

The Tides of Battle in Syria

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Brief Analysis

The Free Syria Army remains in the fight and should be sustained and armed to maintain military pressure on the regime.

The progress of the Syrian regime's offensive against Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces that began in late January 2012 has left many with the impression that the regime is winning the war, that the armed opposition is headed for defeat. But the reality of this war, like most wars, is that the tides of battle shift, with one side or the other enjoying the advantage at different times. In January, FSA formations appeared to have the advantage in many locations, with the regime appearing on the defensive. Now, seemingly, the regime has the advantage, with FSA formations in "retreat" on all fronts. Nevertheless, the FSA has not been "defeated" or "routed," and the regime has not won. Expectations that the FSA can meet the regime's army in open battle and win are misplaced, unrealistic, and inconsistent with the way the FSA has fought the war. The FSA is an emerging force, not one that has sprung whole and fully capable from the instant of the rebellion. It has significant weaknesses -- but it is growing more capable and is resilient. The FSA has changed the nature of the conflict in Syria and, given appropriate assistance, it can become an increasingly important part of a political, economic, and military strategy to defeat the regime.

The State of the Free Syrian Army

FSA forces have not been defeated by the regime's winter offensive. While suffering losses in personnel and forced to abandon areas they had formerly controlled, they were not disarmed, routed (as noted before), or apparently demoralized. And despite seeming setbacks in February and March, the FSA has made important gains.

The FSA's center of gravity, indeed the center of gravity for the revolution, is the relationship between the people in the street and the free soldiers at arms. The FSA cannot exist without the moral and practical support of the people and, so far, the FSA has held this support. There is little or no evidence that the population of the areas where the FSA fought has abandoned it or blames it for the death and destruction inflicted by regime forces. Popular demonstrations of support for the FSA are still occurring around the country, as are peaceful protests against the regime.

FSA elements appear to have recognized the need for a greater level of cooperation and organization both within Syria and without. Within Syria, there is evidence of increasing cooperation among FSA formations. Regional or provincial military councils have appeared in Damascus, Aleppo, Deraa, and Hama, while brigade-level formations were recently announced in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour provinces. This indicates the emergence within Syria of higher-level command structures between individual formations and the nominal FSA headquarters in Turkey.

Multibattalion operations and cooperation among battalions also appear to be on the rise. Some brigades have affiliated battalions, and numerous battalions have affiliated companies. Furthermore, some battalions and brigades are clearly associated with the FSA command in Turkey, although many battalions seem to simply operate under the FSA umbrella. There is also evidence of close cooperation between FSA elements in Homs and the local political opposition. Outside Syria, the prospects for better integration of the armed and unarmed opposition also appear to be improving, with the Syrian National Council and FSA reportedly moving toward greater cooperation. It is important for the FSA to evolve from a collection of largely independent battalions to a more integrated and structured force, one responsive to higher political and military direction, so all of these signs are hopeful.

The FSA is not a complete mystery. A great deal is known about at least some of its formations. Units such as the Khaled bin Walid Battalion and Hamza Battalion in Rastan, and the Farouq battalion in Homs, have established areas of operations, lengthy combat records, and known commanders, some of whom have been in command for months. Since the end of January, increasing numbers of armed resistance elements have announced their existence or been identified within Syria, some sixty between February 1 and March 17. Many of these may be ephemeral, and some are not associated with the FSA, but a number seem to have some real basis of existence. This growth is fueled by continuing defections from the regime's forces.

FSA units are learning how to fight the regime. Tactically, they are doing many of the right things. Attacks on exposed regime posts or positions are frequent and often appear to be successful, destroying equipment, capturing arms and ammunition, and killing or wounding regime personnel. These actions also produce defections from the regime forces. The ambush of vehicles and convoys by direct fire or the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to interrupt long and difficult lines of communication is a favorite tactic. IEDs in fact are reportedly increasingly in use, and FSA elements have begun employing multiple IEDs against a single vehicle to increase the chances of destroying it. Antitank guided missiles (ATGMs) have now been seen with FSA elements in Idlib, Hama, and Deraa provinces, representing an increase in antiarmor capabilities over the ubiquitous and still effective rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). And in a recent development, FSA elements destroyed a road overpass in Deraa province, suggesting an understanding of the importance of the road system to the strategic and operational mobility of the regime's forces.

FSA units have proven resilient. While unable to stand against the mass and firepower the regime can employ at any given point, FSA formations have proven capable of avoiding destruction while inflicting losses on the regime. If forced to withdraw from an area, they redeploy to another, or reemerge when regime forces move on. This has been the pattern since the beginning of the armed resistance.

