How the Structure of Syrian Insurgent Groups Restrains Greater American Support

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On May 15, 2013, Senator John McCain in an interview on Fox News expressed frustrating concerns with the lack of US support for Syrian rebels in their campaign to unseat the repressive Assad regime in Syria. He adamantly petitioned the Obama administration to accelerate its support for the rebel campaign noting that the United States needed to implement game changing actions with no Americans boots on the ground but the employment of a safe zone that would protect the supply of weapons to the, “right people in Syria who are fighting for obviously the things we believe in” (Jamieson, 2013). Response to McCain’s proposal was however tepid and reflected a growing angst within government officials and some members of congress who were at the time, and might still remain, hesitant and restrained in their endorsements for expanded support for Syrian rebels.

Five months later, the Obama administration publically expressed its intent to take military action against the Assad regime after 1,400 civilians were killed by a chemical weapons attack in the suburbs of Ghouta on August 21, 2013 (Warrick, 2013), (Shoichet & Watkins, 2013). Despite heated disputes on the origin of the attacks, a series of American and British intelligence reports indicated the regime’s complicity and thus seemingly validated the administration’s intent to punish the Assad regime through military strikes. Subsequent investigations by inspectors from the United Nations and The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), later confirmed the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta incident but failed to assign blame to Assad’s forces or the Syrian rebels. In the interim, a seemingly indecisive Obama bungled through congressional approval as European allies fled his intervention initiative. Ultimately, the Russian foreign ministry under Sergei Lavrov negotiated a combined agreement with the United States and the Syrian government and created a comprehensive framework for the removal and destruction of Syria’s chemical stockpiles. Syria’s chemical disarmament and membership to the Chemical Weapons Convention not only re-affirmed Assad’s position within the international arena, but also rejuvenated his internal campaign against rebel forces throughout the country.

Assad’s recent resurgence has severely curtailed the opposition’s ability to remove him from power through armed assistance or at the negotiation table in the upcoming Geneva II peace conference. As paralyzing division and leadership disagreements persist within the Syrian political opposition, its militant groups are likewise stifled by the regime’s resurgence, and the lack of efficient organization, tactics and weaponry. More importantly, the introduction of radical jihadist elements into the conflict and the slow yet notable Islamization of the indigenous resistance have increasingly deterred western support for the determined yet so far unsuccessful opposition.

Conflicts of legitimacy between the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) represent the deep divisions that have defined the Syrian insurgency since inception. While the SNC has consistently tried to unite the wide array of armed rebel groups within the country, it has nonetheless failed to secure the recognition of numerous internal leaders who view it as an external and thus illegitimate organization. Divisions and conflicts between the Free Syrian Army, domestic Islamic resistance forces, and foreign Salafi-Jihadist groups have decisively changed the battlefield and ultimately complicated the role of external actors within the war. I therefore evaluate the anatomy of the Syrian opposition with the intent of parsing out the ideological and structural differences between the major rebel groups. More importantly, I hope to define and explore the schism or synergy between the political Islamic groups and the Salafi-Jihadists that are currently involved in the conflict. This typology of Syrian rebel

groups should not only illuminate the obstacles to cooperative action, but also highlight the difficulties that might dominate the post-war Syrian state.

The first section explores existing theories on rebel organizations with an emphasis on the ways through which weaker groups mount successful campaigns against stronger and better equipped actors. The primary objective here is to discern the advantages of rebel victories in civil conflict and their impact on the peace and stability of a post-war state. The second section discusses the structural organization of rebel organizations and explores the effects of fragmentation and infighting within rebel groups. It also explores the effects of external support on the conduct and efficiency of rebel organizations. Utilizing Paul Staniland's Social-Institutional theory, I propose that a rebel group's structure of existing social networks determines its organizational structure and whether or not it is subject to fragmentation during the course of conflict. This section also explores the effects of a rebel group's social base, institutions, and organizational structure and how these factors determine its response to foreign sponsorship.

