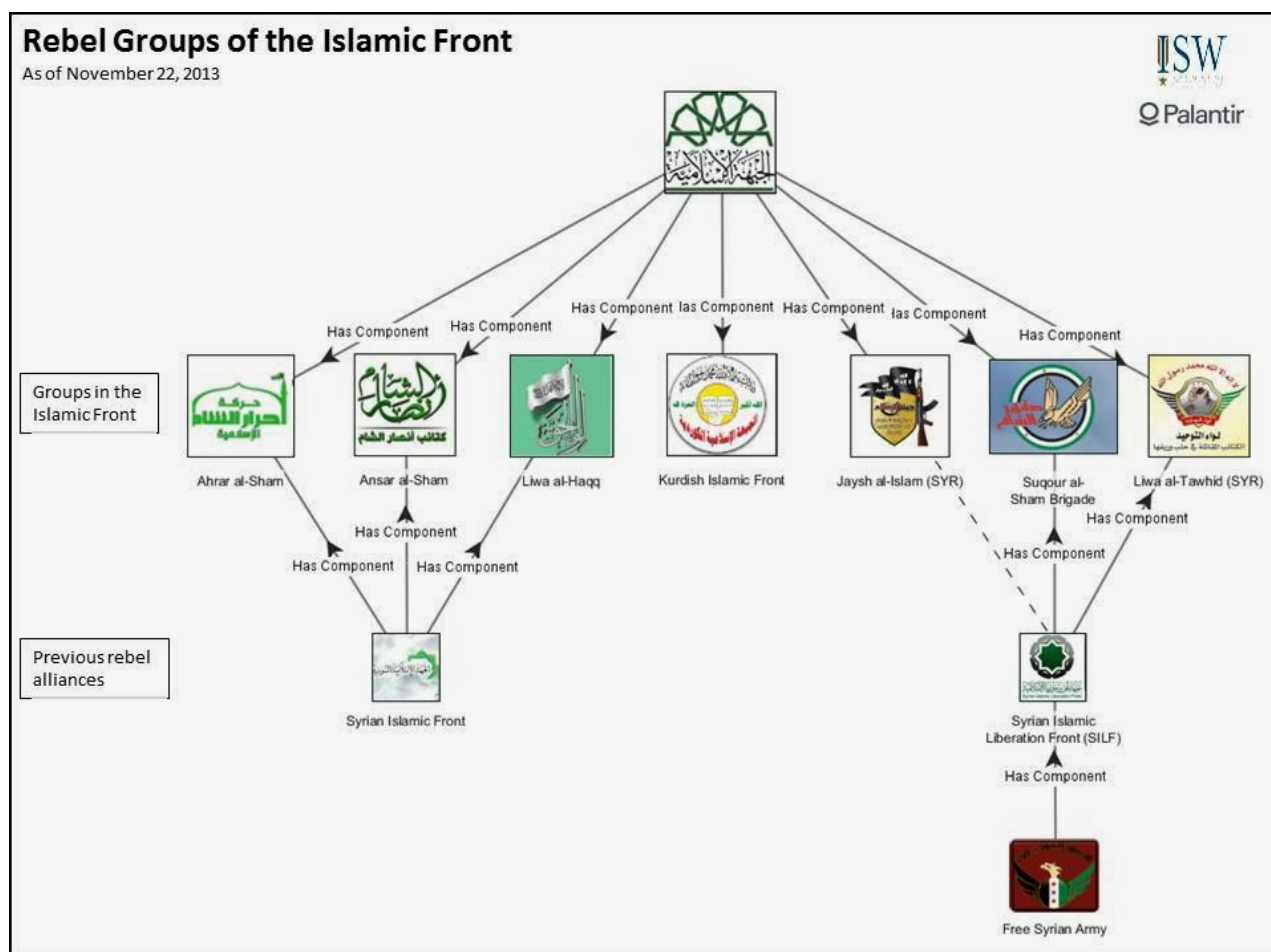


A Power Move by Syria's Rebel Forces

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by Valerie Szybala

Earlier today, a new merger of rebel forces was announced in Syria. While the seemingly endless string of mergers and splits among the Syrian rebels can be difficult to follow, this particular announcement is significant. The new Islamic Front has the potential to finally be the unified fighting force that the Syrian rebels have been waiting for.