FSA Problems

Despite their successes and resilience, FSA formations still suffer from significant problems. To begin with, they are unable to match regime firepower except in small unit-level engagements such as attacks on checkpoints and ambushes. In larger engagements, in which the regime can mass forces and bring armor and artillery to bear, FSA formations are unable to stand for long. Contributing to this shortcoming is a lack of assured ammunition supplies. FSA units have reportedly run low or out of ammunition in a number of battles with regime forces.

Command and control, although improving, remains a weak point for the FSA, whether from FSA headquarters in Turkey to brigades and battalions in Syria or within brigades and battalions themselves. FSA headquarters still

seems to provide guidance more than exercise control. FSA brigades and battalions also do not appear to be tightly integrated structures, coordinating or cooperating with affiliated units rather than commanding and controlling them in a traditional sense. The increasing number of FSA-associated formations itself poses a challenge in terms of integrating and coordinating their activities. Furthermore, the development of intermediate-level command structures inside Syria (councils and brigades) suggests the potential for future disputes between internal and external FSA leadership groups.

Weaknesses in command and control have led to a series of "lonely fights," with each battalion fighting on its own or with minimal cooperation from other battalions, even those in the same areas. Although this situation is beginning to change, as indicated earlier, a clear need exists for improved command and control.

The relative independence of FSA formations creates the opportunity for bad behavior on the part of local units. Given the increasing number of FSA-associated formations, as well as local defense organizations and some probable Islamist combat elements, the appearance of human rights violations by armed resistance forces would not be surprising.

FSA units are not field forces. They are primarily local forces linked to a city or an area within a province. So far, they have not demonstrated the ability to be redeployed across provinces or massed for operations, although they have shown some ability to maneuver operationally, primarily to avoid destruction by regime forces. This limited maneuver capability makes it difficult for the units to exploit the regime's need to spread its forces across the country, thereby creating potential vulnerabilities, or to assist other FSA units.

FSA units have made operational mistakes. The January 2012 battle of the Damascus suburbs, in which FSA formations directly challenged the regime by seizing areas close to the center of the capital, was probably one. Other likely errors were FSA captures of areas such as Zabadani and parts of Homs and Idlib. The FSA's seizure of isolated pockets of territory, even though embarrassing to the regime, allows regime forces to deal with them sequentially, massing forces and reducing each pocket in turn.

As noted, FSA units depend on the support of the population. But their presence within the population -- whether in cities or the countryside -- subjects the people to regime attack. Regime forces engage in siege, bombardment, and assault on areas held by FSA units or in areas of an FSA presence. These tactics are intended not only to destroy FSA formations but also to punish the people and reduce their support for the FSA.

Measuring FSA Effectiveness

Given that the tides of battle in Syria are likely to continue shifting, how should the effectiveness of the FSA be measured? Direct measures include trends in the FSA's combat effectiveness and operational capabilities, its growth, its organizational coherence, its scope of activities (areas of operations, numbers of clashes), and the damage it inflicts on regime forces. By these measures, it is now improving in effectiveness.

Indirect measures relate to the reaction the FSA has drawn from the people, the regime, and the international community. Indeed, the FSA has been able to win and hold the support of the people in the areas in which it operates, despite regime attempts to break this link. The regime's increasingly violent efforts to crush the FSA are themselves a mirror of the FSA's effectiveness. In having to commit forces at a divisional or greater level to push the FSA out of the suburbs of Damascus, Zabadani, and Homs, the regime has demonstrated its view of the FSA as a serious challenge. Lack of major support from the international community, while not related only to FSA weaknesses, is a negative measure of its effectiveness, reflecting problems of unity, identity, and coordination with the external political opposition. More broadly, expectations about the FSA's performance should be realistic and not based on the latest headlines, whether they have the FSA winning or losing.

Implications

At this point in the war, the center of effort for the FSA is in Syria, with the formations fighting against the regime, not the FSA command in Turkey. These formations need to be sustained and strengthened in order to keep them in the fight and inflict more losses and strain on the regime's military and security forces. There appear to be capable units and commanders in the FSA, and support could be funneled to them until the higher level of command becomes effective, or competent higher-level command structures develop within Syria. Whatever concerns Western states and the rest of the international community have about the FSA and its formations should be resolved through contact -- clandestine if necessary -- as well as intelligence collection and analysis. Finally, the FSA should be armed, not to defeat the regime by itself, but as part of a political, economic, and military strategy to cause the regime to break.

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