

Syria : debate and analysis on the popular armed opposition

Thursday 16 January 2014, by [Syria Freedom Forever](#) (Date first published: 6 July 2012).

Contents

- [Opposition to armed opposition](#)
- [Beginning of the armed opposit](#)
- [Composition of the armed \(...\)](#)
- [Military equipment](#)
- [Strategy for armed opposition](#)
- [Role of the FSA and popular](#)

Debates on the role and the nature of the armed opposition groups have been ongoing since their inceptions last year in June 2011 with the establishment of the Free Officer movement by Colonel Husayn Harmoush. This initiative was born killed because of the capture of the Colonel and his execution by the regime, but far from stopping there, the Free Syrian Army followed, led by the former Syrian Air Force Colonel Riad Asaad. Colonel Asaad defected from the air force in July 2011 and took refuge in Turkey where he settled since then.

Despite the fact that the Syrian revolutionary process is until today still characterized by its popular actions, from demonstrations to civil disobedience and strike campaigns as we saw in December 2011. We nevertheless like to express our opinion on this debate through a deep analysis on the nature of the armed opposition groups and the understanding we have on armed resistance.

Opposition to armed opposition

Some Syrian opposition groups has denounced the rise of an armed opposition inside the country and claimed that this has weakened the popular movement. The leader of the NCB Haitam Mannaa has for example declared that “When we were non-violent, we had three million people with us,” in addition to “Now, with the armed resistance, we don’t have more than 50,000 people in the streets.” He also said that “the armed struggle cannot be won. It plays in the hands of the extremist groups who are supported by the Gulf states” [1]. He added that these groups were pushing for foreign intervention, which we oppose [2].

Although we agree on the fact that solely armed resistance to overthrow the regime is not enough and we oppose foreign intervention, we believe the approach of the opposition activist Haitham Manna is not right. The popular movement in Syria has not ceased to grow and increase. In addition the violent repression on the protesters started on the first day of the revolutionary process in March 2011, it was not the armed resistance that launched it. Therefore as said the Cuban anti imperialist and national hero Jose Marti “he who triggers an avoidable war in a country is criminal, but is as criminal he who does not trigger an inevitable war”. We cannot deny that many Syrians felt like this against the violent repression of the regime, which could have avoided this war on its people.

It is worth remembering that there were more than 800 martyrs in Egypt during the three weeks prior to the overthrow of Mubarak. At one point protesters used violence to resist the thugs sent by the Mubarak regime to invade Tahrir square. People in Syria and elsewhere have the right to defend themselves and their families against the oppression of an authoritarian regime. Did we deny this right to the Palestinian resistance against the racist, colonial occupation of their territory by the Israelis? Did we deny the right in the past to South Americans population to launch guerrilla armed resistance against their dictatorship? Obviously not. The right to self-defense against the regime's repression is not in contradiction with the peaceful struggle of the popular movement and the overthrow of the regime, as we will see.

Beginning of the armed opposition groups

Few elements favored the appearance of the armed groups:

- Firstly, the violent repression of the regime against the peaceful protesters and in particular against the leaders of the popular movement by killing them, arresting them or pushing them to exile. This radicalized the movement and brought figures more keen to use armed resistance. Groups of citizens therefore increasingly took arms out of necessity to defend their homes and demonstrations from the shabihas, the security services and the army, and respond to attacks from them.
- Secondly, the increasing defections in the army particularly from rank and files army soldiers refusing to fire on peaceful protesters. On June 26, the 13th general was defecting and leaving to Turkey, while on June 22 a Syrian air force colonel became the first senior officer to defect in an aircraft after he abandoned a mission to attack the city of Dera'a and landed his MiG 21 fighter jet in Jordan. The refusal of soldiers to shoot at peaceful demonstrations led to many mutinies and defections inside the Syrian army. A Syrian general who was a leading member of Bashar al-Assad's inner circle, Manaf Tlass, has also defected to Turkey.
- Lastly, the will of some foreign groups and / or state to fund some armed groups inside Syria to build a base of support, which they lacked. The movement of the Muslim Brotherhood has for example provided financial backing to a militia called the Civilian Protection Committee or the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Battalion in exchange for the groups' loyalty. Some suspicions exist as well on Farouk Battalion led by the famous Abdel Razak Tlass and links with Saudi Arabia. An activist actually declared that "Some Qatari and Saudi businessmen are bypassing the military councils and pumping a big amount of dollars directly to fragmented armed opposition movements inside Syria. Some is going to radical groups" [3].

As we can see nothing was planned to turn the Syrian revolutionary process, which stayed completely peaceful for months, into an armed military component.

Composition of the armed groups

The people composing the armed opposition groups are socially issued from the biggest section of the Syrian revolutionary movement, which includes the economically disenfranchised rural and urban working, lower and middle classes who have experienced the accelerated imposition of neoliberal policies by Bashar Al Assad since his arrival to power [4]. In the armed opposition groups we found both defectors and civilians who took up arms, they are actually the far majority inside them. The armed opposition groups have real popular roots within the uprising and is simply too

diverse for it to be easily turned into a unified proxy force acting in the interests of foreign powers.

