

The Free Syrian Army Bleeds the Assad Regime

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Brief Analysis

The growing Free Syrian Army, the armed wing of the popular rebellion, is playing an increasing role in determining the Assad regime's future.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is now engaged in combat in at least six of the country's fourteen governorates, inflicting greater losses on regime personnel and equipment than at any time since its involvement in the uprising began. Both its ranks and its popular support are growing, and its forces have the types of weapons they need for the kind of warfare they are conducting. Although it does not yet threaten the regime's survival, the militia has at least temporarily forced government troops out of some areas, including near the capital. In short, the FSA is helping to drive the process that will ultimately bring down the regime, and the international community should assist it in doing so.

Processes Shaping the FSA

Regime security and military personnel continue to defect to the FSA, primarily in small groups of five to twenty men, though mass defections of a hundred or more soldiers have been reported as well. These incoming forces feed the strength of existing FSA battalions and spur the formation of new units. Most of the defectors are motivated by a desire to avoid killing civilians, fear of retribution for refusing to do so, and broader opposition to the regime itself. Clashes between FSA and government forces are another major catalyst for defections. In addition, some civilians from areas affected by regime operations have joined the FSA; in fact, certain units may simply be autonomous local defense groups operating under the FSA's name.

Regarding popular support, the failure of other approaches to end the regime's violence has led growing numbers of Syrians to identify with the FSA. The people appreciate the fact that FSA personnel are present on the streets, are actively engaging regime forces, and are willing to take losses in the process.

Organizational and Force Developments

Media reports and FSA communiqués have referred to around 37 named "battalions," 17-23 of which appear to be

More actively engaged in combat. This represents an increase from late November, when 20-22 total battalions reportedly existed and 16-20 were estimated to be active in combat.

In addition, the FSA has claimed to have as many as 40,000 personnel, up from 20,000 in November. These are likely exaggerations, however. Assuming (generously) that the nominal strength of an FSA battalion is 100-200 troops, and that all 37 named battalions do in fact exist, a more reasonable estimate would be 4,000-7,000. That would still represent a substantial increase from November's assessment.

The FSA acquires some arms through defectors, while others are captured, smuggled, and even purchased from regime army forces. It seems to have no shortage of small arms and light crew-served weapons, including assault rifles, medium machine guns, standard rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and scoped/sniper rifles. The FSA also claims to be employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against regime vehicles, and videos have corroborated this. In addition, it has begun using vehicles for tactical troop movement, equipped with improvised armor and machine guns.

The most significant arms development may be the FSA's acquisition of advanced antitank weapons capable of destroying even the most heavily armored regime vehicles. The FSA claims to have used an RPG-29 to destroy a regime BMP infantry fighting vehicle in Deraa, and several videos suggest it has guided antitank missiles as well.

Operational Developments

FSA activities are concentrated in the governorates of Idlib, Hama, Homs, Rif Dimashq, Deraa, and Deir al-Zour. Of some 180 reported clashes between early November and late January, about one-third occurred in Idlib governorate, and about a quarter in Deraa. Clashes have increased significantly in the Rif Dimashq governorate, including suburbs of the capital itself (e.g., Douma and Saqba).

At times, FSA units have openly operated in the streets of Idlib governorate and the cities of Homs, Hama, and Zabadani, and they have managed to establish control over some small areas (e.g., parts of Homs and Zabadani itself). Their most common operations include attacking regime positions (primarily checkpoints), defending demonstrators and local areas, and ambushing regime forces.

The scope and intensity of the fighting seems to be increasing. Idlib, Deraa, and now Rif Dimashq see multiple clashes weekly. And on January 15-18, Zabadani saw a sustained struggle in which the regime committed at least a brigade-size force, including armor. The FSA inflicted losses on armored vehicles, soft-skinned vehicles, and personnel, spurring the withdrawal of regime units. The militia also seems increasingly capable of conducting coordinated local operations against regime positions, as exemplified by reported multiple attacks on checkpoints in Rastan on January 20 and Deraa on January 23.

Impact

The FSA is contributing to the strain on regime forces by requiring them to operate almost continuously and engage in frequent combat. This is in addition to the strain created by hundreds of peaceful civilian demonstrations across the country each week. The regime has been compelled to deploy larger forces and conduct more violent operations, increasing both its losses and the international visibility of its actions. Although attrition of regime personnel is not yet numerically significant, the spectacle of burned-out government vehicles and dead soldiers likely rallies the opposition and decreases morale among regime loyalists. Moreover, the movement of government forces has probably become more difficult in Idlib and Deraa, and small-unit/IED attacks on individual vehicles and convoys will further stretch the regime's resources and increase its losses.

Government forces have not been able to eradicate the FSA in any area. As mentioned previously, the presence of FSA units provides a rallying point for defectors and a boost to local opposition elements, while increased regime

violence produces more desertions and seems to generate more units operating under the FSA flag. Personnel wishing to leave the regime's forces have a place to go, and a synergy is developing between demonstrators and FSA forces.

The FSA still faces major challenges, however. When confronted by massed regime forces, the militia's units have been unable to resist for long, instead melting away to avoid destruction. FSA battalions seem to fight alone and have not yet demonstrated that they can coordinate operations on a regional basis. It is unclear to what extent the FSA's command in Turkey exercises real control over operations, other than providing general guidance. It is also uncertain how much freedom of action Turkey allows these commanders. This means that FSA units are essentially conducting independent actions while the regime conducts coordinated operations. Some FSA communiqués have mentioned an "Office of Strategic Planning," suggesting an effort to improve coordination. The militia is also reportedly working to tighten relations with the Syrian National Council in order to better coordinate the opposition's political and military activities, but the results of this are not yet clear.

Implications

The Assad regime faces a dilemma: the harder it fights, the stronger the opposition -- both armed and unarmed -- becomes. This contributes to the perception that it is slowly losing control of territory and the situation as a whole.

Meanwhile, the armed and unarmed struggles are reinforcing one another. For example, one recent set of Friday demonstrations was dedicated to the FSA, showing the degree of acceptance it has achieved as the defender of the people. This emerging congruence poses a doubly difficult challenge for the regime. Accordingly, external powers seeking the Assad regime's fall should recognize and support the FSA, which appears to be an organic extension of the popular rebellion and will assuredly influence the outcome of the struggle in Syria.

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

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