**THE SYRIA ISLAMIC FRONT**

*Background Brief: CENEX 2013*

**RECENT HISTORY**

The Levant has been the center of some of the Middle East’s bitterest and most geopolitically disruptive conflicts, and the 2011-2013 Syrian civil war proved no exception. Riding a wave of momentum following the capture of key regime bases, a loosely-allied force of rebel and jihadist groups managed to remove the Assad regime from power on August 29, 2013, signaling the end of a war which lasted a little over two years, left an estimated 100,000 dead and destroyed Aleppo, Homs, and several suburbs of Damascus. The victory was owed in no small part to fresh supplies with weapons from a wide variety of external sources and a sustained influx of foreign jihadist fighters from March to August in 2013, most of which already had significant fighting experience.

In the immediate post-war phase, the disparate rebel groups proved unable to unify behind a new government structure. The relatively democratic and nonsectarian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces – commonly called the Syrian National Coalition – had previously been recognized by many major world powers as the legitimate voice of the Syrian opposition. Though largely operating in exile, they had commanded support among the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) within Syria and expected to have a large role in the new government of Syria. However, upon returning to Damascus, they found themselves immediately confronted by a relatively cohesive coalition of Islamist groups (including Jabhat al-Nusra) operating under the banner of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). After negotiations to form a unity government broke down, the SIF seized control of the capital in a quick but bloody battle, with SNC president Moaz al-Khatib and secretary-general Mustafa Sabbagh among the dead. Most other prominent members of the SNC were imprisoned, and the SIF managed to expand its control of the country’s territory down to the southern border and up the strip of Syrian coastline, including the port of Lattakia. However, the destruction of Aleppo disabled rail service and severely curtailed road access to the city, limiting the SIF’s ability to project their rule into Syria’s north.

**Current Political and Economic Status**

Having been in power for less than a year, the SIF’s government structure has not had time to fully form, no written governing document has been established (the 2012 Syrian Constitution was immediately invalidated by the SIF government) and most of the positions within the working government remain informal. The working structure of the SIF government includes a legislature composed of local representatives of the villages and towns under SIF control, who may not themselves be Islamist but are considered loyal to the new government. The legislature’s primary role has been in the managing of reconstruction efforts, and in approving candidates for ministerial posts. The majority of power rests with an Islamic Council composed of high-ranking clerics and leaders of the most influential Islamist groups within the SIF. The Council proposes candidates for ministerial positions to the legislature and its meetings include the Ministers of Defense, Foreign
Affairs, and Finance, as well as a Minister of Family and Social Affairs, and a clerical head of the Council who takes the title of Emir. Though there are rumored to be some internal divisions within the government over implementation of sharia law in the capital and in outlying areas, the continuing difficulties in SIF relations with residual SNC forces, Syria’s neighbors, and the international community, in addition to the worries over its weak control of the Syrian north, have for now kept the SIF government relatively unified. The SIF in known to be strategically allied with al-Qaeda branches, particularly in Iraq, and has expressed its strong support for Hamas and the Palestinian resistance movements. Sunni Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, while not going so far as to declare themselves allied with the SIF government, express their support for the Islamic government as a positive step away from the corruption and immorality of the Assad regime. With the fall of the Assad regime, Iran lost almost all of its power in the country, and the SIF expressly rejects Shiite influence in the new Islamic state.

Figure 1: The length of the Damascus-Aleppo railway was considered the spine of Syria. Currently the line to Latakia is operational, but the line to Aleppo has been destroyed just outside the city limits.
The SIF's weakness in the north provided a perfect opportunity for the country's 2 million-strong Kurdish minority to pursue de facto independence. Quiescent Kurdish areas in the north were all but abandoned by the regime at the beginning of the civil war, and Kurdish organizations quickly moved to fill in the gaps in governance. But though Syrian Kurds were largely pro-rebellion, tensions with rebel groups grew over their relative lack of active assistance to rebels, rumors that the Kurds had entered into an agreement with Assad in exchange for being left alone, and rebel attempts to use Kurdish towns as bases or supply sources. The Kurdish regions had already decided they would not participate in any unity government by the time the SIF took power. The Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD) – an offshoot of the PKK and the most well-organized and popular Kurdish political party – is in fierce competition for influence with a collection of smaller Kurdish groups, which organized as the Kurdish National Council (KNC) under the patronage of Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government president Masoud Barzani. The KNC and PYD represent differing visions of Kurdish nationalism as well as differing visions of how to deal with Turkey, with the PYD favoring more hardline violent tactics to gain Kurdish autonomy in Turkey, and the KNC favoring development of economic interdependence and political leverage that can be used to extract concessions. Neither they nor any Kurdish group is part of the SIF ruling government.

Syria's economy suffered unprecedented damage during the war. The country lost roughly 19% of its GDP in 2012 and another 12% in 2013, with the losses spanning all major sectors, including net investment, mining, and tourism. The loss to the country’s capital stock from sheer destruction of buildings and equipment alone is estimated at $25 billion (by comparison, in 2010 Syria’s total GDP was $59 billion). Unemployment in the major cities is roughly 40%, while unemployment in the more remote agricultural regions is unknown but likely worse. Mass migration of rural Syrians into the cities looking for work, food, or shelter has further exacerbated social problems. As the SIF has cemented its power, it has increasingly begun to implement sharia law restrictions on economic life in the cities, beginning with closings of all Damascene nightclubs and restaurants or shops selling alcohol which had remained open during the war. International aid, which might have helped to offset some of the supply and reconstruction problems, suffered in the wake of the SIF’s rise, and the bulk of aid now comes from the Gulf countries. The aid, and additional humanitarian support from various UN agencies, has been enough to avert humanitarian disaster, but accusations of favoritism and sectarianism in the distribution of food and fuel aid are widely reported.

