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## The Power and Political Future of the Syrian Opposition's Field Commanders

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The dynamics by which the Syrian Revolution brought to prominence a class of political and military leaders are highly indicative of the nature of this complex conflict. Yet they are also some of the least well-understood aspects of the war. For many of the “elite” among Syria’s political opposition— such as the liberals of the 1950s, the ideologues of the 1960s and 1970s, and the leftist youth of the 1980s and 1990s—their political, social, and class-based discourse, ideologies, and allegiances come from the “old world” of Syria. The youth field commanders leading direct hostilities against the regime forces and its allied sectarian militias are perhaps the only ones with a full understanding of the complex developments that took place over the fifteen years before the revolution, and over the past five years of uprising. This article aims to investigate their political, social, and symbolic worlds, and deconstruct their political present and foreseeable future.

## Potential Leadership Groups

For practical purposes, the elite of Syria's political opposition can currently be divided into three groups. The first group is made up of the political opposition's "traditional" leaders. They come primarily from partisan or political movements that have opposed the regime since the mid-1970s, the vast majority of whom are leftists or liberal democrats. During the Damascus Spring in the early 2000s, they were joined by other cultural, economic, and liberal figures, particularly those who signed well-known opposition statements at the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's rule. They have doggedly opposed the Syrian regime over the decades, despite having endured the regime's terrible attempts to crush them. They currently hold the most prominent positions in political organisations that form the Syrian opposition, such as the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, and others. However, these organisations have maintained a certain political distance from one another. It is noteworthy that nearly five years after the Syrian revolution began; no political leader has clearly stood out from these traditional elites.

The second group is made up of politicians / military leaders, whose political authority comes from their military power. There are few central military commanders in the Syrian political arena, due to the fact that opposition militant groups have fragmented. The only major players in this field are the al-Nusra Front and its enigmatic leader, Abu Mohammed Joulani; Jaysh al-Islam and its leader, Zahran Alloush; some of the Ahrar ash-Sham movement's leadership, who were assassinated in September 2014; and the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, Salih Muslim. Yet close inspection reveals that they are leaders of large branches of global and regional military organisations. Two such examples can be found in al-Nusra Front's relationship with al-Qaeda and its leader, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the relationship between the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with its military leadership in the Qandil Mountains. Given this, these military commanders are not able to develop a political leadership role that would add value to their military

leadership; they are thus not likely to become political leaders in Syria's foreseeable future.

The third group is a product of the severe fragmentation of militant groups, including more than a thousand combat teams, blocs, and battalions. Many of these militant blocs were able to expand by uniting multiple groups under a single military conglomerate. In most cases, these blocs were divided by region; combatants who belong to the same slice of society in the region where they are gathered were grouped into given combat blocs. These blocs do not produce regional military leaders with grand ideological or political projects. Rather, they produce individuals who tend to be local military leaders. They lead ordinary citizens with even the smallest desire to defend themselves—particularly against the regime's forces—protect their daily life, and ensure basic services and general security. They are known as the middle leadership, or field commanders. It is this last group which is of particular interest here.

## **Social Origins and Background**

In examining the background of regional and military leaders that have risen to prominence across the wider Arab region during the last few years, three traditional social classes/institutions prove common: they are either related to influential religious leaders (especially those stemming from urban areas), to rural/Bedouin tribal leaders who control certain parties, or to military institutions.

Interestingly, however, these background characteristics do not apply as readily in Syria, primarily because the regime long sought to crush all classes who had some form of local power, both in cities and rural areas. The regime sensed that such local leaders could pose a threat, and thus consciously worked to destroy them both morally and materially by stripping their privileges and breaking down their social or spiritual influence. In their place, the regime worked to establish alternative local leaders, such as the heads of security branches, and the nouveaux riches who enjoyed special economic and commercial privileges, bound to the network of security forces by loyalty and business partnerships. The regime also worked to create a new class of

religious leaders, such as Sheikh Ahmad Kufaro, Mohamed Said Ramadan al-Bouti, and others, who were endorsed by religious institutions loyal to the regime's policies.

