Moderate rebels in Syria have long been marginalized by foreign donors who supported Islamist groups, leading to increasing radicalization of large segments of the rebellion. Yet moderate factions that call for the establishment of a democratic state and that are willing to accept a negotiated solution (without Assad) are re-emerging as key players. This is a particularly favourable moment to support the moderate groups within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) for the following reasons:

- **Islamist Syrian rebel groups have lost much influence.** They are being increasingly overshadowed by the Islamic State (ISIS) and divided as whether to fight it. Since early 2014, there has been an opening of space for moderate Syrian armed groups that must be capitalized upon.

- **The successful distribution of TOW (BG-71) anti-tank weapons to carefully selected armed groups under the umbrella of the Military Operation Command (MOC) proves that well-vetted groups are capable of using sophisticated weapons effectively, thus qualifying them for manning anti-aircraft weapons.** The Syrian regime would lose its unchallenged air supremacy and would be forced to significantly reduce its daily airstrikes on civilians in rebel-held territories. Providing training and more advanced weapons to vetted groups will serve the dual goal of unifying the command structures on the ground and strengthening the opposition leadership as a whole.

- **The best strategy to defeat ISIS in Syria was successfully tested in Idlib province and Aleppo city in early 2014.** Sunni-led moderate groups supported by the local population managed to remove ISIS from these areas. Their success was largely due the fact that they are solidly embedded in the local communities. The most dangerous strategy for defeating ISIS in Syria would be to rely on the Syrian regime and their allied Shia militias to fight ISIS. This would stoke the flames of sectarianism and play into the hands of ISIS, increasing their recruitment capacity and zealouens.

- While intense efforts are being made in Iraq to bring **Kurds and Sunnis together to fight against ISIS, this is already happening in Syria** with mixed Arab-Kurdish brigades and strong collaboration between FSA and Kurdish groups in northern areas.
Despite the major difficulties that the Syrian rebellion is facing in its war against the Assad regime and the “Islamic State” (ISIS), certain moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliated groups have proven to be particularly resilient. After three years of being overshadowed by Islamist rebels, the nationalist-leaning FSA is back as a key player in the conflict, and will have a central role to play in facing Syria’s future challenges.

The early marginalization of FSA moderates

The Syrian uprising started in March 2011 as a peaceful movement demanding reform and then at a later stage, regime change. After months of a brutal militarized repression, an armed struggle began as army defectors and civilians formed localized armed groups. Financial and military support from both states and private networks quickly began to be directed to the more radical groups. Fighters adopted an increasingly Islamist and sectarian discourse in order to attract generous foreign donors, usually from the Gulf. The strength of Islamist armed groups within the Syrian rebellion was directly linked to their capacity to secure funds to buy arms and pay salaries. The motivations of fighters for joining one group or another are rarely ideological. Islamist brigades grew independently from the FSA and were the only ones to successfully form nationwide coalitions with a certain degree of central command. The Islamic Front (IF), an alliance of Islamist factions, was one such group, becoming the single most powerful group within the rebellion in 2013.

The Assad regime facilitated the sectarianisation of part of the rebellion to better fit its demonization of the rebellion as a radical Sunni uprising. From June to October 2011, the regime liberated hundreds of jihadists from the Saydnaya prison. They now form the leadership backbone of nearly all the radical groups. Moderate rebels continued to exist but, until 2014, lacked of funding and were increasingly incapable of contributing effectively in battles against regime targets or of unifying their ranks, making them unable to compete with Islamist groups. By the end of 2013, observers claimed that the non-Islamist FSA brigades had disappeared. This distorted narrative suggested that the revolution had become an Islamist revolution, while it was in reality an Islamist-funded revolution.

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1 Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi announced in April 2013 the extension of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to Syria, changing its name to “the Islamic state of Iraq and Sham/Levant (ISIS/ISIL)” In June 2014, the organization announced the “reestablishment of the Caliphate”, becoming therefore simply the “Islamic State” (IS). The acronyms ISIS, ISIL, and IS can therefore be used. In this paper we use ISIS rather than IS because it is still the most commonly used, including in Arabic (Daesh), because what they call their “state” only extends to Iraq and Syria, and for the purpose of clarity because in this paper we will repeatedly discuss the pre-June 2014 organization when it was still named ISIS.

