

# Indigenous Warfare: The Search for Partners in the Syrian Civil War

A Monograph

by

MAJ Brett W. Roederer  
US Army



School of Advanced Military Studies  
US Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, KS

2018

Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited

**REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE**

*Form Approved*  
OMB No. 0704-0188

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.  
**PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

<b>1. REPORT DATE</b> (DD-MM-YYYY) 24-05-2018	<b>2. REPORT TYPE</b> Master's Thesis	<b>3. DATES COVERED</b> (From - To) JUN 2017 - MAY 2018
--	--	--

<b>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</b> Indigenous Warfare: The Search for Partners in the Syrian Civil War	<b>5a. CONTRACT NUMBER</b>
	<b>5b. GRANT NUMBER</b>
	<b>5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER</b>

<b>6. AUTHOR(S)</b> MAJ Brett Roederer	<b>5d. PROJECT NUMBER</b>
	<b>5e. TASK NUMBER</b>
	<b>5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER</b>

<b>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> US Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301	<b>8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER</b>
--	---

<b>9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</b> Advanced Military Studies Program	<b>10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)</b>
	<b>11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)</b>

**12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**  
Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited

**13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES**

**14. ABSTRACT**  
This monograph seeks to answer the research question: "What criteria can US Special Forces apply to identify the correct partner force(s) among the available armed indigenous groups in Syria to gain the desired operational effects?" By analyzing current strategic guidance and applying unconventional warfare doctrine, special warfare planners can identify suitable partner forces on the convoluted Syrian battlefield. However, this monograph argues that current doctrine lacks a critical component, international palatability, which is necessary for assessing the long-term viability of a potential indigenous force in an unconventional warfare scenario. International palatability is the degree to which the international co

**15. SUBJECT TERMS**  
US Army; US Special Forces; unconventional warfare; proxy war; civil war; special warfare; Syria; SDF; FSA; Southern Front; Turkey; Russia; Iran; Jordan; Israel; Saudi Arabia; UN Security Council; ISIS; Bashar Al-Asad; international palatability

<b>16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:</b>			<b>17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT</b>	<b>18. NUMBER OF PAGES</b>	<b>19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON</b>
<b>a. REPORT</b>	<b>b. ABSTRACT</b>	<b>c. THIS PAGE</b>			MAJ Brett Roederer
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	43	<b>19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER</b> (Include area code)

## Monograph Approval Page

Name of Candidate: MAJ Brett W. Roederer

Monograph Title: Indigenous Warfare: The Search for Partners in the Syrian Civil War

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Monograph Director  
Patricia J. Blocksome, PhD

\_\_\_\_\_, Seminar Leader  
Jason A. Curl, COL

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies  
James C. Markert, COL

Accepted this 24th day of May 2018 by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, Graduate Degree Programs  
Robert F. Baumann, PhD

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Army Command and General Staff College or any other government agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

Fair use determination or copyright permission has been obtained for the inclusion of pictures, maps, graphics, and any other works incorporated into this manuscript. A work of the United States Government is not subject to copyright, however further publication or sale of copyrighted images is not permissible.

## Abstract

Indigenous Warfare: The Search for Partners in the Syrian Civil War, by MAJ Brett W. Roederer, US Army, 43 pages.

This monograph seeks to answer the research question: “What criteria can US Special Forces apply to identify the correct partner force(s) among the available armed indigenous groups in Syria to gain the desired operational effects?” By analyzing current strategic guidance and applying unconventional warfare doctrine, special warfare planners can identify suitable partner forces on the convoluted Syrian battlefield. However, this monograph argues that current doctrine lacks a critical component, international palatability, which is necessary for assessing the long-term viability of a potential indigenous force in an unconventional warfare scenario. International palatability is the degree to which the international community will accept any group as a governing entity at the conclusion of hostilities. After developing this new international palatability criteria, the monograph applies this new unconventional warfare component to an analysis of the current proxy warfare environment in Syria. A review of available literature and reporting from multiple news sources highlights three distinct armed Syrian opposition groups, which are analyzed in terms of feasibility, acceptability, and palatability. This monograph examines the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army (SF-FSA) to determine if any of these groups are suitable partners for the United States. The research indicates that of these groups, the SDF is the only force that is currently a viable US partner. The FSA is not viable, and the SF-FSA has potential to be viable, but more research is needed before making a definitive assessment. The SDF is presently the only indigenous force that both meets the doctrinal criteria for US partnership and could be considered internationally palatable enough to govern at least some parts of the country in a post-conflict Syria.

## Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	v
Acronyms .....	vi
Illustrations .....	vii
Tables .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	2
The Missing Category: International Palatability.....	14
Analyzing Syrian Opposition Groups .....	19
Case Study 1 – Free Syrian Army (FSA).....	22
Case Study 2 – Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) .....	27
Case Study 3 – Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army (SF-FSA) .....	34
Findings and Recommendations.....	39
Conclusion.....	41
Bibliography .....	44

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the most important person in my life, my wife Laura, for her indulgence, motivation, and steadfast love and support while I spent hours locked in the basement writing this monograph. The time I spend away from the family is by no means easy for her, and I am awed by her ability to make the family thrive during my frequent absences. I would also like to thank my monograph director, Dr. Patricia Blocksome, for providing me with timely feedback and organizing my random and chaotic thoughts into a somewhat coherent narrative.

Additionally, I sincerely appreciate my seminar leader, COL Jason Curl, for his guidance, leadership, and meticulous editing.

This monograph topic would not have even registered as a potential research idea if not for my experiences as a member of the Special Forces Regiment. To the leaders, teammates, and peers who I have been privileged to serve alongside, thank you for your mentorship, friendship, and the important work you do all over the world. I am grateful and humbled every day to be a part of such a unique and effective organization.

## Acronyms

ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
ATP	Army Techniques Publication
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CRS	Congressional Research Service
FM	Field Manual
FSA	Free Syrian Army
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MOC	Military Operations Center
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK	<i>Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan</i> (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekita ya Demokratik</i> (Democratic Union Party)
SAC	Syrian Arab Coalition
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SF-SFA	Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army
SNC	Syrian National Council
TC	Training Circular
TRADOC	Training and Doctrine Command
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USASOC	United States Army Special Operations Command
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USSF	United States Special Forces
UW	Unconventional Warfare
YPG	<i>Yekineyen Parastina Gel</i> (People's Defense Unit)

## Illustrations

Figure 1. The Impact of Third Party Intervention and Likelihood of Victory .....	16
--	----

## Tables

Table 1. Indigenous Force Assessment Criteria .....	18
---	----

Table 2. Findings .....	41
-------------------------	----

## Introduction

Unconventional warfare . . . remains uniquely Special Forces'. It is the soul of Special Forces: the willingness to accept its isolation and hardships defines the Special Forces Soldier. Its training is both the keystone and standard of Special Forces training: it has long been an article of faith, confirmed in over forty years of worldwide operations, that if you can do the unconventional warfare missions, you can do all others. The objective of unconventional warfare and Special Forces' dedication to it is expressed in Special Forces' motto: De Oppresso Liber (to free the oppressed).

–Robert M. Gates

Remarks at the dedication of the Office of Strategic Services Memorial

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, provided an environment for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to thrive. The conflict rapidly devolved into a proxy war between many local, regional, and global state and non-state actors. Multiple and competing interests by these actors have ensured a seemingly never-ending armed struggle which has produced one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent history.<sup>1</sup>

The long-term US strategic objectives and desired end state with respect to Syria remain unclear. National-level policy regarding the continued existence of the Bashar al-Assad regime has been mixed, with most recent attitudes trending toward a desire for Assad to have no role whatsoever in any future Syrian government.<sup>2</sup> This policy is directly at odds with the long-term objectives of US adversaries such as Iran and Russia.<sup>3</sup> However, US policy has remained steadfast in its ultimate goal to degrade and dismantle ISIS.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, US Special Forces (USSF) have worked with select Syrian opposition groups to achieve that end.

The United States has adopted a partnered, advisory, and low-footprint approach, and maintains a strong aversion to large numbers of American 'boots on the ground.' While the viability and long-term

---

<sup>1</sup> New Zealand Amnesty International, "Syria: The Worst Humanitarian Crisis of Our Time," April 7, 2015, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org.nz/syria-worst-humanitarian-crisis-our-time>.

<sup>2</sup> US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, White House Press Briefing, Washington, DC, July 7, 2017, accessed December 12, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/07/press-briefing-presidents-meetings-g20-july-7-2017>.

<sup>3</sup> General Joseph Votel, USCENTCOM Posture Statement, March 9, 2017, accessed December 13, 2017, [http://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Votel\\_03-09-17.pdf](http://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Votel_03-09-17.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

utility of this approach is debatable, from a purely military and special operations-specific standpoint, given that this is the approach, is the United States currently partnering with and advising the correct indigenous forces, or is it enabling the next generation of jihadists? What criteria constitutes the ‘right’ partner force for US sponsorship in an unconventional warfare environment, particularly within Syria? Using the various rebel groups and proxy forces currently operating within Syria as a case study, this monograph will seek to answer these questions. Ultimately, the goal of this monograph is to identify armed indigenous groups in Syria, if any, which fit the criteria for US partnership.

In order to be more effective in Syria, USSF must partner with the right indigenous forces who meet the following six doctrinal criteria: the resistance force is combating a weak and unconsolidated regime; the resistance has support among the population; the resistance controls favorable terrain; the resistance is willing to cooperate with the United States; the resistance shares compatible goals and ideology with the United States; and the resistance has capable leadership.<sup>5</sup> In addition, this monograph argues that current doctrine does not go far enough in terms of its ability to analyze potential resistance groups, and develops a new category, international palatability, for inclusion into this analysis framework. This monograph seeks to analyze three armed groups in Syria to determine if the United States can or should partner with them, and will provide an assessment of each group to determine if they are considered internationally palatable enough to govern at least some areas of the country post-conflict. Ultimately, this monograph will attempt to highlight the difficulties of choosing a viable partner force on the complex Syrian battlefield, and will inform policymakers and operational planners as they continue to evaluate the chosen approach.

## Literature Review

### Background of the Syrian Conflict

The roots of the Syrian Civil War can be traced to the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. In March of 1924, Ataturk, the leader of the new Turkish state that superseded the Ottoman

---

<sup>5</sup> US Department of the Army, Training Circular (TC) 18-01, Unconventional Warfare. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 2011), 1-3 – 1-5.

Empire, persuaded the Turkish assembly to abolish the sultanate and the Caliphate, thereby removing one of the most important symbols of Sunni Islamic authority and power.<sup>6</sup> This action led to the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, which set the reestablishment of the Caliphate as one of its primary goals.<sup>7</sup> The establishment and rise of the Muslim Brotherhood only exacerbated the Sunni-Shia divide by attracting followers to an ultra-conservative Salafist version of Islam. This organization has influenced the creation of the most powerful modern Sunni terrorist groups, to include Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and ISIS.<sup>8</sup> While the Muslim Brotherhood has been politically active since the 1920s, the year 1979 proved to be a watershed event in Middle Eastern politics. During this year, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution swept Iran, ushering in a Shia-dominated and authoritarian Islamic theocracy.<sup>9</sup>

The next two decades saw the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the US-led international response during Operation Desert Storm, an increasingly belligerent Saddam Hussein, and the rise of Al-Qaeda, the most prolific and deadly Salafi-jihadists the world had ever seen.<sup>10</sup> The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States by Al-Qaeda directly led to the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, as well as the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.<sup>11</sup>

The events of 9/11, and more specifically, the military actions taken in response to these attacks, represented a dramatic shift in US policy toward the Middle East. The destabilizing effects of long, protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with the adversarial actions taken by regional actors such as Iran and Hezbollah, allowed groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to capitalize on power

---

<sup>6</sup> Jay Sekulow. *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Can't Ignore* (New York, NY: Howard Books, 2014), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Investigative Project, "Bylaws of the International Muslim Brotherhood," ch. II, art. Para. E, accessed October 3, 2017, <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/673.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Farahat, "The Muslim Brotherhood, Fountain of Islamist Violence," *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2017), accessed December 14, 2017, <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/6562.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, "The Wars' Entangled Roots," in *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, ed. Beth Bailey and Richard Immerman (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 23-30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 334-336.

vacuums and existing sectarian strife to expand their political influence and territorial control. AQI targeted primarily American military members, rival Shia militant groups, and ethnic and religious minorities, from 2004 until its break with the main branch of Al-Qaeda in 2014.<sup>12</sup> The Islamic State, or ISIS, as it is commonly called, rose from the remnants of AQI, as the latter was largely dismantled and driven from Iraq as a result of American military operations between 2003-2011.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, created an unstable and ungoverned environment just across the poorly-controlled north-west Iraqi border; the safe haven provided by this Syrian territory allowed ISIS to thrive.

The Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 provided the spark that ignited the Syrian Civil War. In the spring of 2011, the government forces of Bashar al-Assad opened fire on several demonstrators who were protesting the arrest and torture of Syrian teenagers accused of creating anti-regime graffiti.<sup>14</sup> Further protests and heavy-handed government crackdowns led the unrest to devolve into all-out civil war by 2012, prompting foreign actors to join the fray. The internal conflict rapidly developed into a series of proxy wars, characterized by a multitude of domestic, regional, and global powers with competing agendas all supporting various armed factions.<sup>15</sup> Assad intentionally released imprisoned jihadists to join the opposition, thereby hijacking the rebel cause and decreasing the likelihood of international sponsors providing arms or equipment to the uprising.<sup>16</sup>

ISIS capitalized on the uprising against Assad by operating in ungoverned space in Syria and by announcing a merger with the jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013.<sup>17</sup> By 2014, ISIS gained enough size

---

<sup>12</sup> Seth G. Jones, James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler. *Rolling Back the Islamic State* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Glass. *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London: Verso Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-7.

<sup>16</sup> Rick Burns and Nickolas Zappone, "Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update," *TRADOC G-2 ACE Threats Integration* (August 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Hassan Hassan, "ISIS: A Portrait of the Menace That is Sweeping My Homeland," *Assyrian International News Agency*, August 17, 2014, accessed December 15, 2017,

and strength to achieve a massive military breakthrough in Iraq, proclaiming a global caliphate, establishing a ‘state’ over large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, and announcing its capital in Raqqa.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Russia and Iran, in conjunction with Hezbollah, pursued their interests and regional ambitions by continuing to support the Assad regime, supplying it with arms, ammunition, and military advisors.<sup>19</sup>

## Current Environment

The current situation in Syria is a convoluted web of competing interests at the regional and global level, and can best be characterized as a battle for influence. While there is not space in this monograph to fully describe all actors currently engaged or interested in the conflict, key points in the complexity of the environment are described in the following paragraphs.

The Bashar al-Assad regime is a Ba’athist political party dominated by Alawite Arabs, an ethnic minority in Syria. Iran and its proxy militant arm, Hezbollah, support the Assad government primarily because Iran views its relationship with Syria as critical to extending its influence on Lebanese Shiites in its ongoing power struggle against Western-supported Sunni Arabs.<sup>20</sup> Russia also supports the Assad regime and maintains a permanent, overt military presence in the country. Of particular note, Russia has a naval base on the deep-water port on Syria’s Mediterranean coast, which it views as critical to projecting power throughout the Middle East and Europe.<sup>21</sup>

Syrian Kurds, concentrated primarily in the northern part of the country, maintain a long-standing opposition to Assad’s oppressive government and have enjoyed military success against ISIS. However,

---

<http://www.aina.org/news/20140817143123.pdf>. Jabhat al-Nusra rejected a merger with ISIS after this announcement, and as a result, most of its foreign jihadists defected to ISIS.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>19</sup> Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 2-4.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, et al. *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, 95-96.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, 3-4.

the Syrian Kurds' political and military apparatuses maintain close ties with the Turkish-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey views as a terrorist group.<sup>22</sup>

Persian Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan, support anti-Assad and anti-ISIS opposition groups in Syria. However, some, but not all, of these states actively support Salafist anti-Assad groups that the United States opposes.<sup>23</sup>

The United States currently supports armed opposition groups who are combating ISIS, and has enjoyed a great deal of military success in this regard. However, the United States has hesitated to support groups who are actively opposing the Assad regime.

Most of the literature concerning the Syrian Civil War focuses specifically on the counter-ISIL campaign and the heavy-handed brutality of the Bashar al-Assad regime.<sup>24</sup> Several documents and research projects also address the involvement of regional state actors such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, research illustrates what support these states provide to their armed proxy forces in Syria. However, the bulk of the available academic study and research in this area either focuses on the nature of proxy war broadly, or it offers potential strategic solutions for the United States in its fight against ISIS. Very little work exists on operationalizing such an approach, nor is there a comprehensive analysis of the most viable potential US partner forces currently operating in Syria. Therefore, this monograph seeks to fill that research gap by focusing specifically on analyzing the partner

---

<sup>22</sup> Jones, et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London: Verso Press, 2016); Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*; Jones, et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*; Ole Solvang, "Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons." *Human Rights Watch*, May 1, 2017, accessed February 15, 2018, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/syria0517\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/syria0517_web.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Burns and Zappone, "Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update;" Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Co, 2014); Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US response," *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 6, no. 2 (2015); Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

forces available to the United States. There are a multitude of armed opposition groups in Syria, which for the purposes of this monograph are defined as those groups who are engaged in militant opposition to ISIS and/or the Assad regime. This monograph discusses the most prominent of these groups in detail in a later section.

## US Military Strategy

The US military's strategy in Syria can best be summarized as limited involvement, emphasizing a "by, with, and through" approach.<sup>26</sup> While this monograph will proceed under the assumption that the basic strategic guidance from the Obama administration remains unchanged, several significant developments in Syria during the spring of 2017, coupled with statements issued by US national-level policymakers, are also acknowledged and addressed. The Obama administration's policy toward Syria shifted over time between 2011-2016. Initially, President Obama opted for a disengagement approach toward battling Salafi terror groups in the Middle East, which was highlighted by his decision to withdraw American troops from Iraq in 2011.<sup>27</sup> However, in the wake of the alarming military gains by ISIS in 2014, this policy shifted. The Obama administration gradually reintroduced American troops to the region, and relied heavily on the use of special operations forces, intelligence assets, and airpower to retake terrain from ISIS.<sup>28</sup> The foundation of this strategy focused on providing support to indigenous forces, and leveraging these forces to not only retake ground ceded to ISIS, but also to hold this ground in order to prevent a resurgent extremist group from filling the void.

The Trump administration appears to have adopted this latter approach from the previous administration, and added to it. On February 28, 2017, the US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley issued the following statement to the United Nations in New York City: "Some say we should focus more on ISIS. The United States condemns any use of chemical weapons by ISIS or any other non-

---

<sup>26</sup> Votel, USCENTCOM Posture Statement.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, xiv.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

state actor. We are determined to defeat ISIS, and we will defeat ISIS. Their use of chemical weapons only adds to that urgency. But ISIS' barbarity is no excuse for Assad's barbarity. Both used chemical weapons. Both should face the consequences."<sup>29</sup>

In April 2017, Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians.<sup>30</sup> Over the ensuing months, a gradual change in US policy appeared to emerge: American political leaders increasingly indicated that Bashar al-Assad must not remain in power. During a press briefing on July 7, 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in response to a question about whether the United States believes that Assad has no role in the future government of Syria, responded, "Yes, our position continues to be that we see no long-term role for the Assad family or the Assad regime."<sup>31</sup> White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Ambassador Haley repeated this sentiment during a press briefing on September 15, 2017. In this speech, Ambassador Haley commented that, "I think we're not going to be satisfied until we see a solid and stable Syria, and that is not with Assad in place."<sup>32</sup> These comments, repeated several times by multiple members of national policy-making architecture, indicate that the United States now defines success in Syria as the military defeat of ISIS *and* the removal of Assad as the political leader of the country. The US military must consider this as a strategic goal or end state when assessing potential armed rebel groups within Syria. While previous US policy dictated that any indigenous partner forces in Syria target only ISIS and not the Syrian government, recent policy indicates that this is no longer the case. This removes a constraint from military

---

<sup>29</sup> Ambassador Nikki Haley, Remarks to the United Nations, *Explanation of Vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Syria Chemical Weapons* (New York, NY: February 28, 2017), accessed December 12, 2017, <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7691>.

<sup>30</sup> Ole Solvang, "Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons," *Human Rights Watch*, May 1, 2017, accessed February 15, 2018, [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/syria0517\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/syria0517_web.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Tillerson, White House Press Briefing.

<sup>32</sup> Ambassador Nikki Haley, White House Press Briefing, Washington, DC, September 15, 2017, accessed December 12, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/15/press-briefing-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-national-security-advisor>.

planners, and in particular, broadens the aperture for USSF as they assess the viability for partnership of various armed indigenous groups.

The body of work concerning the specifics of the US military's approach in Syria is considerably less than other, more well-documented aspects of the Syrian Civil War such as the ongoing humanitarian crisis. The most recent US Central Command (USCENTCOM) Posture Statement emphasizes the “by, with, and through” approach, which is a cornerstone of US Special Forces doctrine.<sup>33</sup> Recent news reporting also indicates the efficacy of this strategy by delineating the battlefield successes of various US-supported proxies in Syria. However, nearly all available literature is vague and broad when discussing the specifics of these various groups, in terms of their long-range objectives, ideology, and overall suitability for US sponsorship. Considering the evolution in recent strategic guidance concerning Syria, this provides an opportunity to examine *all* available partner forces in Syria, from a fresh perspective, through the lens of existing unconventional warfare doctrine.

No available strategic guidance or analysis indicates any single opposition group within Syria who the United States seeks to ally with. During the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, USSF had a clear partner force in the Northern Alliance and a defined enemy in the Taliban and al-Qaeda.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, USSF partnered with the Iraqi Kurds in support of the conventional US invasion to defeat the Iraqi army and oust Saddam Hussein from power.<sup>35</sup> In Syria, the common enemy is currently ISIS, but recent national-level guidance appears to indicate that the Assad regime falls into the ‘enemy’ category as well. The problem, from a US military standpoint, is identifying suitable opposition groups who meet US criteria for sponsorship, and who consider ISIS *and* Assad enemies. Many of these opposition groups exist, but few meet the US self-imposed criteria for partnership. This

---

<sup>33</sup> Votel, USCENTCOM Posture Statement.

<sup>34</sup> Terry Anderson, “9/11: Bush’s Response” in *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, ed. Beth Bailey and Richard Immerman (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 57-58.

<sup>35</sup> LTC (R) Mark Grdovic, “Task Force 103 during Operation Iraqi Freedom” (personal account of LTC Grdovic while serving as the Operations Officer for 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group).

monograph will examine these opposition groups against a framework of current doctrine and will evaluate the likely consequences of engaging in a military partnership with each group.