The third and fourth sections explore the development of major insurgent groups in the Syrian conflict and their organizational structures and ideologies. It also discusses the differences between moderate Islamist groups and Salafi-Jihadist organizations within the Syrian opposition. By evaluating the structure and efficiency of various rebel groups, I hope to analyze the prospects of rebel victory and the potential impact of western assistance. I however contend that given the various structural differences within the Syrian opposition, fragmentation and infighting ultimately makes some rebel groups better candidates for foreign support than others. Nevertheless, the vast structural and ideological differences between different rebel organizations hinder cooperation and therefore make foreign support an extremely dangerous enterprise for western powers.

In effect, the disarray within rebel coalitions such as the FSA renders them unfavorable candidates for western sponsorship. On the other hand, the better organized and exceptionally effective rebel groups are nonetheless promoters of a more radical Islamic ideology that might deter western patronage. An insurgent victory over the Assad regime engenders grave uncertainties in the post-war era since it could plunge the state into a second round of violent outbidding between the surviving rebels groups. I therefore propose that given the ideological and structural differences between the Syrian opposition, external support if sanctioned, must be delivered with strict specificity to secular and moderate Islamic groups. Since the success of western support will rely on the delicate identification of proper partners within the opposition, a nuanced understanding of the rebel opposition is indispensible to effective policymaking throughout this conflict.

Making a Case for Rebel Victory

Within the literature on civil war duration and termination, support for rebel victories is tied to the greater discourse on what factors successfully terminate civil hostilities and establish durable post-war peace. Given the uncertainty of the post-war environment, the rationale behind negotiated settlements is based on the survival of both parties who then share in compromise of the nation's political future (Arreguin-Toft, 2001). Decisive victory by either the government or rebel groups however eliminates the need to care about the loser's wishes and confers great administrative benefits in the post-war state. But unlike interstate conflicts where armed belligerents occupy distinctly separate and sovereign entities, the domestic nature of civil conflict inherently requires that former belligerents occupy the same state after the conflict is terminated. The winning party within a civil conflict therefore matters and the effects of rebel and government victories are pervasive in the governance and administration of the post-war state.

While the government enters the conflict with disproportionate advantages in the monopoly of the state's coercive instruments, financial institutions, and the ability to leverage support from external states, rebels by the nature of their asymmetrical difference in resources and manpower have to display great tact and institutional capacity in order to survive and emerge victorious. Since rebel movements initially emerge as protests against the government's shortcomings, their uprising is to a great extent legitimized through popular support. Staunch and often violent reprisals by government forces further legitimate the rebels' grievances and subsequently expand their base of support. Given the stark asymmetrical differences in resources, training, and weaponry, rebel organizations are highly reliant on local populations for infrastructural support and protection from the government's detection. Their survival is dependent on sustained cooperation with the local population and a great deal of institutional capacity to

allocate and distribute resources efficiently. It thus follows that when rebel movements' achieve decisive victories; they hold greater incentives to protect the political liberties of the populace since their survival was to a great extent secured through the people.

Though the preference for negotiated settlements is based on the need to stem human suffering and reduce the high costs of violent conflict, the cessation of hostilities after a negotiated agreement nevertheless requires combatants to demobilize and disarm without the guarantee that their cooperation will be upheld by their opponents. The lack of a central authority to adjudicate conflict between rival parties' "encourages adversaries to avoid settlements since cooperation would ultimately require them to relinquish important fall-back defenses at a time when no neutral police and no legitimate government exists to help them enforce the peace" (Walters 1997). More importantly, unlike rebel organizations whose survival is legitimized through popular support, the government's legitimacy in nonetheless tied to its monopoly on state control. If spared defeat through a negotiated agreement, the government has greater incentives to shore up its coercive control on the state since it anticipates future reprisals from rebel organizations.

