



FROM THE BOTTOM, UP

A Strategy for U.S. Military Support to Syria's Armed Opposition

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About the Author



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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ilan Goldenberg, Shawn Brimley, Robert D. Kaplan, Stuart W. Bradin, Bassam Barabandi, Joshua M. Landis, Andrew J. Tabler, Suha Maayeh, and Michael W. S. Ryan for their review of and input into this report. He would also like to thank Maura McCarthy for managing the editing process and Melody Cook for her creativity in the design and layout of this report. The author alone is responsible for any error in fact, analysis, or omission.

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Cover Photo

The United States should pursue a bottom-up strategy for Syria that focuses on uniting individual rebel groups it supports into larger and more cohesive armed opposition institutions. Some of these groups are featured in this are featured on the cover, including, from clockwise: Al-Farqa Al-Shamaliyya; Alwiya Suqur Al-Jabal; Al-Farqa 13; Liwa Al-Sultan Murad; Liwa Al-Mutasem; Jaysh Al-Nasr; Alwiya Al-Furqan; and Liwa Fursan Al-Haq. Sources: Al-Farqa Al-Shamaliyya YouTube page; Alwiya Suqur Al-Jabal YouTube page; RFS Media You Tube page (Al-Farqa 13); Farqa Al-Sultan Murad YouTube Page; RFS Media Office YouTube page (Liwa Al-Mutasem); Jaysh Al-Nasr YouTube page; Al Furq YouTube page (Alwiya Al-Furqan); and Al-Farqa Al-Shamaliyya YouTube page (Liwa Fursan Al-Haq).

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Executive Summary

The primary U.S. effort should be on a bottom-up strategy for building cohesive, moderate armed opposition institutions with a regional focus that is tailored for each individual region within Syria.

With the current state of the Syrian civil war, the conditions are not ripe for de-escalation in the conflict. If the United States is seeking a transition from the Assad regime that does not lead to the enduring rule of ideological extremist organizations throughout Syria, it will need to become the decisive influence that shifts the military balance on the ground in rebel-ruled areas in favor of the politically moderate armed opposition.¹ Therefore, the primary U.S. effort should be on a bottom-up strategy for building cohesive, moderate armed opposition institutions with a regional focus that is tailored for each individual region within Syria. This line of effort depends on providing incentives for the already U.S.-vetted moderate armed opposition groups to join together into larger regional coalitions with genuinely unified command.

Over time, as these moderate rebel institutions become the center of gravity in their respective regions and marginalize or defeat ideological extremist organizations, they can be brought together to form larger civil-military structures and govern the predominately Sunni rebel-ruled areas inside of Syria.² These regional structures can then interact with the remnants of the Assad regime and its loyalist forces to work toward achieving a long-term political solution to the Syrian civil war, such as a federalized Syria. While this approach may seem complex and difficult to execute, there are already examples inside Syria, especially in the south near the Jordanian border, where American strategy to support the armed opposition has had the most success. Indeed, it is the only approach to arming the Syrian opposition that has shown any success over the course of the civil war.

It is important to acknowledge that the complexity of the Syrian civil war will require this careful, phased approach that focuses on achieving its objectives over a time horizon that could be measured in up to a decade or more. This line of effort will also require sustained U.S. commitment to Syria, working through a “light footprint” approach with regional and local partners. The strategy’s overarching objective is to prevent the large areas of the country that are under opposition control, and largely irreconcilable with the state and security structures of the Assad regime, from becoming safe havens for transnational Salafist jihadist groups that target the West.

Introduction

The current U.S. policy to disconnect the military situation inside of Syria from the diplomatic process is unlikely to bring long-term stability to the country or bolster acceptable, non-ideologically extremist governance in opposition-controlled areas. Unless the United States significantly increases and sustains its support for moderate rebel groups to force a shift in the battlefield, the diplomatic process is most likely to fail because there are few incentives for the Assad regime to relinquish power. Moreover, the conditions inside rebel-ruled areas of Syria will favor the entrenchment of ideological extremist organizations.

President Bashar al-Assad's military forces, backed by Russian airpower and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-mobilized Shi'a militias, have made battlefield gains throughout western Syria, putting enormous strain on U.S.-supported moderate armed opposition forces.³ These developments further complicate the ability of the United States to exert influence on the ground in areas that have fallen under rebel control in the region. The Russian military intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime has secured, for the foreseeable future, the continuation of Assad's rule in a statelet instituted over core areas of support for his government in western Syria.

The Assad regime's security forces also have continuing presence in contested theaters in southern Syria

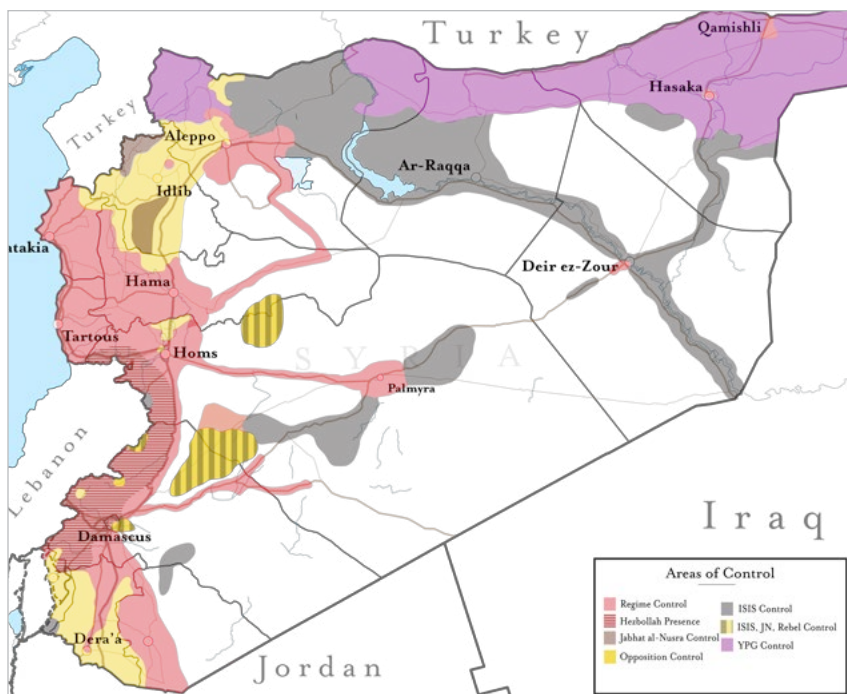
in Dara'a and al-Quneitra governorate, in northwestern Syria in Aleppo governorate, and in eastern Syria in Hasakah and Deir al-Zour governorates.⁴ The indefinite survival of the regime, even if its authority has been substantially weakened since 2011, presents a significant dilemma for the foreign backers of the Syrian armed opposition: Russia and the IRGC are doubling down their support for the Assad regime, which is putting the Syrian armed opposition – still quite conflicted in leadership and ideological goals for the end state of Syria after the conflict – in a worse position than ever for forcing a decisive military conclusion to the war.

Conversely, the Assad regime and its allies are engaging in the diplomatic process from a position of strength, and can use this position to force the development of a post-conflict Syria that preserves the rule of Assad, or hands over governance for the indefinite future to his regime's handpicked successors.⁵ However loyalist forces and their allies are unlikely to restore the Assad regime's rule throughout all of Syria in the foreseeable future, and the establishment of an enduring Assad-led statelet in western Syria would leave the country inherently unstable.⁶ Yet the United States currently has more leverage over the course of the conflict in western Syria than it has been willing to capitalize on.

