

Rebels Worth Supporting: Syria's Harakat Hazm

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Brief Analysis

A close look at the group's military and ideological credentials seems to reveal a model candidate for greater U.S. and allied support, including lethal military assistance.

In mid-April, web videos began to surface showing Syrian rebel unit Harakat Hazm (Steadfastness Movement) employing U.S.-designed antitank guided missiles in Idlib province. The use of these TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles indicates that the United States and/or one of its TOW-equipped allies have provided lethal aid to the group. Videos of two other groups with TOWs have appeared, but Harakat Hazm seems to have received the most, or at least posted the most videos of them in action.

Harakat Hazm has many qualities that make it a good candidate for such assistance. It appears secular in orientation, is well organized from a military perspective, has a significant inventory of heavy weapons, operates across an important area of Syria, and has an established combat record in fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime. In short, the group seems to provide at least a partial answer to longstanding questions about which rebel groups Washington should arm.

IDEOLOGY, LEADERSHIP, AND STRUCTURE

Harakat Hazm formed in January 2014 via the merger of twenty-two separate rebel units. According to its founding documents, it is a "revolutionary political organization with a military wing...working to bring down the regime in Syria and seeking to restore the freedom and dignity of the Syrian people." There is very little Islamist content in these documents or the group's various Internet postings. In general, the movement appears more interested in warfighting against the regime than the infighting that has long plagued the political and military opposition.

The group's leadership is a mix of military officers and civilians. The military commander is said to be Lt. Abdullah Awdah (a.k.a. "Abu Zaid"), while the head of its Political Bureau is Hamza al-Shamali ("Abu Hashem"). At least two of

its three named commanders appear to have previous military experience. Abu Zaid formerly headed the Farouq al-Shamal Brigades, one of the combat formations that merged to form Harakat Hazm.

The group appears to be well organized militarily, with two defined regional sections: the Northern Section covers Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama provinces, while the Southern Section is responsible for Homs, Rif Damascus, Damascus city, and Deraa provinces. The northern commander is Lt. Murshed al-Khaled ("Abu al-Muataasm"), and the southern commander is Muhammad al-Dahhik ("Abu Hatem"). Each is said to set plans in his area of responsibility and likely oversees subcommanders for individual provinces. Thus far, the group has an established battle history in Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, and Homs provinces -- among the most important areas of combat in the country. It has also claimed a presence in Rif Damascus, Damascus city, and Deraa, though this is unconfirmed.

The group's formations appear to have some degree of specialization, with armored and special forces among its original twenty-two units and perhaps an air-defense unit as well. When the movement first formed, the merged units agreed to quit using their own names. Harakat Hazm now has its own distinctive insignia: a stylized sword bearing the movement's name.

The number of fighters in the group is unknown. Based on the scope of its operations, the number of founding units, and videos of its operations, it probably has at least hundreds of personnel, and perhaps several thousand.

WEAPONS AND CAPABILITIES

Harakat Hazm is well equipped with heavy weapons. Assuming this equipment belongs to the overall movement as claimed and not to individual constituent factions, it allows commanders to concentrate heavy weapons based on battlefield requirements rather than on which faction originally "owned" these arms. Indeed, videos have shown the group bringing together significant numbers and types of heavy weapons for specific operations:

- *Armored fighting vehicles:* These include T-72, T-62, and T-55 main battle tanks and BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, used primarily in an infantry support role and as mobile artillery pieces. Most videos show only one such vehicle being used at a time.
- *Artillery and mortars:* These include 122 mm D-30 howitzers, 130 mm M-46 field guns, 82 mm and 120 mm mortars (including improvised versions), 122 mm Grad rockets, and improvised rockets. Field artillery pieces are used in a direct fire role; videos usually show only one piece. Mortars and rockets are used in an indirect fire role, often in batteries.
- *Antitank weapons:* These include RPG-7s (and probably RPG-29s), 73 and 106 mm recoilless rifles, and Konkur, Sagger, and TOW guided missiles. These antitank weapons have been used with effect against regime troops, fortifications, and vehicles.
- *Antiaircraft weapons:* These include 12.7 and 14.5 mm Dushka heavy machine guns, ZPU-2, ZU-23, and S-60 antiaircraft guns, ZSU-23/4 self-propelled antiaircraft guns, and possibly SA-16 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). Many of the antiaircraft guns are truck mounted and used in a ground fire role, sometimes in a battery configuration that improves the chances of a hit.

The size of Harakat Hazm's arsenal is difficult to determine; for some of the above weapons, such as the ZSU-23/4 and field artillery pieces, the group may only have one of each. Its documents mention three sources of supply: external assistance, purchase, and capture. Most of the heavy arms were probably captured from the regime or otherwise obtained within Syria rather than from abroad.

When concentrated in the field, these weapons give Harakat Hazm the ability to engage Assad's forces on equal or better terms, improving the effectiveness of its operations while increasing regime attrition. They also make the group a potentially more effective force against Islamist extremist elements. Such weapons are well suited to a

mobile style of warfare that emphasizes inflicting casualties and damage on regime forces as opposed to taking and holding ground.