2 Formation of the Islamic Front in November 2013 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVPimqnOPAI

3 See Bassma Kodmani and Felix Legrand, “Empowering the democratic resistance in Syria,” September 2014, Arab Reform Initiative

4 In September 2013, the Arab Reform Initiative published a report based on field research in northern Syria trying to identify and analyze the dynamics of some of the “pro-democracy” rebels fighting in Syria. The groups identified had thousands of fighters but extremely limited resources. Most of these groups had dismantled by the end of 2013.

5 Howard LaFranchi, As moderate Syria rebels slip, US forced to consider aiding Islamist groups December 13, 2013 The Christian Science Monitor; Shashank Joshi The good guys have lost in Syria – only the bad guys are left fighting December 13, 2013, The Telegraph
In 2014, moderate brigades within the FSA re-emerged as key players in the conflict. This change of dynamics is due firstly to the fact that Islamist rebels who didn’t side with ISIS were losing both financial and ideological support. The second factor is that a selection of FSA brigades received outside training and support. Finally, successful collaboration with Kurdish militias has allowed them to take a decisive role in resisting the advance of ISIS, positioning themselves as an essential force for the stabilization of the country when the fighting ceases.

**Islamist rebels losing ground**

The killing of nearly all of *Ahrar al-Sham’s* leaders on September 9, 2014 is a considerable blow to Syria’s Islamists, coming in a context of unprecedented difficulties. Overshadowed by the successes of ISIS and divided over the necessity of going to war against it, Islamist rebels have lost funders and fighters, leading to an ideological repositioning.

The main difference between Islamist rebels and their allies in the FSA is that the former claim to fight for the establishment of an “Islamic State” in Syria. The current evolution of the conflict does not leave much political space for such a project. On one side, the utopia of a transnational Islamic state is being implemented by Baghdadi’s “Caliphate”. On the other side, the resilient support provided to Assad by its allies makes the prospect of a full military victory by Islamist rebels increasingly unrealistic. The best that the rebellion can hope for is to put sufficient military pressure on part of the regime to force a decisive group within it to remove Assad from power while preserving the structures of the state.

As ISIS took over Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, *Jabhat al Nosra* and the Islamic Front not only lost their strongholds, but also all the oil-fields in their possession. Losing their political raison d’être, Islamist rebels now have a harder time mobilizing foreign donors to fund what they probably see as two lost wars - the first against the regime and the other against a powerful Sunni proto-“Islamic State”.

Significant defections from the Islamic Front to the FSA have been reported in 2014, including about 800 fighters in eastern Aleppo in August 2014. Former Islamic Front members created new FSA units. Among these new groups, the “Revolutionaries of the North” claimed in its first statement that the revolution had been deviated from its original goals. This type of statement is representative of the renewed nationalist trend currently present in opposition Syria reacting to the Islamist domination over the armed opposition.

One former Islamic Front member who joined the FSA stated:

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6 Official Statement of the Islamic Front concerning the September 9, 2014 attack on Ahrar al-Sham’s leadership [http://justpaste.it/h189](http://justpaste.it/h189)

7 Among the various interpretation of what an “Islamic state” should be a distinction must be made between global jihadists such as Jabhat al Nosra and national Islamists such as members of the Islamic Front whose Islamist project fits into Syria’s national frame.

8 Founding statement of Tajamuu Thuwar al-Shamal, August 2014 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEaR3XjjmOU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEaR3XjjmOU)
“We were with the Islamic Front because they supported our group against the regime. They are not willing to support us now that our village is being under attack by ISIS. In the FSA, I am proud to raise again the Syrian independence flag. The Islamic Front conditioned their support on the use of Islamist and sectarian symbols. We frightened the few Christians and Alawites that were supporting the revolution at the beginning.”

Facing these new challenges, Islamist rebels are repositioning themselves ideologically and building new alliances. The Islamic Front, adopting a more pragmatic line, has signed a surprisingly moderate political covenant and expressed their will to reintegrate into the FSA leadership structures that it previously rejected. Deploring the Islamic Front’s defeatism, however, Jabhat al Nosra is being increasingly hostile to the FSA, desperately seeking to regain popularity lost to ISIS among global jihadist networks.