One element that could not be regulated by the regime—or rather, by its social networks—was the number of people active in the shadow economy. In the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, this amounted to around 40% of Syria's economy. These social and economic networks included thousands of people involved in smuggling, and tens of thousands of informal shopkeepers, unregistered construction workers in informal districts, and intermediaries between local communities, state institutions, and the security branches. These social and economic networks managed to resist attempts at regulation for several reasons. The security system did not view these networks as a danger, and the regime had long seen them as different from those with social or ideological codes, or internal organisation, such as religious conservatives and their organisations, tribal leaders, trade unions, or chambers of commerce or industry – all of which were sources of concern for the regime, who attempted to regulate them by creating alternative networks that would be tied to the regime's agencies, and spread its own discourse and ideology. In contrast, the regime considered economic networks to be inconsequential and found it impossible to imagine that they had any organisational capacity, or the ability, to create military/political commanders or leaders. As with other regimes in the region, the Syrian regime did not imagine that these “social non-movements”—as Iranian scholar Asef Bayat has described them—would be the ones to lead new forms of revolution in the Arab world. The regime had long imagined that a revolution would take the traditional form of an organised coup, like those which had occurred regularly in the region since the early 1950s.

In addition, these networks overlapped with each other through a web of direct economic interests with regime agencies and the regime's underlying ruling class. Smuggler leaders were involved, connected, and partnered with heads of the security branches and other security personnel. Contractors of informal construction networks were involved with the directors of bureaucratic, municipal institutions. Likewise, informal shop contractors were involved with food supply authorities. Attempts to

attack these networks would have directly affected alternative sources of income for the regime-loyal networks that had formed the broad security and bureaucratic institutional base that guaranteed the regime's stability.

Because these people were alleged internal partners of the regime's agencies, their sources of income, and whether their work continued, was tied to whether the regime and its security and bureaucratic apparatus lasted. But the regime's agencies failed to notice the dissatisfaction of the leaders of these networks: while they may have partnered with the heads of security branches and directors of bureaucratic institutions, they nonetheless felt the division of revenue was unfair. They shouldered the entire burden of unregistered and unofficial work, and when different government and security institutions had a score to settle between one another, it was the leaders of these networks who suffered the consequences. Meanwhile, the heads of security branches and directors of bureaucratic institutions were able to profit as a simple result of their positions. They received a share of the partnership without any effort or contribution of capital, and were only partners because they looked the other way. As a result, when people felt that the balance of power no longer favored the regime and its men in their local areas, they turned against those they felt had unjustly shared their source of income. Their underlying motivation was to monopolise prospective income.

The third reason for the regime's failure to regulate these networks stems from their expansion as a natural result of systemic economic change. The regime dismantled the traditional economic systems that were prevalent until the mid-1970s, such as farming, agriculture, and free commerce, which relied on a controlled, centralised economic system that offered certain social guarantees to poorer classes of society. In their place, Syria was moved to a service economy in the early 1990s – a move that proved very disruptive for a state with few primary resources. In addition, the social classes that had been supported by Syria's traditional economy were completely dissolved, while trade organisations, chambers of commerce coalitions, farmers unions, or other such groups in the country disappeared.

When the regime chose this path, it was the prominent new networks of social actors who understood the dynamics of financial resources. As a class, they came to employ vast sections of society.. In a sense, this class unintentionally became a central part of the mechanisms and policies pursued by the ruling Syrian authority to cement its rule over four decades.

## **Social and Political Characteristics of Field Commanders**

Examining the social background of several field commanders is illustrative of shared socio-economic background and political leanings. Omar Shelkho, leader of the Aleppo City Brigade, is a young man from a working class neighbourhood in the eastern part of Aleppo. He is not yet 30 years old, the son of a well-known building contractor, and has worked in construction workshops in different parts of the city for many years. He did not finish his education, and belongs to a social class of Aleppo which is traditional, conservative, and culturally religious.

