

U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE ANNOUNCES NON-LETHAL AID TO FREE SYRIAN ARMY

Following the February 28 Friends of Syria meeting, Secretary of State John F. Kerry announced that the U.S. will provide non-lethal aid, including food and medicine, to Syrian rebel fighters under the auspices of the Supreme Military Command of the Free Syrian Army. This is the first time that the U.S. has publicly committed itself to sending nonlethal support to Syria's armed opposition. The shift is intended to empower Syria's moderate forces, although it falls short of the weapons and equipment that Syrian rebels have requested. This policy decision against providing lethal aid is largely due to concerns over the emergence of powerful Islamist brigades and extremist groups in Syria. By offering support through the new military command, the U.S. is looking to build a better relationship with Syria's armed opposition and check the radical elements within its ranks.

As the U.S. looks to support Syria's opposition in new ways, understanding the composition and structure of the Supreme Military Command will be vital in determining the viability of the organization and the effect such limited support will have.

The Supreme Military Council was created on the heels of a three day conference held in Antalya, Turkey from December 5 – 7, 2012. During this conference, rebel leaders from across Syria announced the election of a new 30-member unified command structure called the Supreme Military Command (SMC). The SMC is led by Chief of Staff Major General Salim Idriss and includes 11 former officers and 19 civilian leaders.

The SMC differs from previous efforts to unify the military opposition because more groups and support networks are included. It could prove to be a more sustainable organization than its predecessors. The SMC includes all of Syria's most important field commanders, and its authority is based on the power and influence of these rebel leaders including: Abdel Qadir Salah, head of the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo; Mustafa Abdel Karim, head of the Dara al-Thawra Brigade; Ahmed Issa, head of Suqour al-Sham Brigade in Idlib; Jamal Marouf, head of the Syrian Martyrs Brigade in Idlib; Osama al-Jinidi, head of the Farouq Battalions; and Gen. Ziad al-Fahd, head of the Damascus Military Council.

The SMC was organized to incorporate the supply chains and networks that already existed inside Syria and eventually channel them through the centralized units of the SMC. In order to achieve this goal, the command is divided into five geographic fronts with six elected members each: the Eastern front, the Western/Middle front, the Northern front, the Southern front, and the Homs front. Although it is highly unusual for there to be elected positions within a military command, the opposition has sought to adhere to democratic principles and enforce a level of accountability by emphasizing the importance of elections. Thus, all current opposition leadership bodies, both political and military, include elected positions.

To support and advise the efforts of the elected SMC members, five military deputies and five civilian assistant deputies were appointed by SMC members to head each front. These appointees are recognized for their tactical knowledge and combat experience, and are thus seen as important operational commanders for each of the fronts. Each front also has five departments to assist in combat support and combat service support including Operations, Intelligence, Supply and Processing, Financial and Administrative Affairs, and Transitional Justice, with a departmental head to oversee and supervise the actions of each department.

Thus, the SMC stands at the nexus of a grassroots military structure and a hierarchical military institution. Syria's armed militias are gradually attempting to transform themselves to resemble a national army. Its legitimacy is derived from the bottom-up, rather than top-down, through the incorporation of rebel networks on the ground. Although this grassroots structure poses a significant obstacle to achieving the benefits of a higher level of operational command, the SMC has been successful in serving as a platform for cooperation.

Regardless of the limits of its current command and control, the SMC plays an important role in synchronizing rebel operations. It has allowed for greater opportunities for collaboration and coordination among the disparate rebel groups operating in Syria. Brigades are now sometimes lending forces and allocating resources to aid in operations occurring outside of their designated fronts. They are developing cross-provincial campaigns as part of the larger strategy to target regime infrastructure.

Until now, disparate sources of funding have significantly handicapped the rebels' ability to unite and consolidate authority on a national level. As the SMC develops its institutional capacity, its ability to assert greater authority will likely depend on its transactional legitimacy, especially its ability to distribute critical resources to rebel-held communities. In addition, the SMC's ability to provide resources and material support to its sub-units will determine whether the body will be able to unite rebel forces under its command. Consolidating the support channels of rebels' main state sponsors will also be fundamental to ensuring the legitimacy of the new organization, even if some private sources of funding continue to flow outside of its channels. The recent announcement that the U.S. will provide non-lethal aid to the SMC, including training assistance, is a significant step in this direction. However, whether such limited support will be enough to empower the SMC remains to be seen.

Providing greater support to the SMC is critical for a number of reasons. The SMC has the potential to serve as a check on radicalization and help to assert a moderate authority in Syria. If the SMC can create strong incentives for moderation, it will likely be able to marginalize the

most radical elements within its structure. Moreover, the SMC is currently the only organization that, if properly supported, could ultimately help fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the state security apparatus and establish a framework for rebuilding Syria's security and governing institutions.

Syria's state security apparatus will fall apart as the Assad regime transforms into a militia-like entity. As remnants of the regime prepare to engage in an insurgency, it will become increasingly difficult for a transition government to build a security institution capable of asserting authority and stability in the context of a bloody civil war. The Supreme Military Council may be the last opportunity for the U.S. to empower an organization that could serve to fill the security vacuum left by this transformation.

For more information about the Supreme Military Council's composition, key leaders, and current operations, see the forthcoming ISW report by Elizabeth O'Bagy titled *The Free Syrian Army*.