**Anti-tank missiles to moderate groups**

Moderate groups, starved of proper equipment for over three years, began to receive small numbers of advanced weapons in spring and summer 2014. American-made anti-tank TOW (BGM-71) missiles were distributed to a selection of FSA groups. The vetting process used by the United States seems to have been based on the political positioning of the groups. Those chosen to receive the missiles had a clearly pragmatic political orientation and vision for the end of the conflict. These brigades call for the establishment of a democratic state and most of them accept the idea that the end to the conflict could come through a negotiated political solution without Assad if enough military pressure is used to force elements within the regime to accept such a deal, acknowledging that a complete fall of the regime is unrealistic.

“Only a few men, all trained abroad, are allowed to use TOW missiles. If we need to destroy a tank we call them, they come, blow up the tank and leave,” explained an FSA fighter from Idlib. “When the regime tries to storm a village or a town, we call the TOW team, they come and blow up one or two of their armed vehicles and the regime then usually gives up.” The FSA may have only received a few TOWs but it makes a significant difference in defensive

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9 Moderate rebels use the Syrian independence flag (black, white and green with three red stars). This flag was the Syrian flag until the Baath party came to power. In 2013, as Islamist brigades were dominant, this flag was rarely seen in the rebel held areas, replaced by Islamist black and white flags with the Shahada.

10 Interview conducted with an Islamic Front defector who joined the FSA, Gaziantep, July 2014.

11 Hassan Aboud, leader of Ahrar al-Sham, reading the Covenant, May 2014 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju_328StoXI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju_328StoXI)

12 Statement from 13 Islamist northern factions rejecting national leadership of the opposition, September 2014 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuMUhidYQht](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuMUhidYQht)

13 Hassan Hassan, “Islamic Front’s new covenant is a step in the right direction,” The National May 20, 2014.

14 On the declaration of Emirates in Syria by Jabhat al Nosra, July 25, 2014, Aks Alser; By the summer 2014, Jabhat al-Nosra was accused of targeted and kidnapped a high number of FSA leaders, particularly in Deraa and Idlib.


16 A series of interviews were conducted with FSA leaders in Antakya, Gaziantep and via Skype between May to September 2014.

17 Interview conducted in July 2014 in Antakya with 3 battalion leaders of the Syrian Revolutionary Front led by Jamal Maarouf.
battles. The regime’s offensive on Aleppo and its counter-offensive in northern Hama in summer 2014 were stopped mostly thanks to the provided anti-tank weapons.

To ensure complete control over these weapons, donors are brought together in the Military Operation Command (MOC)\textsuperscript{18} based in Turkey and Jordan, and deal directly with the brigades of their choosing, bypassing the political and military leadership of the opposition.

Most of the selected groups are either led or assisted by military defectors. In northern Syria, the 5\textsuperscript{th} Legion was formed in September 2014, bringing together some of Syria’s strongest FSA rebel groups in the north, including the Supreme Military Council (SMC)\textsuperscript{19} linked 101\textsuperscript{st} and 13\textsuperscript{th} Divisions. In its first public statement, the 5\textsuperscript{th} Legion claimed to adopt the Syrian independence flag as their only banner, thus banning the widespread Islamic black flag\textsuperscript{20}. Jamal Maarouf’s large alliance, the Syrian Revolutionary Front, also received TOWs on the Idlib and Deraa fronts. Another growing moderate force provided with such missiles is Harakat Hazm, operating in northern Syria. TOWs also reached the southern fronts of Deraa and Quneitra, and even the besieged town of Daraya in the southern suburbs of Damascus. A total of 20 units have been identified in 8 provinces that have received TOW missiles.\textsuperscript{21}

The promising alliance of rebels and Kurds against ISIS

The PYD (Democratic Union Party, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, PKK) took control of the Kurdish areas in northern Syria that had been abandoned by the regime in July 2012. Since then, they have been administrating and defending these territories. In 2014, new cooperation between Kurdish militias and brigades of the FSA has proved particularly efficient against ISIS.