### Proxy War and US Doctrine

There is a large field of literature that discusses the nature of proxy war. Historical examples of various proxy wars, particularly during the Cold War era, are readily available. In addition, USSF unconventional warfare doctrine covers this topic extensively.<sup>36</sup>

The academic body of work discusses proxy war in general, and examines the topic from a multitude of angles. Andrew Mumford, in his article, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” argues that proxy warfare will be a significant feature of warfare in future conflicts.<sup>37</sup> General Joseph Votel, Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland, Charles Connett, and Will Irwin, in their article, “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone,” make a compelling case for the utility and effectiveness of unconventional warfare activities (i.e., US-sponsored proxy war) in the ‘gray zone,’ defined as an environment of conflict outside the realm of peace, but short of the threshold constituting war.<sup>38</sup> Christopher Linebarger and Andrew Enterline, in their article entitled “Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars,” discuss the effects of proxy wars, and how in some instances, intervention on behalf of rebel groups can tip the scales significantly against government forces.<sup>39</sup> However, most of the literature does not provide a deep analysis of the US criteria required to support a rebel group or a resistance movement.

---

<sup>36</sup> The primary doctrine manuals examined for this monograph include US Army TC 18-01 (2011), US Army TC 18-02 (2016), US Department of the Army, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-05.1, C1, Unconventional Warfare (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), and US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-05, Special Operations (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Mumford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” *The RUSI Journal*, 158, no. 2 (2013): 40-46, accessed August 6, 2017, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph L. Votel, Charles T. Cleveland, Charles T. Connett, and Will Irwin. "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Linebarger and Andrew Enterline, “Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars” in *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* ed. T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016), 93-108.

In fact, much of the academic work reviewed by this monograph advocates the US approach of empowering and leveraging indigenous forces to attain favorable US military and strategic objectives in Syria, but none of the scholarly work provides criteria to determine which indigenous forces should benefit from U.S. sponsorship, nor does it analyze how to implement such strategic ideas at the operational level.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike academic research on proxy wars, USSF doctrine does provide specific criteria for choosing proxy forces to work with, which are summarized under the two broad categories of ‘feasibility’ and ‘appropriateness.’<sup>41</sup> According to unconventional warfare doctrine, support to a resistance movement is considered *feasible* after conducting an assessment to determine if the following conditions in the operational environment exist: a weakened or unconsolidated regime in power; popular support for resistance activities; and resistance movement control of favorable terrain.<sup>42</sup> US support to a resistance is considered *appropriate* when the following conditions exist: the resistance is willing to cooperate with the United States; the resistance has compatible objectives and ideology; and there is capable resistance leadership available for direction.<sup>43</sup>

Feasibility is primarily an analysis of the physical and human dimensions of the operational environment to determine whether it is conducive to unconventional warfare activities. The first subcomponent of feasibility is a weak or unconsolidated government or occupying power currently exerting control over a population.<sup>44</sup> It is extremely difficult to organize a successful resistance against a

---

<sup>40</sup> For an academic analysis of proxy warfare, see Benedetta Berti and Yoel Guzansky, “Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2014): 25-34; Andrew Muford, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict,” *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013): 40-46; Chris Loveman, “Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 2, no. 03 (2002): 29-48; Geraint Alun Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 3 (2014): 522-538; Bertil Dunér, “Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 18, no. 4 (1981): 353-361.

<sup>41</sup> US Army TC 18-01 (2011), 1-3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

regime with a strong internal security apparatus, particularly one serving an indigenous government that has had years to consolidate its power. However, a resistance has a higher probability of success against a recently formed foreign occupying power. Additionally, a regime that cannot project power into or effectively control all of its terrain, or requires significant external support to maintain control, is considered sufficiently weak or unconsolidated for a resistance movement to thrive.<sup>45</sup>

The will of the population is the second requirement to consider when determining the feasibility of US sponsorship to a resistance. The population “must possess not only the desire to resist but also the will to bear the significant hardships associated with repressive countermeasures by the government or occupying power.”<sup>46</sup> Since resistance movements are generally of long duration, the distinction between a population’s willingness to resist and its actual willingness to sustain prolonged hardship is critical. It is also important to consider that the attitudes of populations who have recently been overtaken by a hostile foreign occupying power will likely differ significantly from those who have spent years suffering under an oppressive regime. Finally, when assessing a population’s will, planners should assess whether the population has maintained its unique cultural, ethnic, and religious societal norms, or whether it has fully assimilated to the norms of the occupying power in order to survive.<sup>47</sup>

The final factor to consider when determining feasibility is whether or not the resistance controls favorable terrain. Favorable terrain, defined as “human and physical terrain that provides safe haven,” is critical to a resistance force’s success and longevity.<sup>48</sup> Favorable terrain can be an area that is physically difficult to access, such as mountains or jungles, or it can be an artificial safe haven such as an urban

---

<sup>45</sup> US Army TC 18-01 (2011), 1-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-4.

ghetto or an international border. Whatever the nature of the safe haven, it must provide the resistance with a secure area to train, organize, recuperate, resupply, and recruit support.<sup>49</sup>

Appropriateness is the second category that planners use to determine whether to provide support to a resistance movement. While feasibility primarily focuses on the assessment of the operational environment, appropriateness concerns the characteristics of the resistance movement itself.<sup>50</sup> The first aspect of the resistance that make it favorable to receive US support is whether it is willing to cooperate with the United States.<sup>51</sup> This willingness to cooperate must be genuine, but this is a fairly straightforward and binary assessment which should be determined early in the planning process.

The second and most critical aspect when determining appropriateness is assessing whether the resistance shares compatible goals and ideology with the United States.<sup>52</sup> The political and military goals of the resistance must overlap with those of the United States, and this assessment should go beyond simply sharing a common enemy. Planners must consider long-term US strategic guidance and US policy when assessing whether a resistance's goals are aligned. Additionally, planners must also consider the overarching ideology of a resistance to ensure it is compatible with the United States. Ideologies which are counter to US interests tomorrow will effectively trump any short-term military goals or political agendas that are compatible today.

Finally, when determining whether support to a resistance is appropriate, planners are required to determine whether a resistance has capable leadership. This factor is difficult to determine without an in-depth understanding of the resistance force's organization, military leadership at various levels, and political leadership. According to doctrine, "this level of fidelity normally requires a degree of first-hand observation in order to develop an educated assessment."<sup>53</sup> However, planners can make preliminary

---

<sup>49</sup> US Army TC 18-01 (2011), 1-5.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-5.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-6.

assessments of a resistance force's leadership capability by examining the organization's previous battlefield performance, its method of fighting, longevity, or its treatment of civilians during the course of the conflict prior to US involvement.

The available literature and doctrine provides unconventional warfare planners and practitioners with a foundation to understand the nuances and dynamics of proxy warfare. Unconventional warfare doctrine clearly describes the attributes that a potential partner force must possess, as well as the characteristics of the operational environment that must be present, prior to providing US sponsorship to such a partner force. However, the doctrine focuses primarily on the potential effectiveness of an indigenous force in an ongoing unconventional warfare campaign and does not adequately address the long-term implications of US sponsorship. In today's globally connected environment, conflict is no longer local or even regional. Therefore, any proxy force engaged in armed conflict must gain the approval of the international community in order to gain and maintain power at the conclusion of hostilities.

### The Missing Category: International Palatability

By its very nature, unconventional warfare and proxy wars always take place within the context of an ongoing civil war or domestic armed conflict. An armed opposition group or insurgency rebels against a hostile regime or governing power, and a third party intervenes to assist the opposition. In many cases, other parties intervene to assist the governing power as well, resulting in a protracted proxy conflict. As such, it is necessary to examine civil wars, third party intervention in civil wars, and how these conflicts are typically resolved.

According to authors Linebarger and Enterline, in their article, "Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars," civil wars are increasingly less likely to end in decisive military victory the longer they last, and the more factions that are involved.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, after approximately

---

<sup>54</sup> Linebarger and Enterline, "Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars," 94.

five years of conflict, the odds that either side in a civil war will achieve military victory is nearly zero.<sup>55</sup>

Third party intervention which supports non-state actors tends to significantly aid rebel forces, but counterintuitively, third-party support to the government of a state can harm the cause of government forces because it reduces the legitimacy of the existing government, thereby making it more difficult to quell the uprising. The research suggests that the most likely outcome for the conclusion of the Syrian Civil War at this point is some sort of negotiated political settlement.<sup>56</sup> The graphic below illustrates the likelihood of victory for government or rebel forces over time and the impact of third party intervention in the outcome of the conflict.

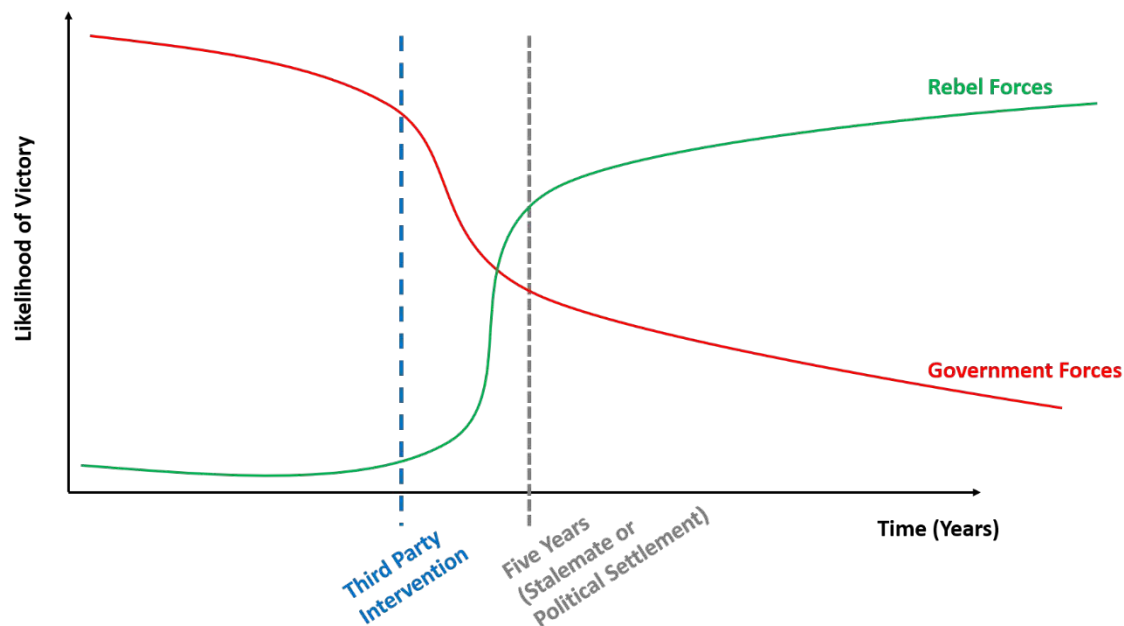


Figure 1. The Impact of Third Party Intervention and Likelihood of Victory.

Source: Original graphic by author, data from Christopher Linebarger and Andrew Enterline, “Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars” in *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* ed. T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016), 93-108.

<sup>55</sup> Linebarger and Enterline, “Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars,” 100.

<sup>56</sup> The research regarding civil war outcomes is conflicted. Some scholars believe that third-party intervention is more likely to prolong the conflict by introducing more arms and military expertise into the environment. However, most scholars agree that the longer a civil war continues, the less likely the conflict will be resolved militarily. Therefore, in the case of the Syrian Civil War, it is reasonable to anticipate that a political solution is the most likely outcome. For more information on civil war outcomes, see *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* ed. T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016).

In addition to examining the duration of the conflict to determine likely outcomes, Linebarger and Enterline's research suggests a secondary implication for proxy wars, for if a political settlement is the expected outcome, that settlement must be accepted by not only the state and the rebel group, but also by all of the sponsors that have supported both the state and the rebel group in the conflict. Therefore, this monograph posits that within the context of proxy war, UW planners must consider the broader international political context when assessing and evaluating a potential partner for US sponsorship. As such, this monograph introduces another category, termed 'international palatability', that must be considered alongside the doctrinally defined 'feasibility' and 'appropriateness'.

