

RELEASE IN PART B6

From: H <hrod17@clintonemail.com>
Sent: Monday, February 27, 2012 10:17 AM
To: 'Russorv@state.gov'
Subject: Fw: Must read on composition of Syrian FSA

Pls print for me.

From: Anne-Marie Slaughter [mailto:]
Sent: Monday, February 27, 2012 09:35 AM
To: H
Cc: Jacob J Sullivan (SullivanJJ@state.gov) <SullivanJJ@state.gov>; Cheryl Mills <MillsCD@state.gov>; Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Subject: Must read on composition of Syrian FSA

This is by far the most detailed and informative piece I have seen on the exact composition of the FSA, their weapons, intelligence, motives, etc. V valuable read from Nir Rosen, who has been in Syria for past two months.

Best,
AM

Journalist Nir Rosen recently spent two months in Syria with unique access. As well as meeting members of various communities across the country - supporters of the country's rulers and of the opposition alike - he spent time with armed resistance groups in Homs, Idlib, Deraa, and Damascus suburbs. He also travelled extensively around the country last year, documenting his experiences for Al Jazeera.

This is the first in a series of interviews he gave to Al Jazeera since his return.

Al Jazeera: Who are the armed opposition?

Nir Rosen: The formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was declared publicly in the summer of 2011, and has been endorsed by the Syrian National Council, the main opposition bloc. While many in the media trying to cover Syria from outside refer to it as an entity with a leader based in Turkey, there is no central or unified leadership for the armed revolution.

The FSA is a name endorsed and signed on to by diverse armed opposition actors throughout the country, who each operate in a similar manner and towards a similar goal, but each with local leadership. Local armed groups have only limited communication with those in neighbouring towns or provinces - and, moreover, they were operating long before the summer.

AJ: Who are the fighters - army defectors, armed civilians or "armed gangs"?

NR: The issue of defectors is a distraction. Armed resistance began long before defections started. While fighters are often portrayed in the media as defectors from the Syrian military, the majority are civilians who have taken up arms. The opposition believes it will have more legitimacy if fighters are dubbed "defectors", and described collectively as the Free Syrian Army.

They are also not armed gangs, as the regime and its supporters describe them. They are much more akin to a popular armed struggle or an insurgency. In fact, many Syrian revolutionaries use the term *muqawama*,

["resistance"] to describe themselves. This I find particularly ironic, as the Syrian regime and its supporters champion "resistance" (to Israel and the West) as the reason for their legitimacy, and the reason why they are being targeted by an alleged "foreign conspiracy" in the form of this uprising.

As the armed groups gain experience, they are adopting classic insurgent techniques of providing services to the population, while also blending in with them. In my encounters with armed opposition groups throughout Syria, I was reminded of Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in south Lebanon, Iraqi Sunni and Shia insurgents and resistance groups as well as the Taliban in Afghan villages - not in the religious sense, but in how they were an organic part of the community.

AJ: When did the armed struggle begin?

NR: The first acts of armed self-defence or opposition in Syria took place by late April, especially after April 22 when Friday demonstrations throughout the country were met with live fire, causing many deaths.

By the end of April, individuals in Homs' Bab Amr and Bab Sbaa neighbourhoods took up arms to defend themselves. At first they used shotguns and hunting rifles, along with rocks and improvised weapons. In Homs, the first armed group was established in Bab Sbaa in May. Likewise, the first accounts of armed resistance in Idlib, Deraa, Damascus and its suburbs date from late April.



Armed men are often deployed to protect protesters

AJ: Who were the first to take up arms?

NR: The armed phenomenon began in rural areas, known in Arabic as the *reef*, and in the working class urban *shaabi* areas. Men there were more likely to own guns and were known as *qabaday* - "tough" men more likely to have the courage (and potential for violence) that one needs to respond violently to security forces. They had more grievances - and less to lose - than middle or upper class activists with university degrees.

AJ: Who do the armed groups target?