Time is running out for the United States to utilize this leverage. Russian and Assad regime airstrikes have had a devastating impact on rebel-supporting communities throughout western Syria, many of which are the home areas of moderate armed opposition organizations, including several that are militarily supported by the United States.⁷ These conditions inside Syria are actively eroding support for the United States and its policy goals among the very opposition communities it needs to support in order to bring about its desire for a stable, sustainable, and inclusive post-conflict state.⁸

In addition to the Assad regime and its allies, ideological extremist organizations embedded within the Syrian armed opposition challenge moderate actors within the revolutionary movement and will need to be overcome. Throughout western Syria, from Aleppo to Dara'a, the rising power of sectarian Sunni ideological extremist organizations within the armed opposition threatens to entrench a

Syria Overview: Main Combatants and Their Areas of Control



Institute for the Study of War



Southern Front fighters stand at attention during a training exercise in Dara'a, Syria. The Southern Front is the strongest moderate armed opposition organization in Syria, and the "Southern Front model" should be applied to build up moderate rebel institutions in other areas of Syria. (Syrian Revolutionaries Front YouTube)

post-Assad reality – one that closely resembles the sharia state that is the goal of influential jihadist theorists such as Abu Bark al-Naji, Abu Khalid al-Suri, and Abu Musab al-Suri.⁹ Another challenge is that currently the Syrian moderate armed opposition organizations do not display enough unity of command and internal coordination to repel either the Assad regime and its allies or ideological extremist organizations.

The current U.S. policy focus on empowering individual moderate armed opposition organizations with military assistance is insufficient to overcome these challenges. The United States should instead take a region-by-region approach to improve the capacity of several moderate armed opposition organizations that it currently supports and unify these organizations' efforts to grow and operate under a single chain-of-command. These rebel institutions should take the form of regional coalitions that can directly and effectively coordinate military campaigns against the Assad regime and its allies, confront and defeat ideological extremist organizations, and protect incipient civilian institutions of moderate opposition governance. Therefore, the United States should look to the "Southern Front model" as a blueprint to build opposition military-civil governance

structures throughout Syria that are predominately Sunni and under rebel jurisdiction, including in northern Syria and eventually in eastern Syria as territory is retaken from ISIS.¹⁰

The United States should look to the "Southern Front model" as a blueprint to build opposition military-civil governance structures throughout Syria that are predominately Sunni and under rebel jurisdiction.

Current U.S. Support for the Syrian Armed Opposition

It is a misconception that the United States does not provide the Syrian armed opposition with military support against the Assad regime in western Syria. The United States is currently a willing participant, via proxy, working with regional partners including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, and Qatar to support the Syrian armed opposition's fight against the Assad regime and its allies.¹¹ Since 2012, the United States has slowly and cautiously provided assistance to vetted, relatively politically moderate, armed opposition organizations inside Syria, reportedly working via the Central Intelligence Agency.¹² U.S. support for the Syrian moderate armed opposition has slowly worked up the levels of escalation but has not been enough, and more can be done to bolster already U.S.-backed rebel organizations and to attract the support of rebel groups not currently backed by the United States.¹³

U.S. assistance to the Syrian armed opposition has developed from the provision of nonlethal support such as salaries, medicine, food, communications equipment, and survival equipment beginning in the summer of 2012, to lethal assistance in the form of vehicles, ammunition, the provision of light weapons and basic infantry training by the fall of 2013, to the provision of anti-tank heavy weapons, BGM-71 Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles, by the winter of 2014.¹⁴ Of the Syrian moderate armed opposition fighters, more than 10,000 have been trained under U.S.-led programs. It is unknown how many U.S.-trained fighters are still active combatants in the civil war.¹⁵

TOW missiles currently represent the most powerful weapons provided by the United States to the Syrian armed opposition.¹⁶ It is not an overstatement to suggest that the Syrian armed opposition groups that have been vetted and received a sustained supply of the anti-tank missiles hold the calling card of U.S. approval and are the foundation of U.S. influence in the anti-Assad regime fight in western Syria. Since the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war, U.S. lines of effort, particularly the provision of TOW missiles, have been effective on the battlefield and widely and popularly noted in Syrian opposition and international media.¹⁷ Although the exact vetting guidelines under which Syrian armed opposition groups are scrutinized to receive U.S. military assistance are not publicly available, most of the U.S.-supplied groups share certain characteristics.

First, they are willing to receive assistance from the United States in spite of deeply held, regionally popular narratives in the Middle East that the United States is an

aggressive, imperialistic nation, and in spite of the ideological radicalization of many of Syria's armed opposition groups, which reject a U.S. role in the civil war. Second, U.S.-backed Syrian armed opposition groups are willing to receive assistance from the United States with "strings attached" requiring these groups to abide by a post-conflict political structure in Syria along U.S. guidelines. These define a postwar Syria that is inclusive and will build responsive governance structures allowing for the development of civil society institutions not dominated by ideological extremist actors. Third, and most practically important in the context of the civil war, these rebel groups have been operationally effective, particularly the armed opposition organizations that have received a steady supply of TOW missiles and have been deploying them to significant effect on the battlefield.

The United States is currently a willing participant, via proxy, working with regional partners including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, and Qatar to support the Syrian armed opposition's fight against the Assad regime and its allies.

Thus far in the conflict, the U.S. support for the Syrian armed opposition has been through the provision of military assistance to "trusted commanders."¹⁸ Trusted commander-led rebel groups can be easier to vet and track and simpler to support, in theory: The relationship among the United States and its regional partner personnel and the trusted commander and the rank-and-file of the organization should be tighter and facilitate the transfer of military assistance.¹⁹ This approach is pragmatic and follows sound logic based on the development of the Syrian civil war.²⁰

Syria's war is an amalgamation of local conflicts, and the mobilization of armed opposition groups since the start of the war in 2011 has been highly localized. The cooperation of rebel groups across the ideological spectrum to achieve military gains against the Assad regime and its allies most frequently occurs on the local, or at best regional, level.²¹ The pressure of the Syrian civil war has led to greater convergence, operational coordination, and resource sharing within Syria's armed opposition movement across the ideological spectrum.²²

U.S. Assistance to the Syrian Rebels: Just Enough to Stay in the Fight, Not Enough to Win It

2011	2012	2013	2014–2016	2016–
INITIAL NETWORKING	SALARIES	BASIC INFANTRY TRAINING	BGM-71 TOW ANTI-TANK MISSILES	?
SOME COORDINATION WITH REBEL LEADERS	MEDICINE	LIGHT WEAPONS		
	FOOD	AMMUNITION		
	COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT	VEHICLES		
	SURVIVAL EQUIPMENT (SUCH AS TENTS)			

The United States is attempting to fight a war via proxy against the Assad regime and its allies, and properly vetting rebel groups, their leadership, and their rank-and-file has been a slow, limited, but ultimately necessary exercise in an attempt to build U.S. influence within the rebel ranks throughout western Syria.²³ Proxy wars historically carry great risk, even beyond the CIA's support for jihadist fighters against Soviet forces in Afghanistan.²⁴

Over the course of the Syrian civil war perhaps as many as 1,000 to 1,500 armed opposition groups have been mobilized, most of them on the local, village, and urban district level, generally without unity of leadership across groups or a clear desired end state for post-conflict

Syria.²⁵ Estimates of the number of Syrian rebel fighters that could be defined as part of the moderate armed opposition across Syria vary greatly, ranging from 20,000 to more than 100,000.²⁶ Weakening the moderate armed opposition movement as a whole is the fact that it generally consists of hundreds of small groups with a local focus in their operations, and without coherent command-and-control structure to design and execute campaigns against the movement's enemies.²⁷ U.S. efforts to engage the moderate armed opposition are also complicated because there is still deep reservation within the Syrian opposition movement, and opposition-supporting regional actors, to completely marginalize, confront, and defeat non-ISIS, ideological extremist organizations that are embedded in the broader armed opposition's military campaigns against the Assad regime and its allies.²⁸