Shelkho became politically active by participating and leading protests in Aleppo's working class neighbourhoods. He was arrested several times, then joined one of the first armed groups in the countryside north of Aleppo, which helped liberate the first towns and cities in the region, including Marea, Anadan, Bayanoun, and others. He soon after joined the Tawhid and Jihad battalion, made up of young men from Aleppo, and helped liberate eastern neighbourhoods of the city in mid-2012. Shelkho became the head of the Aleppo City Brigade, which included a number of battalions working closely together.

Shelkho's background is nearly identical to that of military commander Abdel Qader Saleh, also known as Hajji Marea. He also had not yet turned 30 when the Syrian revolution began, and is one of the founders of the Tawhid Brigade, and one of its most important leaders. He became known for leading the battle to liberate al-Mosha School in Aleppo. Abdel Qader Saleh was a grain and food dealer who was involved with the Syrian revolution from its start, first in peaceful demonstrations in its early months, and then by forming local militias to defend neighborhoods and cities. Saleh became

famous for selling his personal belonging to buy weapons, and was soon elected military commander of the Tawhid Brigade, the largest faction in the region north of Aleppo and based in the city of A'zaz. He also led the operation to liberate working class neighborhoods in the western parts of Aleppo, by which point more than 10,000 fighters had joined the Tawhid Brigade. The Syrian regime offered a reward of \$200,000 for his assassination, something rarely done for opposition military commanders. The regime ultimately killed Saleh in October 2013 by bombing the brigade's headquarters during a meeting of its leadership.

Jamal Maarouf, another local commander, is from the countryside in the Idlib governorate, and leader of the Syria Revolutionaries Front. He had been a construction worker in Lebanon and, according to public rumor, had been active in smuggling networks. He joined local fighters in the area around Zawiya Mountain in the Idlib governorate, and then rose to become the General Commander of several armed groups, which then formed the Syria Revolutionaries Front in late 2013. While Abdel Qader Saleh and Jamal Maarouf are no longer central figures in the political/military arena in Syria, in the public mind, they and many other commanders like them have become the closest thing to an ideal figure in non-Islamic militant groups.

There are dozens of other local commanders like those profiled above, who have led local military battalions, brigades, and alliances that were not part of politically ideological organisations. They have five features in common:

1. They come from the local area, are leaders of local networks of previously unorganised workers, and have the typical characteristics of young men who come from social environments in remote areas (unfinished education, moderate income).
2. They were not part of central or regional government institutions, particularly not military or security institutions.

3. They do not espouse radical religious or political ideologies. Their decision to join was a result of the circumstances they were in and the degree of violence used against them, not because of partisan or proselytising institutions.
4. They possess the charismatic characteristics of leaders, and were able to turn very quickly their innate abilities into the qualities necessary for organised military/political action, right at the start of the revolution. They were able to apply these skills and adapt them along with shifts in the revolution.
5. They were not part of the public sphere, particularly not the media or political arena. They were also not part of a clear political project for the nation, but were instead defending their local areas. They are nonetheless clear opponents of the Syrian regime and its use of violence against local residents.

Prior to a discussion of the political future of this class of military commanders, two observations must be recognised. First, while it is true that they, along with their local military organisations, are funded and armed by third parties or other countries in the region, they are nonetheless not affiliated with or under the control of these parties or nations. This sets them apart from other, stronger military organisations like the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG), the al-Nusra Front, or Jaysh al-Islam, each of which is under the umbrella of a broader, non-Syrian organisation or another country.

