: N/A

Lieutenant Colonel Harmoush started the Free Officers Movement when he announced his defection in an early June 2011 video statement. Syrian security forces detained Harmoush in mid-September 2011 and executed him in January 2012.



Colonel Riad Asaad

Commander: Free Syrian Army

Area of Operations: N/A

Colonel Riad Asaad formed the Free Syrian Army at the end of July 2011, and by mid-October his umbrella group was affiliated with many of the key rebel groups operating on the ground in Syria.



Colonel Ahmed Hijazi

Deputy Commander: Free Syrian Army

Area of Operations: N/A

Colonel Hijazi escaped to Turkey after his frequently participates in video statements and press interviews from the Free Syrian Army headquarters in Turkey where he acts as a deputy to Colonel Asaad.



Colonel Malik al-Kurdi

Deputy Commander: Free Syrian Army

Area of Operations: N/A

Colonel Malik al-Kurdi escaped to Turkey after his late August defection from the Syrian Navy. He has made numerous video and press statements during his time in with the FSA leadership.



Captain Mohammed Hamdo

Spokesman: Free Syrian Army

Area of Operations: N/A

Captain Mohammed Hamdo has not appeared in video statements but frequently conducts press interviews in which he is cited as a “spokesman” or “senior leader” in the FSA’s media headquarters in Turkey.

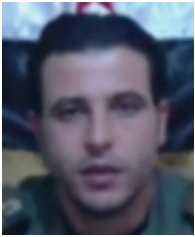


General Mustafa Ahmed al-Sheikh

Commander: Syrian Higher Revolutionary Council

Area of Operations: N/A

General Mustafa al-Sheikh did not defect until late January 2012, but when he did he became the highest ranking officer to defect. He formed the Higher Revolutionary Council outside of the FSA, but the two groups merged in February.

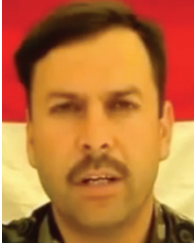


Captain Baseem al-Khalid

Affiliated With: Syrian Higher Revolutionary Council

Area of Operations: N/A

Captain al-Khalid made the video statement that announced the formation of the Higher Revolutionary Council, in which he said he would act as General Mustafa al-Sheikh's aide.



Colonel Abdul Satar Yunsu

Commander: Hamza Battalion

Area of Operations: Idlib city and suburbs

Colonel Yunsu has participated in a number of video statements from the FSA headquarters in Turkey, and ostensibly leads the Hamza Battalion around Idlib. However, there is little evidence that links him to effective rebel groups in Idlib.



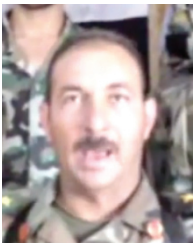
Captain Ahyam al-Kurdi

Commander: Qashoush Battalion

Area of Operations: Hama

FSA leadership named Captain al-Kurdi the commander of the Qashoush Battalion in Hama province. While al-Kurdi continues to appear in FSA statements; however, there is little evidence that links him to effective rebel groups in Hama.

FREE SYRIAN ARMY UNIT LEADERS

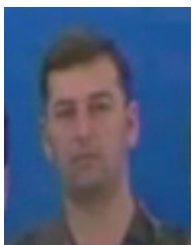


Captain Ammar al-Wawi

Commander: Ababeel Battalion

Area of Operations: Aleppo

Captain al-Wawi ostensibly leads a rebel unit in Aleppo, and he has reported on the group's operations there. However, the frequency of his video and press statements suggest that he has remained in Turkey and has become closely aligned with FSA leaders.



Captain Ibrahim Munir Majmour

Commander: Hourriyeh Battalion

Area of Operations: Aleppo

Captain Majmour participated in several video statements from Turkey in July and September of 2011 before returning to Syria to lead a rebel group in November. It is difficult to attribute limited engagements around Aleppo to Captain Majmour's group.