Kurds have increasingly tried to incorporate Arabs both in their armed militias (known as YPGs or People’s Protection Units) and in the self-administration governance structures.\textsuperscript{22} Kurds control three enclave territories that are directly threatened by ISIS and have a significant Arab population, including a rising number of displaced persons. In such a situation, Kurds know they have no choice but to adopt an inclusive approach towards Arabs. YPG Arab brigades were formed with a mission of defending Arab villages in Kurdish areas from ISIS.\textsuperscript{23} Liwa Jabhat al-Akrad, a mixed Arab-Kurdish brigade, ideologically close to the

\textsuperscript{18} The Military Operation Command is a structure created by countries providing support to the rebellion. Based in Turkey and Jordan it selects the groups and coordinates directly the distribution of supplies

\textsuperscript{19} The Supreme Military Council (SMC) is in theory the national leadership of the FSA and is supposed to coordinate supplies to different factions. In 2014 the SMC is inactive as support in directly distributed by donors gathered in the MOC to the factions on the ground. It therefore has no authority on groups on the ground.

\textsuperscript{20} Tabulated from ARI interviews with representatives of various rebel factions.

\textsuperscript{21} A coalition of Kurdish parties dominated by the PYD created provisional self-administration structures in the 3 “Cantons” under Kurdish control. An Arab tribal leader of the Shammar tribe is president of the “Canton of Jazira”, the largest Kurdish held enclave.

\textsuperscript{22} Video of Arab YPG fighter training https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfLxeAvgX8

\textsuperscript{23} Video of Arab YPG fighter training https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfLxeAvgX8
PYD but part of the FSA, is playing a central role in bringing together the two communities to fight against ISIS.

In 2014, after the complete takeover by ISIS of the Raqqa province and the eastern part of Aleppo province, a number of FSA fighters found refuge in Kurdish controlled areas. Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa and Kataeb Shams al-Shamal, for example, have been conducting underground operations and raids against the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa, using Kurdish controlled areas as a rear base.

Previous battles have clearly proved the effectiveness of Kurdish-Arab cooperation. After the fall of Mosul and Deir Ezzor, ISIS sent its best troops, equipped with US weapons seized in Iraq, to attack the “Canton of Kobane” (Ayn al-Arab), the most vulnerable of the three Kurdish-held enclaves. Arab FSA brigades made up the front line of defence in the outskirts of Kurdish areas and were backed by the YPG. To everyone’s surprise, they managed to repel the attack. Arab-Kurdish cooperation is absolutely necessary when it comes to attacking ISIS positions in Arab inhabited areas. “When Kurds attack alone it is seen as an aggression by Arab tribes,” explained one FSA fighter. Examples of victories by Kurdish-Arab forces include the battles of Yarubiya in October 2013, Kobane in July 2014, and Marea in August 2014. When Kurdish forces fought alone in Arab areas, they were routed. Such was the case in Tal Abyad in July 2013 and Tal Hamis in February 2014. In Aleppo city, the 16th Division of the FSA and the Fajr al-Houriya brigades are holding the front line against the regime, along with the Kurds. In August 2014, FSA leader Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Akidi visited YPG leaders in Afrin promising further collaboration.

FSA groups cooperating with Kurds are usually the most moderate, if not secular, and in general are firmly anti-Islamist. They were among the first to fight ISIS in January 2014, and today often refuse to cooperate with radical rebels such as Jabhat al-Nosra and Ahrar al-Sham. Discussions with a number of pro-Kurdish FSA fighters indicated their willingness to implement Syrian law instead of sharia law in rebel-held territory.

The absence of a unified leadership and efficient governance

As neither the regime nor the opposition is likely to win militarily, large segments of Syrian territory will continue to be divided until a viable solution can be found. Until now, the rebellion hasn’t been able to organize efficient local governance structures or a unified military and political leadership. The city of Aleppo, in particular, highlights the difficulties that the opposition is facing in creating a viable alternative model of governance. Under-resourced local structures had to compete with politico-military groups backed by generous donors. When rebels expelled ISIS from Aleppo, removing one of the main obstacles to unified local governance, the regime immediately launched an intense airstrike campaign making civilian life impossible in what was supposed to be the rebellion’s capital. This clearly

