

The Free Syrian Army: A Military Assessment

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Brief Analysis

On April 10, 2012, Jeffrey White and Andrew Exum addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. White, a defense fellow at the Institute, previously completed a thirty-four-year career with the Defense Intelligence Agency, serving in a wide variety of senior analytical and leadership positions. Mr. Exum, a senior fellow with the Center for a New American Security, is editor of the blog *Abu Muqawama*. His military career included leading a platoon of Army Rangers in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as advising top CENTCOM officials. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Jeffrey White

The Free Syrian Army is not a static or perfect military instrument. Rather, it is evolving along with the situation in Syria and emerging as a powerful actor. As it develops and its capabilities improve, its influence over the crisis will only increase. The FSA is thus worthy of outside support, both lethal and nonlethal, including assistance in increasing its organizational effectiveness.

The events of January-February help shed light on the FSA's development and current status. In January, the militia made significant gains against Bashar al-Assad's forces, taking full or partial control of Zabadani, Homs, Rastan, the suburbs of Damascus, and parts of Idlib. In response, the regime launched a sustained offensive against the FSA later that month. Regime forces reasserted themselves in areas previously thought to be held by the militia, with the goal of destroying FSA formations, punishing those who supported them, and retaking the areas. By early February, Assad's forces had successfully reclaimed the Damascus suburbs, Zabadani, Bab al-Amr, Homs, and portions of Idlib, and conducted suppression operations in Deraa, Hama, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zour.

The FSA avoided destruction, however, escaping significant losses and inflicting damage on government forces. Further, the FSA forced the regime to use heavier weaponry and exposed its inability to carry out more than one or two large-scale operations simultaneously. While certainly not a victory for the FSA, the outcome showed that the militia posed a real threat to the regime. Indeed, the FSA appeared to fully rebound as it headed into March.

As a military organization, the FSA is consistently improving. Higher-level battalion-size formations are beginning

to appear, as well as an increasing number of brigade formations. It has also set up a number of Revolutionary Councils that provide local, municipal, and provincial coordination between the battalions. The FSA is led by identifiable commanders, and its formations are acquiring a combat track record, learning how to fight as they conduct various operations against exposed regime positions. In addition to focusing on convoy ambushes, checkpoint assaults, and targeted assassinations, they are attacking the regime's lines of communication and transportation infrastructure.

Despite these important strides, the FSA still faces several critical challenges. Most important, the regime has begun to use combat aviation to suppress the opposition, a factor that deserves more international attention. Additionally, the FSA struggles with command and control, though it has made some progress on that front. Mobility across longer distances also continues to challenge the very localized opposition forces, which are not readily deployable and have trouble coordinating across a large city or province. Yet this, too, seems to be improving. Finally, the Syrian people are facing greater regime pressure to cease providing the support that is so critical to FSA operations. This pressure has yet to break the people away, but if it did, it could be disastrous for the militia.

Overall, the evidence shows that the FSA's effectiveness is growing. To continue on this trajectory, the opposition needs appropriate weapons and equipment, as well as an assured supply of ammunition. The regime has repeatedly shown that it seeks a firepower solution to the conflict, not a political one. In the short term, the conflict is likely to escalate as the regime shows itself willing to fight harder and the FSA shows no signs of waning.

The United States certainly has clandestine and special forces capable of intervening indirectly or directly in Syria. Although the latter route would perhaps entail greater risk, direct intervention is the faster, better, and more efficient strategy, and would give the United States more influence over the outcome in the long run.

Andrew Exum

Assessing the Free Syrian Army poses three analytical problems. First, it is difficult to get dispassionate reporting from the ground. Most reports come from involved parties who have an interest in misrepresenting their relative strength and the situation on the ground. Second, although the Syrian conflict appears to be a traditional order-of-battle problem, a similar hypothesis proved incorrect in Libya just a few months ago. Third, while Assad's forces appear very strong, there is a cost to ongoing operations, and that cost is difficult for outside analysts to calculate. Regime forces may therefore be stronger or weaker than they appear.

In addition to accepting these limitations on analysis, it is important to frame the conflict in broader terms. Members of the Syrian opposition are reluctant to label themselves "insurgents" given the terrorist connotation that term has assumed in light of recent events in the Middle East. Yet by the U.S. government's definition, the opposition is certainly an insurgency.

Analysts have learned much about insurgencies over the past ten years. Insurgencies and civil wars, which make up about 80 percent of all wars, are common, protracted, and very difficult to win. About 80 percent of all insurgencies and civil wars are won by the established government, and third parties supporting such uprisings have an even more difficult time prevailing.

Typically, each side of an insurgency attempts to establish a normative system of control. For most people caught up in such conflicts, prewar political dispositions are replaced by a tendency to side with the party that best serves their calculated survival interests. Accordingly, the population often sways easily from one side to the other or remains passive throughout the conflict in order to increase their chances of survival. If either party hopes to employ a successful "hearts and minds" strategy, it must convince the people that it is in their best strategic interest to support that side.

In Syria, convincing the people that international support is unwavering would likely increase popular support for

the FSA. Yet this effect would vary by area, making it necessary to study the "hearts and minds" phenomenon on a local level. In contrast, inconsistent international support often presages defeat. Even if the United States chooses not to intervene, the situation risks becoming a proxy war, since other players will no doubt insert themselves.

Although the Assad regime's downfall would be a huge setback for Iran and a boon for U.S. interests in the region, three aspects of the fighting continue to worry Washington. First, the regime has chemical and biological weapons dispersed throughout the country. Given the reported presence of al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters in Syria, the prospect of weapons of mass destruction falling into the wrong hands would become increasingly likely if the regime were toppled or sufficiently threatened. Yet this is not a good enough reason for the administration to avoid intervention. To the contrary, the presence of WMDs could provide the impetus for intervention, with the goal of securing the weapons and preventing their misuse. Second, the conflict could spill over to neighboring countries; the administration is especially concerned about the potential adverse effects it might have on Lebanon and Iraq. Third, the administration is concerned about the conflict becoming protracted. Whether the opposition wins or loses, the fighting is likely to last a long time, and this possibility weighs heavily on Washington.

Going forward, it is imperative that the United States make a clear decision on intervention. If it decides to intervene, it should do so early and decisively. And if it decides not to intervene, it should stay out of the conflict completely. Thus far, the administration seems to be taking the latter route, contrary to international calls for removing the regime from power.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Rebecca Edelston. ❖

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