

The Syrian Islamic Front: A New Extremist Force

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Another prominent Salafist militia has emerged in Syria, further complicating Washington's efforts to find rebel factions that align with U.S. interests.

The second half of 2012 saw increased radicalization of the Syrian armed opposition, particularly in the north and east. What began as a mainly secular force with the creation of the umbrella Free Syrian Army has slowly fragmented into Islamist splinter factions, including Suqur al-Sham, Kataib Ahrar al-Sham (KAS), and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). Designated a terrorist organization by Washington in early December, JN has received the most attention, but little has been said about KAS, another popular Salafi-jihadist group whose strength and support continue to grow in Aleppo, Idlib, and elsewhere. On December 21, KAS announced the creation of a new umbrella fighting force called the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). Given this group's increasing prowess on the battlefield and ideological similarity to JN, Washington must develop a better understanding of its capabilities and reach.

WHO THEY ARE

In the statement and video proclaiming the SIF's creation, spokesman Abu Abdul Rahman al-Souri declared that the group followed extremist Salafi doctrines and planned to topple the Assad regime and its allies, after which it would institute its interpretation of sharia (Islamic law). According to him, this would mean establishing institutions focusing on political matters, *dawa* (Islamic advocacy), cultural education, and humanitarian relief.

The SIF is made up of eleven brigades, including KAS (which operates throughout Syria), Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyah (which operates in and around Aleppo), Kataib Ansar al-Sham (in and around Latakia), Liwa al-Haqq (in Homs), Jaish al-Tawhid (in Deir al-Zour), Jamaat al-Taliah al-Islamiyah (in rural parts of Idlib), Katibat Musab bin Umayr (in rural parts of Aleppo), and the Damascus-area groups Katibat Suqur al-Islam, Kataib al-Iman al-Muqatilah, Saraya al-Maham al-Khasa, and Katibat al-Hamzah bin Abdul Mutalib. The latter five brigades have little to no battle record posted online, which suggests they are not real players on the ground.

At the end of its December statement, the SIF emphasizes that it is open to other Islamist organizations joining its cause, and the accompanying video shows the front's fighters in action in Damascus, Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zour, among other places. Since then, the SIF and JN have been at the forefront of several key battles, including the recent liberation of Taftanaz airport, a jailbreak in Idlib, and efforts to take Jisr al-Shughour.

The video also shows the SIF's humanitarian relief efforts, such as paving new roads and clearing old ones, baking bread for the increasing number of needy Syrians, and supplying foodstuffs. Other soft-power efforts include Quranic recitation contests for children. In addition, the video highlights two of the main actors financing these efforts: the Humanitarian Relief Fund (IHH), a government-linked Turkish NGO with ties to Hamas, and Qatar Charity, another government-linked NGO.

WHAT THEY WANT

The SIF released a broader explanation of its goals on January 17. Parts of this seven-page charter rehash the December video, but other portions provide more details.

First, after overthrowing the Assad regime, the SIF hopes to empower Islam in society by preparing individuals to take leadership roles in various fields during the transition period. It also hopes to rebuild Syria on a foundation of integrity and transparency, which means fighting corruption and exploitation in line with the Quranic and Salafist doctrines. Decisionmaking would proceed in accordance with the principles of consultation, avoiding discord, and remaining in line with sharia. According to the charter, this program would be implemented gradually -- the SIF claims it would shy away from "extremism" (i.e., unnecessary use of *takfir*, or excommunication, against other Muslims) and avoid the mistakes of the past. Once decisions are made, though, they will be binding.

The charter also covers women, sectarian issues, and non-Muslims. In the SIF's view, women play a complementary role; Western conceptions of women's rights are against Islam and unacceptable. Moreover, despite calling for the preservation of Syrian unity and the rejection of ethnic and sectarian divisions, the group demands that Sunni Islam be the state religion and only source of legislation post-Assad. Its views on minority rights are based on its interpretation of sharia, suggesting that non-Sunnis would be second-class citizens.

Although the charter emphasizes justice and fairness when dealing with non-Muslims, it also rejects interfaith activities and comingling.

HOW THEY DIFFER FROM JABHAT AL-NUSRA

Despite swimming in similar ideological waters and coordinating on the battlefield with JN, the SIF is a subtly different group. Whether these distinctions make a difference on the ground will likely be unknown until after the Assad regime falls, since that is the shared focus among rebel factions at the moment.

Unlike JN, which is viewed as a branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the SIF does not have any known command-and-control ties with al-Qaeda. Further, JN's communications appear first on al-Qaeda's premiere online forum, Shumukh al-Islam, while the SIF has its own independent Facebook and Twitter accounts that it uses as its first point of release.

In addition, one of JN's most high-profile opponents -- jihadist ideologue Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartusi -- is believed to be fighting under the SIF banner with Kataib Ansar al-Sham. His overall approval of the front's charter could draw global jihadist support away from the SIF due to ongoing arguments between him and Sheikh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, JN's own global jihadist champion. Shinqiti has yet to comment on the SIF's formation or views, however, even as another popular ideologue -- Jordanian Iyad Qanibi -- has offered his approval.

To be sure, both Qanibi and Tartusi have tempered their approval by arguing that certain portions of the SIF charter do not go far enough. Qanibi is worried about its call for gradual change and inclusiveness, asking whether these principles need apply post-Assad. And Tartusi has taken issue with the SIF's statements of concern for "all the Muslims of Syria," admonishing the group for not highlighting the entire Islamic *umma* (community). He is also perturbed that the charter does not specifically call for a full-on Islamic state, only for giving Islam room to flourish.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the SIF has not stated outright that it wants an Islamic state, its specific objectives and policies make clear that this is in fact what it seeks. The group's vision of sharia-based legislation indicates that minorities would be "protected" but not given full rights post-Assad. And while the SIF does not have links to al-Qaeda in the same manner as Jabhat al-Nusra, its messages do make their way to popular jihadist forums. Additionally, some of the brigades within the new umbrella group, especially KAS, are known to have foreign fighters.

Given these factors and reports of growing operational coordination with JN, the SIF is not a faction the Obama administration should work with politically or militarily. According to recent rumors, however, KAS may soon join the Supreme Military Council (SMC), an armed affiliate of the U.S.-supported National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC). This would constrain potential U.S. efforts to help the opposition. Even if its brigades do not join the council, the SIF is still an important player on the ground, not only because of its fighting capabilities, but also in terms of providing some form of proto-governance in parts of Syria. The United States will have to contend with this reality when deciding how it wants to approach the current state of play.

Because it has dithered in backing the opposition thus far, the administration now faces a steeper challenge in securing U.S. interests in Syria. If rumors of KAS joining the SMC prove false, Washington should step up efforts to train, fund, and provide weaponry to the council's armed units. At the very least, this could help contain the outgrowth of fighting forces that are antithetical to American values and interests in the region.

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