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24 Interview with a member of Jabhat al-Akrad brigades and a member of Kataeb Shams al-Shamal in Urfa and Gaziantep, July 2014
25 Interview with an FSA fighter via Skype, August 2014
27 FSA-YPG meeting in Afrin on August 22, 2014 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55Vo8hvPQN4&feature=youtu.be
indicates the urgent need to stabilize rebel-held territory to ensure a bearable life for civilians, build a functioning alternative to Assad or ISIS, and avoid chaos in the prospect of transition. Despite the fact that moderate rebel groups have been regaining credibility since early 2014, this trend is not currently leading to further unification of the rebellion under a single political and military leadership. The formation of a provisional government which includes a Ministry of Defence, hasn’t yet led to any progress in this direction. “We have no authority on factions because we have no supply to give them. Since Salim Idriss, [the former SMC chief of Staff leader] left, nothing goes through us,” lamented General Mohamed Nour Khalouf, Minister of Defence in the Syrian provisional government. The current low levels of military support that the FSA receives go directly through the MOC to a selection of groups. Bypassing the national leadership structures of the opposition (SMC or Ministry of Defence) allows donors to more carefully select the groups they want to support, but it only reinforces these groups’ resistance to come under any national command structure.

**The rebellion’s incapacity to prevent airstrikes**

A significant part of the death toll in rebel-held areas is due to aerial bombing by the regime. Regularly targeting civilian areas far from the front lines, with a special focus on vital infrastructure such as hospitals, schools and bakeries, the regime clearly seeks to make life in rebel-held areas unbearable, forcing large segments of the population into exile. The rather successful experience of anti-tank TOW missile deliveries suggests that small mobile teams of selected trained fighters could be equipped with anti-aircraft MANPADs. The regime’s air force is crumbling. Lacking missiles, fighter jets and pilots, it uses helicopters to drop home-made bombs and TNT barrels. The regime can’t afford to lose its remaining aircraft. In August 2014, after the army had lost track of one of its fighter jets, the air force secret services reportedly executed three pilots because they refused to fly, fearing that the rebels were in possession of MANPADs. Anti-aircraft weapons will not be a game changer for the opposition, but would reduce civilian casualties and indirectly facilitate the setting up of functioning local governance and the administration of humanitarian aid. Fearing that these weapons could fall into the hands of jihadists or Kurdish militias, Western donors and Turkey have opposed the delivery of such weapons. As both ISIS and the PKK are in possession of anti-aircraft weapons, the argument of the risk of weapons falling into the wrong hands is now irrelevant. The FSA is now the only actor in the conflict without any serious means of protecting its territory from airstrikes.

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28 Interview in July 2014 in Gaziantep
29 The Violation Documentation Center (VDC) in Syria publishes a weekly report on casualties, tabulating the number of casualties caused by airstrikes. Nearly every week, airstrikes are reported by the VDC as the leading cause of casualties. [http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/](http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/)
30 Man portable air defense system
31 [مخابرات بشار الجوية تعدم طيارين في مطار حماة, كلنا شركاء, مجازات بشار الجوية تعم 3 طيارين في مطار حماة](https://www.kullanishara.com) 20 August 2014
32 Pictures of Kurdish fighters carrying MANPADs were circulated by the Media Office of the YPG. For ISIS arms possessions, see "Islamic State weapons in Iraq and Syria," September 2014, Conflict Armament Research.
On September 16, 2014 the Raqqa Media Office reported that ISIS downed a regime Mig-21 fighter-jet.
The role of the FSA in destroying the Islamic State

Voices in the West are now calling for renewed collaboration with Assad against jihadists. Beside the immorality of such a strategy, it would be largely counterproductive. The Syrian Army is crumbling and incapable of winning against the underequipped FSA. It can’t therefore be expected to reconquer eastern Syria. The few advances of regime forces are the work of highly sectarian units within the security apparatus - the 4th Division and the Republican Guard - supported by foreign Shia militias such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade. Trying to take back eastern Syria with such sectarian forces is guaranteed to push locals into the arms of ISIS. Only empowered local Sunnis can efficiently fight ISIS in its current stronghold. In Iraq, a vast portion of the Sunni population sees ISIS as a protector in the face of a sectarian Shia government in a Shia-majority country. Despite the limited success shown by Kurdish YPG-Peshmarga forces, backed by the US air force, in pushing ISIS away from Erbil, the eventual destruction of ISIS in Mosul and Tikrit would undoubtedly require Sunni Arabs to turn against them. A Kurdish/Sunni Arab alliance against ISIS, the successful formula that everyone is hoping for Iraq, already exists in Syria. In Syria, ISIS is mostly foreign-led, with weak links to the local population. If sufficiently empowered, Sunni rebels in Syria can seriously weaken ISIS. While the Iraqi army and the Syrian regime were never able to win any decisive battle against ISIS, the FSA managed to clear it out of two Syrian provinces in January 2014.