Major Maher Rahman al-Nuemi

Commander: Moawiyah Bin Abi Sufian Battalion

Area of Operations: Damascus

Major al-Nuemi's oratory skill and press interviews from inside Syria have made him a key figure in the movement. His unit has conducted some of the attacks around Damascus. Unlike other FSA leaders he was initially included by the Higher Revolutionary Council.



Captain Qais Qataneh

Commander: Omari Battalion

Area of Operations: Dera'a province

Captain Qataneh leads the most effective rebel organization on the Hawran plain. He leading raids and ambushes along an arc of small towns and avoids sustained conflict with security forces. He has also coordinated with other rebel units in Dera'a province.



Captain Yousif al-Din Yahya

Commander: Harmoush Battalion

Area of Operations: Jebel al-Zawiya, Idlib

Captain Yahya joined up with FSA leadership in Turkey after his August defection from the Syrian Army. He returned to the mountainous Jebel-al Zawiya region to lead a large rebel force conducting raids and ambushes.

KHALID BIN WALID BRIGADE, HOMS PROVINCE



Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Ali

Commander: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Major Shiekh Ali became the leader of the armed resistance movement around Homs in September 2011, organizing the various defected officers under the Khalid bin Walid Brigade.



Major Ali Mohammed Ayoub

Commander: Hamza Battalion

Area of Operations: Rastan

Major Ayoub commands Khalid bin Walid's Hamza Battalion. Although he appears to be a late-comer to the broader organization, he played a key role in wresting control of Rastan's western neighborhoods from loyalists in late January 2012.



Lieutenant Ibrahim Ayoub

Deputy Commander: Farouq Battalion

Area of Operations: Rastan

After his defection in July 2010, Lieutenant Ayoub was a key participant in the formation of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade. He currently acts as a leader within the Hamza Battalion and continued his leadership role during the late January 2012 Rastan offensive.



Major Ahmad Bahboh

Affiliated with: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Major Bahboh was the first leader of Khalid bin Walid in June 2011, and his brother Abdullah has maintained close ties with MAJ Sheikh Ali. Bahboh lead rebels against loyalist forces in Rastan, January-February 2012.



Captain Abdullah Bahboh

Commander: Mohammed Tlass Battalion

Area of Operations: Rastan

Captain Abdullah Bahboh joined his brother Ahmad during initial formation of Khalid bin Walid, and has maintained close ties with Major Sheikh Ali since then, appearing in a number of key video statements. He fought with Ahmad in Rastan in February 2012.



Lieutenant Abd al-Razaq Tlass

Commander: Farouq Battalion

Area of Operations: Bab Amr, Homs city

Lieutenant Tlass, nephew of a long-time Syrian Defense Minister, was an inspirational leader who commanded the Khalid bin Walid's Farouq Battalion in Bab Amr, Homs. He was killed in a regime artillery barrage on February 9, 2012.



Lieutenant Walid al-Abdullah

Deputy Commander: Farouq Battalion

Area of Operations: Bab Amr, Homs city

Lieutenant al-Abdullah has appeared beside Lieutenant Abd al-Razaq Tlass in both video statements and clips showing the two young defectors working with their militia group inside Homs' Bab Amr neighborhood.

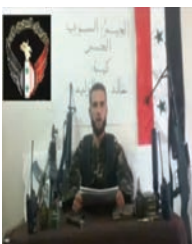


Captain Yousef al-Hamoud

Commander: Fadi al-Qassim Battalion

Area of Operations: Bab Dreib, Homs city

Captain al-Hamoud was one of the first members of Khalid bin Walid under Major Ahmad Bahboh. In January and February 2012, he led rebels against loyalist forces in Homs' Bab Dreib neighborhood.



Lieutenant Faez Ahmed al-Abdullah

Commander: Ali bin Abi Talib Company

Area of Operations: Houleh region, Homs countryside

Lieutenant al-Abdullah participated in early video statements before appearing days after the late September 2011 Rastan battle to announce the Khalid bin Walid Brigade's withdrawal and claim responsibility for effective attacks in the Homs countryside.