International palatability concerns the degree to which the global community will accept the sponsored proxy force becoming the legitimate governing body. By way of illustration, one should consider the case of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion of 1979-1989.<sup>57</sup> The mujahedeen were fighting the Soviet-backed Afghanistan government, and this armed force received significant levels of military aid from the United States and a coalition of other nations. The mujahedeen were a capable military force, and U.S. policymakers considered it feasible and appropriate to sponsor their armed struggle against the Soviets. Militarily, this plan was successful – the Soviets were driven from Afghanistan and the local government ultimately collapsed. However, US support for the mujahedeen vanished after the military victory because policy-makers viewed them as an unpalatable governing entity composed of religious zealots, who by then had transitioned into an Islamic movement known as the Taliban. Pakistan continued to provide rigorous support to the Taliban, primarily because they viewed “the Pashtun-dominated religious movement in Afghanistan as a means to guarantee ‘strategic depth’ against their archrival India.”<sup>58</sup>

This monograph argues that international palatability is another category that must be considered when assessing whether to provide support to a resistance force. The logic behind the addition of this

---

<sup>57</sup> Reynolds, “The Wars’ Entangled Roots: Regional Realities and Washington’s Vision,” 24-27.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 28.

factor is the underlying assumption that any resistance force under consideration for US sponsorship will require the support of the international community in today's globally interconnected society if it hopes to gain and maintain power. Under this reasoning, how can one determine whether a resistance can eventually be supported and accepted by the international community? What measurements can be applied to determine this potential level of support?

This monograph proposes that if three or more permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are willing to accept a resistance movement as an acceptable governing body, then that resistance element is considered to be internationally palatable. The following chart captures the proposed evaluation metrics discussed above:

**Table 1. Indigenous Force Assessment Criteria**

	<u>Requirements</u>	<u>Metric 1</u>	<u>Metric 2</u>	<u>Metric 3</u>
<b>Feasible</b>	Weak or Unconsolidated Regime	Regime cannot control all of its terrain	Regime requires external support	Regime does not have a strong internal security apparatus
	Will of the Population	Desire to resist	Will to endure hardship	Maintained unique identity
	Favorable Terrain	Resistance has a safe haven to train, organize, and recuperate	Physical or artificial safe haven	Indigenous logistics systems exist or can be developed
<b>Appropriate</b>	Willing to Cooperate with the US	Yes or no based on initial assessment		
	Compatible Goals and Ideology	Operational goals must be at least partially aligned with the U.S.	Ideology not in conflict with long term US policy goals	
	Capable Leadership	Operational and tactical level military leaders must be present	Some semblance of political structure or leadership	Subjective assessment whether these people exist or can be developed
<b>Internationally Palatable</b>	Likely to be Accepted by Majority of UNSC	Three or more permanent members of UNSC likely to approve of the resistance force over the existing regime	This assessment based on strategic level input and guidance	

Source: Created by author.

Assuming that the Syrian Civil War will most likely end in a negotiated political settlement, proxy warfare planning in the United States must take into account the international palatability of supported groups. Planners should take steps now to ensure that the indigenous forces the United States sponsors in this conflict maintain the strongest possible position at the negotiating table. The armed forces that will ultimately control the political destiny of Syria must have the mechanisms and infrastructure in place at the conclusion of hostilities to hold terrain and effectively govern. Additionally, these entities must have enough power and political clout internally to maintain their gains, garner international

support, and address the grievances of the populace effectively enough to keep the threshold of conflict and civil unrest beneath the level of armed uprising.

It is unclear if any of the armed opposition groups in Syria are presently capable of achieving these aims without significant international support. Therefore, it is imperative that the proxy forces who are being supported by the United States in the current conflict are capable of garnering, or are at least palatable enough in the eyes of the global community to receive, broad-based international support. If the ‘winners’ at the end of the Syrian conflict (or the strongest players at the bargaining table) are not entities that the United Nations can realistically consent to supporting and securing for the long term, then the entire endeavor will likely become an exercise in futility, whether or not the US-supported group emerges militarily victorious.

### Analyzing Syrian Opposition Groups

As described above, updated strategic guidance and the current international political landscape provides UW planners an opportunity to take a fresh look at the problem and create an operational approach in accordance with US policy. This monograph theorizes that by applying the doctrinal categories of ‘feasibility’ and ‘appropriateness,’ with the addition of ‘international palatability’ toward US-sponsored proxy forces in Syria, the United States can broker a favorable conclusion to the Syrian conflict.

There are literally dozens, if not scores, of armed groups currently operating within Syria. Nearly all groups have competing interests, ideologies, and end states, but several of the larger and more dominant groups have some shared objectives. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) report from January 2017, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US response*, provides a good overview of all belligerents in the country. Likewise, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Threat Report from August 2017, *Iraq and Syria Update*, lists all of the major armed groups in the country as well as their international sponsors. Additionally, an article published in August 2016 by Cody Roche, “Syrian

Opposition Factions in the Syrian Civil War” provides an excellent description of even the most obscure rebel groups in country, to include an overview of their recent activities.<sup>59</sup>

However, the available literature does not provide a deep analysis of these groups against the doctrinal criteria for US sponsorship as described above. As of the time of this writing, no current research provides an in-depth examination of any Syrian opposition group. This monograph will investigate the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Free Syrian Army (FSA), and the Southern Front, as the three primary opposition groups in country, to determine if these organizations meet the criteria for US sponsorship as per doctrine. These three groups were chosen as the focus of this analysis for several reasons. First, there is enough literature on each group to develop a baseline understanding of the group’s aims and capabilities. Second, all of these groups are large enough that they might realistically be able to have a seat at the table in any political settlement. Finally, these opposition groups all consider both Assad and ISIS to be their enemy. Therefore, this monograph will apply the metrics described in Table 1 as a lens through which to evaluate the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army (SF-FSA). Each of these groups will be analyzed against these metrics to determine which of these groups, if any, are suitable partner forces for the United States in Syria. One required factor, which is common to all of these groups, is the prerequisite that they are battling a weak and unconsolidated regime.

The environment in Syria certainly validates the requirement that a weak and unconsolidated regime be in power. As discussed above, this monograph classifies the Bashar al-Assad government and ISIS as the two primary occupying powers exerting control in Syria. The Assad government is incapable of projecting power or control to large swaths of the Syrian countryside. At its peak in 2014, ISIS controlled over 100,000 square kilometers of territory, evenly dispersed between Iraq and Syria.<sup>60</sup> The

---

<sup>59</sup> Cody Roche, “Syrian Opposition Factions in the Syrian Civil War,” *Medium*, August 10, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, [https://medium.com/@badly\\_xeroxel/syrian-opposition-factions-in-the-syrian-civil-war-5d8412c9d7e6](https://medium.com/@badly_xeroxel/syrian-opposition-factions-in-the-syrian-civil-war-5d8412c9d7e6).

<sup>60</sup> Jones, et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, xi. Also see map on page xii of this report for a detailed depiction of the map of Syria and the area controlled by ISIS during this timeframe.

Syrian military is currently reliant on Iran for its strategy and survival.<sup>61</sup> The government of Syria is dependent upon Russia to ensure Assad's continued grip on power; Russia's status as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council has protected the Assad regime from international pressure.<sup>62</sup> From a western political perspective, one can safely assume that Syria lacks any inherent power and control over its country if adversarial and destabilizing nations such as Iran and Russia provide its primary means of external support.

Likewise, ISIS can be considered a weak and unconsolidated regime. In September 2017, after nearly nine months of fighting, the ISIS-controlled city of Mosul, Iraq fell to US-supported forces, and very few ISIS fighters surrendered. In October 2017, thousands of ISIS fighters surrendered to Kurdish forces after a relatively short fight for the last ISIS stronghold in Iraq, the city of Hawija.<sup>63</sup> Less than two weeks later, on October 17, 2017, the BBC reported that the self-proclaimed ISIS "capital" of Raqqa, Syria fell to Syrian Kurdish fighters supported by the United States.<sup>64</sup> It is clear at the time of this writing that ISIS is no longer effectively functioning as an occupying power, and any remnants of an ISIS controlled 'caliphate' in Iraq or Syria will likely evaporate.

This monograph will proceed under the well-documented assumption that the Bashar al-Assad government, as well as ISIS, are weak and unconsolidated. Since the criteria for determining whether a weak or unconsolidated regime is in power can be considered constant for Syria, subsequent case studies will not examine this issue further. Therefore, of the seven criteria described in Table 1, the examination of the three potential proxy groups described below will focus on the following six: will of the

---

<sup>61</sup> Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe* (London: Verso Press, 2016), 140.

<sup>62</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response." *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 6, no. 2 (2015): 7.

<sup>63</sup> Rod Nordland, "ISIS Fighters, Having Pledged to Fight or Die, Surrender en Masse," *New York Times*, October 8, 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/10/08/world/middleeast/isis-iraq-surrender.html>.

<sup>64</sup> BBC Staff, "Raqqa: IS 'capital' falls to US-backed Syrian forces," *BBC*, October 17, 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41646802>.

population, favorable terrain, willing to cooperate with the United States, compatible goals and ideology (beyond simply being willing to fight against ISIS and the Assad government), capable leadership, and internationally palatable to at least three members of the UNSC.

## Case Study 1 – Free Syrian Army (FSA)

### FSA Overview

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is the original armed opposition group in Syria. In the wake of the 2011 protests that sparked the Syrian Civil War, junior military officers from the Syrian Army defected to form the core of the FSA.<sup>65</sup> While the group claimed leadership over the several armed opposition groups in Syria, many local leaders did not recognize its authority due to trust issues and an inability to define shared goals.<sup>66</sup> Today, the group is essentially an umbrella organization that is plagued by attrition and defection to other groups. Its numbers were once estimated at nearly 60,000 fighters, but because it primarily targets the Assad regime, it has borne the brunt of combat casualties sustained at the hands of the Syrian military.

Additional estimates say the FSA consists of over 2,500 different armed factions, making it a fractured, incoherent, and loosely affiliated alliance.<sup>67</sup> This case study will examine the Free Syrian Army without the Southern Front, which is only loosely affiliated with the FSA and is large and distinct enough to be considered a separate group. Therefore, this monograph will examine the Southern Front in a subsequent case study.

### Feasibility

As stated in the case studies introduction section, this monograph assumes that the FSA is battling a weak and unconsolidated regime in the Assad government and ISIS. Therefore, it is necessary

---

<sup>65</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US response,” 4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, 41.

to begin this case study by examining whether the FSA maintains support among the population.

Due to the disparate and fractured nature of the FSA, it is difficult to discern with any reliability that the organization enjoys popular support. To date, the group's activities in Syria can best be described as a "decentralized insurgency."<sup>68</sup> It is reasonable to assume that since the group has yet to develop a clear chain of command, centralized leadership, and shared goals, and the fact that the groups who fight under its banner are more concerned with achieving localized security objectives, it seems then, at best, that the FSA enjoys limited popular support. In the key city of Aleppo, the majority of the population has become disenfranchised with the FSA due to its inability to secure the city, while its mere presence inside city limits incites the continued wrath of the Assad regime.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, this paper assesses that while the FSA, or specific local militia groups associated with it, does have low levels of support among the population in certain areas of the country, its support does not rise to a sufficient threshold across the areas it seeks to extend its influence. This lack of support is primarily due to its inability to protect the civilian populace from the overwhelming military superiority of the Assad regime.

