

# Field Reports on Syria and the Opposition

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**O**n March 7, 2013, Andrew J. Tabler, Jeffrey White, and Simon Henderson addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to discuss their recent trips to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, and the Persian Gulf. Mr. Tabler is a senior fellow at the Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). Mr. White is a defense fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. Mr. Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## ANDREW J. TABLER

**T**he Syrian opposition and neighboring states are baffled by Washington's continuing assertion that the conflict will cauterize itself from within, when every indication points to broad regional spillover. In each of the countries visited on the recent Washington Institute staff trip, the risk of such escalation is growing.

In Lebanon, events are spilling over the border despite the government's policy of disassociation from the conflict.

The northern Beqa Valley is particularly strategic because it connects areas under Hezbollah's control to the regime-held Alawite heartland in Syria.

In Turkey, authorities are strictly controlling the border, and the number of internally displaced Syrians waiting on the other side has increased dramatically. Aid is not reaching these parts of Syria, making the situation both a humanitarian problem and a source of instability. Turkey is also worried about developments in the Syrian Kurdish areas.

In Israel, officials are contemplating the likelihood of a failed state across the Golan Heights. Their main concern, however, is potential transfer of the regime's strategic weapons, whether purposeful (to Hezbollah) or accidental (to jihadists).

Jordan presents the most complicated picture. In the past sixty days alone, 100,000 refugees have streamed across the border, and the Zaatari refugee camp outside Amman has become the kingdom's sixth-largest city. Syrian regime forces openly murder individuals who try to flee across the border, so Jordan's armed forces have been quietly responding, sustaining a number of casualties in the process.

Within Syria, the rebels have shifted markedly toward Salafism and jihadism since November, and anger against the United States has increased amid reports of the White House vetoing plans to send them arms. Perhaps most disturbing is the rapid growth of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, which has moved to the vanguard of the armed opposition.

Meanwhile, the external opposition continues to be ineffectual. Despite the hopes pinned to the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), the body has largely failed to fulfill its purpose, with unelected "local representatives" who remain out of touch with the armed rebels inside Syria. Going forward, the SOC's effectiveness will depend on external incentives to work with the internal opposition on developing a political entity post-Assad.

It is difficult to see how the U.S. announcement of food and medical support for the armed opposition will help take down the regime. For one thing, aid distributed through the SOC may not reach fighters on the ground. More assertive action is needed to cultivate influence with armed groups. There is still time to provide lethal and nonlethal U.S. assistance directly to the rebels -- the sooner this happens, the better Washington's chances of containing the crisis and shaping a better future for the Syrian people.

## JEFFREY WHITE

**T**he Institute staff trip to the region highlighted several aspects of the military situation in Syria. First, quantifying the Free Syrian Army and other armed factions remains elusive -- military leaders and analysts continue to disagree about the opposition's size, makeup, command structure, and arsenal.

Second, ability and willingness to fight are the main sources of political legitimacy and power among the opposition. This trend has marginalized political activists and advantaged Islamist groups. The latter are described as having cohesion, discipline, effective leadership, and high combat spirit, all of which the secular units tend to lack. Jabhat al-Nusra in particular was described as highly professional, and the group is now active in eight of Syria's provinces.

Third, weapons shortages among rebel units are interfering with their ability to conduct and sustain operations. Logistics and planning are negotiated rather than organized; groups trade ammunition and weapons and bargain over what percentage of their arsenal will be used in attacking a regime base. There is no visible indication that the Supreme Military Council exercises any command on the ground.

Fourth, individuals expressed universal antipathy toward the international community and the United States specifically. Conspiracy theories are rampant, including the notion that Washington, Israel, and Iran are somehow

cooperating to quash the rebellion. At the same time, many Syrians see Jabhat al-Nusra as the revolution's heroes because of their willingness to fight and take casualties; they do not understand why the United States has designated it as a terrorist group.

Fifth, the conflict is spilling over to Syria's neighbors. The Jordanian border is a war zone -- the Free Syrian Army is fighting regime forces for control of various crossings, and fleeing refugees are caught in the crossfire. Meanwhile, Israel sees security in the Golan disintegrating as the regime focuses its forces elsewhere. Although the Israel Defense Forces have considerable experience in preventing terrorist infiltration, a bigger problem could emerge as the final battle for Damascus begins -- namely, a large flow of refugees into the Golan.

Finally, the regime remains cohesive primarily due to arms shipments from Iran and Hezbollah. It has also formed large numbers of irregular and auxiliary forces and is transferring operational abilities to them. Nevertheless, one analyst studying funeral data for regime soldiers calculated that an average of forty are killed per day, with two to three times that number wounded and unable to return to duty. In short, the regime is slowly exhausting itself, while the rebels, like rising water, are gradually shrinking its islands of control.

## SIMON HENDERSON

**T**he Syrian crisis combines three issues of primary importance to the Gulf Cooperation Council: the rise of political Islam, the suffering of fellow Arabs, and Iran. As Arab states, the GCC countries are anguished by the graphic reports of suffering in Syria. And as Gulf states, they fear Iran's influence and see Bashar al-Assad's ouster as a likely strategic setback for Tehran.

Despite their shared sympathy with the rebels, however, GCC countries also compete closely with each other for regional primacy, and Syria has become a major arena for their political rivalries. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are particularly active rivals, and their competitive instincts may be stronger than their sense of responsibility for the outcome. For example, in supplying weapons to rebels in Syria, both countries have fewer scruples than the West and are likely arming jihadist groups.

At the same time, Iran's shadow at least partially constrains Doha's willingness to act in Syria. More than any other GCC state, Qatar has to maintain some degree of working relations with Tehran. Much of the country's wealth comes from the offshore North Field natural gas reservoir, which is contiguous with Iran's South Pars field. Sharing this essential reservoir means that Qatar's willingness to poke Iran in the eye is much less than that of Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates.

Asked about differences in their views on how to handle Syria, many GCC officials pointed to a lack of U.S. leadership, indicating that their countries are determined to do something because Washington is not doing enough. Therefore, in the absence of significant U.S. action, political rivalries in the Gulf may grow more contentious. By the time Assad falls, the gaps may be so wide that GCC states cease to be united against Iran or effective allies of the United States.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Katie Kiraly. ❖*

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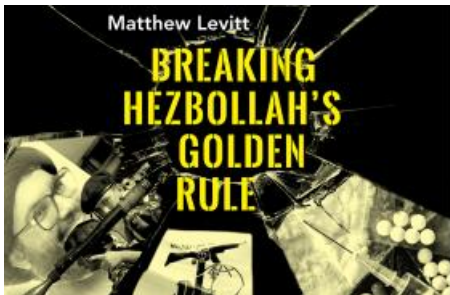
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