Captain Rawad Ahmed al-Aksah

Commander: Special Tasks Battalion

Area of Operations: Zafaraneh

A relative late-comer within Khalid bin Walid, CPT al-Aksah announced his defection at the end of December 2011, when he formed the Special Task Battalion under the leadership of Khalid bin Walid.



Captain Ayad al-Deek

Affiliated with: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Captain al-Deek, who has been called Khalid bin Walid's chief of staff, was one of the inaugural members of the organization under Major Ahmad Bahboh, and has participated in a series of video statements claiming responsibility for operations in Rastan.



Lieutenant Ahmed Mustafa Khalaf

Affiliated with: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Lieutenant Khalaf was one of the first and most respected free officers around Homs after his defection in late June 2011 and subsequent involvement with Khalid bin Walid. He was killed in action during the late September 2011 regime assault on Rastan.

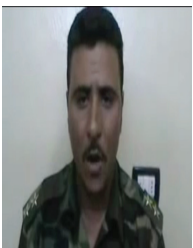


Lieutenant Mohammed Abd al-Aziz Tlass

Affiliated with: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Lieutenant Abd al-Aziz Tlass ambushed security forces along the road from Homs to Rastan in September and fought in Rastan at the end of that. He has not appeared in video statements since then, and may have been killed.



Lieutenant Amjad al-Hamid

Affiliated with: Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Lieutenant al-Hamid was an early member of the Rastan Free Officer's movement before joining Khalid bin Walid in September 2011. The Rastan native appeared in a number of key video statements during Khalid bin Walid's formative period.



Lieutenant Omar Shamsi

Affiliated With: Khalid bin al-Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Rastan

Lieutenant Shamsi was an early member of the Rastan Free Officer's movement before joining Khalid bin Walid in September 2011. He appeared in a number of key video statements during Khalid bin Walid's formative period.

HAMA COUNTRYSIDE & SOUTH IDLIB



Captain Zuhair Al-Sheikh

Commander: Osama bin Zaid Battalion

Area of Operations: Idlib & Hama

Captain al-Sheikh announced his defection, joining the Abou al-Fidaa Battalion in early November. At the end of that month, he announced the formation of the Osama bin Zaid Battalion from the head of over 75 rebels organized into 5 'companies.'



Lieutenant Ayman Hallaq

Affiliated with: Abou al-Fidaa Company, Osama bin Zaid Battalion

Area of Operations: Northern Hama countryside

Lieutenant Hallaq appears alternately as the commander of the Mohammed Hussein al-Hallaq Company and the Iman bin Hussein Abdallah Company. In February 2012 his unit captured and then released 11 Iranian pilgrims travelling through Hama.

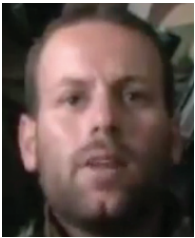


Lieutenant Abdel Majid Ayoub

Commander: Kifah Sirmala Company, Osama bin Zaid Battalion

Area of Operations: Khan Shaykhun, Idlib

Lieutenant Ayoub has appeared as a 'company' commander under Zuhair al-Sheikh. In an early December video statement claimed credit for defending a demonstration in Khan Shaykhun and destroying armored troop carriers in the engagement.

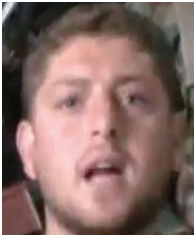


Lieutenant Mohammed Base

Commander: Mohammed al-Sheikh Company, Osama bin Zaid Bn

Area of Operations: Idlib & Hama

Lieutenant Base has appeared in two videos with Captain Zuhair al-Sheikh as a subordinate leader in his organization.