The Brigades

The seven rebel brigades that form the founding members of the Islamic Front include some of the country's strongest groups. Ideologically they span the Islamist spectrum from those who have called for a modern, moderate state with a foundation of Islamic law, to those who have called for a state with strict interpretation of Sharia law and have at times appeared to have more in common with the al-Qaeda affiliates than with their fellow Syrian rebels.

Suqur al-Sham – Suqur al-Sham was founded in 2011 and is based in Idlib province. It

was a member of the moderate Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), which came under the umbrella of the western-back Supreme Military Council (SMC). The group's leader, Ahmad Eissa, was named as the head of the new Islamic Front. Eissa has previously called for a moderate Islamic state that is not imposed on society. Though its forces are formidable, Suqur al-Sham is by no means the strongest brigade in this alliance, making the choice of Eissa as leader notable. The group has had recent trouble with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

Liwa al-Tawhid – Liwa al-Tawhid is by most accounts the strongest group in Aleppo, estimated to have around 11,000 fighters. It was formed in July 2012 as a merger of smaller militias in the area. Although they have cooperated with the more extremist groups in battle, they have espoused a moderate Islamic ideology and were respected by other rebel groups. This was demonstrated in September when they were called in to mediate fighting between ISIS and an FSA-linked brigade in the northern city of Azaz. Their former military commander Abdel Qader Saleh had previously stated that he wants a modern Islamic state with a basis in Sharia law, but with civilian rule, elections, and minority protection.

Jaysh al-Islam – Jaysh al-Islam, based in the Damascus area, was created in late September 2013 when Liwa al-Islam consolidated its power by subsuming dozens of other brigades. Liwa al-Islam had previously been a member of the SILF and therefore had fallen under the SMC's umbrella, but made it clear that it was breaking completely with the SMC in its new incarnation. In recent weeks it has received criticism from ISIS for pulling out of several battles, pushing Jaysh al-Islam to make a public rebuttal.

Ahrar al-Sham – Ahrar al-Sham was the leading member of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), an umbrella coalition of more hardline Islamic groups, unaffiliated with the SMC. Though it is still widely referred to as Ahrar al-Sham, the full name for the group is Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, which it took on in January of this year when Ahrar al-Sham consolidated several groups into one. Ahrar al-Sham is one of the more extreme Syrian rebel groups, and has a Salafi jihadist ideology. Its leader, Hassan Aboud has stated that democracy is a tool of the west and Sharia is the only acceptable option. This group frequently fights in close cooperation with both of the al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria, and has also been one of the few rebel groups to regularly hold al-Qaeda style advocacy tents, trying to win over the Syrian people to their philosophy. Ahrar al-Sham is also one of the few groups that operates on a national level and is strong on several different fronts.

Ansar al-Sham – Ansar al-Sham was also a member of the SIF, and operates mainly in Latakia. It has not been as public with statements of its ideology as some of the other brigades, leading to speculation that it may not have a solid command and control structure among its various units. If its ideology can be gleaned from the founding charter of the SIF, it wants to topple the regime and create an Islamic state based on Sharia law. Notably, the charter does clearly state that the SIF's approach "is one of centrism and moderation. It is far from religious fanaticism and its resulting deviation of

creed and action;" and makes specific mention of women's rights. Although it is difficult to know how much of these words are aspirational rather than reflective of reality. Like Ahrar al-Sham, Ansar al-Sham has put some effort towards prosthetizing and civil works.

Liwa al-Haq – Liwa al-Haq formed in August 2012 as a merger of other rebel brigades in Homs, and was also a member of SIF. Its founders have claimed that is not a Salafi jihadist group, and its members have a range of ideologies (which is probably true for all of the brigades in Syria). It is one of the smaller groups in this alliance.

Kurdish Islamic Front – By most accounts this is a very small fighting force, numbering less than 1,000 fighters. The Kurdish Islamic Front has fought with the al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria against the Kurdish YPG fighting forces. Coming on the heels of the recent announcement by the YPG of an interim Kurdish government in Hasaka – a move which was widely condemned by other rebels as an attempt to break up the country – the Kurdish Islamic Front's inclusion in this new alliance is most likely a message to the YPG not to get too comfortable.