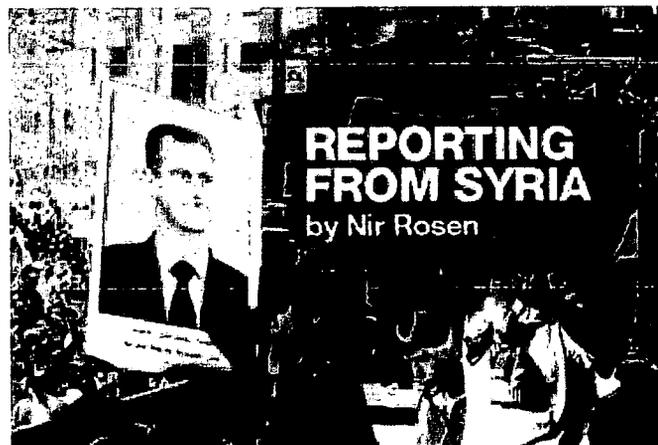
NR: From an early stage of the uprising, suspected informants for the regime have been intimidated, expelled and often killed.

These are called *mukhbir* ["sources"], or in colloquial Syrian *awayneh* or *fasfus*. Executions of those suspected of spying for the regime take place regularly all throughout Syria, including in Damascus. By the summer there were regular ambushes of security officers on the roads, as well as attacks against *shabiha* ["thugs"], as the civilian paramilitary or militia forces of the security agencies are known.

AJ: What methods and weapons do the fighters use?

NR: Initially, individuals responded to the violent crackdown on demonstrations by using any weapons they had at home to take pot shots at security forces. Then groups of demonstrators used rocks, Molotov cocktails, dynamite sticks, knives, shotguns, hunting rifles, pistols and the occasional automatic rifle to defend demonstrations when security forces attacked.

This escalated into attacks on buses, or gatherings of security forces believed to be on their way to attack demonstrations, and evolved into a classic insurgency. In some places, demonstrators also responded to attacks by security forces by attacking buildings belonging to the ruling Baath Party, the police, the security forces or courthouses - and ridding these of any state presence.



The armed groups generally operate secretly and in small groups, conducting ambushes on targets of opportunity using light arms and, increasingly, improvised explosive devices. For the past few months, insurgents have been using improvised explosive devices such as those found in Iraq, Afghanistan or southern Lebanon. Unlike in Iraq, however, the explosives used in these IEDs are fertiliser-based. These have been used in Idlib, Hama and Homs. In addition, rocket-propelled grenades - such as LAW anti-tank shells - have also more recently been used as shoulder-fired anti-armour missiles. The fighters have access to some sniper rifles as well.

I have seen evidence of complex attacks, involving several IEDs followed by heavy machine-gun fire.

AJ: How do armed groups get their arms?

NR: The Syrian insurgency is not well-armed or well-funded. Fighters purchase their weapons locally on the black market, from arms dealers and smugglers who are profiting from the violence in Syria. I have been with insurgents purchasing weapons and seen how they arrange to do so via smugglers from Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey.

They also capture weapons from security forces in attacks on regime arms depots. One armed group in Idlib captured several dozen Kornet anti-tank missiles. Sometimes they even purchase them from corrupt officers within the security apparatus.

AJ: How do the groups finance their arms purchases?

NR: Many fund their arms purchases by turning to their savings or selling what valuables they have, or the products of their shops or farms. Others borrow money from friends. Much of the financing comes from Syrian businessmen inside or outside the country. Some Syrian opposition activists and politicians in exile are sending money to people inside. In addition, diaspora Syrians tied to Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, or to conservative clerics in the Gulf, also send money to certain groups.

The fighters usually belong to small cadres, such as "Abu Muhamad's Group", where Abu Muhamad may have access to some money with which he supports his band of fighters. Some groups give their "companies" or "brigades" names - often after "martyrs" or those with "heroic" religious connotations. This creates the false impression in much of the foreign media that there is some national leader, a chain of command, a structure or order of battle and divisions.

The fighters arm themselves and fund themselves as individuals or small groups, not as the "Free Syrian Army". Nor are they funded directly by any state actor or intelligence agency. Indirectly, however, some Syrian exile religious movements or opposition political figures might be channelling funding from various countries to groups inside Syria.

AJ: How much impact do army defections have?