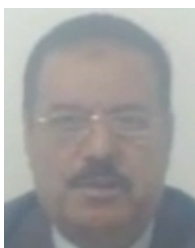


Lieutenant Mahmoud Ahmed Hummadi

Commander: Hassan Al-Hassan Company, Osama bin Zaid Bn

Area of Operations: Idlib & Hama

Lieutenant Hummadi has appeared in two videos with Captain Zuhair al-Sheikh as a subordinate leader in his organization.



Brigadier General Radwan al-Madloush

Commander: Suleiman Battalion

Area of Operations: Maarat al-Numan, Idlib

General Madloush defected from the Air Force Intelligence, a rare example of defection from the regime intelligence apparatus. The FSA named him commander of the Suleiman Battalion in Idlib. Loyalist forces killed him when they raided his safe house in November 2011.



Captain Zahir Abdul Karim

Affiliated With: Suleiman Battalion

Area of Operations: Karnaz & Muhradeh, Hama

Captain Karim claimed responsibility for some of the earliest effective attacks against regime convoys travelling through the Hama countryside in September 2011. He was severely wounded in the same raid that killed Radwan al-Madloush.

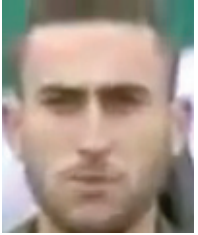


Colonel Adnan Hallaq

Affiliated With: Abou al-Fidaa Battalion

Area of Operations: Hama

Colonel Hallaq defected in December 2011 with a small group of soldiers, announcing his plans to join the Abou al-Fidaa battalion of the Free Syrian Army “under the leadership of Riad Asaad.



Lieutenant Talal al-Masri

Affiliated With: Khouder al-Sharif Company, Osama bin Zaid Battalion

Area of Operations: Kafr Nabuda, Hama

Lieutenant al-Masri announced his defection from Syrian Special Forces in December 2011 and appeared in mid-February video, stating his connection to both Osama bin Zaid and Abou al-Fidaa Battalions before engaging regime forces with an advanced AT weapon.



Lieutenant Mohammed al-Khal

Affiliated With: Kouder al-Sharif Company, Osama bin Zaid Battalion

Area of Operations: Kafr Nabuda, Hama

In December 2011 Lieutenant Mohammed al-Khal announced his defection from the Syrian Army and the formation of the Khouder a-Sharif Company of the Osama bin Zaid Battalion.

APPENDIX 2: ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS

ALEPPO PROVINCE

Ababeel Battalion

Area of Operations: Aleppo Province
Commander: Captain Ammar al-Wawi
Estimated Strength: UNK

Captain al-Wawi has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks throughout Aleppo and northern Idlib on behalf of the Ababeel Battalion; however, al-Wawi appears to have remained in Turkey since October 2011, making it difficult to attribute activity in Aleppo to his leadership and calling into question the credibility of this rebel unit.

Hourriyeh Battalion

Area of Operations: Aleppo Province
Commander: Captain Ibrahim Munir Majmour
Estimated Strength: 25-30

Captain Majmour's Hourriyeh Battalion was one of the twenty-two militia groups that the FSA announced in its October 2011 video. In November 2011, Majmour made a video statement with a formation of over 25 rebels. Captain Majmour has close ties with FSA leadership but it is difficult to directly attribute the limited engagements around Aleppo to this rebel group.

IDLIB PROVINCE

Harmoush Battalion

Area of Operations: Jebel al-Zawiya
Commander: Captain Yousif al-Din Yahya
Estimated Strength: 150

The rebels in Jebel al-Zawiya demonstrated impressive capability in October and November 2011, conducting raids and ambushes along the major roads that surrounded their mountain hideout. After regime security forces inflicted a significant defeat to these rebels in late December, the group demonstrated resiliency by continuing to conduct major ambushes and raids as early as January 2012.

Hamza Battalion

Area of Operations: Idlib city and suburbs
Commander: Colonel Abdul Satar Yunsu
Estimated Strength: UNK

When the FSA announced its expanded formal structure in October 2011, it placed Colonel Yunsu in command of the Hamza Battalion around Idlib city. Despite the frequency of rebel engagements in this area, it is difficult to determine the Hamza Battalion's effectiveness due to the number of other rebel groups operating in the area.