Admittedly, Syria's armed opposition has faced challenges in unifying in the past. The atomized nature of the rebel forces is a product of the organic roots of the Syrian uprising. But changes in the conflict have forced the rebels to evolve in order to survive. One result of this evolution has been the increasing drive for unification among the internal fighting forces, independent of the political leadership-in-exile which has failed to provide the amount of support that the fighting groups have so desperately needed. The increase in foreign elements in the conflict, on both sides, has accelerated this evolution. Smaller, scattered, local rebel brigades have been unable to compete with the al-Qaeda affiliates – particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham – which have demonstrated the ability to operate at a national level. On the other side, this year has seen a tremendous influx of pro-regime foreign fighters in the form of Hezbollah members, Iraqi Shi'ite militias, and Iranian trainers and strategists. These forces have significantly boosted the strength and fighting capabilities of the regime, which was operating with greatly diminished strength as of the end of 2012.

There have been a number of notable mergers among the rebel groups this year, particularly in the months since the August 21st chemical weapons attack. Some of those attempts have been successful, like Jaysh al-Islam, while others, like the September 24th Islamic Alliance, have fallen apart quickly. But with every attempt the rebel brigades have been learning important lessons about what they need to do to succeed in forming a larger rebel army, and the Islamic Front announced earlier today demonstrates this clearly. Notably, this group does not include either of the al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria. Also, in the announcement they were clear state that this was intended to be a full merger and not just another coordinating body. Both of these moves were intended to avoid the pitfalls that plagued previous mergers.

After the creation of Jaysh al-Islam under Zahran Alloush on September 29th, it was clear that the western-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC) was in trouble. General Salim

Idris reportedly cut short a trip to France to rush back to Turkey to try to salvage the SMC with a reorganization that would be more inclusive of local leaders and give Zahran Alloush a seat at the table. But eventually this initiative died out, and shortly afterwards the social media chatter about an imminent rebel alliance of the country's strongest brigades began. Then came the death of Liwa al-Tawhid's military commander, Abdel Qader al-Saleh, in a regime airstrike near Aleppo over the weekend. Al-Saleh was a well-respected, charismatic leader, and it was rumored that he would be named as the leader of the new alliance. The loss of Abdel Qader al-Saleh is doubtless a blow to this unification, but despite this setback it seems that the groundwork had been fully laid and with some reorganization behind the scenes, the brigades went ahead with their announcement and subsequent interview live on Al Jazeera.

Implications

The creation of the new Islamic Front is a double-edged sword:

On one hand, this may be the nail in the coffin of the SMC. The western-backed umbrella group was wobbly enough after the resignation of a leading northern commander and the failed negotiations to bring Jaysh al-Islam back into the fold. With the additional losses of Suqur al-Sham and Liwa al-Tawhid it is hard to imagine that the SMC can now survive with any semblance of legitimacy or power on the ground. Additionally, the fact that it is an "Islamic" alliance and includes some of Syria's truly hardline elements is worrisome, since it could mean that this new union will push the more moderate groups in that direction.

On the other hand, this new Islamic Front does not include either of the al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Syria. And as the Islamic Front has now set itself up as the most powerful rebel group in the country, it seems that they may attempt to sideline al-Qaeda and reclaim the Syrian insurgency. Around the same time of the merger announcement, Liwa al-Haq published a statement to clarify its views that seems to support this possibility. In the statement they say that while they appreciate ISIS for its support in fighting against the regime, they do not acknowledge the ISIS brothers as legitimate leaders for Syria. Additionally, the fact that Ahmad Eissa of Suqur al-Sham was named as the leader of the Islamic Front over commanders from more powerful brigades may be a sign that the Islamic Front will attempt to stay on the more moderate end of the spectrum.

This new group will be built gradually over the next three months as the brigades work towards integrating their organizational structures. We can also expect to see more rebel units joining the Islamic Front in the coming days, as they have indicated that they are currently reviewing requests from prospective members. If they start to announce the addition of other power players like the Farouq Brigades, the Furqan Brigades, and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Battalions, it will be a good indication that the Islamic Front is here

to stay. Even as it stands with the current members, the new group will have an estimated 45,000 fighters, and span critical battlefronts that including Damascus, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, and Aleppo.

Another thing to watch for will be the response of the SMC leadership. FSA spokesman Louay Meqdad has already reached out an olive branch, saying that: "the alliance is welcomed because it represents a combined set of interests of the Syrian people. The SMC is not opposed to alliances that draw people together under the hope for a protective and democratic future Syria. They [the SMC] do not wish to discount such alliances that are not in nature harmful to those values."