Currently, the most coherent moderate armed opposition coalition that could be scaled up to a higher degree of institutionalization is the Southern Front, which is strongest in the Dara'a and al-Quneitra governorates near the Syrian-Jordanian border.²⁹ However, at present there are few other moderate rebel organizations that have the immediate potential institutional capacity to be centers of gravity for the broader opposition movement in their home regions. These moderate armed opposition groups will also have difficulty confronting both the Assad regime and its allies as well as ideological extremist organizations within the rebel movement writ large, such as the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib and Aleppo.³⁰ While this reality is most stark in northwestern Syria,



The militant Salafist organization Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya sponsors a Quranic memorization and recitation class in Idlib governorate. One of the most powerful ideological extremist groups in rebel-ruled areas of northern Syria, it is a close and continuing ally of Jabhat al-Nusra, but also works closely with U.S.-backed rebel groups. (Ahrar Al Sham Al Islamiyya YouTube)

the Southern Front also has organizational difficulties, partly driven by rivalries within the coalition among its constituent trusted commander-led groups, which will need to be actively overcome.³¹

Further complicating U.S. options is the reality that many of the Syrian armed opposition groups, whether through their own choice or via the influence of regional backers, or both, have adopted increasingly militant Sunni Islamist ideology.³² These groups are working toward a post-conflict Syria that may facilitate the rise of the sharia state envisioned by jihadist theorists.³³ This situation is particularly problematic in northwestern Syria and in the area of Damascus, but is a growing challenge in southern Syria as well. While the organizations that work toward this end state for Syria, which is at odds with U.S. policy, have generally been marginalized from receiving U.S. military assistance, these groups have received support from the United States' regional partners that have invested heavily in combatants in the Syrian civil war, such as Turkey, Qatar, and from private donors in the other Gulf Arab nations, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.³⁴

U.S. lines of effort should move beyond the focus on empowering trusted commanders and their individual armed groups to building strong, multi-factional moderate armed opposition institutions.

It is in this complex sociopolitical context that the United States has placed a premium on selecting and vetting trusted commanders and their fighters.³⁵ The likely vetting requirements, while strenuous and limiting the number of armed opposition fighters that have been provided U.S. military assistance, also provides U.S. personnel with a stronger sense of whom they are dealing with, and the political end state envisioned by these armed opposition groups. However, while this approach is logical, it has not been matched with significant increases in U.S. military assistance to those armed opposition organizations that have been cleared through the vetting process,³⁶ or to those actively working toward building the capacity of the moderate armed opposition to provide security, and facilitate the delivery of social goods, to their communities.³⁷



Fighters from the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra pray before engaging in battle with Assad regime forces in Idlib governorate. U.S.-supported armed opposition groups will need to confront and defeat Jabhat al-Nusra to prevent rebel-ruled areas in Syria from becoming safe havens for transnational jihadist networks. (Al-Manara Al-Bayda Twitter)

This approach also has another long-term weakness: It does not focus on scaling up the incipient institutions of already existing, moderate armed opposition coalitions mobilized on the local and regional level, including several that received TOW missiles and other U.S. support. Without improving Syrian rebel forces' leadership institutions on the ground that receive U.S. military assistance, internal competition, "warlordism," and increasingly weaker group cohesion within the moderate armed opposition will likely collapse these U.S.-supported groups over time. U.S. lines of effort should move beyond the focus on empowering trusted commanders and their individual armed groups to building strong, multi-factional moderate armed opposition institutions, which act like "real armies" and can fill the security and governance vacuums inside of Syria.



Lesson 1: Legitimacy Must Come from the Local Level

The most prominent example of the failure of the United States to exert influence on the Syrian armed opposition to cohere into a more unified institution is the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (SMC-FSA). The SMC-FSA, formed in December 2012, attempted to organize Syria's rebel groups along the lines of a regular military force, divided into regional commands.³⁸ The SMC-FSA adopted the necessary region-by-region approach to delegating its command structure, but with a fatal flaw: it could not provide the sustained logistical support from opposition-backing states to rebel fighters on the ground.³⁹

Local rebel leaders and their fighters chafed at being told what to do by former Syrian military officers who sought to lead from exile outside of Syria, but could not produce matériel when it was needed on the battlefield against Assad regime forces. The central command of the SMC-FSA and commanders and their armed groups on the ground frequently engaged in leadership disputes, and the SMC-FSA ultimately failed to establish a nationally focused leadership body with authority over a large number of armed opposition groups.⁴⁰ Consistently, moderate Syrian rebel organizations inside Syria asked the United States to do more to support them, and although U.S. support was provided, it was not provided in sufficient quantities to make the

SMC-FSA the command center of the armed opposition movement.⁴¹ Another fault of the SMC-FSA was that it represented too much of a "go big," approach. Coordinating a coherent armed opposition strategy that supported U.S. policy objectives for Syria, with groups across the ideological spectrum, was difficult enough. Trying to get it to work across Syria's regions, each with its own sociopolitical and historical context and all under varying degrees of control and presence of the Assad regime, proved to be a very daunting task. By contrast, a local, region-by-region approach would mitigate these challenges to a significant degree. Such an approach should actively focus on how to take already vetted and supported moderate armed opposition organizations and work them into regional coalitions that can become institutionalized centers of gravity for the opposition.

This is more practical than trying to build an entirely new rebel army outside of Syria to insert into the country, because it adheres to the pattern of mobilization and organization followed by the armed opposition throughout the conflict.⁴² Most frequently, Syrian armed opposition groups are organized on the local level in their area of origin and typically conduct operations near their home areas. The U.S. "Syria Train and Equip" program failed not only because it could not recruit enough moderate armed opposition fighters to only

battle ISIS instead of the Assad regime and its allies, but also because it sought to create a new rebel army inorganically outside the country and insert it into Syria, rather than to empower and increase the capacity of existing armed opposition coalitions that could then be scaled up to larger and stronger institutions.⁴³

Lesson 2: The United States Must Exercise Strategic Patience with Rebels

Harakat Hazm (Steadfastness Movement) is the most noteworthy U.S. effort to learn from the mistake of not organizing the armed opposition at the level of a regionally focused coalition. It failed because the United States neglected to practice strategic patience in providing it support when it struggled on the battlefield against al Qaeda. Harakat Hazm formed in January 2014 out of 22 constituent moderate armed opposition groups that operated in northwestern Syria's Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, and Homs governorates, with a center of gravity in Idlib and Aleppo. It had an estimated force of 5,000 fighters.⁴⁴

Notably, Harakat Hazm fought against Assad regime forces and ISIS, and it was an important component of a unified armed opposition military campaign in January 2014 that significantly weakened ISIS' presence in northwestern Syria. By April 2014, within three months of its formation, some of the constituent groups within Harakat Hazm began to receive TOW missiles, which were primarily deployed against the Assad regime and its allies.⁴⁵ Harakat Hazm was an effective, albeit politically marginalized and limited organization within the armed opposition that uneasily coexisted with, and later was actively targeted by, Jabhat al-Nusra.

Jabhat al-Nusra's operations against Harakat Hazm, which it accused of being a tool of the United States in Syria, began in November 2014, after U.S. airstrikes hit the al Qaeda affiliate in Idlib, and intensified in January 2015.⁴⁶ At the end of January 2015, the United States reportedly refused continued military assistance to Harakat Hazm due to its battlefield failures against Jabhat al-Nusra, which resulted in the slow collapse of the organization and its dissolution in March 2015.⁴⁷ The United States will need to engage in more proactive lines of effort to empower and scale up the most successful existing models of armed opposition organizations that it supports in western Syria, rather than abandon Syrian rebel partners who suffer setbacks.