A resistance movement's ability to garner widespread popular support goes hand in hand with its ability to control favorable terrain. At the beginning of its revolutionary activities, the FSA was able to carve out some areas in which it maintained safe haven.<sup>70</sup> In mid-2013, approximately fifty percent of Syria's population fell under the control of opposition groups (to include Kurdish, FSA, and al-Qaeda linked jihadist groups), but the FSA only controlled a fraction of this territory, dispersed in isolated pockets around the country.<sup>71</sup> However, after several years of civil war, infighting, attacks by jihadist

---

<sup>68</sup> Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand." *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, Analysis Paper, no. 26 (November 2016), accessed November 3, 2017, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr\\_20161123\\_free\\_syrian\\_army1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf).

<sup>69</sup> Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, 116-122.

<sup>70</sup> Adam Lucente and Zouhir Al Shimale, "Free Syrian Army Decimated by Desertions," *Al-Jazeera*, November 11, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/free-syrian-army-decimated-desertions-151111064831800.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014), see map on page 5 of this report.

groups, and desertions, the FSA elements in the strategically important northern areas of the country have been largely marginalized, and they currently are unable to hold significant amounts of terrain.<sup>72</sup>

### Appropriateness

The FSA is willing to cooperate with the United States and has received limited support throughout the Syrian Civil War. In December 2015, during an interview with the BBC, an FSA spokesman declared the FSA to be “the West’s best partner on the ground in Syria.”<sup>73</sup> The FSA has also accepted aid from the United States, which began as non-lethal humanitarian assistance at the beginning of the war, and slowly evolved to include light weapons and other forms of military assistance. The US government has been hesitant to supply the FSA with arms due to the fear that this material will fall into the hands of terrorist organizations.<sup>74</sup>

The disparate factions which compose the FSA, and their conflicting goals and ideology, make this group problematic when considering their suitability for US sponsorship. As mentioned previously, the FSA began as a secular and democratic revolutionary movement in opposition to the Assad regime. Thousands of jihadists, recently released from Syrian prisons at the start of the uprising in 2011, essentially hijacked the FSA’s cause.<sup>75</sup> Syrian jihadists have always been particularly irritated by the Assad government, primarily due to its secular ideology and its alignment with Shia-dominated groups and governments in the region. Times of crisis, such as the Syrian Civil War, give Syrian Islamist groups the perfect opportunity to target the Assad regime.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Burns and Zappone, “Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update,” 31.

<sup>73</sup> Mark Lowen, “FSA: ‘We are the West’s best partners’,” *BBC*, December 3, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-34993039/what-role-will-free-syrian-army-play-in-is-fight>.

<sup>74</sup> Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War*, 11.

<sup>75</sup> Burns and Zappone, “Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update,” 9.

<sup>76</sup> Aron Lund, “Syrian Jihadism,” *UI brief* 13 (September 14, 2012): 11-12, accessed December 15, 2017, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/32833405/Aron.Lund.Syrian.Jihadism.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513392842&Signature=t9ujr11CjHFCDBo5w8UjrtW%2BqIk%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DSyrian\\_Jihadism.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/32833405/Aron.Lund.Syrian.Jihadism.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513392842&Signature=t9ujr11CjHFCDBo5w8UjrtW%2BqIk%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DSyrian_Jihadism.pdf).

In addition to the disparate groups associated with the FSA, factions fighting under the FSA flag tend to shift loyalties as a matter of convenience or practicality. The more traditional Sunni Arabs appear to be more comfortable operating alongside hardline Islamist factions linked to al-Qaeda, as opposed to the more secular factions who have avoided working with Islamist factions.<sup>77</sup> As of April 2017, reporting suggests that some al-Qaeda linked factions have shifted from Islamist symbols and rhetoric in favor of a nationalistic approach, likely in an attempt to garner international support.<sup>78</sup> An example of this shift includes a statement issued via Twitter from Saleh al-Hamwi, a former al-Nusra Front Shura member, in which he said, “The time has come to declare that the Islamic project in the revolution has failed and we apologize to our great people for the burdens we have borne and we must retreat to advance the clean national project.”<sup>79</sup>

All of this is incredibly problematic for the United States when considering whether to support the FSA. The FSA’s stated goals and ideology at the beginning of its revolution were wholly congruent with American values.<sup>80</sup> However, absent strong leadership, the FSA has devolved into a fractured movement that exists less as an organized revolution and more as an umbrella term for any armed group that is battling the Assad regime. Because of these factors, the FSA, when considered holistically, does not appear to be capable of committing to shared goals and ideology compatible with US interests.

An analysis of the leadership of the FSA further illustrates this point. At the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, political groups merged to form the Syrian National Council (SNC), which still nominally represents the FSA abroad.<sup>81</sup> However, both the SNC political leadership and the FSA military

---

<sup>77</sup> Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War*, 8-9.

<sup>78</sup> Roche, “Factions Fighting in the Syrian Civil War.”

<sup>79</sup> Saleh al-Hamwi, Twitter post, April 25, 2017 (5:29 a.m.), accessed November 3, 2017, <https://twitter.com/asseraaalsham/status/856847591153258497>.

<sup>80</sup> Scott Bobb, “Syrian Rebels Share Common Goal,” *Voice of America*, August 23, 2012, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/syrian-rebels-share-common-goal/1494623.html>.

<sup>81</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response,” 5.

leadership have proven incapable of providing effective strategic guidance, or preventing the influence and infiltration of Islamist factions in the FSA ranks. Furthermore, the SNC itself includes a large block of members from the Muslim Brotherhood, a political party that was outlawed in Syria in the 1980s.<sup>82</sup> Research indicates that the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its claims as a peaceful political organization, is itself a terrorist organization that has operated with impunity for nearly a century.<sup>83</sup> Clearly, the presence of all of these factors indicate a lack of acceptable political and military leadership among the FSA.

### International Palatability

The FSA used to be internationally palatable; the Obama administration provided lethal support to this group as early as 2012.<sup>84</sup> During this same timeframe, UNSC permanent members France and the United Kingdom provided political support and non-lethal aid to the FSA.<sup>85</sup> However, this early support from the United States and its European allies appears to have waned, primarily due to the fact that the FSA has morphed from a secular, pro-democratic movement to a disparate and unorganized insurgency lacking strategic guidance and infected with armed Islamist groups.

The FSA does not currently appear to be an internationally palatable organization to exercise governmental control in a post-conflict Syria. As of 2012, the group received limited support from the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar; Russia and Iran oppose the group and openly accuse state sponsors of the FSA of supporting terrorists.<sup>86</sup> The organization no longer enjoys capable leadership, and

---

<sup>82</sup> S.B., “Who are the Syrian Opposition?” *The Economist*, June 20, 2013, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2013/06/economist-explains-12>.

<sup>83</sup> Cynthia Farahat, “The Muslim Brotherhood, Fountain of Islamist Violence,” *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2017), accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/6562.pdf>.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Hosenball, “Obama Authorizes Secret Support for Syrian Rebels,” *Reuters*, August 1, 2012, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-obama-order/obama-authorizes-secret-support-for-syrian-rebels-idUSBRE8701OK20120802>.

<sup>85</sup> Reuters Staff, “Syrian Rebels Elect Head of New Military Command,” *Reuters*, December 8, 2012, accessed February 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-rebels/syrian-rebels-elect-head-of-new-military-command-idUSBRE8B70AJ20121208>.

<sup>86</sup> Aron Lund, “Syrian Jihadism,” *UI brief* 13 (September 14, 2012): 13, accessed December 15, 2017, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/32833405/Aron.Lund.Syrian.Jihadism.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=>

its goals and ideology are no longer coherent enough to be considered acceptable by the international community. Absent an ability to separate the original members and leaders of the FSA (those with secular, non-sectarian, and democratic ambitions), empowering this group risks inadvertently strengthening factions with ties to al-Qaeda and other extremist groups.

## Case Study 2 – Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

### SDF Overview

The genesis and general composition of this organization warrants specific attention due to its complexity. The SDF is an armed opposition group in Syria composed primarily of Syrian Kurds. In 2015, in the wake of Kurdish *Yekineyen Parastina Gel* (YPG, or People’s Defense Unit) military success against ISIS in the vicinity of Kobane, Syria, the Kurdish YPG elements merged with non-Kurdish rebel groups, to include Syrian Arabs, to form the SDF.<sup>87</sup> As of 2016, the unit’s numbers were dominated by approximately 35,000 fighters from the YPG, which was augmented by approximately 7,000 members of the Syrian Arab Coalition.<sup>88</sup> The size, effectiveness, and a lack of a suitable government partner force in Syria make the SDF an attractive potential partner for the United States.<sup>89</sup>

### Feasibility

One of the doctrinal criteria to consider under ‘feasibility’ is the requirement for the resistance to maintain support among the population. The Syrian Kurds are united with the larger, multi-state Kurdish community through a common language, culture, and ethnicity. Given the fact that the YPG have traditionally defended, and currently lead the fight on behalf of, the Syrian Kurdish population, it is

---

AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513392842&Signature=t9ujr11CjHFCDBo5w8UjrtW%2BqIk%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DSyrian\_Jihadism.pdf.

<sup>87</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, “Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response,” 6-7.

<sup>88</sup> Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, 41.

<sup>89</sup> Jones, et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, xv.

reasonable to assume that they enjoy some level of support among the populace.<sup>90</sup> In addition to its ethnic and historical links to the sizeable Kurdish population in Syria, the SDF maintains popular support through its conduct of operations. While the YPG elements of the SDF are widely regarded as the most militarily effective, Syrian Arab elements of the SDF have recently taken the lead in clearing and securing traditionally Sunni Arab areas.<sup>91</sup> This ensures that the SDF is likely able to interact positively and maintain support with various Syrian populations.

A key factor in the success of the SDF can be attributed to the relative autonomy of the Kurds in Syria. In 2012, due to the increased pressure caused by the Syrian Civil War on the Assad regime, Syria withdrew its troops from Kurdish areas of north and north-east Syria.<sup>92</sup> This resulted in an unprecedented level of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and ultimately gave them favorable terrain to continue their resistance. Owning favorable terrain is the third and final criteria required to meet the standard of 'feasibility' when considering whether to provide US sponsorship.

As of the spring of 2017, the SDF, and specifically, the Kurdish YPG, appears to control a significant amount of terrain along the Turkish border in north and north-east Syria.<sup>93</sup> In December 2016, then Secretary of Defense Ash Carter "announced that the force management level for US personnel in Syria would increase to potentially allow the deployment of up to 500 individuals."<sup>94</sup> More recent reporting from March 2017 indicates that approximately 500 American troops are deployed near the city

---

<sup>90</sup> BBC Staff, "Who are the Kurds?" *BBC*, October 31, 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29702440>.

<sup>91</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State," (Washington, DC: June 1, 2016): 11, accessed March 7, 2018, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160601\\_R44513\\_5495271f00c8aa5dd47b42cfec2503c8f370a256.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160601_R44513_5495271f00c8aa5dd47b42cfec2503c8f370a256.pdf).

<sup>92</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Co, 2014), 103.

<sup>93</sup> Burns Nickolas Zappone, "Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update," see map on page 29 of this report.

<sup>94</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response," 11.

of Manbij, which is an area under Kurdish control.<sup>95</sup> The fact that the SDF controls so much ground bordered by a NATO ally, and that the US government feels comfortable enough to deploy at least 500 troops to the area, indicates that this organization meets the criteria of holding favorable terrain.