Indeed, Harakat Hazm units appear to be operationally and tactically mobile. In addition to captured army trucks and utility vehicles, the group employs a significant number of pickup and flatbed trucks, minibuses, and sedans to move personnel and equipment. Many of these civilian vehicles have been repurposed as weapons platforms. The group also has several heavy-equipment transporters to save wear and tear on its armored vehicles. With such mobility, it can affect both the battlefield and the political situation in more places more quickly.

MILITARY EFFECTIVENESS

Harakat Hazm appears effective as a military force. It is able to move personnel and concentrate weapons, and its fighters often employ directed fire, not just the "spray and pray" fire typical of many rebel units. Armored vehicle crews show reasonable driving and shooting skills; artillery pieces are manned by crews with some degree of training on their weapons; and antitank gunners often seem to hit their targets. Moreover, the seizure of regime positions suggests an ability to plan and coordinate actions. All of these factors indicate that the group has some level of professional military experience and expertise that could be built on to make it still more effective.

The movement also appears to have a substantial combat history. This includes daily attrition engagements aimed at wearing down regime forces rather than achieving specific objectives. Such battles -- which remain one of the war's principal forms of combat -- typically involve firing on regime strongpoints, lines of communication, and facilities. The group has also been involved in more elaborate offensive actions, particularly against strongpoints. The aim of the latter actions is to kill regime forces, capture weapons and ammunition, and at least temporarily seize key terrain. An example of this kind of action was the successful attack this February on the so-called "poultry barrier," a well-defended regime position near Morek in Hama province. The group also claims to have been involved with other forces in larger-scale offensives in the northern and western suburbs of Aleppo city, in other areas south of that city, in the northern Hama countryside, and in northern Homs province.

In its initial declaration, the movement stated its willingness to "coordinate with any warring faction that is working to achieve the same goals." Its apparent focus on military actions should make working with other moderate groups easier.

WORTHINESS FOR U.S. MILITARY SUPPORT

In addition to meeting political criteria, any Syria rebel unit being considered for U.S. or allied military assistance should be measured against a broad set of military criteria. As described above, Harakat Hazm appears to rate well on several benchmarks:

- *Ideology:* It is a moderate/secularist faction, not an extremist/jihadist group.
- *Structure and forces:* It appears to have substantial numbers of subordinate units, personnel, and heavy weapons, giving it some weight in the military and political situation.
- *Area of operation:* It operates across a broad portion of northern and western Syria, giving it potentially greater influence on the conflict.
- *Military professionalism:* It has personnel with some military expertise and training who know how to use their weapons.
- *Combat history:* It has an established record of success in different kinds of actions; it is not a "YouTube unit" whose exploits are mainly online rather than on the battlefield.
- *Cooperation:* It works with other rebel units for operational purposes, further increasing its military and political influence.

On other criteria, it is not yet clear how the group rates:

- *Command and control:* This quality is lacking in many Syrian rebel formations; Harakat Hazm appears to have made some progress in this regard, but the jury is still out.
- *Cohesion:* Many rebel umbrella groups turn out to be ephemeral; Harakat's staying power remains to be seen.
- *Sustainment:* The group's ability to sustain itself seems good so far but needs to be demonstrated over time. This means replacing lost weapons, repairing weapons and vehicles, and acquiring adequate ammunition and other supplies.
- *Recruitment:* The group must be able to replace battle casualties and other losses as the war progresses. For now, the nature and effectiveness of its recruitment efforts is unclear; well-armed and well-financed groups tend to attract the most recruits.
- *Weapons security:* Its willingness and ability to safeguard externally provided weapons and ammunition is unknown. Various media reports indicate that TOWs were provided in small numbers as a test of the group's ability to do so, and that some technical and accounting safeguards were put in place to prevent transfer to other organizations.

CONCLUSION

The above criteria do not constitute absolute rules -- combat units are always more (or less) than the sum of their parts, and in Harakat Hazm's case, it is the total picture that is important. From this broader perspective, the group seems to be having some success in addressing two key challenges that have long beset the Syrian opposition. First, it has what appears to be a workable command-and-control concept that should permit unity of effort across its forces. Second, it appears to be focused on the military task of defeating or at least wearing down the regime rather than rebel infighting. As mentioned previously, this focus on military objectives should help it find consensus with other groups more easily.

In short, Harakat Hazm appears to be a model for the type of group the United States and its allies can support with meaningful, lethal military assistance. It seems to meet several important military and political criteria, and how it rates on others can be determined by contact with the organization and intelligence collection. That process already appears to be under way for this group and, perhaps, other rebel factions on the more secular/less Islamist side of the spectrum. In addition to providing more weapons, an assistance program could improve the skills of individual fighters and whole units, making them more effective on the battlefield. Efforts to enhance command and control and establish sound logistics would have similar benefits.

Right now, the Assad regime is gaining, albeit unevenly, on the battlefield, while the rebel side is dominated by Islamist forces. That is clearly not the situation Washington should prefer. Effective moderate and secular forces are important to the outcome -- ideally, they can help defeat the regime, control Islamist extremist factions, and stabilize post-Assad Syria along lines that do not harm U.S. and allied interests. Expeditiously building the capabilities of forces like Harakat Hazm can contribute to that end.

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