

# The armed struggle and arming the Syrian opposition

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The Syrian revolution could not be restricted to a single form. Peaceful demonstrations (which remained peaceful for seven months) faced the brutal military reaction of the regime, threatening millions of Syrians when they tried to rally in the streets and occupy squares, as in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Libya. The Syrian people insisted on facing this brutality in a heroic, peaceful way.

The regime increased the brutality of its repression, using the army and many security forces and *Shabbiha* (thugs). After an enormous increase in the number of martyrs, peacefully demonstrating people were obliged to carry arms to defend themselves, especially after a number of soldiers deserted from the army and affiliated with the revolution.

In the first period, weapons were used to protect the demonstrations against security forces and *Shabbiha*, but the growing violence of the regime was alone a sufficient cause for the shift from peaceful to armed struggle. The same rebels who had been demonstrating nonviolently formed fighting battalions to defend themselves from the criminal acts of the regime.

Then the regime began inflicting total destruction on entire neighborhoods, villages and cities, causing great numbers of people to flee to other cities. This prevented demonstrations in the destroyed cities and neighborhoods as well as in shelter regions where activists became busy in rescue work and in helping refugees. This situation favored the predominance of armed struggle at the expense of peaceful demonstrations, on the one hand, and posed new problems regarding the sources of arms and financial support on the other hand.

At first rebels used light weapons that had previously been available in the country. Thereafter they acquired weapons from the army itself by attacking its units, or buying them from corrupt officials or from those who were sympathetic to the revolution. Nevertheless, this was not enough to face the military forces of the regime. The army and security forces were obliged to withdraw from many regions by the modest strikes of armed rebels who were relying on broad popular support. As a result, most sections of the army were kept in their barracks (without communication with their families or vacations). The regime relied mainly on its aircraft forces and a wide range of missiles as

alternatives. Also, this increased the number of victims and the extent of destruction.

Since the beginning of the revolution, the regime has depended on select military units to strike the revolution. These were the fourth division of the army, formed by Rifaat Al-Assad, the republican guard, aircraft intelligence, which is mainly composed of Alawites, and Shabbiha that were trained by specialists from Iran and Hezbollah in a manner similar to the Iranian revolutionary guard. These forces were weakened by the determined assaults of the armed revolution.

Early on, the balance of forces favored the revolution. However, the persistent chaos, the absence of military experience (most defected officials were held in Turkey and Jordan under confinement), prevented the formation of a military strategy capable of overthrowing the regime. The revolutionaries' strategy focused on the liberation of cities and regions, which made them susceptible to massive destruction by the brutal strikes of Assad's aircraft and missiles, and not on targeting the particular fighting forces of the regime. Later, Assad was able to get the support of new forces from Iran, Hezbollah and Iraq (sectarian forces linked to Iran), and received new sophisticated weaponry from Russia, to launch counter-attacks against liberated areas such as Al-Qusair, Tal-Kalakh, Homs, Eastern Ghota in Damascus, and many other neighborhoods in Damascus, Deir-El Zour and Aleppo.

The revolution is now facing a war with Hezbollah and Iran and remnants of the regime forces, all equipped with new, sophisticated Russian weaponry. The regime continues to rely on aircraft strikes and heavy missiles and even chemical weapons. On the other side, there has been no actual arming of the revolutionary troops from abroad. Those who are armed, like Jabhat-Annusra, have mainly imposed their authority on previously liberated areas, and created conflicts that weaken the revolution; in fact these troops represent a counter-revolution.

Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and also the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, have sought to dominate or "buy" battalions by supporting them with weapons. Fighting battalions recognize now that this limited support was aimed at prolonging the armed struggle rather than carrying the revolution to victory. It remains true that weapons are mainly acquired by attacking the army.

Now, the intervention of foreign forces—of Iran and Hezbollah and the Russian support of the regime with weaponry—has become obvious. The regime is counterattacking the revolution to change the balance of forces and is defeating the revolution and achieving victory in some regions. The issue of arming the fighting battalions poses itself, and the question is: should we accept foreign arms or not?

Saudi Arabia and Qatar are preparing to support the revolution. France put pressure on the European Union to change its policy against arming the Syrian rebels, but the EU rejected this. After the regime regained control of Al-Qusair city, the U.S. decided to arm the opposition, and then retreated. Some leaders of the FSA have claimed that they received sophisticated Russian arms via Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

It should be clear that the old imperialist forces are taking a negative position towards arming the revolution. The weapons that were delivered were meant to prolong the struggle and to cause massive destruction in Syria. Will the situation be different now? I don't think so. Surely, rebels are in need of anti-craft and anti-tank missiles, in addition to light weapons and ammunition. But it should be obvious that the imperialist perspective is tending towards a political solution. Actually, the imperialist powers have assigned Syria to Russia. The political solution will be the imposition of Russian imperialist dominance on Syria. Consequently, rebels should find other ways to get weapons, and must establish real army forces capable of struggle until victory.

**Salameh Kaileh**

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\* <http://cpdweb.org/news/Syria-Kaileh.shtml>