Second, while it is true that some of their general rhetoric may seem typical of conservative Islam, religion plays no part in their ideological beliefs, and they are not part of any radical movements. Their rhetoric is simply related to the circumstances particular to today's Syrian reality, and especially the level of violence and the sectarianism proffered by the regime. The staggering amount of violence, pressure, and attacks faced by the communities from which these leaders come often leads to the rise of religious discourse and social conservatism. Likewise, discursive and identity-based

rhetoric is a response to the mechanics of the Syrian regime, which has a clear sectarian doctrine intensified by its alliance with and submission to.

## **Political Prospects**

While until recently these local commanders did not express any political inclinations, three underlying aspects of their political presence can be noted:

**First**, some political powers have taken a radical position against the head of the Syrian regime, the nature of the government, its ideology, and its hard-liner sectarian core. These include the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, the Syrian National Council before it, as well as local councils and the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union before that. These powers represent an indirect political front for this class of local military commanders. In other words, because the tendencies and discourse of these political groups corresponds to the underlying political tendencies of this local military class, they may not be able to turn this unspoken tendency into coherent rhetoric.

**Second**, all Syrian political opposition powers realise that there are certain red lines in relation to local military field command. States involved in the Syrian conflict, both within the region and beyond, realise this as well. No political agreement between the opposition and the government will be possible without taking these into consideration.

Third, the Syrian regime recognises that members of this local military class are the only ones with a clear popular and political presence, and that they are the regime's only rivals for political control on the ground. If facing a political /security dilemma, that the regime knows it can overcome all political opposition, both domestic and foreign, but not this class of local military commanders.

Setting the nature of current political representation aside, we can then lay out two possible political paths that this class of local military commanders may take. If the government and the opposition reach a political agreement that they do not agree with, then the vast majority of these commanders will become local powers that oppose the

agreement, and will resist the new legitimate forces' authority in the areas they control. Some areas may remain beyond the bounds of this new legitimacy, and if these militias create alternative institutions, public bodies may not be able to work in those areas. In this case, the new legitimate powers will either seek to break these regional "rebellions," or negotiate and offer concessions to the leaders and the areas they control. These local commanders may thus become tools in the hands of regional powers who feel the political agreement has not served their greater interests in the Syrian question, in turn causing them to reject a peace process in the country. It is not hard to imagine regional powers entering into local conflicts, given that they could potentially have differing stances on the future of the settlement.

On the other hand, if the government and the opposition reach a political agreement that they agree with, these commanders will become local leaders and will seek the fastest mechanism possible to turn their symbolic capital into material capital. They could become political commanders, either in the administration of their local areas (by controlling the decentralised and municipal institutions that exist in their area), or through political domination - becoming parliamentarians and a part of the future political system, and then using these representative powers to access the state's executive agencies, such as ministries and embassies. They could also exercise control over much of the financial and investment resources in the area. first controlling the resources for reconstruction and initial investments, then continuing to accumulate resources, and ultimately turning into a local economic power, allied with central economic powers. This could take the same shape as political alliances between the center and the periphery. They could also come to dominate the social capital in these local environments, where their power comes from their image as local hero over years of confronting the regime. This dominance could create hierarchies in the area's social landscape.

## **Recommendations**

A political agreement between the government and the opposition could be accepted by some commanders and rejected by others. The proportion of acceptance and rejection will likely be directly related to how the agreement determines the form of a new

political regime in Syria. This is related to the fate of the current regime, and—most importantly—the political fate of President Bashar al-Assad. Accordingly, the following recommendations can be proposed:

- Armed opposition forces should try to form a central “communications room” with this class of local military commanders.
- Institutional powers should expand their knowledge of the connections between these commanders and their local communities.
- No political entity should issue a political or cultural ruling that applies to this class based on current exceptional developments. This is particularly important in order to avoid any assessment of the value of these commanders’ situation.
- Those involved in the negotiations should ensure that the political and social future of these political commanders is clearly and positively defined, in order to gain their relative acceptance of any political agreement.

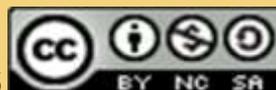
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