A Harakat Hazm fighter demonstrates how to set up and use a BGM-71 TOW missile in Aleppo governorate in October 2014. Harakat Hazm was the first U.S.-backed, Syrian moderate armed opposition organization to receive the advanced anti-tank missiles, although it collapsed over time due to a lack of sustained U.S. support. (Harakat Hazm YouTube)

Lesson 3: The United States Must Be Willing to Provide Conventional Military Support

Harakat Hazm also collapsed because the United States did not provide conventional support to protect it or provide deterrence against future attacks by Jabhat al-Nusra. However, the United States seemingly learned from this lesson and provided close-air support to "Division 30," the moderate armed opposition group that had been mobilized to fight ISIS under the Syria Train and Equip program. In July 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra attacked Division 30 fighters as they crossed the Syrian-Turkish border; U.S. close-air support combined with the U.S. military training that the Division 30 fighters received had a devastating effect on Jabhat al-Nusra. U.S. operational support prevented the complete defeat of Division 30 fighters.⁴⁸

Ideological extremist actors within the Syrian rebel movement have attacked and will continue to attack U.S.-backed moderate armed opposition organizations and seek to consolidate and expand their influence and power over civil society in rebel-administered areas.⁴⁹ This was the fate that befell Harakat Hazm and Division 30, and it is a constant threat for all moderate armed opposition organizations that represent a challenge to the long-term sociopolitical power of the extremist factions within the Syrian rebel movement. The lesson the United States needs to learn from its experience with Harakat Hazm is that as it pursues a strategy to scale up the institutional capacity and military effectiveness of moderate armed opposition organizations, it will also have to provide occasional conventional support to them.

Scale Up Current U.S. Capacity-Building Efforts to Support the Syrian Armed Opposition

Currently, the United States is deploying Army Special Forces personnel, in cooperation with Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), in northeastern Syria to build the institutional capacity and warfighting ability of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition in the campaign against ISIS.⁵⁰ The SDF coalition is prosecuting an effective campaign against ISIS, which has been amplified by active U.S. support and has provided a permissive human terrain in which U.S. forces operate. Although the foundation of the SDF is predominantly ethnic Kurdish armed groups organized under the People's Protection Units umbrella, other ethnic militias including Assyrian Christians and ethnic Turkmen, and an increasing number of Sunni Arab FSA armed opposition groups, are joining and being built into the SDF's structures.⁵¹

The SDF model, although a work in progress that is too closely tied in its leadership levels with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), demonstrates that sustained U.S. military assistance and the capacity-building efforts of U.S. Army Special Forces trainers can have great impact on the battlefield inside Syria. It also demonstrates that the United States will need to be more proactive in accepting the risk to deploy special operators into Syria's complex human terrain.⁵² Developing the institutions of the moderate armed opposition movement

in western Syria via active engagement with the Army Special Forces and/or Special Forces trainers from Arab partner nations such as Jordan or the United Arab Emirates would be a significant and impactful escalation of U.S. involvement in the conflict.⁵³ This line of effort is vital to preventative counterterrorism, as ideological extremist organizations such as al Qaeda are seeking to build enduring governance structures to rule Sunni communities in western Syria that have fallen out of the Assad regime's control.⁵⁴ There are notable and relatively successful moderate armed opposition coalitions with a local and regional focus that can be the foundation of this strategy to institutionalize the moderate rebel military structures in western Syria.

The goal of U.S. strategy should be to create unified and institutionalized command-and-control structures within these coalitions in a phased process to improve their ability to provide security for local governing councils and humanitarian relief organizations that service local communities. Over time, former FSA fighters who are now refugees could be enticed back to their home country if better and stronger armed opposition institutions have been built, thus bringing reserve manpower to these coalitions.⁵⁵ The Southern Front is the moderate armed coalition that has the most potential to be scaled up more quickly, as it has a presence in Syria's Dara'a, al-Quneitra, Suweida, and Rif Damascus governorates and includes up to 29 constituent armed groups that have received TOW missiles. Beyond the Southern Front, the United States should also focus on

building the capacity of the institutions of Jaysh al-Nasr (Victory Army) and Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya (Northern Division). These nascent regional coalitions – composed of TOW-supplied groups that have their centers of gravity in localized areas of the Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo governorates – also have the potential to be scaled up, albeit more slowly than the Southern Front. These emerging coalitions are described in more detail below.



A commander from the northern Syrian moderate armed opposition coalition Jaysh al-Thuwar announces the addition of several rebel groups to the Syrian Democratic Forces regional coalition in Idlib and Aleppo governorates. The Syrian Democratic Forces is a multi-ethnic, U.S.-backed, regional coalition that is the primary platform for the coalition's counter-ISIS campaign. (Jesh AlThuwar YouTube)