Abu Bakr al-Sideeq Battalion

Area of Operations: Idlib city

Commander: UNK

Estimated Strength: UNK

Little information is available about this rebel unit other than the fact the Dhiraar bin al-Azwar Company claimed affiliation to the larger unit during its formation.

Dhiraar bin al-Azwar Company

Area of Operations: Sarmeen

Commander: UNK

Estimated Strength: 15

Little information is available about this rebel unit outside of the Dhiraar bin al-Azwar Company's formation announcement in early December 2011. The unit claimed affiliation to the larger Abu Bakr al-Sideeq Battalion during its formation.

Moua'aweya Battalion

Area of Operations: Saraqib

Commander: UNK

Estimated Strength: 50

This relatively large rebel group announced its formation mid-February video that showed a large gathering of at least fifty rebel fighters. Journalists interviewing rebel fighters in Saraqib around this timeframe noted the level of organization demonstrated by the Saraqib rebels.

HAMA COUNTRYSIDE & SOUTH IDLIB PROVINCE

Abou al-Fidaa Battalion

Area of Operations: Hama countryside & south Idlib province

Commander: UNK

Estimated Strength: 500 (combined with Osama bin Zaid Battalion)

The Abou al-Fidaa was recognized as a Hama-based FSA unit in the October 2011 video statement that first announced the umbrella groups formal structure. A number of individuals who identified themselves as members of this group have also identified themselves as members of the Osama bin Zaid Battalion, suggesting that the two groups are intimately related, if not one and the same.

Together, the Abou al-Fidaa and Osama bin Zaid Battalions conducted over twenty raids and abushes against regime security forces in this agricultural plain at the foothills of the Idlib plateau north of Hama city.

Osama bin Zaid Battalion

Area of Operations: Hama countryside & south Idlib province

Commander: Captain Zuhair al-Sheikh

Estimated Strength: 500 (combined with Abou al-Fidaa Battalion)

Captain al-Sheikh, who originally identified himself a member of the Abou al-Fidaa Battalion, announced Osama bin Zaid's formation at the end of November 2011. A number of his junior leaders have since referred themselves as both members of Osama bin Zaid and Abou al-Fidaa, suggesting that the two groups are intimately related, if not one and the same. Together, the Abou al-Fidaa and Osama bin Zaid Battalions conducted over twenty raids and abushes against regime security forces in this agricultural plain at the foothills of the Idlib plateau north of Hama city.

Mohammed Hussein al-Hallaq Company (Osama bin Zaid Battalion)

Area of Operations: Kafr Nabuda, Idlib/Hama
Commander: Lieutenant Ayman Hallaq
Estimated Strength: 25-50 (combined with Iman bin Hussein Abdullah Company)

Lieutenant Hallaq appears alternately as the commander of the Mohammed Hussein al-Hallaq Company and the Iman bin Hussein Abdallah Company. In February 2012 his unit captured and then released 11 Iranian pilgrims travelling through Hama.

Iman bin Hussein Abdullah Company (Abou al-Fidaa Battalion)

Area of Operations: Kafr Nabuda, Idlib/Hama
Commander: Lieutenant Ayman Hallaq
Estimated Strength: 25-50 (combined with the Mohammed Hussein al-Hallaq Company)

Lieutenant Hallaq appears alternately as the commander of the Mohammed Hussein al-Hallaq Company and the Iman bin Hussein Abdallah Company. In February 2012 his unit captured and then released 11 Iranian pilgrims travelling through Hama.

Kifah Sirmala Company

Area of Operations: Khan Shaykhun, Idlib & Murak, Hama
Commander: Lieutenant Abdel Majid Ayoub
Estimated Strength: 25

The Kifa Sirmala Company is an organized under the Osama bin Zaid Battalion. The unit has claimed credit for defending a demonstration in Khan Shaykhun, destroying armored troop carriers and ambushing loyalist forces near Murak.