FSA sleeper cells and hostile tribes conduct daily underground operations, assassinating jihadi leaders and sabotaging oil facilities in ISIS-controlled eastern Syria. ISIS will survive attacks by a weak sectarian Alawite-dominated army but will have great difficulties in fighting a popular Sunni uprising. It’s the “farmers, teachers and pharmacists”, who Obama didn’t think it was worth aiding, that can beat the jihadi state militarily and politically. Whatever it will take to put an end to ISIS’s exclusive control over eastern Syria, any realistic strategy to fight ISIS must have at its core Sunni FSA brigades and local tribes.

The prospect of the reunification of a national army

A complete military victory currently seems impossible for either side. The regime lacks loyal recruits and is increasingly relying on foreign Shia fighters. Rebels also understand that they will not win, even if advanced weapons are delivered. The main issue now is to determine what can be an acceptable political solution that would guarantee some sort of transition while preventing the disintegration of the state, from which ISIS would prosper. Many FSA leaders, especially those from areas under ISIS control, privately say they are ready to fight against ISIS alongside Alawites in a reunified army if Assad is replaced. Syria’s future army, in the prospect of a peace deal leading to transition, will have the hard task of fighting ISIS and protecting different communities from vengeance. The moderate brigades of the FSA will

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34 “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Syria,” The White House, June 19, 2014, Office of the Press Secretary.
36 A series of interviews were conducted in person and via Skype with FSA leaders in Antakya, Gaziantep from May to September 2014.
certainly play a central role in not only stabilizing the country but in reforming the security apparatus.
ANNEX 1: TERRITORIAL CONTROL OF SYRIA – JULY 2014

Source: noria-research.com
ANNEX 2: EXAMPLES OF RISING FSA BRIGADES

This is a non-exhaustive list of some of the moderate FSA units that have recently been regaining strength in the fight against the regime and ISIS. Some of these groups have been vetted by Military Operation Command (MOC) to receive TOW missiles. Others have proven particularly resilient in the fight against ISIS. These are examples of groups that claim to fight for a democratic state and that are willing to accept a political solution leading to the departure of Assad and to the reunification of the army. They are examples from the largest gathering and alliances of the FSA. The majority of FSA fighters still operate within small local units with no links to political and military leadership at a regional or national level.

**Harakat Hazm (Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Latakia, Homs)**

Created with the benediction of Salim Idriss in early 2014, *Harakat Hazm* is active on the Aleppo front against the regime and ISIS and to a lesser extent on the Idlib, Hama and Homs fronts. Its fighters are experienced and trained; many are ex-Farouk members. This group is the first to have received TOW missiles. The movement is very popular among other rebel groups as its fighters are among the best trained and its structure command seems to be functioning. On September 16, 2014, a regime airstrike killed the Hazm leader for the Homs region.

**Firqa 101 Mushat (Idlib, Hama)**

Formed in the summer 2013 upon the request of the Supreme Military Council, *Firqa 101 Mushat* (or 101st infantry division) is active in Idlib and Hama. It gathers local brigades, including the *Tajamuu Humat al-thawra*, a non-Islamist FSA group which included religious minorities in its leadership. The 101st division is led by a defected pilot, Hassan Hamadeh. He recognizes the coalition as the sole representative of Syrians and claims his unit will re-join the army after the fall of Assad. The 101st division received TOW missiles in spring 2014.

**Firqa 13 (Idlib, Hama)**

One of the main FSA forces in Idlib, the 13th division is led by Ahmad al-Saoud. This group calls for a civil state (*Madania* in Arabic meaning not religious or military), and openly says it would accept a political solution without Assad. Ahmad al-Saoud was detained by ISIS in 2013 and managed to escape. He claims that his group is ready to guarantee protection to the interim government if it is willing to move inside Syria. The 13th division received TOW missiles and are active on the Idlib and Hama fronts.