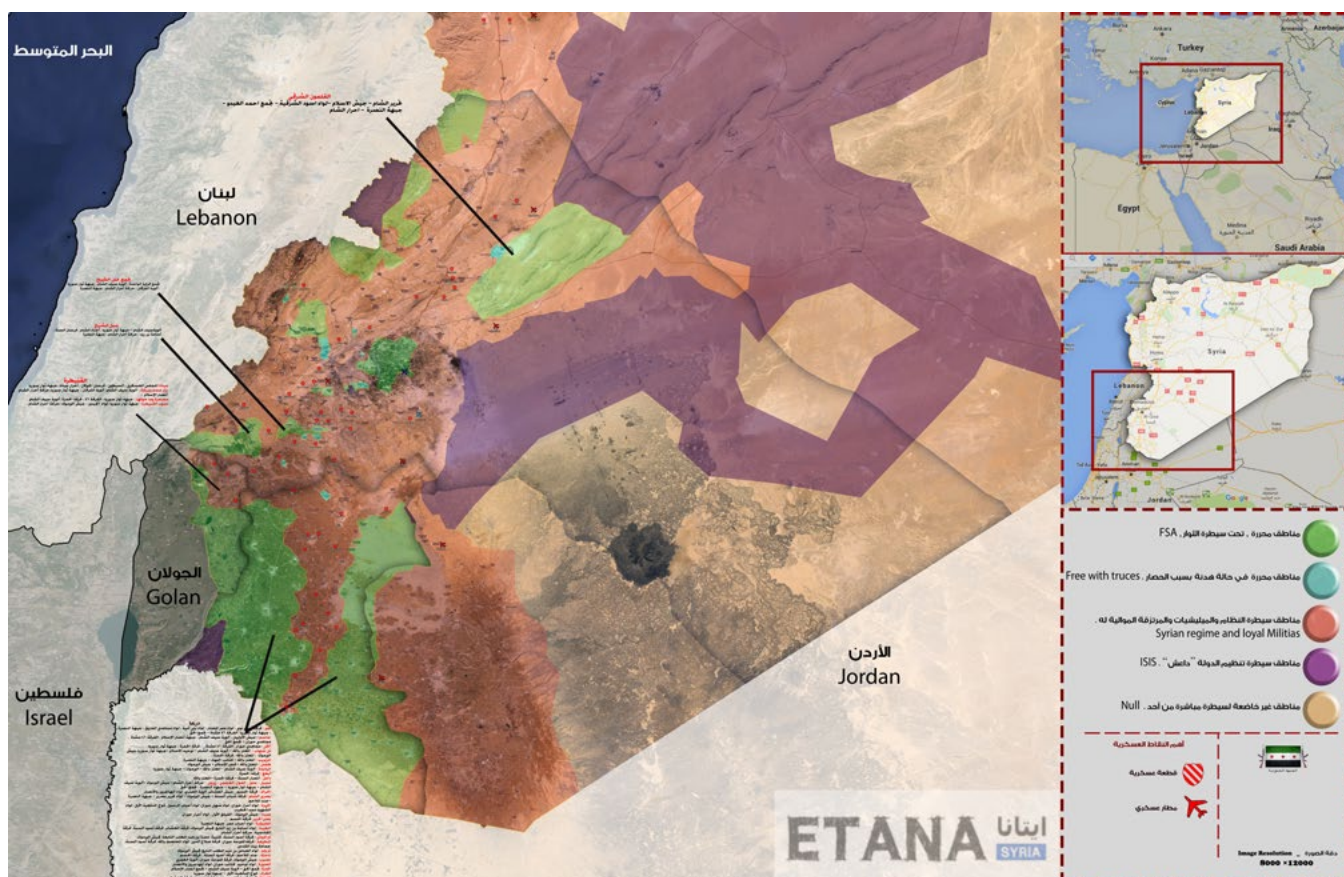
Southern Front

The Southern Front announced its formation in February 2014 after several months of discussions between its constituent groups. Since this time, the Southern Front has claimed between 40 to 50 constituent groups in Syria's Dara'a, al-Quneitra, and Rif Damascus governorates. The largest number of constituent groups within the Southern Front are located in Dara'a and al-Quneitra governorates, although the Southern Front has recently put more energy into expanding into Rif Damascus (to directly pressure Assad) and into the badia (semi-arid steppe) region of the Homs governorate on the borders of northern Dara'a and Suweida governorates as a shield against the expansion of ISIS. Over the long term the Southern Front will need to incorporate more powerful Damascus-area armed opposition coalitions, such as Faylaq al-Rahman; the struggle to control the Damascus region is important as its outcome will help establish the parameters of a post-conflict Syria.

Currently, the Southern Front is best thought of as a loose coalition that receives its strategic direction from

its state sponsors, particularly the United States and Jordan, and that has had limited success in building a more cohesive and unified command. As many as 29 constituent groups within the Southern Front are believed to have been vetted by the United States and have received TOWs, while as many as 16 of those groups continue to receive a steady supply of the anti-tank missiles. It is estimated that the constituent groups within the Southern Front may currently include as many as 30,000 fighters. However, battlefield attrition, fighters quitting the war and leaving Syria to become refugees, and the common practice of the inflation of rank-and-file totals by commanders may mean that the total given for the overall strength of the Southern Front is an inflated figure.

The basic constituent organization within the Southern Front is a local coalition of rebel organizations that have several constituent groups, mobilized on the local-district level in a village/town or a few villages/towns and unified under a joint command. Frequently, several local coalitions will exist in the same battlespace, and will share village/town, familial, clan, and tribal ties



This map depicts the state of the conflict in southern Syria. The Southern Front (area of control in green) is the most powerful armed opposition actor in southern Syria, although the Assad regime and its allies and ideological extremist actors in the armed opposition are challenging it. If the U.S. wants to have lasting influence in the Syrian civil war it will need to provide greater support for the Southern Front to become the most powerful actor in southern Syria. (Southern Front/Etana)

to each other, particularly in Dara'a, al-Quneitra, and Rif Damascus governorates. Local coalitions can form joint operations rooms, which bring together several local coalitions for a specific purpose, such as seizing an Assad regime military outpost or capturing a strategic highway. Joint operations rooms are autonomous within the Southern Front structure and do not have a strongly developed command structure. Constituent organizations within the joint operations room can and do leave it at their discretion. Two examples of this model are Tahalaf Suqur al-Janoob and Usud al-Harb. Within each there are constituent local coalitions that unite several armed opposition groups under one organization, with a stronger command structure than the joint operations room. The most powerful local coalitions within the Southern Front are Jaysh al-Yarmouk, Alwiya al-Omari, Usud al-Sunna, Farqat al-Hamza, Jabhat Thuwar Sooria-Janoob, Faylaq al-Awwal, Alwiya Sayf al-Sham, Alwiya al-Furqan, and Jaysh al-Ashayer.



Fighters from the ideological extremist organization Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk participate in a parade of tanks seized from the Assad regime in Dara'a governorate. A former Southern Front affiliate, the group has declared its support for ISIS and fights against both the Southern Front and Jabhat al-Nusra and is an example of the rising challenge of ideological extremist organizations to the Southern Front. (Liwa Shuhada Al Yarmouk YouTube)

One of the unique features of the Southern Front is that it has developed its own Mithaq (Covenant) that supports an inclusive and democratic post-conflict Syria. This Mithaq was developed in stages since the Southern Front's formation was announced in February 2014, but it is still more comprehensive than the Riyadh Declaration, which was developed almost two years after the Southern Front was formed. The greatest

challenge to the Southern Front stems from the regional coalition's inability to build a truly unified leadership. It has suffered battlefield losses, internal leadership disputes among its constituent groups, warlordism, the retirement of its fighters to become refugees, and the challenge coming from the rising power of Sunni ideological extremist groups.

The greatest challenge to the Southern Front stems from the regional coalition's inability to build a truly unified leadership.

However, in spite of it all the Southern Front still maintains tremendous potential to be scaled up into a stronger institution that can unify military and humanitarian assistance to the rebels in order to maximize the soft power of the United States on the Syrian opposition. It also has demonstrated continuing, but straining, deterrent power against ideological extremist groups in southern Syria, which is not yet the norm in northwest Syria. Also, through its covenant the Southern Front has the potential to establish a pluralistic precedent that could assuage the fears of Syria's regime-loyalist communities, many of them ethnic and sectarian minorities such as Christians, Druze, and Alawites whose eventual buy-in and participation would be required to achieve a transition from the Assad regime.⁵⁶

Recent tepid U.S. and Jordanian support is partly to blame for the Southern Front's challenges, especially uneven material support to the Southern Front's most active affiliates. The line of effort outlined in this study will require more assertive and sustained U.S. and Jordanian support for the Southern Front in order to restore the confidence of the moderate armed opposition on the ground in southern Syria. As in northern Syria, the moderate armed opposition in southern Syria will need to regain its faith that the United States and its regional partners will not abandon it.

Northern Syria

Northwest Syria presents a more complex challenge than southern Syria for the United States. This region has some potentially foundational moderate armed opposition coalitions, but they are newer, smaller, and comparatively weaker than the Southern Front, and military pressure from the Assad regime and its allies are forcing them deeper into interoperability with ideological extremist organizations. U.S.-supported rebel groups in northern Syria will also need to coordinate better to protect the moderate opposition movement from ideological extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in rebel-ruled areas.

In the area of Aleppo, these groups also have significant animosity toward the SDF, which they have fought fierce battles against and which they perceive to be working toward the PKK's strategic ambition of creating a Kurdish-dominated, greater Rojava (western Kurdistan) region across northern Syria. These tensions, between predominantly Arab and Turkmen U.S.-supported rebel groups in Aleppo now coordinated under the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and the U.S.-supported SDF, require decisive action from the United States. It will take time, but the United States and Turkey will need to strategically coordinate with each other to reduce tensions and achieve a cessation of hostilities between the Aleppo area, U.S.-supported rebels and the SDF. Long-term, the United States and Turkey will need to work together to promote the creation of a multi-ethnic, armed opposition coalition in the Aleppo area to stabilize one of the most important front lines against the Assad regime, its allies, and ISIS.

In spite of these difficulties, there are nascent moderate armed opposition regional coalitions the United States can work with to strengthen the movement on the ground in northern Syria. One such promising coalition is Jaysh al-Nasr, which has gone through two iterations since its initial formation in August 2015. The nascent Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya coalition also has the potential to become a strong moderate armed opposition institution in northern Syria.

