Islamic State's Perspectives on the Free Syrian Army

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The Narrative of the Islamic State

Briefing paper

IX

This briefing series builds on the research conducted on political Islam at DU to shed light on the narrative of Islamists and jihadis in the MENA region and beyond.

This short briefing paper is the first of a series of four papers that will discuss IS' view on the Syrian military battlefield. This paper will be followed by three briefing papers on the group's perspective on the Syrian Kurdish factions, the Sunni Sahwat and the Jihadi Nusra Front. The analysis is based on an investigation of IS' newsletter, *al-Naba'*, and the magazines *Dābiq*, *Rumīyah* and *Dār al-Islām*.

While its territory encompassed a third of both Iraq and Syria, since 2015, the Caliphate has suffered countless military defeats. In Iraq, were military victory over IS was declared by the government in December 2017, the group has been driven out of cities, including its once stronghold Mosul. Out of the ashes of the Caliphate, small cells have resorted to insurgency operations in the rural areas of Iraq (Bulos, 2019). In Syria though, in spite of the multitude of enemies, it seems that IS remained a threat to the country. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, the Syrian battlefield has been characterized by the fluidity of insurgent groups, which successively formed and broke coalition(s) against Bashar al-Assad and IS. Who are those actors, whom do they fights and why? This briefing paper attempt to answer those questions through the lenses of IS' media outlet.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a loose faction of officers of the Syrian Army Forces who defected from the Syrian Army in summer 2011. Its main goal was to bring down the government of Bashar al-Assad. In the IS' words, the FSA "is a superficial grouping of loosely joined bands with a feeble central leadership based in Turkey (*Dābiq* 4: 41). Using the word "bands", IS delegitimized the military nature of the FSA. More specifically, IS considered the FSA as a "nationalist faction" composed of "former [Baathist] officers who never repented from apostasy" (*Dābiq* 12: 44). Nationalism, in this context, was considered an anti-Islamic ideology because it divides the Muslim community, the Ummah.

The group ensured that its enemy was not able to achieve major battlefield successes; neither against the Assad regime, not against the Caliphate. Those military defeats, according to IS, explained that the FSA has been relinquished to the favour of Islamist and Kurdish factions (*Dābiq* 9: 22). Since 2011, the FSA was the Western powers' preferred allied on the Syrian field. Yet, the FSA happened to be poor allies of the American forces in Syria, IS argued. Their corrupted nature led its member to sell the weapons they receive from "Western and apostate donors to local arms dealers" (*Dābiq* 4: 41). IS alleged that it bought those weapons. In the group's words, even though the FSA pretended to fight for "kufrī ideology of democracy", it did not have actual ideology but that of "theft and tobacco" (Ibid; *Dābiq* 12: 45; *Dār al-Islām* 7: 26).

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This lack of strong ideology and military power led the FSA to seek alliances with Jihadi groups – especially al-Qaeda branch in Syria – and the Kurdish representatives of PKK in Syria to fight al-Assad and IS (*Dābiq* 4: 41). Since 2014, the FSA – as an independent actor – disappeared and merged with jihadi factions and form broad military coalitions against the new enemy: Islamic State (*Dābiq* 9: 64). Indeed, the Syrian Revolution Command Council was created in August 2014 from the fusion between FSA units and Jihadi groups *Liwa' Suqur al-Shām* (Levant Falcons Brigade) and *Jaysh al-Islām* (Army of Islam). Similarly, in May 2014, FSA units allied with *Harakat Ahrār al-Sham al-Islamiya* (Islamic Movement of the Free Men of the Levant) and *Jabhat al-Nusra* (Front of Victory) to form *Jaysh al-Fatah* (the Army of Conquest). According to IS, these alliances were a "plot" again the new common enemy: The Caliphate (*Dābiq* 10: 71; *Dār al-Islām* 7: 30-34). On the other side, IS failed to provide examples of alliances between the FSA and Kurdish forces in Syria. This might be explained by the fact that both actors – albeit opposing IS – did not share the same goals in Syria. While the FSA was committed to topple Bashar al-Assad, the PKK and its Syrian branch, the YPG, aimed to set up a Kurdish federal region in the North of Syria. This latter objective did not necessarily entail a Syria without al-Assad, but instead opposed the territorial velleity of the Syrian and Turkish presidents.

The secularist and nationalist nature of the FSA was used by IS as a tool of delegitimization – as both features went against the core principles of the Caliphate: a transborder community based on Islam. Moreover, the group postulated that, instead of fighting for global Islamic objectives, these coalitions vowed to focus on national Syrian goals in several declarations released in September 2015 (*Dābiq* 12: 13-14). Aware of these alliances, the group saw it as a proof of FSA's treacherous and un-Islamic nature. The group repeated that the FSA was among the groups that "raised the banners of "jāhilī secularism" and supported "the jāhilī flag of Sykes-Picot" in the lands it conquered (*Dābiq* 10: 59).

Yet, in spite of its secularist nature, IS claimed that the FSA went through a process of "Islamization" (*Dābiq* 12: 32). This shift, the groups argued, was caused by the presence of Islamists factions in Syria, such *al-Nusra* and ISIS (later IS). Consequently, "secularists and nationalists were now in a propaganda race with the mujāhidīn" (Ibid). In other words, according to IS, the fierce competition between warring factions, the need for recruitment and the appeal to popular support all pushed the FSA to become more Islamic – albeit superficially.

IS built on the shifting nature and fluid alliances formed by FSA units. In November 2015, the group predicted that the FSA would abandon its main objective of regime change. At that time, IS recognized that the FSA was trained by Jordan – that was in favour of a Russian intervention in Syria – and was negotiating with Russia about the future of the country. As imagined by the group, it would not have been surprising that

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the FSA turn towards the Syrian regime and engage in a total war against the Caliphate (*Dābiq* 12: 45; *Dār al-Islām* 7: 27). Should this situation have materialized, IS ensured, the FSA would have waged war against their former Jihadi and PKK allies.

The analysis above was based a few excerpts of IS' media outlet. Actually, the group barely mentioned the FSA as a separate and an influential actor in the context of the Syrian conflict. The FSA was notable by its almost complete absence in IS' newsletter in Arabic, *al-Naba'*. Instead, IS assimilated the FSA (*Jaysh al-Har* in Arabic) to broader coalitions, or to the umbrella phrasing "*Sahawat al-Ridda"* (factions of Ridda). While it was not clear which factions were specifically referred to by IS under this appellation, the FSA was effectively not recognized any central role, nor an independent existence from the coalitions it formed, mostly with Jihadi groups. In English and French media outlets, the words "Free Syrian Army" or "FSA" were cited only 31 times, while the PKK was cited more than 1,000 times. This shows that the FSA did not pose a great threat to IS. It is likely that the group's use of the abbreviation "FSA" in English and French media outlets stemmed from the fact that IS' non-Arabic speaking audiences were aware of the term FSA – most notably through European and American media. Conversely, it is likely that the phrasing "factions of Ridda" would have been confusing, as it was not imbued with any specific cultural or historical value for Western audiences.

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