**Tajamuu Suqqour al-Ghab (Hama, Idlib, Aleppo)**

Led by Lieutenant Jamil Raadoun, a defector from the air defence forces, this group operates in western Hama. It was provided with TOWs and has been working under the authority of the military council of Hama. They also have mobile brigades that participate in the defence of Aleppo city.
Liwa Suqqour al-Jabal (Idlib, Hama, Aleppo)

Liwa Suqqour al-Jabal is an FSA group which gathered local Idlib battalions and military defectors. Active on the Wadi Deif, Hamadiya and Hama fronts. The group coordinates with rebels of other areas and sent a unit to Sheikh Najar in Aleppo in September 2014. Liwa Suqqour al-Jabal received TOW missiles in spring and summer 2014.

Liwa al-Aadiyat (Latakia)

Liwa al-Aadiyat is an FSA brigade active in the Latakia Front against the regime and local pro-regime militias. This group received TOW missiles. They fight within the “Costal operation room” under the leadership of Colonel Malek Kurdi and under the authority of the Supreme Military Council of the FSA. Most of its fighters are from Latakia, unlike many of the Islamist factions operating in area.

Kataeb Shams al-Shamal (Aleppo, Raqqa)

Mostly composed of fighters from al-Bab and Minbej, this group includes Arab and Kurds and is among the first to have collaborated with Kurdish YPG militias against ISIS. Firmly anti-Islamist, this group is very critical of the FSA leadership for compromising with Islamist rebel factions.

Tajamuu Fajr al-Huriya (Aleppo, Idlib, Damascus)

A strong coalition in Aleppo with some presence in Idlib and Southern Damascus, this unit was one of the first to engage in the anti-ISIS campaign early 2014. They have always had bad relations with Islamist rebel factions and have built strong ties with the Kurds in Aleppo city and eastern Aleppo.

Liwa Jabhat al-Akrad (Aleppo, Raqqa)

Liwa Jabhat al-Akrad is a mixed Kurdish-Arab brigade operating outside of Kurdish held territories against ISIS, and at times against the regime. It is affiliated to the FSA, but ideologically is close to the PYD and with strong ties with the YPG. It plays an essential role in bringing the two communities together. It raises both the Kurdish and the Syrian revolutionary (independence) flag. It is one of the strongest forces on the eastern Aleppo front against ISIS.

Firqa 77 (Aleppo, Deir Ezzor)

The 77th division is active in Aleppo, with sleepers cells in Deir Ezzor. Its leader, defected Colonel Ziad Haj Obeid, is a member of the Supreme Military Council and is part of a powerful tribe in eastern Syria.

Firqa 16 (Aleppo)

The 16th division, formed by local brigades from the Aleppo suburbs and countryside, is holding the front against the regime in the northern part of the city, along with Kurdish YPG militias. They were among the few rebel groups to clash with ISIS as early as 2013, before the wider campaign to
expel it from northwest Syria began in January 2014.

**Tajamuu Thuwar al-Shamal (Aleppo)**

The ‘Revolutionaries of the North’, was lately created by former *Liwa al-Tawheed* fighters and other local brigades affiliated to the Islamic Front. This group is fighting in the front line for the defence of Marea against ISIS. It claims that the revolution was diverted from its original goals under pressure of Islamist groups and pledges to only use the Syrian independence flag as their symbol.

**Jeish al-Mujahidin (Aleppo)**

*Jeish al-Mujahidin* is a moderate Islamist group, affiliated to the FSA, formed in January 2014 in Aleppo on the eve of the war against ISIS. The group gained local popularity for its success in expelling ISIS from Aleppo city. Unlike radical Islamists and non-FSA factions, it maintains good relations with local civilian governance structures as well as with the Syrian National Coalition.

**Kataeb Nour Addin al-Zanki (Aleppo)**

The Nour Addin al-Zanki brigades, led by Sheikh Tawfiq Shahab Eddin, is a moderate Islamist group whose political discourse has evolved toward increased pragmatism. This unit was very active and efficient in the fight against ISIS in the western part of the province of Aleppo. The group acknowledges that the establishment of an Islamic state is impossible in Syria and that a solution to the conflict will certainly come through an agreement with part of the current regime.

**Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa (Raqqa)**

The “Revolutionaries of Raqqa” brigade, led by Abu Issa, is one of the most active FSA groups fighting jihadists inside the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa. In 2013, this brigade was forced to make an alliance with Jabhat al-Nosra to protect itself from ISIS when it banned non-Islamist brigades from the region. The brigade had to take the name liwa thuwar al-Raqqa al-islamiya. It was later kicked out by Nosra for not being “Islamic” enough. It then dropped the adjective “al-islamiya”, and started underground resistance against ISIS. Today, it is a close ally of the Kurdish YPG.