JAYSH AL-NASR

The first Jaysh al-Nasr coalition announced its formation in August 2015. At the time it consisted of 16 constituent moderate armed opposition groups, the majority of which currently receive a steady supply of TOW missiles. Several of the most prominent U.S.-supported groups in northwest Syria were part of the first Jaysh al-Nasr coalition, including Tajammu' al-Ezza, Alwiya Suqur al-Jabal, Liwa al-Saadis, Al-Farqa 111, and Al-Farqa 60. They sought to create a unified command throughout the region, including in the Hama, Idlib, Latakia, and Aleppo governorates. This coalition is best understood as a proto-"Northern Front," or a regional coalition built along similar lines to the Southern Front.

Jaysh al-Nasr's original leader, Lieutenant Colonel Jamil Ra'adoun, a defected Syrian military officer and one of the most powerful armed opposition leaders on the ground in northern Syria, was assassinated in August 2015. Jaysh al-Nasr's first iteration was unable to keep the participation of its constituent groups, and while it did not formally disband, the Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015 incentivized the independent operation of most of its constituent groups. The critical difference between Jaysh al-Nasr and the Southern Front is that a far stronger ideological extremist organization, Jaysh al-Fateh (Army of Conquest), constrains Jaysh al-Nasr.

U.S.-supported rebel groups in northern Syria will need to coordinate better to protect the moderate opposition movement from ideological extremist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in rebel-ruled areas.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey organized Jaysh al-Fateh in March 2015, and Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya are its most important and powerful members. After seizing the majority of the Idlib governorate by the end of April 2015, it threatened the Assad regime's demographic core of the Alawi community in Latakia, which was a major contributing factor leading to the Russian intervention in Syria. Since then, Jaysh al-Fateh has aided and abetted the development of a state based on one advocated by prominent jihadist theorists.⁵⁷

Currently, most of the original constituent groups within the Jaysh al-Nasr coalition operate independently, and several of them still receive a steady supply of TOWs, which they have used to good effect on the battlefield against Russian-backed Assad regime forces. The successor coalition to Jaysh al-Nasr was reconstituted in late October 2015, a month after the Russian intervention in Syria. Some of these groups,

such as Alwiya Suqur al-Jabal, are building an FSA-led coalition of U.S.-supported armed opposition groups that are taking advantage of the cessation of hostilities with the Assad regime and its allies to directly fight ISIS with the support of U.S. air strikes.⁵⁸ Three constituent groups-Tajammu Suqur al-Ghab, Fawaj 111, and Al-Inqath al-Muqatila constitute Jaysh al-Nasr. Jaysh al-Nasr is now believed to have 5,000 fighters who are led by defected Syrian army officers.

Jaysh al-Nasr's center of gravity is in the southern Idlib and northern Hama governorates, although it has also fought in Latakia and Aleppo. The incipient regional coalition has some of the most proficient TOW operators currently fighting in the war, contributing to the highest number of "TOW kills" of Assad regime armor and vehicles since the beginning of the Russian intervention in Syria. It is integrating a civil-military institution with the rebel councils in its area of operations and has agreed to the Riyadh Declaration.

AL-FARQA AL-SHAMALIYYA

This moderate armed opposition coalition announced its formation in December 2015. It is composed of two constituent groups, Liwa Fursan al-Haq and Al-Farqa 101 Masha', both of which are prominent within the U.S.-supplied moderate armed opposition movement in northwest Syria. Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya closely coordinates with another important opposition organization in northwestern Syria, Al-Farqa 16, which provides the coalition with additional reserve manpower and stockpiles of TOWs. Combined, the three groups are believed to have more than 4,500 fighters.

Although in the incipient stage of its development, Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya's leadership expresses a desire to emulate Jaysh al-Nasr and become a foundation for the institutions of the moderate armed opposition in northwest Syria. Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya's constituent organizations would normally operate in the Idlib and Hama governorates, like Jaysh al-Nasr. However, reportedly due to pressure from Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib, Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya has shifted its focus to the Aleppo governorate, where it fights against the Assad regime and ISIS.

Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya and several other U.S.-supported rebel groups, including the Al-Farqa Al-Sultan Murad coalition in the city and northern suburbs of Aleppo (which fights both the Assad regime and ISIS), present a challenge to the United States in building a moderate armed opposition institution in the Aleppo area. These U.S.-backed groups recently decided to



Fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliate Fastaqim Kama Umrit accompany the FSA's Supreme Military Council former Aleppo governorate commander Colonel Abd al-Jabar al-Oqaidi in 2013. Fastaqim Kama Umrit is one of the most powerful FSA organizations inside of Aleppo city and although it works closely with U.S.-vetted rebel groups, has not received U.S. military support. The U.S. will need to take more risk to support groups such as Fastaqim Kama Umrit that can be vetted and can reduce the influence of ideological extremist groups in rebel-ruled areas. (Liwa Halab Al Madina Al Islami YouTube)

operate under the command of Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, a reality that challenges the long-term U.S. effort to build moderate armed opposition institutions that can marginalize ideological extremist organizations.

At this stage in the conflict, the United States will need to take the risk of deploying special operators on the ground in northern Syria to partner with moderate rebel organizations it supports.

At this stage in the conflict, the United States will need to take the risk of deploying special operators on the ground in northern Syria to partner with moderate rebel organizations it supports in exchange for these groups walking away from coordinating with Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and Jabhat al-Nusra. Aleppo-area rebel groups that have received U.S. military assistance but in an unsustainable manner, such as Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and Al-Fawj al-Awwal, will be critical in this effort. Other groups such as Fastaqim Kama Umrit, which is powerful in Aleppo city and is a signatory of the Riyadh Declaration but has not received U.S. assistance, will also need to be brought into coordination with the U.S.-backed armed opposition coalitions.

The United States cannot ignore those rebel groups it does not currently and actively support. Working collectively and under active U.S. special operations guidance, such groups could change the balance of power within the armed opposition movement in northern Syria.⁵⁹ Rebel groups that prove to be irreconcilable to the political end state goals of the moderate armed opposition – such as Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya – will need to be confronted, defeated, and disarmed. Ultimately, the goal would be to reconstitute the original iteration of the Jaysh al-Nasr and unify it with Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya, Jaysh al-Nasr's previous constituent groups in Hama, Idlib, and Latakia, expand it to incorporate the other nascent, currently U.S.-supported moderate armed opposition coalition, Al-Farqa Al-Sultan Murad. The goal over time then would be to incorporate into this regional coalition the previously supported and acceptable but not previously supported armed opposition groups in the Aleppo area.

U.S.-supplied moderate armed opposition groups in northwest Syria have been effective on the battlefield against the Assad regime and its allies, demonstrating how committed U.S. support can have a real impact on the ground.

The success of the moderate armed opposition in northwest Syria will depend on Jaysh al-Nasr and Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya institutionalizing and becoming the center of gravity, which is necessary in order to coordinate more effectively against Assad regime and allied forces, and against ideological extremist organizations. Collectively, the U.S.-supplied moderate armed opposition groups in northwest Syria have been effective on the battlefield against the Assad regime and its allies, demonstrating how committed U.S. support can have a real impact on the ground even in areas of the country where there is a strong presence of ideological extremist groups. Institutionalizing Jaysh al-Nasr could also provide a forceful counterweight to Jabhat al-Nusra and other ideological extremist organizations in northern Syria that are attempting to build a sharia state along jihadist theorists' principles.⁶⁰

Build and Protect Syrian Opposition Zones

These coalitions can have a wider popular base of support, wider area of influence, and more mature and separated political and military structures that can coordinate with local civil society groups to impact several rebel-held communities. Over time, these structures can be the foundation of an incipient civil-military organization at the provincial level, which is more resilient against collapse if the military leadership is removed from power or becomes a casualty of war. These coalitions can also have an advantage of reserve manpower across several constituent groups to replace battlefield attrition and can serve as a collective action threat that is a credible deterrent against ideological extremist organizations within the Syrian armed opposition.⁶¹

It would also set the conditions for the potential introduction of more advanced air defenses for the moderate armed opposition movement and the communities that support the opposition, which were being heavily targeted by Russian and Assad regime airstrikes. A common demand of the Syrian moderate armed opposition is the introduction of MANPADs into the fight against the Assad regime and its allies.⁶² This line of effort would, and should, only be distributed in Syria if there are institutionally strong, armed opposition organizations in place. These institutions, scaled up from currently U.S.-backed coalitions, will need to be able to facilitate the entry of U.S. Arab partner special forces to deploy MANPADs.