The great degree of distrust between governments and rebels when compounded with the fragile nature of negotiated agreements ultimately leads to the recurrence of violence after an initial period of post-war peace. As a result, wars that terminate in negotiated settlements are also twice as likely to reignite as those ending in victory (Cunningham, Gleditsch, & Salehyan, 2009), (Toft, 2010). The incentive to save more lives through negotiated agreements is therefore stifled by the recurrence of violence after a settlement fails. Though recurring conflicts produce greater structural costs and incur significantly higher death rates, the favorability for insurgent victories is not solely based on the need to eliminate untrustworthy governments through sustained conflict. The point here is to identify the key elements that lend to rebel victory and effectively incorporate these factors into negotiated agreements.

As earlier alluded to, rebel victory is inseparably tied to a movement's ability to mobilize popular support and successfully employ limited resources against a greater and more powerful force. While the monopoly on public support provides a reservoir for recruitment and protection against detection, it does not substitute institutional stability, sound strategy and leadership. Rebel movements that lack well developed institutional capacities and efficient management are unable to effectively allocate their limited resources, replenish personnel losses, and most importantly, adjust their strategies in response to changing battlefield conditions. Since survival depends on the ability to withstand the government's immense retributive capability, rebel strength will have substantial implications on the duration and outcomes of conflict. If the keys to rebel victories are tied to institutional and structural capabilities that allow an insurgent group to resist and inflict costs on the government, an insurgent group's relative strength should also affect how it interacts with other rebel organizations and external states.

How Rebels Win Wars

It is well substantiated within present literature that conflicts between governments and strong rebels are shorter since strong insurgents have greater targeting and defensive capabilities that improve their chances of achieving decisive victories. The ability to inflict significant damage on the government also provides stronger bargaining positions and additional leverage to demand concessions from the government (Cunningham, Gleditsch, & Salehyan, 2009). Without the ability to inflict significant damage on the government, conflicts between strong governments and weak rebels are often longer and dependent on the rebels' ability to control peripheral territories that shelter them from the government's retributive instruments. (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012),(Toft, 2010). Despite their initial strength and capabilities, time nevertheless favors rebel organizations. If they survive the initial stages of vulnerability and governmental reprisal, the duration of conflict is extended and the government is less likely to emerge in victory.

Within this context, the duration and outcome of civil conflict is undoubtedly tied to the strength of insurgent groups. Strong rebel organizations will have clear central commands structures that allow them to mount effective challenges against the state. The solid command structure offers a clear bargaining partner and also enhances a group's ability to mobilize fighters and replenish its battlefield losses. These groups have a greater ability to procure arms, training, and advanced battlefield tactics that improve their ability to effectively resist the government and achieve decisive

battlefield victories.

The strength of a rebel organization also translates into its ability to discern and employ appropriate strategies within a constantly evolving battlefield. The strategic-Interaction theory proposes that actors engaged in asymmetric warfare select and deploy battlefield strategies in relation to their capabilities and those of their opponents. Direct strategies target an adversary's armed forces in order to destroy its fighting capability while indirect strategies focus on destroying the opponent's will to fight (Arreguin-Toft, 2001). Weak actors elevate their chances for victory through indirect guerilla strategies that dilute the government's power advantage while strong actors rely on their ability to directly confront the government and emerge victorious (Arreguin-Toft, 2001).

The fog of asymmetrical warfare creates informational asymmetries that force governments and rebels to evaluate their capabilities and those of their allies and rivals based on the available information. The selection and implementation of strategy is dependent on a group's ability to acquire and correctly interpret information from the battlefield. Stronger rebel groups with greater institutionalization have better specialization and cooperation within their intelligence networks and are therefore able to collect, analyze and disseminate information to their leadership more effectively. This level of internal organization allows for better coordination between the group's central leadership, its financiers and the commanders and fighters that implement battlefield strategies.