**Jabhat Thuwar Souria (All of Syria)**

The Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF) is one of the strongest rebel groups in the north. It received financial and military support from Saudi Arabia and probably from the US. The group now has branches on the southern front. Led by Jamal Maarouf, the SRF played a central role in expelling ISIS from Idlib and regularly sends troops to eastern Aleppo. On September
15, 2014, a few days after President Obama’s declarations that the US will train and support the FSA against ISIS, Jamal Maarouf survived two assassination attempts, one by an ISIS suicide bomber and a second one by a regime airstrike that killed several of his relatives.

**Alwiya al-Omari** (*Deraa, Quneitra*)

One of the strongest units on the southern front, the Omari brigades, part of the Syrian Revolutionary Front, played a central role in battles in the city and province of Deraa. In September 2014, a few days after the takeover of the border-post with the Golan, its leader, Qais al-Qataana, was assassinated.

**Firqa al-Hamza** (*Deraa, Quneitra*)

The Hamza division is an FSA unit composed of 6 brigades from the town of Inkhel, in Deraa. The division has worked under the supervision of the Deraa military council and now receives support, including TOW missiles from the MOC.

**Alwiya Ahmad al Adbo** (*Damascus, Homs*)

Active in Dumayr, Eastern Ghouta and Southern Homs, the Ahmad al-Abdo brigades have several trained units hiding in the mountains of Qalamoun and in the desert along the Damascus-Badgdad road. They have been provided with TOW missiles and managed to disturb the regime’s eastern supply line by attacking the only road to Iraq that is still under regime control. The group is led by defected colonel Bakur Salim al-Salim, the leader of the military council for Damascus Province.

**Liwa Shabab Salamiya** (*Hama*)

The “Salamiya youth Brigade” is a group from the Ismaelian town of Salamiya. Despite their small number, they have always been active under different names, often marginalized by other rebel groups for having non-Sunni fighters. They re-emerged in summer 2014 to fight the regime and ISIS. They are still small but their role can be crucial in bridging different communities.

**Firqa 2** (*Deraa, Quneitra, Damascus*)

The 2nd division gathers the formerly powerful Ababil Horan army as well as several local brigades southern Syria. The division is active in Deraa and southern Damascus. They operate as part of the unified “Southern Front” created by the SMC. They use the same logo as the provisional government to show their willingness to submit to civilian authority.
**Firqa Yarmouk (Deraa, Quneitra)**

The Yarmouk division is the strongest rebel group in the south. It is led by Bachar al-Zoubi of the powerful Zoubi tribe, which has branches in Syria and Jordan. Fighters of this division are trained inside and outside Syria. In spring 2014, they received TOW missiles. In July 2014, in a context of rising tensions with Islamist factions, the defected pilot and chief of staff of the division, Moussa al-Zoubi, was kidnapped.

**Liwa Shuhada al-Islam (southern Damascus)**

Dominant in the town of Daraya and one of the strongest in southern Damascus, this brigade is famous for being the only FSA unit which is under complete authority of the local civilian council and can operate only with its approval. Despite the ongoing siege on Daraya, Liwa Shuhada al-islam was supplied with TOW missiles.

**Alwiya Seif al-Sham (Damascus, Deraa, Quneitra)**

Originally from Damascus, the Seif al-Sham Brigades are mostly fighting in Quneitra and Deraa provinces. In 2012 and 2013, they participated in impressive incursions in central Damascus and its northern suburbs. This group received TOW missiles.
About ARI

The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) is a consortium of policy analysis institutes that mobilizes research capacity to advance knowledge and nurture home-grown programs for democratic reform in the Arab world. ARI seeks to generate, facilitate, and disseminate knowledge by and for Arab societies. In the quest to build free, just and democratic societies, ARI focuses on the current revolutionary processes in the Arab world, on the new patterns of interaction between political forces, governments and societies, on today’s political, socio-economic and cultural transformations, and on social justice. It opens a space for diverse voices and brings in the key actors in the transformation processes at play: intellectuals, activists, women, civil society representatives, human rights groups, social movements, political parties, the private sector and the media.

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