

## Fallout from the Fall of Taftanaz

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler), [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white), [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



#### [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.



#### [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



#### [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](/experts/aaron-y-zelin)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Brief Analysis

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**The latest rebel success, while significant in battlefield terms, has empowered extremist forces and further highlighted Washington's insufficient support for Syria's mainstream opposition.**

On January 11, in yet another sign that the Assad regime is increasingly giving way, an assortment of Islamist/jihadist fighters captured the Taftanaz airbase in Syria. While good news for achieving Washington's seventeen-month-old (and counting) goal of forcing Bashar al-Assad to "step aside," the capture of the base and its weapons stockpile by groups opposed to U.S. interests comes at the expense of the mainline opposition Supreme Military Council (SMC), an armed affiliate of the U.S.-supported National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). To accelerate Assad's departure and dilute the political and military impact of the Islamists, Washington and its allies will need to boost support for the SMC and other mainline nationalist groups while removing obstructions to urgent humanitarian aid amid an unusually harsh winter.

## MILITARY IMPLICATIONS

**T**aftanaz was an important victory for the opposition and a clear defeat for the regime. The rebels succeeded because they were able to concentrate adequate forces, coordinate their actions, bring heavy weapons to bear, and sustain the siege for months under regime air attack. This indicates an improvement in their performance, at least for the units involved. It also repeats rebel successes in taking defended regime positions elsewhere in the country, including Aleppo province, Deir al-Zour, and the Damascus countryside.

The victory brought some important direct gains for the rebels:

- They destroyed or captured fifteen to twenty helicopters at the airfield. Most of these were Mi-8/17 utility helicopters, some of which had been equipped with rocket pods for an attack role. This represents approximately 20 percent of the regime's prewar active inventory of a much-relied-upon type of aircraft.
- They captured additional heavy weapons and large quantities of ammunition. Coupled with the freeing up of rebel forces, the equipment gains should boost the opposition's ability to assault other regime positions in the north and perhaps bring them under their control sooner. The battle will also be a huge boost for rebel morale, showing they can take even a major defended position.
- The regime was unable to prevent loss of the base, one of several such failures in the past few months. Damascus did not appear to make any serious attempt to reinforce the airfield or relieve the siege. The number of troops involved in the defense seemed relatively small, and they largely relied on heavy weapons and air power -- a regime pattern. In addition, at least some of the defenders were irregular soldiers from the pro-Assad "popular committees," not regular combat troops; some reports even indicate that officers were evacuated by air before the base fell.

## WHO FOUGHT AND WHAT IT MEANS

**T**hree rebel factions took part in the fight: Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), and the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF). All three are outside the structure of the SMC, a grouping of provincial military council leaders and battalion (*katiba*) and brigade (*liwa*) commanders formed in December. The council's purpose is to unite Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions, implement command and control, funnel SOC support to armed units, and keep weapons out of the hands of extremists.

Jabhat al-Nusra, an independent faction that is not part of the FSA, is a global jihadist group that follows al-Qaeda's worldview. According to the State Department's December announcement designating it as a terrorist organization, JN was established as a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq nearly a year ago. Over the past few months, it has gained prominence as one of the country's best fighting forces, conducting more than 600 suicide bombings, assassinations, improvised explosive device attacks, and strikes on regime checkpoints and security/military buildings, in addition to regular battlefield action. Although JN is capable of attacking most parts of Syria, the majority of its operations have occurred in Aleppo and Idlib, and to a lesser extent Damascus and Deir al-Zour. The group's ultimate goal is to establish an Islamic state in the entire Levant as a starting point to reestablishing the Caliphate.

The Syrian Islamic Front is a conglomeration of eleven "brigades" outside the FSA. Formed last December, it lacks JN's coherent structure. Ideologically, the SIF can best be described as a collection of locally focused jihadists with no known connections to al-Qaeda. Three of the brigades took part in the Taftanaz battle: Kataib Ahrar al-Sham (the SIF's leading unit), Jamaat al-Taliah al-Islamiyah, and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyah. Like JN, the SIF's goal is to establish an Islamic state based on Salafi interpretations of Islam, but only within Syria proper. The video announcing the group's creation indicates that its funding comes from the Qatar Charity Organization and Turkey's Humanitarian Relief Fund (IHH), which supports U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as Hamas.

The Syrian Liberation Front is another grouping of so-called brigades outside the FSA, founded last September. The smallest faction involved in the Taftanaz operation was Liwa Dawoud, one of the eight battalions within Suqur al-Sham, a leading SLF brigade. Ideologically similar to the SIF, the SLF hopes to establish an Islamic state in Syria; its members are a mix of Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamists and Salafists who are less radical than those in the SIF and JN. The SLF is believed to receive funding from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and wealthy Persian Gulf donors.

Given their demonstrated fighting prowess, these Islamist forces have earned much respect from Syrians. Unlike some FSA groups, which have increasingly been accused of corruption in places such as Aleppo, JN, the SIF, and the SLF are viewed as fair brokers that do not take advantage of the downtrodden. Unless something changes, Islamists are likely to play a significant role in northern Syria following the regime's departure.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WAR

**F**or the rebels, the airbase capture indicates that major regime positions in the provinces are vulnerable. But it also suggests that better-defended areas -- such as Damascus and environs, where regime forces are relatively dense and well supported -- will remain a serious challenge.

In addition, the battle raises questions about the regime's strategy of maintaining some military presence, in every province. Although this approach allows Assad to maintain the image that he has not lost any province, it is costing the regime a good deal of personnel and equipment while providing the rebels with better arms and ammunition. Currently, several other northern airfields are under attack; if the rebels can overcome their organizational limitations and capture those bases as well, it would be a still greater, even strategic, defeat for the regime.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**I**n war, no single success or failure should be given too much emphasis, especially in its immediate aftermath. Furthermore, gains in one part of Syria do not necessarily indicate progress elsewhere in this far-flung and complex conflict. Nevertheless, the capture of Taftanaz is yet another sign that the regime is losing control throughout much of the country.

At the same time, victories by Islamist/jihadist groups would seem to come at the expense of the mainline nationalist armed groups represented by the SMC, a coalition that Washington has regular contact with despite withholding direct support. The Islamists are now better tested, better armed, and receiving support from Syrians who are fighting the regime while suffering the worst winter in twenty years.

To temper Islamist gains and better influence Syria's political and military future post-Assad, Washington should encourage its allies to arm SMC units in order to boost their fighting capacity. It should also provide vital intelligence and logistical support to help SMC forces displace the regime more quickly and establish areas where civilian SOC members can work with local and revolutionary councils on providing vital humanitarian assistance and local governance. Finally, Washington should cut the legal and bureaucratic red tape impeding the provision of U.S. assistance outside official channels, since a majority of aid is currently distributed via the regime-dominated Syrian Arab Red Crescent to areas under regime control.

*Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington 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>). Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. Aaron Y. Zelin is the Institute's Richard Borow fellow. ❖*

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