Cohesion and Fractionalization within Rebel Movements

As earlier indicated, the strength of a rebel movement is tied to its institutional and structural capabilities that allow for the efficient delegation of duties, procurement/distribution of resources, implementation of goals and strategies, and recruitment and maintenance of fighters. High institutionalization within a rebel movement mirrors the specialization of institutions within a government. It facilitates and coordinates leaders and members while providing a mechanism of oversight and enforcement of rules and regulations. Since asymmetric warfare is more amendable to multiple autonomous organizations operating locally and in isolated fronts, institutionalization also unites and controls the actions of each individual rebel group.

Insurgencies that feature multiple rebel groups are increasingly subject to internal divisions and therefore more reliant on strong institutions that maintain the central command and adjudicate conflicts between leaders (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012). Though different rebel groups can exist within the same coalition, and even disagree on the means to achieving their objectives, they must share a particular collective identity that defines the overall movement. They must also share a similar command structure that governs the decisions and actions taken by members. Power within such a coalition is derived from its leadership, popular support, and material resources (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012). Its effectiveness and overall strength is ultimately tied to the institutional links between the rebel fighters and their leaders. All other factors held constant, the Syrian National Council (SNC), is emblematic of the problems associated with a fragmented coalition with decentralized power, weak institutions, and multiple individual organizations.

Since fragmented rebel movements lack strong institutions to constrain and mediate conflicts and also enforce collective rules, they are often susceptible to widespread infighting. The lack of a strong dominant command structure that exercises hegemonic control over the coalition further exacerbates internal fighting as individual rebel groups contest for dominance. Fragmented rebel coalitions are not only limited in their operational efficiency, but also susceptible to infiltration by external actors who promote division and defection in order to keep the coalition weak, pliable and dependent on external patronage (Bakke, Cunningham, & Seymour, 2012). In order to determine the effects of external actors on the stability of a rebel organization, the following section explores the social bases upon which rebel groups are constructed. The effects of external support on cohesive vs. fragmented rebel movements are of extreme importance to this discussion and will answer the question of whether or not external sponsorships change the conduct and behavior of rebel groups.

Where do Effective Insurgent Groups Come from?

Staniland 2012 proposes that the social ties and networks that build an insurgent organization ultimately shape the institutions that determine a group's cohesion or fragmentation. Through the social-institutional theory, Staniland argues that since a rebel group's social base determines its upward organization, the resulting institutions will determine whether external resources help or hinder its stability. While external support has been previously associated with changing the conduct of rebel organizations, Staniland argues that insurgent groups formed through overlapping social networks create stronger institutions that utilize resource flows to strengthen the organization and improve its fighting capability. Within a coalition, overlapping social networks create links that connect rebel groups horizontally across localities and vertically within a community (Staniland, 2012). The insurgent coalitions subsequently utilize these networks to create formal institutions that leverage horizontal connectivity to establish a robust central command. (Staniland, 2012). Resources are distributed through established criteria and institutions allow for proper monitoring and diligent observation against indiscipline.

Insurgent organizations that are formed through divided social networks cannot control or discipline their ranks and are therefore less likely to have robust institutions that control internal behavior. These groups have weak horizontal and vertical social bases and therefore struggle to create central command systems. Discipline is harder to establish and the lack of strong institutions make these groups more susceptible to fragmentation. These rebel organizations are popular at the outset of war but have a harder time managing new fighters and creating sustainable leadership. The lack of horizontal and vertical ties also leads to the amalgamation of groups that lack linguistic, ideological, and ethnic commonalities into weak umbrella coalitions (Staniland, 2012). Though external resources can hold these loose fragmented coalitions together for short periods of time, the lack of strong of institutional capacity hinders the ability to effectively distribute resources towards a common objective. Resources become the objects of contest and sources of indiscipline as the insurgents overall efficiency is limited.