NR: There is a steady stream of army defectors, and to a lesser extent from the security agencies. Some defect with their weapons.

The regime is in a quandary. Its security agencies alone cannot clear or hold a village or a neighbourhood or a city. They need the Syrian army to back them up. But Syrian conscripts are often from the Sunni majority - and so is most of the opposition - from all over Syria, including from hotspots of the revolution. So it is soldiers' own brothers and cousins who are demonstrating. Moreover, when the poorly paid Syrian soldiers are deployed to an area, they fraternise with the local population. Locals feed them and let them use their mobile phones to call home. Local activists persuade them to defect and arrange for their safe haven.



Videos have been posted online of men saying they have defected from the army with their guns [YouTube]

Meanwhile, Sunni members of the army are coming under increasing suspicion by the security agencies, and there have been cases of security men killing soldiers for refusing to obey orders to shoot. Hundreds of soldiers and officers have also been arrested.

AJ: *What is the rank of the defecting officers?*

NR: I did not meet any more senior than lieutenants, but some majors and colonels have also defected.

Local opposition leaders will say that they need fighters more than officers. They are also suspicious of officers who have waited so long to defect. They will ask: "What have they been waiting for?" They are worried that some defecting officers are double agents who would inform on them, which has already happened.

Additionally, opposition leaders claim they are in touch with senior officers who have "made their allegiance to the revolution clear" and who provide them with intelligence - and are thus more valuable to their cause if they remain inside the system. Finally, defecting officers face a logistical challenge. They must arrange for a safe place to flee - and they must arrange protection for their families.

AJ: *To what extent is the Syrian uprising a peaceful one?*

NR: The debate over whether or not it is peaceful is not based on empirical research but on propaganda from both sides. The pro-regime media wants to portray the revolutionaries as nothing more than armed criminals and terrorist gangs. In response, opposition supporters have, until recently, denied all violence - fetishising the notion of a peaceful revolution - which has hurt not only their credibility, but the credibility of foreign media which often uncritically report their accounts.

The debate is also largely irrelevant. On the ground it was clear that by the end of Ramadan (late August), that there was a growing consensus on the part of opposition supporters that only an armed struggle could overthrow the regime.

AJ: Is the armed opposition popular with the protesters?

NR: In the anti-regime demonstrations which take place throughout Syria every day, many of the same songs are sung and same chants shouted. Among them for the past few months have been slogans supporting the "Free Syrian Army" or even: "The people want the arming of the revolutionaries." In some areas: "The people want a declaration of jihad," has been a popular call.

Chants in support of the FSA can now be heard in every demonstration taking place in Syria. In fact, many demonstrations take place only because the armed opposition is there to secure them.



Rosen says many of those the opposition reports as killed are fighters who perished in clashes [REUTERS/YouTube]

AJ: Who is being killed?

NR: Every day the opposition gives a death toll, usually without any explanation of the cause of the deaths. Many of those reported killed are in fact dead opposition fighters, but the cause of their death is hidden and they are described in reports as innocent civilians killed by security forces, as if they were all merely protesting or sitting in their homes. Of course, those deaths still happen regularly as well.

And, every day, members of the Syrian army, security agencies and the vague paramilitary and militia phenomenon known as *shabiha* ["thugs"] are also killed by anti-regime fighters.

AJ: Are there veterans of the insurgency in Iraq fighting in Syria?

NR: This is a common claim by the Syrian regime. There are Syrians who went to Iraq during the US-led invasion who are now taking part in the uprising. They are a minority of the fighters and crucially, all those I met were part of the first generation of foreign volunteers who flocked to Iraq in March 2003, before the Salafi jihadist days of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Most of these men fled back to Syria after two or three weeks, when they realised Iraq was such a dangerous place.

AJ: Are the fighters inspired by any particular ideology?

NR: The regime and its supporters describe the opposition, especially the armed opposition, as Salafis, Jihadists, Muslim Brotherhood supporters, al-Qaeda and terrorists. This is not true, but it's worth noting that all the fighters I met - in the provinces of Homs, Idlib, Hama, Deraa and the Damascus suburbs - were Sunni Muslims, and most were pious.