### Appropriateness

Clearly, the SDF is willing to cooperate with the United States. Since 2016, American troops have supported and advised the SDF, and those troops are still deployed to SDF-controlled areas.<sup>96</sup> At the strategic level, the Kurdish-dominated SDF is astutely aware of the ever-present and dominating role the United States plays in Middle Eastern politics, and would very much like to have its enduring support.<sup>97</sup>

However, it is imperative for the SDF, or any potential rebel group, to maintain compatible goals and ideology with the United States before it can receive American sponsorship in a UW campaign. Politically, the SDF maintains compatibility with the United States to some degree. Although there are many disparate political parties among the Syrian Kurds, (some of which are openly communist), the *Partiya Yekita ya Demokratik* (PYD, or Democratic Union Party) dominates the political landscape of the SDF. By maintaining direction and control of its military arm, the YPG, the PYD has become the largest and most disciplined Syrian Kurdish political party, exercising state-like functionality.<sup>98</sup> In September 2017, the PYD held free elections and executed a peaceful transfer of power. This is compatible with American democratic ideals.<sup>99</sup>

In fact, many of the Syrian Kurds' political goals are compatible with the views of the United

---

<sup>95</sup> Al-Jazeera Staff, "Syria's Bashar al-Assad calls US forces 'invaders'," *Al-Jazeera*, March 11, 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/syria-bashar-al-assad-calls-forces-invaders-170311163549058.html>.

<sup>96</sup> The Economist Staff, "Anyone for Raqqa?" *The Economist*, November 10, 2016, accessed November 2, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21709967-there-less-offensive-islamic-states-capital-meets-eye-anyone>.

<sup>97</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, 75.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>99</sup> Rudaw Staff, "PYD Elect New Co-Chairs at Party Congress," *Rudaw*, September 28, 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/28092017>.

States. The PYD is largely secular and pro-western. The previous leader of the PYD, Salih Muslim, is quoted as saying “We see our future in Western democracy... There is no doubt that the interests of the American people are not contrary to ours.”<sup>100</sup> The ultimate determination of the PYD’s alignment with US policy should be determined by elected American government officials, who must decide the level of political support to provide to the Syrian Kurds and the SDF, and must determine the degree to which their goals align with US interests. While some of the SDF’s political goals (primarily, the goal of an independent Kurdish state) are potentially problematic for the United States to support due to the complex nature of international relations in the region, it is the assessment of this monograph that the SDF’s military goals are completely compatible with US interests.

Militarily, the goals of the SDF are wholly congruent with those of the United States. The SDF has stated that they are not aligned with Assad or any jihadist opposition group in Syria.<sup>101</sup> For its part, the United States views the YPG, and by extension, the SDF, as its most capable ally on the ground in the fight against ISIS in Syria.<sup>102</sup> The battlefield performance of the SDF, namely, its recent defeat of ISIS in Raqqa, demonstrates its military effectiveness and its compatibility with US military goals.<sup>103</sup> Taken as a whole, the SDF meets the minimum standard required for US sponsorship in terms of sharing compatible goals, interests, and ideology.

Furthermore, the SDF appears to have capable leadership willing to accept US direction, the third and final criteria required by the doctrinal definition of ‘appropriateness.’ While very little scholarly work exists to prove or assess the effectiveness of the SDF leadership, the research illustrated by this case study

---

<sup>100</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, 90-91.

<sup>101</sup> BBC Staff, “Raqqa: IS ‘capital’ falls to US-backed Syrian forces,” *BBC*, October 17, 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41646802>.

<sup>102</sup> The Economist Staff, “Anyone for Raqqa?” *The Economist*, November 10, 2016, accessed November 2, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21709967-there-less-offensive-islamic-states-capital-meets-eye-anyone>.

<sup>103</sup> BBC Staff, “Who are the Kurds?”

offers clear indications that such leadership exists. The political activity of the PYD, in terms of its ability to attain relative autonomy and function as a pseudo-state in northern Syria, as well as its ability to garner international support and negotiate on behalf of the Syrian Kurds, indicates functional and capable leadership.<sup>104</sup> The fact that the YPG continues to support the PYD, and that the YPG continues to enjoy battlefield success against ISIS, indicates a clear chain of command and capable military leadership as well. Furthermore, recent joint operations involving American advisors and SDF units indicate effective US leadership of this organization.<sup>105</sup>

### International Palatability

As mentioned previously, the United States views the SDF as the most viable partner in Syria for the purposes of the counter-ISIS campaign. As a largely secular and pro-Western organization, they appear to be a palatable force to provide a semblance of governance and control in at least some areas of a post-ISIS Syria. The problem, however, is Turkey.

The Turkish government views Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria as a direct threat to the Turkish state.<sup>106</sup> There are many reasons for Turkey's position on this issue, but the primary one involves the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK, or Kurdistan Workers Party). The PKK is affiliated with the PYD, and the former has been waging an ongoing insurgency against Turkey for decades.<sup>107</sup> Turkey views the YPG as the Syrian arm of the PKK, which both the United States and Turkey classify as a terrorist group.<sup>108</sup> The United States does not view the YPG as a terrorist group, despite Turkish claims that the two groups are connected. Meanwhile, fifteen to twenty percent of Turkey's population is Kurdish, and

---

<sup>104</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, see Chapter 9, "Autonomy."

<sup>105</sup> Mariya Petkova, "What Will Happen to Post-ISIL Raqqa?" *Al-Jazeera*, October 17, 2017, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/10/sdf-captures-syria-raqqa-city-isil-171013110014050.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Jones, et al., *Rolling Back the Islamic State*, 98.

<sup>107</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the US and Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (2015): 102-111.

<sup>108</sup> Blanchard, Humud, and Nikitin, "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response," 10.

the Turkish government, since the creation of the modern state of Turkey, has always been suspicious of Kurdish intentions and has staunchly opposed any Kurdish bid for independence in the region. Turkey fears its own sizeable Kurdish population, spearheaded by the PKK, would elect to break away from the Turkish state.<sup>109</sup>

As a result, the United States has been forced to walk a political tightrope by providing nuanced support to the Syrian Kurds while not antagonizing its long-standing NATO ally to the north.<sup>110</sup> Turkey is important to the United States not only for its important geopolitical location as the crossroads between the Middle East and Europe, but also because US military bases are located there. The strategic value of having a permanent military presence on Turkish soil is critical for the US ability to pursue its interests in Europe and the Middle East. Militarily, the basing, overflight rights, and logistical lines of communications afforded by the US-Turkish alliance provide critical components of American operational reach. This is why Turkey's regression from a secular democracy to a religious autocracy in recent decades is alarming, and potentially damaging, to this long-term alliance.<sup>111</sup>

Clear evidence exists that Turkey is covertly supporting al-Qaeda affiliated jihadist groups in Syria.<sup>112</sup> Through its support of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Turkey is using its counter-ISIS campaign as a smokescreen to attack Kurds in Syria.<sup>113</sup> A NATO member providing support to an obvious foe with Salafi jihadist ideologies clearly in conflict with United States interests is alarming. In the words of Charles Glass, in his book *Syria Burning*, Turkey is "an ally but no friend."<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Hugh Pope, "Kurds, Turkey and the Unbearable Vagueness of Ethnicity," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 19, no. 1/2 (2013): 127.

<sup>110</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, 80-81.

<sup>111</sup> Cihan Tugal, "In Turkey, the Regime Slides from Soft to Hard Totalitarianism," *Open Democracy* 17 (2016).

<sup>112</sup> Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*, 81.

<sup>113</sup> Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, 141.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Other countries in the region also maintain tenuous outlooks toward the SDF in particular and the Kurds in general. If Syrian Kurds, led by the SDF, serve as a model for the sizeable Kurdish population in the region, Syria's neighbors will not view their success on the battlefield favorably. Iran and Turkey view an independent Kurdistan as a political and economic risk. Iran is not supportive of the SDF because they fear that their success will embolden Iran's own repressed Kurdish population.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Iraq faces problems with state cohesion given the growing autonomy and stated self-determination goals of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq are incentivized to allow the SDF military success against ISIS while opposing any Kurdish ability to gain a level of power or autonomy that would threaten the interests of those countries. Meanwhile, Russia, for strategic reasons of its own, has chosen to side with the Syrian state and is actively opposing the SDF militarily.<sup>117</sup> Russia's long-term support for the Assad regime, as well as its recent tacit support to Turkey's policy aims, indicate its opposition to the SDF.<sup>118</sup>

However, UNSC permanent members France and the United Kingdom provide military and political support to the SDF. In 2016, France openly admitted to supporting the SDF militarily, and news reporting indicates that British special operations troops are operating alongside the SDF as well.<sup>119</sup> Additionally, France and the United Kingdom have maintained diplomatic ties with the Syrian Kurdish

---

<sup>115</sup> Alireza Nader, Larry Hanauer, Brenna Allen, and Alli G. Scotten, *Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>117</sup> Reuters Staff, "US-Backed Alliance says Russian Jets Struck its Fighters in east Syria," *Reuters*, September 25, 2017, accessed February 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-backed-alliance-says-russian-jets-struck-its-fighters-in-east-syria-idUSKCN1C0118>.

<sup>118</sup> Umut Uras and Tamila Varshalomidze, "What is Russia's End Game in Afrin?" *Al-Jazeera*, January 23 2018, accessed February 1, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/russia-green-light-turkeys-afrin-offensive-180123064315810.html>.

<sup>119</sup> RFI Staff, "France Admits Special Forces are advising Syrian Rebels," *RFI*, September 6, 2016, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://en.rfi.fr/france/20160609-france-admits-special-forces-are-advising-syrian-rebels>; and Jiyar Gol, "Syria Conflict: On the Frontline in Battle for IS-Held Manbij," *BBC*, June 15, 2016, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36539723>.

political leadership.<sup>120</sup>

Ultimately, this problem of international palatability boils down to the weighing of strategic options. American policymakers must calculate the risk involved in supporting the SDF at the cost of antagonizing Turkey. Given that Turkey appears to be the most vocal opponent of Kurdish autonomy in Syria, but acknowledging that Turkey is supportive of al-Qaeda linked groups, this paper argues that the SDF is an internationally acceptable entity to provide governance in some parts of Syria – particularly in areas that are predominantly Kurdish. While Turkey’s concerns should be given consideration, it may be possible to provide diplomatic reassurance to Turkey that Kurdish autonomy in Syria will not empower the PKK in Turkey. Additionally, the YPG appears to have garnered some support from UNSC members France and Russia. Therefore, while Turkey may protest, it is reasonable to conclude that the United States should consider the SDF to have enough international palatability to receive full US and coalition support.

### Case Study 3 – Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army (SF-FSA)

#### Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army (SF-FSA) Overview

The Southern Front (SF-FSA) faction is loosely aligned with the Free Syrian Army, but does not fall under the FSA’s military or political control. Since the Southern Front is essentially a splinter group of the FSA and it conducts operations almost exclusively in the southern section of Syria independent of other groups operating under the FSA moniker, it is distinct enough to warrant specific analysis in its own case study. The SF-FSA is geographically situated along Syria’s southern border and is estimated to have approximately 30,000 fighters.<sup>121</sup> While the group is loosely affiliated with the FSA, nuanced differences exist in terms of its organization, goals, location, and leadership. This case study will explore those

---

<sup>120</sup> NRT Staff, “PYD Leader Salih Muslim Meets French President at Elysee Palace,” *NRT*, May 9, 2017, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.nrttv.com/en/Details.aspx?Jimare=14386>; ANF Staff, “PYD Co-President to Speak at UK Parliament,” *ANF News*, March 12, 2015, accessed February 16, 2018, <https://anfenglish.com/news/pyd-co-president-muslim-to-speak-at-uk-parliament-10646>.