As a result of the recurrent debate on western support for Syrian rebel groups, the following section employs Staniland's Social-Institutional theory to evaluate the evolution of major Syrian insurgent groups with emphasis on their formation, structural organization and institutional capacity. The subsequent debate focuses on the prospective effects of sustained western patronage of Syrian insurgent groups and whether or not external support can deliver a decisive defeat to the Assad regime. Central to this argument is the growing strength of Islamic and Salafi-jihadist groups within the conflict and the implications of a victory delivered by their efforts. A comparative examination of the secular and Islamic contingents of the Syrian insurgency will ultimately prove beneficial to nuanced understanding of the relationship between a group's institutional capacity and its efficiency of operation. If the secular insurgency is indeed hindered by structural and institutional problems that cannot be rectified, western policy makers must ultimately re-evaluate the efficacy of their sustained sponsorship.

The Anatomy of Syrian Opposition

Similar to revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian conflict was sparked by minor confrontations between protestors and security forces in the southern city of Deraa after police arrested, detained, and brutally tortured 15 young boys for painting graffiti slogans that embraced the spirit of the Arab spring. The Syrian regime responded with incredible brutality that resulted in the deaths of peaceful protestors and ultimately ignited a full-scale revolution against Assad's regime. Subsequent defections from the Syrian army slowly expanded the scope of revolution as domestic groups organized into armed militias in opposition to the regime's violent repression. But while the early years of revolution were dominated by a nationalist/democratic fervor, the futility of Syria's secular opposition has given rise to an increasingly radical Islamist opposition.

The introduction of Iranian, Turkish, and Iraqi influence into the conflict has progressively changed the dynamics of conflict and the 2013 battlefield is starkly different from its 2011 origins. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2013 reignited Sunni and Shiite sectarian rivalries and encouraged an eager Syria to allow the flow of Sunni insurgents into the Iraqi fray (Landis, 2012). Under the Assad regime, extensive resource and manpower networks were established with the assistance of Syrian security and intelligence services and facilitated the transport of foreign fighters into the Iraqi arena. In the aftermath of the Iraqi conflict, Baghdad and Tehran's efforts to stave off Sunni extremism have been however complicated by the challenge to Assad's authority in Syria. The extensive networks established to support the Iraqi insurgency against American occupation are now utilized to supply and transport Iraqi Jihadi fighters into

the Syrian front (O'Bagy, 2012). Given their extensive combat experience and established training and support infrastructure, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)/Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) have increasingly coordinated and supported Syrian affiliates in their campaign against Assad. Though ISIS initially operated in isolated pockets within Syria, it has nevertheless expanded its network of well-organized cells that effectively coordinate and execute operations against Assad's forces (O'Bagy, 2012). This involvement of foreign fighters in the Syrian front is well recognized within academic and governmental circles, but their resurgent efficiency has in the past months rejuvenated media attention to their role within the constantly evolving insurgency.

But despite the media's interchangeable use of the terms 'Islamist', 'Salafi' and 'Jihadi', to describe the Islamization of the Syrian opposition, the latter ideologies remain distinctly different and their respective application within a state system is also starkly varied. There are also significant differences between the Islamic and secular factions of the insurgency and the variation between both groups is intimately tied to their specific histories in pre-war era.

Moderate Islamism within this context refers to the belief that political power and state control should be based on Islamic principles that are nonetheless compatible to democratic processes (Johnston, 2008). The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood though expelled from Syria in 1982, served as the best example of moderate Islamism within a state's political structure. From its early origins, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood sought to implement Islamic values in society through education and reform. Violent crackdowns by the Syrian regime in the early 1960's radicalized the movement and created a substantial cleavage between supporters of violent agitation and those that favored peaceful political opposition. After the outbreak of protests in 2011, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was the most organized political group and was therefore thrust into a leadership role despite its existence in exile since 1982. Its efficiency was however hindered by the lack of connectivity within Syria and the brotherhood was later incorporated into the Syrian National Council (SNC) in November 2011.