It would be Arab partner special operators, such as from the United Arab Emirates or Jordan, who would control any stockpiles of MANPADs introduced in Syria and deploy them on the battlefield.⁶³ This would be part of sustained U.S. support to protect incipient rebel institutions as they develop the capability to present an alternative civil-military authority to the Assad regime and from ideological extremist organizations.⁶⁴ The insertion of Arab partner special forces into western Syria that are administered by the strengthened moderate armed opposition coalitions could assist in providing intelligence for targeted strikes against Assad regime and allied forces, should they prove necessary.

Further, building the institutional capacity of moderate armed opposition institutions in western Syria is key to preventing the enduring establishment of ideological extremist organizations among the Sunni communities in Syria that have fallen under the control of the opposition. In the event that a diplomatic conclusion has been reached to end the civil war, the prospects for a long-term peace are threatened by ideological extremist organizations.

Conclusion

The Syrian moderate armed opposition needs to be empowered to become a serious military and social force, at the expense of ideological extremist organizations. Optimally, the end game of enhanced U.S. support for the Syrian moderate armed opposition will be a country that emerges from the civil war with the Assad regime transitioned out of power, the institution of an inclusive government that practices responsive governance respecting Syria's ethnic and sectarian diversity, and the more ideologically radical actors within the armed opposition's ranks marginalized and defeated.

However the United States should plan for a "war after the war" scenario in Syria: building a strategy to militarily defeat ideological extremist organizations within the armed opposition, while expanding support for the institution-building of moderate armed opposition coalitions on a region-by-region basis. If the United States is willing to provide a greater amount of military assistance to empower the moderate armed opposition, it should do so in a manner that rewards moderate rebel groups for confronting, and over time defeating ideological extremist organizations.

While the ongoing diplomatic process is necessary and should not be completely abandoned, it falls short in delivering greater U.S. influence on the ground inside of Syria's rebel-ruled areas.

While the ongoing diplomatic process is necessary and should not be completely abandoned, it falls short in delivering greater U.S. influence on the ground inside of Syria's rebel-ruled areas. The United States can utilize its increased influence to leverage into existence more unified, coherent, and militarily effective moderate armed opposition institutions. These institutions will be necessary in order to prevent opposition-controlled areas from being governed by ideological extremist actors, and if the cessation of hostilities with the Assad regime collapses, to be able to fight the regime and its allies to a standstill.

Endnotes

1. This study chooses to use the term “moderate armed opposition/moderate rebels.” Defining moderation in the context of a brutal, increasingly sectarian civil war such as Syria’s is always difficult. Moderation, for the purposes of this study, indicates that the armed opposition group accepts the pluralistic and inclusive platforms as defined by the December 11, 2015, Riyadh Declaration or has been vetted by the United States and supports this overarching political goal for Syria. The Riyadh Declaration is part of the broader “Vienna process,” which is the latest series of negotiations that are part of the diplomatic effort to achieve the end of the Syrian civil war. This process is named after the October 30, 2015, Vienna communique, released under the auspices of the United Nations, which calls for a transition from the Assad government to a secular, inclusive and democratic Syria post-conflict. What is most noteworthy about the Vienna process is the December 11 Riyadh Declaration. This declaration came about as a result of U.S. pressure on the armed opposition, and U.S. regional partners that are backers of the armed opposition. See “Final Statement on the Conference of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, Riyadh, December 10, 2015,” Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 14, 2015, <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/ImportantIssues/Pages/ArticleID20151214143757814.aspx>; “Vienna Communique on Syria,” United Nations Office of the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, October 30, 2015, <http://www.un.org/sg/offthecuff/index.asp?nid=4246>.

For the rest of the conflict, the Riyadh Declaration serves as a very useful guideline for vetting the Syrian armed opposition for future U.S. support, and is a baseline metric against which the United States can assess any armed opposition organization that seeks its military support. This approach is the correct one, and U.S. policymakers should not waver on demanding that Syrian armed opposition groups abide by the political platform contained in the Riyadh Declaration, and that the Syrian rebels that seek U.S. military assistance have a choice. They can either work toward building a sharia state by force in areas under rebel rule, such as in Idlib, or they can work toward the goals of the Vienna process and genuinely engage in building opposition-controlled areas that can be compatible with reentry into a unitary state that is pluralistic, inclusive, and practices governance that does not entrench ideological extremist organizations.

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5. Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, “Assad Has His Way in Syria: The Peace Talks and After,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-01-19/assad-has-it-his-way>; Andrew J. Tabler and Olivier Decottignies, “The Vienna Process: Transitioning Towards a Transition?” Policy Watch no. 2536, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 17, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-vienna-process-transitioning-toward-a-transition>.
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7. David Hearst, “Putin’s War in Syria is Chechnya Revisited,” *Middle East Monitor*, January 23, 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/europe/23504-putins-war-in-syria-is-chechnya-revisited>; and Liz Sly, “Russian Airstrikes Force a Halt to Aid in Syria, Triggering a New Crisis,” *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/russian-airstrikes-force-a-halt-to-aid-in-syria-triggering-a-new-crisis/2015/12/14/cebc4b66-9f87-11e5-9ad2-568d814bbf3b_story.html.
8. U.S. policy toward Syria seeks a negotiated conclusion to the conflict, with the removal of President Assad from power. It seeks a post-conflict Syria that is inclusive (i.e., pluralistic and respectful of ethnic and sectarian minority rights, and granting full political participation), building responsive governance structures to allow for the development of robust and free civil society institutions, and sustainably stable so that Syrian territory does not become a long-term base of operations for ideological extremist organizations. See Secretary of State John Kerry, “U.S. Policy Toward Syria,” (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, No-

vember 12, 2015), <http://www.c-span.org/video/?400602-1/secretary-state-john-kerry-us-strategy-syria>.