<sup>121</sup> Burns and Zappone, “Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update,” 32.

differences while examining its suitability as a potential recipient of US sponsorship. The United States, Jordan, and indirectly, Israel currently support this group.<sup>122</sup> The SF-FSA can best be described as a moderate opposition coalition, and its value lies in its ability to serve as a potential buffer against Iranian influence in southern Syria.<sup>123</sup>

## Feasibility

Since the SF-SFA is a relatively new organization, very little reporting or academic research exists to definitively articulate its level of popular support within Syria. However, recent analysis indicates that the SF-FSA is the most coherent and capable branch of the FSA, and has managed to maintain its status as a largely secular and pluralistic organization.<sup>124</sup> The group currently maintains its hold on a swath of territory in southern Syria along the Jordanian border, which is advantageous due to its strategic proximity to Damascus, and the fact that Jordan is a staunch American ally.<sup>125</sup> Additionally, the SF-FSA seems to be positioning itself politically for a post-conflict Syria by attempting to strengthen its political apparatus and conducting civil outreach.<sup>126</sup>

Absent peer-reviewed academic work in reference to the SF-FSA, the factors listed above do not equate to a conclusive assessment on whether the organization enjoys popular support or maintains favorable terrain. However, the literature that does exist serve as positive indicators. Based on news reporting from multiple outlets, and the limited academic analysis conducted to date, this monograph will

---

<sup>122</sup> Mona Alami, "Next Israel-Hezbollah Confrontation Could be in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, July 26, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/syria-south-ceasefire-israel-hezbollah-confrontation.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Kahl, Colin H., Ilan Goldenberg, and Nicholas Heras, "A Strategy for Ending the Syrian Civil War," *Center for a New American Security*, June 7, 2017, accessed December 15, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-strategy-for-ending-the-syrian-civil-war>.

<sup>124</sup> Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, 41.

<sup>125</sup> Burns and Zappone, "Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update," 9, 32.

<sup>126</sup> Lina Khatib, "Syria's Last Best Hope: The Southern Front," *The National Interest*, July 6, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-last-best-hope-the-southern-front-13263>.

proceed under the assumption that the SF-FSA meets the minimum threshold required for US sponsorship by maintaining acceptable levels of popular support and controlling favorable terrain.<sup>127</sup>

### Appropriateness

The SF-FSA is willing to cooperate with the United States. Currently, the group is maintaining operations and control of territory in southern Syria at the behest of US and Jordanian support.<sup>128</sup> Under the direction and control of the Military Operations Center (MOC) in Jordan, the SF-FSA receives funding, training, and support from the Jordanian and American governments.<sup>129</sup> Since the SF-FSA shares many interests with Jordan and the United States, and FSA elements have borne the brunt of attacks from ISIS and the Assad regime, this group has shown its willingness to cooperate with the United States in exchange for its continued support.

An examination of the goals and ideology of the SF-FSA highlights a number of interests this group shares with the United States. Interestingly, some commentators view the SF-FSA as the west's "last best hope" for Syria, due to its proximity to Damascus, its opposition to the Assad regime and ISIS, and its de facto role as the vanguard against Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah militant groups in southern Syria.<sup>130</sup> The SF-FSA's track record of consistently battling the Assad regime, Iranian-backed militant groups, and groups linked to ISIS and al-Qaeda are also good for the national interests of long-term

---

<sup>127</sup> Zachary Laub, "Who's Who in Syria's Civil War," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 28, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/background/whos-who-syrias-civil-war>; Mona Alami, "Next Israel-Hezbollah Confrontation Could be in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, July 26, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/syria-south-ceasefire-israel-hezbollah-confrontation.html>; Lina Khatib, "Syria's Last Best Hope: The Southern Front," *The National Interest*, July 6, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-last-best-hope-the-southern-front-13263>; Mohammad Ersan, "Extremist Expansion in Southern Syria Puts Jordan on Guard," *Al-Monitor*, March 13, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/syria-southern-front-islamist-factions-threat-jordan.html>.

<sup>128</sup> Burns and Zappone, "Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update," 32.

<sup>129</sup> Mohammad Ersan, "Extremist Expansion in Southern Syria Puts Jordan on Guard," *Al-Monitor*, March 13, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/syria-southern-front-islamist-factions-threat-jordan.html>.

<sup>130</sup> Lina Khatib, "Syria's Last Best Hope: The Southern Front," *The National Interest*, July 6, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-last-best-hope-the-southern-front-13263>.

American allies Jordan and Israel. In fact, Israel, along with Jordan and the United States, currently provide support to some elements of the SF-FSA for this reason.<sup>131</sup>

The ideology of the SF-FSA likewise appears to have remained mostly consistent with the original ideology espoused by the original members of the FSA at the start of the revolution. This group has created ethical guidelines for its members, and has largely rejected extremists in its ranks.<sup>132</sup> However, the SF-FSA is estimated to consist of approximately fifty-eight separate armed groups, oftentimes pursuing their own objectives, which is indicative of the localized nature of their struggle.<sup>133</sup>

The ad hoc nature of the armed groups operating under the SF-FSA moniker indicate a lack of clear and effective strategic leadership. Some leaders of this group appear to have identified this problem and have begun developing a political organization to advance their cause abroad. Indeed, this is the area in which the SF-FSA requires the greatest amount of external support, and if provided, such support could potentially result in developing the unity of effort this organization needs.<sup>134</sup> Doctrinally, any rebel force must have capable leadership prior to receiving US support. However, this need not be a disqualifying factor in the event that some level of military leadership is present within the opposition. While non-doctrinal, some professional literature within the Army special operations community advocates for an increased role for USSF in waging ‘political warfare.’ This idea calls for enhancing the legitimacy of a partner force’s political apparatus through influence operations, external messaging, advising, and propaganda.<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Mona Alami, “Next Israel-Hezbollah Confrontation Could be in Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, July 26, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/syria-south-ceasefire-israel-hezbollah-confrontation.html>.

<sup>132</sup> Khatib, “Syria’s Last Best Hope: The Southern Front.”

<sup>133</sup> Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, 36.

<sup>134</sup> Khatib, “Syria’s Last Best Hope: The Southern Front.”

<sup>135</sup> USASOC, “SOF Support to Political Warfare,” March 10, 2015, accessed December 14, 2017, [http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Support%20to%20Political%20Warfare%20White%20Paper%20v2.3-RMT%20\(10MAR2015\)%20%20.pdf](http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Support%20to%20Political%20Warfare%20White%20Paper%20v2.3-RMT%20(10MAR2015)%20%20.pdf).

Recent analysis indicates that the SF-FSA has the potential to be an extremely effective opposition force in Syria. With its high numbers of US-vetted military leaders, it could possibly serve as a model for a nationalistic and pluralistic security apparatus in post-conflict Syria.<sup>136</sup> Given these factors, it is the assessment of this monograph that the SF-FSA currently possesses capable military leadership, but its political leadership is lacking. However, there is a possibility that through extended US influence and support, this group can develop the necessary political leadership.

### International Palatability

It is imperative that any of the opposition groups to emerge from the ashes of post-conflict Syria are able to provide governance to at least some portions of the country. However, it is equally important that such a group govern the areas under its control in a secular and pluralistic fashion absent the influence of Islamist organizations. Syria is traditionally a mosaic of surprising diversity and tolerance, consisting of a diverse mixture of ethnicities, religions, and sects.<sup>137</sup> As such, any government in post-conflict Syria must be representative of such a mosaic to be considered internationally palatable. If the SF-FSA can address some of the issues this case study identifies, they can potentially fill this vacuum. Currently, insufficient evidence exists to determine the international community's, and particularly the UNSC's, opinion toward the SF-SFA. Limited reporting indicates that France has provided some level of support to the SF-SFA, but the scope and scale of this support is unclear.<sup>138</sup> The United States and Russia also entered into talks with Jordan to coordinate a ceasefire in southwest Syria that favored the SF-SFA, which indicates at least tacit support to this group.<sup>139</sup> However, as a standalone

---

<sup>136</sup> Nicholas Heras, Bassam Barabandi, and Hassan Hassan, "President Trump Should Invest in Southern Syria's Rebels," *Fair Observer*, January 23, 2017, accessed November 3, 2017, [https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle\\_east\\_north\\_africa/donald-trump-syrian-war-latest-news-analysis-34505/](https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/donald-trump-syrian-war-latest-news-analysis-34505/).

<sup>137</sup> Glass, *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*, 74.

<sup>138</sup> Fox News Staff, "US-Backed Syrian Rebels Make New Push South of Damascus," *Fox*, November 28, 2014, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/11/28/us-backed-rebels-make-new-push-in-southern-syria.html>.

<sup>139</sup> Sam Heller, "Saving America's Syrian Ceasefire," *The Century Foundation*, October 20, 2017, accessed February 16, 2018, <https://tcf.org/content/report/saving-americas-syrian-ceasefire/>.

organization absent significant levels of external support, it currently does not possess the power or political capital required to be a palatable governing apparatus in the eyes of the international community. Although, from the viewpoint of western powers involved in Syria, it is currently the “last best hope” of the west to serve as a moderate alternative to the ruling Assad regime or hostile occupying powers such as ISIS.<sup>140</sup>

## Findings and Recommendations

After analyzing the FSA, SDF, and SF-FSA against the criteria listed above, this monograph determines that the SDF is currently the only suitable and capable US partner force in Syria. This group meets all of the criteria for a feasible, acceptable, and internationally palatable group, and arguably, the international community would accept it as an effective governing entity in a potential Syrian settlement. Therefore, according to these criteria, the SDF should receive broad-based US support, to include USSF advisors, and the research cited by this monograph indicates that this is already occurring. However, the ongoing tension with Turkey regarding the role of the SDF is the issue that must be addressed if the SDF is to be successful in any long-term peace settlements. As of the time of this writing, Turkey appears to be willing to escalate conflict in Syria in order to suppress Kurdish territorial gains; this risk of conflict is something that must be dealt with at the diplomatic level to set the conditions for successful military support to this proxy force.

The FSA initially had potential to become a beneficiary of US support during the early stages of the Syrian Civil War. However, the evolution of this group has caused it to become a shadow of its former self and has endowed it with less than desirable qualities. More specifically, the FSA no longer enjoys popular support, does not control favorable terrain, and as a whole, does not share compatible goals and ideology with the United States. It is impossible to speculate how effective this group could have been if the United States had chosen to intervene more forcefully on its behalf in the early stages of

---

<sup>140</sup> Lina Khatib, “Syria’s Last Best Hope: The Southern Front,” *The National Interest*, July 6, 2015, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-last-best-hope-the-southern-front-13263>.

the conflict, but it is the assessment of this monograph that broad-based support to this group at this point would cause more harm than good, due to the FSA's current affiliation with Sunni extremists.

The SF-FSA, on the other hand, displays many traits that could potentially make it a viable partner force in Syria. However, there are too many unknowns about the group in order to make an accurate assessment or recommendation in terms of whether it is prudent for the United States to support this organization. The military and political leadership capability of the SF-FSA is unclear. Additionally, the international palatability of this group, in the eyes of key regional and global actors, is uncertain at this time; it has received some international support, but the level and commitment of that support is unclear. Ultimately, this monograph assesses that more research and analysis of this group is required before the US government decides to provide wholesale support to the SF-FSA. Judging from the low level of support currently provided to this group, as opposed to more capable organizations such as the SDF, it appears that American policymakers are currently operating under the same conclusion. Table 2, below, summarizes the findings of all three case studies.

**Table 2. Findings.**

<b>Feasibility</b>			
	<b>Weak and Unconsolidated Regime</b>	<b>Support of the Populace</b>	<b>Favorable Terrain</b>
<b>FSA</b>	X		
<b>SDF</b>	X	X	X
<b>SF-FSA</b>	X	X	X
<b>Appropriateness</b>			
	<b>Willing to Cooperate with the US</b>	<b>Compatible Goals and Ideology</b>	<b>Capable Leadership Available for Direction</b>
<b>FSA</b>	X		
<b>SDF</b>	X	X	X
<b>SF-FSA</b>	X	X	
<b>International Palatability</b>			
<b>FSA</b>			
<b>SDF</b>	X		
<b>SF-FSA</b>			

Source: Created by author.