Manha al-Fikri Company

Area of Operations: Khan Shaykhun, Idlib
Commander: Lieutenant Abu Zaid
Estimated Strength: 15

The Manha al-Fikri Company is organized under the Osama bin Zaid Battalion and has claimed credit for engaging loyalist forces in Khan Shaykhun.

Abu Ammar Company

Area of Operations: Idlib
Commander: Lieutenant Ameen Abu Othman
Estimated Strength: 15

The Abu Ammar Company appears to have operated independently under Ahmad Mudir al-Hussein prior to his death in mid-November 2011. The unit was incorporated into the Osama bin Zaid Battalion later in the month under the leadership of Lieutenant Othman.

Hassan al-Hassan Company

Area of Operations: Idlib/Hama
Commander: Lieutenant Mahmoud Ahmed Hummadi
Estimated Strength: 15

The Hassan al-Hassan Company is organized under the Osama bin Zaid Battalion and has claimed credit for ambushing regime security forces on the Aleppo to Damascus highway.

Mohammed al-Sheikh Company

Area of Operations: Idlib/Hama
Commander: Lieutenant Mohammed Base
Estimated Strength: 15

The Hassan al-Hassan Company is organized under the Osama bin Zaid Battalion but has not taken credit for any specific attacks.

Khouder al-Sharif Company

Area of Operations: Kafr Nabuda, Idlib/Hama
Commander: Lieutenant Mohammed al-Khal
Estimated Strength: 15-25

This unit formed in mid-December 2011 and stated its affiliation with the Osama bin Zaid Battalion. One of its Lieutenants, Talal al-Masri, appeared in mid-February video stating his affiliation with both the Osama bin Zaid and Abou al-Fidaa Battalions.

Mosaab al-Sabeh Company

Area of Operations: UNK
Commander: UNK
Estimated Strength: 30

This unit formed in mid-February 2012 and stated its affiliation with the Osama bin Zaid Battalion. No evidence of the affiliation appears outside of this video statement, and the unit has not claimed responsibility for any specific engagements.

Azz al-Din Company

Area of Operations: Idlib
Commander: Jafar Abdel Fatah Akrabo
Estimated Strength: 20

This unit formed in mid-February 2012 and stated its affiliation with the Osama bin Zaid Battalion. No evidence of the affiliation appears outside of this video statement, and the unit has not claimed responsibility for any specific engagements.

Suleiman Battalion

Area of Operations: south Idlib province
Commander: Brigadier General Radwan al-Madloush (KIA, 14 November 2011)
Estimated Strength: 25-50 (as of early November 2011)

When the FSA announced its expanded formal structure in October 2011, it included General Madloush's Suleiman Battalion operating in the northern Hama countryside and Idlib province. This group seems to have disbanded since the raid that killed the General, and its members have likely joined the Abou al-Fidaa Battalion and its affiliates.

Qashoush Battalion

Area of Operations: Hama
Commander: Captain Ahyam al-Kurdi
Estimated Strength: UNK

When the FSA announced its expanded formal structure in October 2011, it included Captain al-Kurdi as the commander of the Qashoush Battalion in Hama. However, the Qashoush Battalion has not claimed responsibility for specific operations, unlike the other militias operating in the area, calling into question the credibility of this unit.

HOMS PROVINCE

Khalid bin Walid Brigade

Area of Operations: Homs Province
Commander: Major Abdul Rahman Sheikh Al
Estimated Strength: 3,000+

The Khalid bin Walid Brigade is the largest and most effective rebel force operating in Syria. After uniting various rebel commanders operating around Homs, the unit fought its first major engagement at the end of September 2011 when it conducted a fighting retreat against security forces in the town of Rastan.