Unlike political Islamist movements such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist ideology seeks a new world order based on sharia law and is therefore opposed to a modern day democratic system. There however exists a distinct variation in the practice of Salafist ideology and the cleavage between those that embrace participation within the political order and those that support traditional Salifism. Staunch supporters of traditional Salafism are notably referred to as Salafi-Jihadists based on their support for militant Jihadism as the primary tool towards achieving the vision of an Islamic caliphate. These groups have increasingly entered the Syrian fray and amplified the role of jihadist rhetoric within the opposition.

The Assad-Jihadist Connection

The support of foreign terrorist organizations by the Assad regime has in the past been a hallmark and staple of Syria's foreign policy. This relationship extended Assad's influence in Lebanon and Iraq while counterbalancing the influence of Gulf States within the regime. For instance, The Al-Saiqa movement in Palestine was a creation of the Syrian Baath party and proved instrumental in fighting against Yasser Arafat's Fatah during the Lebanese civil war (O'Bagy, 2012). Syria also leveraged Palestinian groups to further its strategic interests within the region and until recently, its relationship with Hamas in Gaza was yet another example of Syria's proxy influence within Palestine. While Syrian intelligence and security forces provided logistical and training support for numerous radical organizations in the past, the "armament of militant groups with Syrian weapons at a large scale has now turned against the regime as foreign militants demonstrate greater weapons capabilities than other homegrown rebel groups" (O'Bagy, 2012). The Syrian conflict has increasingly displayed the cleavage between the Syrian government and its former proxies who have progressively rebuffed past patronage and now challenge the Assad regime.

The Typology of Syrian Insurgency

Syrian National Coalition (SNC)

The Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in November 2011 in Turkey but slowly grew into a greater coalition

of political opposition groups inside and outside of Syria. Considering that initial resistance to Assad's regime was localized and lacked central organization, the SNC erupted into the international scene after its consolidation of various exiled political movements into a single coalition. These groups included the Syrian Islamic Brotherhood, National coordination committees inside Syria, the secular National Bloc, and Kurdish opposition groups (Haddad, 2012). Despite the SNC's recognition within the international realm, it lacks legitimacy within many rebel organizations engaged in the actual fighting. Its inability to garner internal support is further exacerbated by the lack of seasoned leadership and control of competing factions within its ranks.

Despite recognition by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), growing estrangement between the two parties has in the past few months threatened its representation of internal groups (Haddad, 2012). The relative growth of Salafi-Jihadist contingents within the rebel opposition further challenges the SNC and FSA's moderate and secular disposition. The latter translates into greater apprehension amongst western state's whose preferences, while opposed to the Assad regime, don't fully correspond to those of internal actors.

The Free-Syrian Army

The Free-Syrian Army was formed in July 2011 at the beginning of the Syrian crisis and is primarily composed of officers that have defected from the Syrian military. Despite its initially small size, the FSA has swelled to a force of approximately 80,000 fighters under an increasingly diversified command structure. The FSA is predominantly Sunni but also incorporates battalions of Kurdish, Druze, Turkish, and Palestinian forces (O'Bagy, The Free Syrian Army, 2013). Structural limitations, disagreements within the command, and the lack dependable communication and weapons systems have considerably limited its offensive capabilities.

While the FSA maintains a predominantly secular coalition of fighters, some of its affiliates espouse the primacy of Islamic ideology in the future of post-war Syria. Affiliates such as The Suqour al-Sham brigade, Farouq brigades, and Jebel Al-Zawiyah, have however showcased a great degree of operational success in support and coordination of the FSA's campaigns (O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012). While the latter groups highlight the moderate spectrum of the FSA's Islamist coalition, Salafi-Jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra have progressively challenged the FSA's avowedly nationalist and secular view of the revolution.