### Conclusion

The academic literature and available doctrine concerning proxy war, unconventional warfare, and civil war is broad in scope. While this body of work provides useful information to military planners, very little material exists to guide decision makers in the process of selecting viable US-sponsored proxy

forces. Unconventional warfare doctrine does provide certain criteria that the operational environment and the potential resistance force must meet prior to proceeding with US sponsorship. However, these criteria provide few, if any, measurable metrics for planners to apply.

This is understandable because unconventional warfare is, by its very nature, complex and ambiguous. A planner's assessment of an indigenous force is also subjective, and commanders at every level are expected to apply sound judgment informed by strategic guidance and a thorough understanding of the operational environment. Through an analysis of doctrine, this monograph attempted to develop better ways of assessing the doctrinal criteria planners must consider when evaluating whether to provide US support to an armed insurgency. After conducting this analysis, and with the understanding that conflicts are no longer localized in today's globally connected world, this monograph argues that doctrine is missing the element of international palatability.

In a proxy war scenario, a third party provides some level of support to an armed indigenous force to secure a political objective. The proxy force that a third-party nation supports must be considered internationally palatable enough in the eyes of the global community to govern, in some capacity, post-conflict. This monograph examined three of the most prominent armed groups in Syria and analyzed their potential for US sponsorship through the lens of existing doctrine and their assessed level of international palatability.

The research suggests that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is the least viable partner force of the three groups evaluated in the previous pages of this monograph. The FSA does not enjoy the support of the population and does not control favorable terrain, and therefore it is not feasible for the United States to support this group. The FSA also does not share compatible goals and ideology with the United States and does not have capable leadership available to take direction from the United States, which makes US sponsorship inappropriate. These factors, combined with the infiltration of Salafi jihadists into the ranks of the FSA, indicate that this organization also falls well short of internationally palatable to govern any part of Syria at the conclusion of hostilities.

On the other hand, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) meet all criteria for US sponsorship. All available information suggests that the United States recognizes this fact and is providing the SDF with full support. This monograph also assesses that the SDF is internationally palatable enough to govern in at least some parts of Syria whenever the conflict reaches a political settlement. While Turkey and other regional actors may protest the growing strength, influence, and autonomy of the SDF, they are presently the best available partner force for the United States in Syria.

The Southern Front of the Free Syrian Army (SF-FSA) is the most ambiguous of the armed groups this monograph examined. More research and analysis is needed in order to form a complete assessment of whether the United States should fully support the SF-FSA. However, the research conducted to date indicates that the SF-FSA possesses many desirable qualities that the United States seeks in an indigenous partner force. It is unclear if the SF-FSA has capable military and political leadership available for direction due to its decentralized nature, and it is also unclear if this group meets the minimal standard for international palatability. Nevertheless, the research shows that the United States is providing the SF-FSA with limited support, and this group likely has the potential to be a viable partner.

While no one can predict the changes in the operational environment or the evolutions in strategic guidance that will emerge in response to this conflict, it is reasonable to anticipate that the United States will most likely not make a large commitment of conventional forces in Syria. Ultimately, the Syrian Civil War is a battlefield well suited to the strengths and capabilities of the Special Forces regiment. USSF must continue to evaluate the situation, assess its indigenous forces, and update its operational approach accordingly to provide the best military advice to policymakers so they can make informed decisions in the best interest of the United States.

*De Oppresso Liber*

## Bibliography

- Alami, Mona. "Next Israel-Hezbollah Confrontation Could be in Syria." *Al-Monitor*, July 26, 2017. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/syria-south-ceasefire-israel-hezbollah-confrontation.html>.
- Anderson, Terry. "9/11: Bush's Response." In *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, edited by Beth Bailey and Richard Immerman, 54-74. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Berti, Benedetta, and Yoel Guzansky. "Saudi Arabia's Foreign Policy on Iran and the Proxy War in Syria: Toward a New Chapter?" *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 8, no. 3 (2014): 25-34. Accessed November 3, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23739770.2014.11446600>.
- Biddle, Stephen, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker. "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance." *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2017): 1-54. Accessed September 4, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2017.1307745>.
- Blanchard, Christopher, Carla E. Humud, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin. "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US response." *Current Politics and Economics of the Middle East* 6, no. 2 (2015).
- Brown, Seyom. "Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 243-257. Accessed September 4, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2015.1134047>.
- Burns, Rick, and Nickolas Zappone. "Threat Report: Iraq and Syria Update." *TRADOC G-2 ACE Threats Integration*, August 2017.
- Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- Congressional Research Service. "Kurds in Iraq and Syria: U.S. Partners Against the Islamic State." Washington, DC, June 1, 2016. Accessed March 7, 2018. [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160601\\_R44513\\_5495271f00c8aa5dd47b42cfec2503c8f370a256.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20160601_R44513_5495271f00c8aa5dd47b42cfec2503c8f370a256.pdf).
- Dunér, Bertil. "Proxy Intervention in Civil Wars." *Journal of Peace Research* 18, no. 4 (1981): 353-361.
- Ersan, Mohammad. "Extremist Expansion in Southern Syria Puts Jordan on Guard." *Al-Monitor*, March 13, 2017. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/syria-southern-front-islamist-factions-threat-jordan.html>.
- Farahat, Cynthia. "The Muslim Brotherhood, Fountain of Islamist Violence." *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2017). Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/6562.pdf>.
- Glass, Charles. *Syria Burning: A Short History of a Catastrophe*. London: Verso Press, 2016.
- Gunter, Michael. *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War*. London: Hurst & Co, 2014.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the US and Turkey." *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 1 (2015): 102-111.
- Haley, Nikki. Remarks to the United Nations. Explanation of Vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Syria Chemical Weapons, February 28, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017. <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7691>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. White House Press Briefing, September 15, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/15/press-briefing-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-national-security-advisor>.
- Heras, Nicholas, Bassam Barabandi, and Hassan Hassan. "President Trump Should Invest in Southern Syria's Rebels." *Fair Observer*, January 23, 2017. Accessed November 3, 2017. [https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle\\_east\\_north\\_africa/donald-trump-syrian-war-latest-news-analysis-34505/](https://www.fairobserver.com/region/middle_east_north_africa/donald-trump-syrian-war-latest-news-analysis-34505/).
- Hughes, Geraint Alun. "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 3 (2014): 522-538. Accessed March 3, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2014.913542>
- Jenkins, Brian Michael. *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014.
- Johnson, Matthew. "The Growing Relevance of Special Operations Forces in U.S. Military Strategy." *Comparative Strategy* 25, no. 4 (2006): 273-296. Accessed September 9, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01495930601028622?src=recsys>
- Jones, Seth, James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler. *Rolling Back the Islamic State*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017.
- Kahl, Colin H., Ilan Goldenberg, and Nicholas Heras. "A Strategy for Ending the Syrian Civil War." Center for a New American Security, June 7, 2017. Accessed December 15, 2017. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-strategy-for-ending-the-syrian-civil-war>.
- Khatib, Lina. "Syria's Last Best Hope: The Southern Front." *The National Interest*, July 6, 2015. Accessed November 3, 2017. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-last-best-hope-the-southern-front-13263>.
- Krieg, Andreas. "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East." *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (2016): 97-113. Accessed October 6, 2017. <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/92/1/97/2199936>
- Laub, Zachary. "Who's Who in Syria's Civil War." Council on Foreign Relations, April 28, 2017. Accessed November 3, 2017. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/whos-who-syrias-civil-war>.
- Linebarger, Christopher, and Andrew Enterline. "Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars." In *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* edited by T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, 93-108. London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016.

- Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand." *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. Analysis Paper, no. 26* (November 2016). Accessed November 3, 2017. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr\\_20161123\\_free\\_syrian\\_army1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf).
- Loveman, Chris. "Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention." *Conflict, Security & Development* 2, no. 03 (2002): 29-48.
- Lund, Aron. "Syrian Jihadism." *UI brief* 13 (September 14, 2012): 11-12. Accessed December 15, 2017. [https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/32833405/Aron.Lund.Syrian.Jihadism.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513392842&Signature=t9ujr11CjHFCDBo5w8UjrtW%2BqIk%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DSyrian\\_Jihadism.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/32833405/Aron.Lund.Syrian.Jihadism.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513392842&Signature=t9ujr11CjHFCDBo5w8UjrtW%2BqIk%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DSyrian_Jihadism.pdf).
- Marshall, Alex. "From Civil War to Proxy War: Past History and Current Dilemmas." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 183-195. Accessed December 12, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129172>
- Mumford, Andrew. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict." *The RUSI Journal* 158, no. 2 (2013): 40-46. Accessed August 6, 2017. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2013.787733?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.
- Nader, Alireza, Larry Hanauer, Brenna Allen, and Alli G. Scotten. *Regional Implications of an Independent Kurdistan*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016.
- New Zealand Amnesty International. "Syria: The Worst Humanitarian Crisis of Our Time." Last modified April 7, 2015. Accessed December 14, 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org.nz/syria-worst-humanitarian-crisis-our-time>.
- Pope, Hugh. "Kurds, Turkey and the Unbearable Vagueness of Ethnicity." *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 19, no. 1/2 (2013): 127.
- Reynolds, Michael. "The Wars' Entangled Roots: Regional Realities and Washington's Vision." In *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, edited by Beth Bailey and Richard Immerman, 21-54. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Robinson, Linda. *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016.
- Roche, Cody. "Syrian Opposition Factions in the Syrian Civil War." *Medium*. Last modified August 10, 2016. Accessed August 30, 2017. [https://medium.com/@badly\\_xeroxed/syrian-opposition-factions-in-the-syrian-civil-war-5d8412c9d7e6](https://medium.com/@badly_xeroxed/syrian-opposition-factions-in-the-syrian-civil-war-5d8412c9d7e6).
- Sekulow, Jay. *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Can't Ignore*. New York, NY: Howard Books, 2014.
- Solvang, Ole. "Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons." *Human Rights Watch Report*. May 1, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2018. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/syria0517\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/syria0517_web.pdf).

- Tillerson, Rex. "White House Press Briefing." Washington, DC, July 7, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/07/07/press-briefing-presidents-meetings-g20-july-7-2017>.
- Tugal, Cihan. "In Turkey, the Regime Slides from Soft to Hard Totalitarianism." *Open Democracy* 17 (2016).
- USASOC. "SOF Support to Political Warfare," March 10, 2015. Accessed December 14, 2017. [http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Support%20to%20Political%20Warfare%20White%20Paper%20v2.3-RMT%20\(10MAR2015\)%20%20%20.pdf](http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Support%20to%20Political%20Warfare%20White%20Paper%20v2.3-RMT%20(10MAR2015)%20%20%20.pdf).
- US Department of the Army. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-05, *Special Operations*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Army Techniques Publication 3-05.1, *Unconventional Warfare*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, September 2013.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Field Manual 3-18, *Special Forces Operations*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Training Circular 18-01, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Training Circular 18-02, *Special Forces Advisor Guide*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2016.
- Votel, Joseph. Testimony Before US Congress: USCENTCOM Posture Statement, March 9, 2017. Accessed December 13, 2017. [http://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Votel\\_03-09-17.pdf](http://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Votel_03-09-17.pdf).
- Votel, Joseph L., Charles T. Cleveland, Charles T. Connett, and Will Irwin. "Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone." *Joint Forces Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2016).