Units and branches of the Syrian army were structured at the time of Hafez Al Assad, making it difficult to mutiny or organize collective insubordination. The structure of the high military command has been based on clientelist and sectarian relations, and very often a mix of the both. Most of the units loyal to Assad are dominated by Alawite officers, but there are also Sunni officers and even generals. For example, the battalion commander who led the terrible attack on Baba Amr in Homs was a Sunni colonel.

The role assigned to them was to repress popular protests to protect the regime, implementing various forms of repression and discrimination. Most of the time, the defectors had no choice but to revolt individually or in small groups, carrying their weapons or not, what often happened.

These conditions nevertheless did not prevent increasing defections and the regime has been forced to bail out its military unity by new elements, some of which are subordinated to the security apparatuses. Thousands of soldiers and officers have been imprisoned for being suspected of sympathy towards the revolution. At least half of Syrian army's casualties were actually killed by regime loyalists, according to different sources.

The names of the armed groups: sectarianism or just product of their social milieu?

Most of the names of the armed groups have a religious Sunni connotation (such as Khalid Ibn al-Walid, who was the Muslim Arab conqueror of Syria in the 7th century. The names of other units associated with the Free Syrian Army—such as the Umar Ibn al-Khattab battalion in Dir al-Zour—also offer evidence of this orientation) and for this reason some have been fast to accuse them of being sectarian. These names on the opposite do not indicate a sectarian trend, but is a result of the social milieu their members are from, which is usually rural, socially marginalized and where practice of religion is usual. These names are therefore a reflection of their social milieu [5].

In addition to this, we do find other communities among members of the armed opposition groups. Alawite brigades were also formed in the beginning of the year 2012 in the province of Idlib notably. Officer Muteeh Ilyas Ilyas was the first Syrian Christian officer to defect from the Syrian army. Security forces killed many Syrian Christian activists assisting or being linked to the FSA. Hossam Mikhail was killed because of his links with the Free Syrian Army.

Military equipment

Most of the armed opposition groups have denied the reception of weapons supplied by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, despite Western media claims [6].

The far majority of the armed opposition groups are struggling against the regime with basic equipment (including army Kalashnikov, Dragunov sniper rifle, machine gun PKT and rocket launchers RPG-7) stolen or purchased from the corrupt Syrian army. The more sophisticated equipments were, especially Metis and Kornet anti-tank missiles, generally gained and captured in battle with the regular forces of the Syrian regime or by buying them to corrupt officers

This does not mean some arms and ammos were not delivered to the armed opposition groups but not as we portray it as organized and in big quantity. A first large delivery was provided in few months ago (March or April), and was allocated to various selected groups operation in and around Idlib, Hama, Homs and the outskirts of Damascus. Each area received several hundred rocket-

propelled grenade launchers (with 10 grenades per launcher), Kalashnikov rifles, BKC machine guns and ammunition, according to several sources [7]. There were also two smaller consignments since the first delivery, but none of it was made following the demands of the armed opposition groups. These latter just took what were given to them.

According to various opposition sources, only small amount of arms have been sent by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, while the Turks have denied any role in arming the Syrian rebels. A large amount of armed opposition groups have actually refuse to pledge allegiance to the Gulf groups, a condition by these latter on delivery of weapons and arms [8].

The claim of Saudi Arabia to pay the FSA elements is still awaited and is not happening until now, while CIA presence in Southern Turkey is more an operation to list the armed opposition groups than to assist them in any way. A high religious cleric member of the High Council of Oulemas, the most important religious authority in Saudi Arabia, has actually issued a Fatwa beginning of June forbidding Saudis to go fight the Syrian regime, or in other words to make the Jihad in Syria.

Some of the armed opposition groups also used to purchase weapons and munitions via smugglers from Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey, but these passages have been weakened considerably as these countries have arrested and forbidden increasingly any movement of arms on their borders.

Lastly but not least, the armed opposition groups receive support from the population in supporting the fighters with money, arms, food, medical supplies and whatever other aid they can secure.

Strategy for armed opposition groups

Until today, the FSA is not a single and unified institution and until recently, coordination rarely extended beyond neighboring towns and villages and never to the provincial or national level. Many rebels didn't even know the commanders in towns two hours away. Despite the lack of coordination, increasing and encouraging progresses have been witnessed these past few months.

Over the past months grassroots popular movements have increasingly burgeoned into a system of national, regional, and local actors who together coordinate demonstrations, armed attacks, humanitarian aid and interviews for media outlets. The establishment of the 'Joint Action Committee' is designed to "unify the political work and the field work in Syria across all the revolutionary levels to ensure a smooth future transition [9]. Its Executive is formed of three representatives from each of the four main opposition groups in Syria, including the two most important the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) and the Local Coordination Committee (LCC), in addition to other local committees. The Committee also has the objective to coordinate and have authority over the armed opposition groups linked to or claiming to be part of the Free Syrian Army.

On the armed resistance side, some efforts have been made to coordinate the activities of the various armed groups in Syria by establishing a Unified Military Council. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has been negotiating with the various factions in the hope of persuading them to join such a body.