Farouq Battalion

Area of Operations: Bab Amr, Homs City
Commander: Lieutenant Abdul Razaq Tlass (KIA, 9 February 2012)
Estimated Strength: 1,000 (as of early February 2012)

Khalid bin Walid's Farouq Battalion has been its most effective fighting unit, inflicting heavy losses on loyalist forces in Homs' Bab Amr neighborhood in late October and early November 2011 under the leadership of Lieutenant Tlass. In February 2012, more stiff resistance in Bab Amr led to a three week siege and bombardment of the neighborhood before ground forces entered to take the neighborhood.

Fadi al-Qassim Battalion

Area of Operations: Bab Dreib, Homs City
Commander: Captain Yousef al-Hamood
Estimated Strength: 100

Captain Yousef al-Hamood, one of the first members of Khalid bin Walid, conducted successful operations against regime forces in Homs' Bab Dreib neighborhood in January and February 2012.

Mohammed Tlass Battalion

Area of Operations: Rastan, Homs Province
Commander: Major Ahmad Bahboh
Estimated Strength: 50-100

Major Ahmad Bahboh, the original commander of Khalid bin Walid, has continued to conduct operations against regime forces in Rastan through February 2012.

Hamza Battalion

Area of Operations: Rastan, Homs Province
Commander: Major Ali Mohammed Ayoub
Estimated Strength: 50-100

The Hamza Battalion, led by Lieutenant Ibrahim Ayoub and his brother Major Ali Mohammed Ayoub succeeded in wresting Rastan's western neighborhoods from regime control in late January 2012.

Ali bin Abi Taleb Company

Area of Operations: Houleh, Homs Province
Commander: Lieutenant Faiez Ahmed al-Abdullah
Estimated Strength: 25

The Ali bin Abi Taleb Company of the Khalid bin Walid Brigade withdrew from Rastan in September 2011 during the regime's offensive there and began conducting ambushes and raids against regime security forces in the Houleh region of the Homs countryside, a little more than 10km west of Rastan.

Special Tasks Battalion

Area of Operations: Zafaraneh & Mukhtarieh, Homs Province
Commander: Captain Rawad Ahmed al-Aksah
Estimated Strength: 50

DERA'A PROVINCE

Omari Battalion

Area of Operations: Dera'a Province
Commander: Captain Qais Qataneh
Estimated Strength: 100

Captain Qais Qataneh's Omari Battalion has successfully executed hit-and-run attacks against loyalist forces across a belt of towns in central Dera'a Province.

Nasir Salah al-Din Battalion

Area of Operations: Sanamein, Dera'a Province
Commander: UNK
Estimated Strength: 25-50

The Nasir Salah al-Din Battalion operates independently of the Omari Battalion, conducting raids and ambushes in the countryside around Sanamein. The group coordinated with the Omari Battalion's Captain Qataneh as of November 2011.

Ahmed Khalaf Battalion

Area of Operations: Jizah, Dera'a Province
Commander: UNK
Estimated Strength: 25

The Ahmed Khalaf Battalion operates in close coordination with the Shuhadaa al-Hurria Battalion that operates less than 10km to the north in Musayfirah, and maintains communication with the Omari Battalion. The unit has conducted infrequent but particularly effective raids against regime checkpoints and has established roadblocks around Jizah.

Shuhadaa al-Hurria Battalion

Area of Operations: Musayfirah, Dera'a Province
Commander: UNK
Estimated Strength: 25

The Shuhadaa al-Hurria Battalion operates in close coordination with the the Ahmed Khalaf Battalion that operates less than 10km to the south in Jizah, and maintains communication with the Omari Battalion. The unit has conducted infrequent but particularly effective raids against regime checkpoints.

Raed al-Masri Company

Area of Operations: Tasil, Dera'a Province

Commander: UNK

Estimated Strength: 10

Omari Battalion commander Qais Qataneh traveled to Tasil to establish the Raed al-Masri Company in Janaury 2012, but the limited number of reported attacks in the Tasil area calls into question the credibility of this rebel group.

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