9. This study uses the term “ideological extremist organizations” to refer to armed opposition groups that are seeking to impose a sharia state based on Sunni sectarian extremist principles. The goal of these organizations is to build a post-conflict state based on that advocated by prominent jihadist theorists such as Abu Bakr al-Naji, Abu Khalid al-Suri, and Abu Musab al-Suri, among others, by force over the territory of Syria. They also reject a post-conflict Syria that is inclusive, as defined by U.S. policy. These groups can include Syrian and foreign fighters and do not necessarily need to be formally affiliated with either the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or al Qaeda. While this study acknowledges that there are a range of ideological extremist organizations fighting in the Syrian civil war, with the Assad regime and in the armed opposition, including Shi’a, Christian, Kurdish ethnic nationalist, Arab ethnic nationalist, Assyrian ethnic nationalist, and Turkmen ethnic nationalist groups, the most powerful and relevant ideological extremist organizations within the Syrian armed opposition in western Syria are sectarian Sunni ideological extremists. The following armed opposition groups are considered ideological extremists for the purpose of this study, although this is not an exhaustive list, as Syrian rebel organizations can be formed, or shift their allegiances, frequently: ISIS; Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Ajnad Kavkaq, Jund al-Aqsa, Imarat al-Qawqaz fi al-Sham, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Hizb al-Islami al-Turkistani, Harakat al-Muthanna al-Islamiyya, and Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk.
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13. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) has a useful category for classifying armed opposition organizations that are not currently U.S.-supported, but could be amenable to receiving U.S. support, and could work toward building civil-military administration in opposition-controlled areas of Syria, thus preventing the entrenchment of ideological extremist actors. These Syrian rebel groups are defined by the ISW as the “Potential Powerbrokers” who, with increased U.S. support, which the ISW classifies as “requires incentive,” could confront ideological extremist actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra. These Potential Powerbrokers could then join and strengthen what this study refers to as “regional coalitions,” which already have U.S. assistance. See Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers*, (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, March 2016), 9–11, http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian%20Armed%20Opposition%20Power-brokers_0.pdf.
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59. The ISW provides a useful categorization of the Aleppo-area armed opposition groups that have received U.S. support. ISW categorizes most of the previously U.S.-supported, Powerbroker and Potential Powerbroker rebel organizations in the Aleppo area as ideologically Islamist, but reconcilable with U.S. goals in Syria with renewed military assistance. This study agrees that in the city of Aleppo and its surrounding suburbs the United States will need to be pragmatic and seek to incorporate as broad a number of acceptable armed opposition groups as possible to form a functioning and enduring regional coalition. Where this study differs in its perspective is that it views certain organizations such as Al-Farqa Al-Shamaliyya as having great potential to be the leadership foundation of an effective, moderate armed opposition regional coalition for a broader area of northern Syria, including the city of Aleppo and its suburbs due to the potential incorporation of groups such as Al-Farqa 16, Al-Farqa 13, and other U.S.-vetted, TOW-receiving organizations in northern Syria. See: Jennifer

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60. Hassan Mustafa, "The Moderate Rebels: A Growing List of Vetted Groups Fielding BGM-71 TOW Anti-Tank Guided Missiles," <https://hasanmustafas.wordpress.com/2015/05/08/the-moderate-rebels-a-complete-and-growing-list-of-vetted-groups-fielding-tow-missiles/>; "Kubra Fasa'il Al-Mu'arada Al-Musalah bi-Halab wa Reefiha Tandamiju Tahta Qiyadatu Muwahada [Major Armed Opposition Factions in Halab and Its Countryside Join Under One Command]," ARA News, February 16, 2016, <http://aranews.org/2016/02/%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%89-%D9%81%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81/>; "Bayan Tashkeel Al-Farqa Al-Shamaaliyya Al-Taba'a Al-Jaysh Al-Suri Al-Hurr wa al-lati tudumu kul min Al-Farqa 101 Masha' wa Liwa Fursan Al-Haqq [Announcement of the Formation of the Northern Division of the Free Syrian Army from the Joining of All of the 101st Infantry Brigade and the Knights of Truth Brigade]," Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office, December 8, 2015, <https://rfsmediaoffice.com/2015/12/08/24079/#.Vq-lxDUmSG9>; "Al-Farqa Al-Shamaliyya Indimajun been Fasalayn min Al-Jaysh Al-Hurr fi shmaal Sooria [The Northern Division from the Incorporation of Two Free Syrian Army Factions in Northern Syria]," STEP Agency, December 8, 2015, <http://stepagency-sy.net/archives/65506>; "Al-Jaysh Al-Hurr Yisitrun 'ala Morek al-Istratigiyya fi Rif Hama [The Free Syrian Army Enters Strategic Morek in the Hama Countryside]," December 2, 2015, [http://www.annahar.com/article/281602-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A9](http://www.annahar.com/article/281602-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A9;); #FSA_OurChoice," Revolutionary Forces of Syria Media Office, December 1, 2015, https://twitter.com/RFS_mediaoffice/status/67171021623345025/photo/1; "Jaysh Al-Nasr Qaidmun-Brumoo Ta'rifi Al-Jaysh Al-Nasr [Jaysh Al-Nasr Is Coming-Jaysh Al-Nasr Promotional], Jaysh Al-Nasr YouTube channel, November 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWnMZiYq9QA&feature=youtu.be>; "Tashkeel Jaysh Al-Nasr bi-Indimajun Kamaali-thalatha fasa'il taba'a Al-Jaysh Al-Suri Al-Hurr bi-Rif Hama [Announcement of Jaysh Al-Nasr Incorporates the Entirety of Three Free Syrian Army Factions in the Hama Countryside]," Syria Press, October 26, 2015, <http://www.syria-press.co/article.php?id=4546>; Nicholas A. Heras, "Syrian Opposition Leader Allied with Muslim Brotherhood Positions His Group to Receive U.S. Aid," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, September 30, 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=44425&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=676&cHash=791d9e8fdd31dd8db6700cbd8e0c27b#.VuuEk-YeInA](http://www.jamestown.org/regions/middleeast/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=44425&tx_ttnews[backPid]=676&cHash=791d9e8fdd31dd8db6700cbd8e0c27b#.VuuEk-YeInA); Nicholas A. Heras, "Prominent FSA Commander Lieutenant Colonel Jamil Ra'dun (and Recipient of U.S. Military Equipment) Assassinated in Turkey," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, vol. 6, no. 8 (August 31, 2015), [http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=44312&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=539#.Vq-wJzUmSG8](http://mlm.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=44312&tx_ttnews[backPid]=539#.Vq-wJzUmSG8); and "Jaysh al-Nasr Yijma'oo 16 Fasiilan Sooria Mu'a'rada Did Al-Assad [Jaysh Al-Nasr Combines 16 Syrian Opposition Factions Against Assad]," Al-Mesryoon, August 4, 2015, <http://almesryoon.com/%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%88-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85/788637-%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9-16-%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A7-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF>.
61. The ISW has a useful method for categorizing the different lines of effort that moderate, or U.S. accepted, armed opposition organizations could employ to "challenge" ideological extremist actors in the rebel movement. These categories are "Non-Lethal," and "Lethal," and nonlethal lines of effort as defined by ISW include refusing to cooperate with ideological extremist actors in local governance councils or sharia courts, preventing the free movement of ideological extremists, and seizing their military resources. Lethal lines of effort include a range of kinetic activities with the most meaningful being to seize territory from ideological extremist actors. See Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Armed Opposition Powerbrokers* (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, March 2016), 11, http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian%20Armed%20Opposition%20Powerbrokers_0.pdf.
62. Jeff Seldin and Jamie Dettmer, "Advanced Weapons May Reach Syrian Rebels Despite U.S. Concerns," *Voice of America*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/advanced-weapons-may-reach-syrian-rebels-despite-us-concerns/3023843.html>; Michael Pizzi, "Question for Obama's Syria Plan: Who Are the Moderate Rebels?" *Al Jazeera*, October 2, 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/10/2/syria-moderate-rebels1.html>.
63. In particular the United Arab Emirates' ongoing unconventional warfare (UW) operations in Yemen could be leveraged to engage in this line of effort. Emirati Special Forces are currently assessed to be capable of providing sustained, in-field oversight of U.S.-supplied MANPADS. Author's interview with a professor at the United Arab Emirates' National Defense College on February 26, 2016 in Abu Dhabi.
64. The entrenchment of ideological extremist organizations in rebel-ruled areas of Syria is a major impediment to

more aggressive U.S. lines of effort to provide assistance to the armed opposition. For a thorough analysis of how the ideological extremist organizations embedded within the Syrian opposition complicate U.S. efforts to establish a safe zone in northern Syria, as one type of a more aggressive line of effort, see Fabrice Balanche, "How to Prevent al-Qaeda from Seizing a Safe Zone in Northwestern Syria," Policy Watch 2579, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 7, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-prevent-al-qaeda-from-seizing-a-safe-zone-in-northwestern-syria>.

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