They fight for a multitude of reasons: for their friends, for their neighbourhoods, for their villages, for their province, for revenge, for self-defence, for dignity, for their brethren in other parts of the country who are also fighting. They do not read religious literature or listen to sermons. Their views on Islam are consistent with the general attitudes of Syrian Sunni society, which is conservative and religious.

Because there are many small groups in the armed opposition it is difficult to describe their ideology in general terms. The Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood ideologies are not important in Syria and do not play a significant role in the revolution. But most Syrian Sunnis taking part in the uprising are themselves devout. Many fighters were not religious before the uprising, but now pray and are inspired by Islam, which gives them a creed and a discourse. Many believe they will be martyred and go to paradise if they die. They are not fighting for Islam but they are inspired by it. Some drink alcohol, which is forbidden in Islam, and do not pray. And their brothers in arms do not force them to pray.



While the resistance is becoming increasingly well-armed, some groups complain they don't have enough weapons

Of the sheikhs who are important in the revolution, many are actually Sufis. I have met Sufi sheikhs who had established their own armed groups. Some fighters are also influenced by a general sense of Sunni identity, but others do not care about this. I encountered one armed Salafi group in Idlib. I also found some groups that indirectly receive financial assistance from Islamist exile groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, though this has seemingly not yet influenced their ideology. Some fighters are the sons or nephews of people who were jailed during the 1980s for alleged membership of the Muslim Brotherhood.

AJ: Are Palestinian groups active in Syria?

NR: In Homs there is an armed Palestinian group working with the opposition Homs Revolutionary Council. They helped evacuate wounded people from the Bab Amr neighbourhood during the autumn, and transported them safely to the Homs Palestinian refugee camp, which has also seen demonstrations. Armed Palestinian factions in both Lebanon and Syria have received military training over the years. But while the factions, officially, have sedulously abstained from taking sides in the conflict, many individual members certainly have. In Latakia during the summer and autumn, Palestinians with training in explosives and other military skills assisted opposition militia in the Ramel neighborhood. Palestinians with medical training also provided assistance. In Deraa, Palestinians also provided similar assistance. Palestinians allied to either Hamas or the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command have reportedly smuggled supplies into Syria on behalf of revolutionaries.

Hamas has withdrawn all its members and their families from Syria with the exception of its political office. As an organisation, Hamas is still grateful to the regime for the support it received over the years. Palestinians in Syria are integrated into society there, and they are Sunni Arabs - like the majority of Syrians.

The group has been in a difficult position. It is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood but it has been close to the Syrian regime. "We committed to the Syrian regime that we have [had] no relations with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," a Hamas official told me. "We committed to the regime not to be involved. If we cannot stop the fire we will not be wood upon it. We learned from Arafat's experience in Kuwait," he said - referring to the expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait in 1991 in response to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's stand with Saddam Hussein.

"Hamas has a different position from Hezbollah," the official continued. "We are Sunni, we have the support of the people. We have support from Iran and Syria but it's not the only support. If we lose the support of Iran and Syria, it will affect us deeply - but it's not a strategic loss. This is different from Hezbollah. If Hezbollah loses the support of Syria it might be the end of Hezbollah. From the first day we declared that we were thankful for the regime - which supported the [Hamas] resistance during some very difficult periods we went through, and at the same time we admire people getting their freedom, reform and prosperity.

" Hamas' Khaled Meshaal tried to advise Bashar al-Assad to reform after Egypt's Mubarak fell from power, warning him that the same events might come to Syria. But Assad believed he was immune to such uprisings. Meshaal met senior Syrian officials such as Assef Shawqat, Walid al-Muallem and Bouthaina Shaaban, offering to mediate between the regime and its people. He also met Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah to ask him to take his plan to Assad. But these mediation attempts failed."

Some members of the Syrian National Council told Hamas they should not fully pull out of Syria, because the new government that would follow Assad would be under US pressure, so Hamas members may not be able to return - but if they maintain a presence there, then the new government would have to deal with them as a "fact on the ground".

Look out for more interviews and features from Nir Rosen to be published here on Al Jazeera over the rest of this week.

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