Military councils have actually increasingly being formed throughout Syria in an effort to bring a command and control structure to disparate militia groups. According to an activist of the Joint Committee, they had in June ten military councils across the country, which were now sharing tactics and other information. The city of Homs is the notable exception. It lacks such a council because the three main military groups in the city do not get along.

Responsible operational level structures have therefore continually emerged in the form of provincial military councils that derive legitimacy from the local rebel groups operating under their command. The provincial military councils operate under the umbrella of the FSA, but make their own operational decisions.

Viable provincial military councils have formed in Homs, Hama, idlib, Deraa, and Damascus. Each military council represents a collection of effective, pre-existing FSA battalions. Each military council coordinates with their political opposition counterpart, the provincial revolutionary councils, some powerful and established rebel organizations have not accepted their military council's leadership, but enough rebel units have backed the councils to give them legitimacy [10].

The FSA is nevertheless until today more of a label representing a number of independent armed groups located throughout Syria, despite important progresses towards more coordination.

The LCC (see their analysis of FSA) and different groups such the Syrian revolutionary left have called for unification of the various armed groups in Syria under a civil authority towards which they would be accountable. The actions of the FSA should also be coordinated by local opposition groups to achieve the objectives of the revolutionary movement and not other interests foreign to it.

Role of the FSA and popular actions, the necessary complementary

This is why we support the role of the FSA in a coordinated role with forces on the ground such as the LCC and other groups struggling against the regime, addressing the objectives of the Syrian revolution.

This also means the respect of the FSA of Human rights and human dignity and therefore we condemn the practices listed by Amnesty in this report [11]. In the same time, the armed groups are to serve only the objectives of the popular movement and the revolution and not foreign powers. They also have to distinguish them clearly from some armed groups pursuing mafia or sectarian objectives, both elements weakening the revolutionary process.

In a statement made by the FSA in June, it committed to "respect to the principles of international and humanitarian law" and added that it will also only serve the "government to be elected by the people" after the fall of the Assad regime, " it will ensure the people's unity and territorial integrity" and that "it will not interfere in the political process.". We oppose the calls from some armed groups for a foreign military intervention, but moreover we tell them that their calls are a lost of time, because it will not change the fact that currently no foreign power is willing to undertake a foreign military intervention in Syria. We tell them let's unite and collaborate between the popular movement and the armed opposition groups, because this is the only element we can have control on!

Notwithstanding the need for a unified and accountable FSA, this should not detract from the project of building the revolutionary and popular movement, as stated by the LCC: "We must work with local leading activists to focus on continuing and improving their revolutionary activities and increasing their efficiency. The discourse on peaceful civil disobedience has not yet reached the majority and persuaded them of its effectiveness. Many methods of civilian resistance have yet to be used, or have been used only briefly."

Local groups and coordination committees are the effective and direct organizational format for the revolution. The political groups should support them and work on developing a clear and unified revolutionary strategy. From there we can build a revolutionary coalition bringing together the

expand and assist the popular movement in its action.

This means rebuilding as well popular organisations, especially unions in universities and workplaces, which is starting [13].

Che Guevara explained well in his various struggles the necessity for the guerrilla war to be supported by the struggle of the peasant and the workers to overthrow the regime and seize power.

In conclusion, the struggle concerns everyone and all sections of society, we support armed resistance as asserted above but this will not be enough. The popular movement is the key element in the continuation of the revolution and its success. The popular movement and armed resistance have to unite completely and coordinate fully to achieve the objectives of the Syrian revolution and to overthrow of the regime. No assistance whatsoever will come from the outside that will be a game changer for the opposition and the popular movement, the solution is in Syria and among Syrians.

Syria Freedom Forever

P.S.

* Posted on July 6, 2012:

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/07/06/syria-debate-and-analysis-on-the-popular-armed-opposition/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://syrianncb.org/2012/05/17/haytham-manna-we-are-not-against-the-state-but-against-the-regime/>

[2] see our position regarding this topic:

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/05/24/open-letter-to-the-stop-the-war-coalition-st-wc-or-real-solidarity-is-needed/>

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9342471/Syrian-activists-announce-new-leadership.html>

[4] see this article for more info:

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/05/20/syria-one-year-after-the-beginning-of-the-revolution-part-i/>

[5] see analysis of : ()

[6] <http://world.time.com/2012/06/22/opening-the-weapons-tap-syrias-rebels-await-fresh-and-free-ammo/>

[7] <http://world.time.com/2012/06/22/opening-the-weapons-tap-syrias-rebels-await-fresh-and-free-ammo/>

[8] <http://world.time.com/2012/06/22/opening-the-weapons-tap-syrias-rebels-await-fresh-and-free-ammo/>

[9] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9342471/Syrian-activists-announce-new-leadership.html>

[10] http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_MaturingInsurgency_21June2012.pdf

[11] <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/20/syria-armed-opposition-groups-committing-abuses>

[12] <http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=data%5C2012%5C06%5C06-18%5C18qpt899.htm>

[13] see article for more info:

<http://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2012/06/26/the-student-movement-in-syria-and-its-role-in-the-revolution/>