Disparate funding and the lack of resources has further amplified the pressure from Jihadist groups and strained the FSA's ability to consolidate its authority at a national level. Late in December 2012, rebel leaders formed a council of elected military leaders to oversee and execute the FSA's military campaign in Syria. Since its inception, The Supreme Military Command (SMC) has concertedly worked to unify the opposition under a single command structure and thus enhance its ability to communicate and coordinate with rebel forces throughout the country. The SMC's legitimacy is however determined by the power and influence of individual rebel leaders and it therefore lacks the institutional capacity to demand strict adherence from all of its commanders (O'Bagy, The Free Syrian Army, 2013). The lack of an enforceable chain of command has severely hindered its ability to fully integrate new independent rebel groups under its authority. Despite its institutional deficiencies, the SMC has nevertheless improved rebel operations and enhanced the coordinating capacity of regional commanders throughout the country. This increased cooperation materialized in the rebels taking control of "the majority of the eastern portion of the country, and overrunning their first provincial capital in March 2013 in the capture of al-Raqqa city" (O'Bagy, The Free Syrian Army, 2013). This level of success is largely limited to predominantly rural and desolate portions of the country and fighting has largely stalemated along current battle fronts particularly in the key areas of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus (O'Bagy, The Free Syrian Army, 2013).

Despite Assad's recent resurgence, the success of the rebel mission is dependent on the SMC's ability to exercise solitary command and authority over all levels of the insurgency. Though a rebel victory remains highly unlikely, the SMC is the only organization with the institutional capability to reconstitute Syria's security and governmental institutions in a post-war Syria. Its ability to "act as the basis for a national defense institution will be an important component in filling the power vacuum left by Assad's fall" and will be instrumental in securing and stabilizing the post-war state (O'Bagy, The Free Syrian Army, 2013). As the conflict evolves, sectarian polarization, the lack of strong military institutions and the SMC's inability to curb the strength of extremist groups severely impedes its ability

to secure critical resources from external donors. Assad's victories and the opposition's disarray has also threatened potential supporters within the Christian and Alawite communities and their persistent fears of retribution under Islamic rule will remain pervasive unless their security is guaranteed by a strong and competent opposition.

FSA Affiliates

Given the wide variety of Islamic groups currently involved in the Syrian conflict, affiliates of The Free Syrian Army range from moderate Islamists to staunch jihadists and should be therefore examined in reference to their governing ideologies. Rebel groups such as Suqour Al-Sham espouse an Islamist political agenda but nonetheless support the establishment of a secular Syrian state (O'Bagy, 2012). These groups reject the forceful imposition of Islamic principles in a post-war Syria and willingly support the protection of minority rights. They adhere to strict codes of conduct that limit transgressions against the civilian population and generally avoid tactics that generate high civilian casualties.

Within the same vein, foreign Islamic fighters that embrace the moderate Islamist ideology view their participation as direct opposition to Assad's brutality against their Muslim brethren. Groups such as the Umma brigade that are highly organized and well trained do not seek the establishment of an Islamic caliphate but instead provide logistical, humanitarian and weapons support to the Syrian insurgency as an extension of their religious obligation to support their brothers in need (O'Bagy, 2012). It thus follows that the groups mentioned above willingly cooperate with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), despite its secular disposition. These groups have strong organizational structures that effectively coordinate their leaders with the actual fighters. Institutional specificity allows for the delegation of responsibilities and the efficient allocation of resources. Despite their relatively small size, these groups are extremely effective and form an indomitable wing of the Syrian opposition.

Jabhat Al-Nusra

Jabhat Al-Nusra (JN) forms Syria's strongest domestic Salafi-Jihadist organization and though its members emphasize the need to protect Syria's people against the regime's brutality, it nevertheless espouses a staunch jihadist ideology that seeks the establishment of a global caliphate (O'Bagy, 2012). Jabhat al-Nusra began as a small resistance force but its ranks have been increasingly populated with experienced fighters from Iraq and Lebanon. Many of JN's original cadre belonged to the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi networks from Afghanistan and Iraq and are therefore experienced fighters from both fronts. Given the relationship between the Assad regime and jihadist organizations in Lebanon, it is also possible that its members were once sponsored by the Assad regime.