**Military Affairs**

Demoralized by the war and facing severe problems of cash flow, the Syrian military fractured. The Alawite senior officers who were the most experienced at command were killed or driven into hiding by the time SIF came to power, leaving a leadership vacuum that has to some extent been filled with less-competent Sunni officers. Leftover equipment was primarily Russian in origin, including MiG fighters, submarines, and air defense systems. Syria’s chemical and biological weapons stores, which included Sarin and VX nerve gases and anthrax, were also legacies of scientific cooperation with Russia. The disorientation caused by the fall of the regime and the subsequent coup left control of bases and weapons stockpiles up in the air for several weeks before the SIF asserted its control.
A shortage of military-age males and a desperate need to impose some stability in the country compelled the SIF to recruit among former FSA fighters and non-Sunnis, and though this caused some intra-military tensions, the SIF has established an active fighting force of nearly 50,000, capable of operating an estimated 700 Soviet T-72/72M battle tanks and 600 BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles. Army contingents are distributed throughout the southern, eastern, and coastal provinces, and maintain active oversight of local governance. Though they also control the remaining naval vessels and air fighters, they don’t have the funds or personnel to operate them. The paramilitary forces, including the shabiha, have largely gone underground but potential reprisal actions against military personnel and citizens remain a concern.

International Objectives and Relationships

The SIF’s overriding priority is to maintain its control over southern and eastern Syria, which entails preventing any foreign intervention aimed at bringing down its government. Its secondary priorities include securing remaining weapons stocks, implementing sharia law provisions in the major cities, and lobbying for more international recognition among governments inclined towards them. Ideally, the SIF would like to establish control over the Aleppo and Kurdish provinces and eliminating remaining SNC factions in those regions, however, its limited military resources and the state of the regional infrastructure prevent it from significantly moving toward those goals.

The international response to Syria's governance situation has been mixed. Lebanon, seeking good relations with its dominant neighbor and desperate for calm after two years of spillover violence, recognized the SIF government within a month of its establishment. Sunni Middle Eastern regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have also recognized the new government and offered financial aid. The United States and Germany have refused to recognize the SIF, and continue to allocate moderate funding to SNC holdout rebels in the country. While neither the US nor Germany have made any moves toward taking military action against the SIF government, both continue to strongly voice their displeasure at the UN Security Council, denouncing the SIF coup as a “criminal hijacking of the Syrian people’s aspirations to democracy by a fanatical group of militants, who show no commitment to equitable rebuilding of the country or to fair governance of its people.” Both call for international pressure to be brought to bear on the SIF regime.

Russia, still struggling to realign its diplomatic stance after the loss of its ally Assad regime, also does not recognize the SIF. However, its wish to maintain access to its naval base in Tartus has compelled it to take a more moderate approach. While there has been no diplomatic contact between the SIF and Russia, the SIF does not interfere with Russia’s minimal operations in Tartus, and Russia has not yet spoken against the SIF government in the UN. Furthermore, Russia has publically ridiculed calls by the West to isolate or work against the SIF, claiming that Russia will remain committed to non-interference and will veto any UN resolution aimed at regime change in Syria.

Turkey’s government faces difficult dilemmas in its approach to the SIF. While Turkey is historically secular in public policy and social affairs, conservative Islam has retained significant cultural
presence in Turkey, and the election of the ruling AKP party in 2002 signaled a return of moderate Islamic influence in Turkish government. Though it supported the secularist SNC during the civil war, its fears over Kurdish autonomy directly to its south have led the Turkish government to publically demand that Syria maintain stability and control within its borders, implicitly granting some small measure of legitimacy to the SIF. However, Turkey continues to allow SNC holdouts to operate in zones on its southern border with Syria, shielded within the large refugee camps that continue to house over 200,000 Syrians who fled the fighting and have either lost their homes in the destruction or fear returning to their homes if it means living under SIF rule. With significant international aid and NGO operations occurring within the camps, Turkey can credibly claim they cannot be expected to raid the camps looking for SNC rebels.

During former President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, Georgia’s relationship with Syria was extremely tense. Syria accused Georgia, the United States and the West of ignoring the rights of the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It also accused Georgia of starting the war against Russia in 2008 and stated that Russia’s response to Georgian aggression was correct and necessary. In 2012, Georgia joined the European Union in placing sanctions on Syria. While Georgia has not openly declared its stance on the new radical Islamic government of Syria, it has expressed concern regarding the authoritarian nature of the regime and the government’s disregard for human rights.

The SIF does not allow any Western IGOs or NGOs to operate within the territory they control, insisting on receiving assistance only from Islamic charities and organizations. Syria has not yet been reinstated in the Arab League, though Egypt, under the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence, has helped to establish a dialogue between SIF government and Arab League officials. However, Western IGOs continue to operate in the Syrian refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, and to a limited extent in the northern Syrian regions not controlled by the SIF. The UN has also established a dialogue between the SIF and various relevant UN agencies, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Though the UN also does not have any presence in SIF territory, its connections to the SIF represent the most direct channel of communication for Western governments.