In 2007 however, "the Syrian government adjusted its policy towards Iraq, retracting its tacit tolerance of jihadist activities, and began to crack down on the Syrian members of the Al-Zarqawi network. One casualty of this policy change was Sheikh Abu al-Qaqaa, who was assassinated by the Syrian intelligence services in late 2007 for his part in channeling foreign fighters to Iraq through Syria" (Benotman & Blake, 2012). Despite incidents like these, the network was never destroyed and many jihadists in Syria escaped arrest by relocating to Iraq and returning to Syria in 2011. One such jihadist is Abu Mohammad al-Julani, JN's leader. Al-Julani's leadership is uncontested because of his experience in Iraq; his long absence from Syria is irrelevant given the group's ideological rejection of borders within 'Muslim lands' where they wish to establish a 'caliphate' (Benotman & Blake, 2012).

JN displays in depth knowledge of logistical channels previously utilized by the Assad regime and it extensively employs this tactical knowledge to support and replenish its fighters (O'Bagy, 2012). Notable assistance from AQI is also evident in the organization's increased deployment of IED's on the Syrian front. Building from the AQI experience in Iraq, Jabhat al- Nusra is noted to be extremely sensitive to civilian casualties and its growth in popularity reflects a concerted effort by its leadership to shelter civilians from unnecessary injury. The sensitivity to civilian casualties is also aided by its level of effectiveness and performance on the battlefield.

Its strong command structure and expansive recruitment system imposes strict security measures that not only protect the identity of its top echelons, but also strictly governs its mode of operation. The recruitment and training of new fighters is undertaken with excruciating oversight as the organization tries to avoid infiltration by the Syrian

government. JN members adhere to an ideology of Al-raya that mandates "all mujahedeen fighters to follow single leadership under Islamic rule" (Benotman & Blake, 2012). Its ranks are therefore populated by extremely disciplined and well trained fighters whose allegiance to the leadership and the group's mission is unmovable. Despite its staunch jihadist ideology, JN fighters have repeatedly coordinated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and other Islamist groups during operations against government forces. This level of cooperation is nevertheless on the decline and aurguements between the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra have recently resulted in the assassinations of several FSA commanders in the southern regions of Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah (Rif Al-Hasakah) (Benotman & Blake, 2012).

Conclusion

At the moment, the future of Syria's armed revolution is extremely precarious and their initial advantages against government forces have been slowly diminished by internal conflicts, ineffective leadership and the lack of sustainable institutions within the rebel movement. The FSA's strengths that were initially secured by strong tribal ties within Sunni communities in Homs and Aleppo are slowly disappearing under the threat of Salafi-Jihadist encroachment. The level of fragmentation detailed above has revealed the indelible nature of a coalition whose strength and unity no longer comes from historical tribal support networks. As prescribed by Staniland's social-institutional theory, fragmentation within the current rebel movement is due to its divided social networks that cannot exercise control or discipline within the cadre of fighters.

The influx of foreign fighters and influence from Al-Qaida affiliates in Iraq has systemically injured a concerted effort by FSA leaders to consolidate their authority within the ranks. Financial support from the Gulf States has further inundated the FSA's meager resources and defections from within its ranks are progressively higher as fighters join the better funded jihadi organizations. Ultimately, the lack of efficient institutions within the FSA not only hinders its ability to mount an efficient resistance, but also makes it an unsuitable candidate for western support. Unless the tide of extremism is substantially mitigated, defections within the FSA will persist and also deter potential supporters within the Christian and Alawite communities. It is therefore my terminal position that given the risks detailed herein, if the FSA fails to consolidate its ranks under a governable command system, the Obama administration cannot credibly provide the financial and material support it needs.

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