



## MIDDLE EAST

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# Syrian rebel fighters' civil war within a civil war

**A senior rebel commander with the Free Syrian Army has been shot and killed by jihadis. As Paul Wood reports, the killing is part of an escalating struggle within the armed uprising between moderates and Islamists linked to al-Qaeda.**

The Free Syrian Army commander, stocky, bearded, dressed in camouflage, oozed menace and seethed with righteous anger.

We were speaking about the biggest jihadi group in Syria, the Nusra Front, who had kidnapped his brother.

"I know the names of all their emirs [leaders]. They will have nowhere to hide. This will be all-out war," he said.

He explained that he was now free to take his revenge because he had just paid \$50,000 (£33,000) to get his brother out.

He had hated to do this because Nusra would just spend the money on weapons to use against the FSA.

He told me they had sent a suicide bomber to infiltrate his command post, killing 12 of his men.

They were able to do that, he complained bitterly, only because he had sent most of his troops to fight in Qusayr, which later fell to the regime.

### 'Powerful players'

I met that particular commander in Turkey, not far from the border with Syria, 10 days ago.

He was describing a long-standing and often bloody enmity among those fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad - "secular" against jihadi, "moderate" versus "extremist".

That struggle has now resulted in the loss of one of the FSA's most senior figures, Kamal Hamami, who commanded an important brigade in his native north-western province of Latakia.

Even as the Syrian regime pushes back the rebels on several fronts, a civil war within the civil war is building on the opposition side.

A spokesman for the FSA's Supreme Military Council said Mr Hamami had been driving through Latakia when they ran into a checkpoint run by the main group linked to al-Qaeda in Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

The fighters at the checkpoint refused to let him pass, saying he would need to get permission from their emir. He told them they had to take their checkpoint down.

As the argument raged, one of the fighters - a foreign jihadi from Iraq, it is said - raised his weapon and shot Mr Hamami. The FSA men retreated with their mortally wounded commander.

According to the FSA, the emir gave a long list of reasons for the killing, one of which included the fact he was a member of the FSA's Supreme Military Council.

The FSA said the Islamic State had threatened to kill all of the other members of the Supreme Military Council - another sign of the escalating struggle within the armed uprising.

This is partly a battle over spoils, partly ideological.

In truth, almost all of those fighting the regime are to some degree religious, including those FSA brigades commonly labelled "secular".

The crucial difference, though, is that the "secular" FSA will accept a civil state while the jihadis are fighting to establish an Islamic theocracy.

A year ago, the jihadis were still operating almost underground in Syria. Now they are powerful and important players, in some places running whole towns, where they impose Sharia law.

"This is a disaster for us, a disaster for the revolution," a female opposition activist told me.

She was complaining about Islamist gunmen telling her not to smoke, to cover her head, and to leave meetings where she was the only woman.

"We do not want these people," she went on, referring to the foreign fighters who have joined jihadi brigades. "This is not Syria."

She admitted that the jihadis had grown in popularity because of corruption and infighting among the FSA. Many rebel groups were preying on the people they are supposed to be fighting for, she conceded.

I spoke to another activist who had spent two years on the run from the regime, only to finally flee Syria because he spoke out against looting by the FSA. "One word about this on Facebook can earn you a bullet," he told me.

The moral clarity of the early days of the uprising has been lost.

Then, people wanted to defend themselves against overwhelming and brutal force - and ultimately to replace a corrupt, one-party dictatorship.

Now many people tell me the revolution itself has become corrupt and, in rebel-held areas, they fear a different kind of tyranny: crime, kidnapping, gangsterism.

#### **'Starved of weapons'**

By the laws of sheer demographics in Syria, President Assad should have been finished long ago. Three quarters of the country is Sunni and this is a predominantly Sunni uprising.

But now some who supported the revolution are even switching, however reluctantly, to the regime, as the lesser of two evils. The result is that the government is looking stronger than ever.

The town of Qusayr fell to a government offensive six weeks ago.

It looks very much like the last rebel pockets in the much bigger city of Homs will be next.

One of those pockets is Khaldiya. For two years the rebels held out here, but now government tanks are closing in.

An activist reached by Skype told us that most people have fled Khaldiya, just fighters and their families remaining, living in medieval conditions without power and running water.

In a video uploaded to YouTube, three FSA fighters stand looking at the camera and declare they will defend Khaldiya to their last breath.

"This is the only weapon we have left," says one, pointing to a suicide belt he is wearing. "By God's will, we can hold this place."

The suicide belt is a sign of how Islamist ideology has spread even through the FSA, as well as of how desperate the battle against the regime has become.

The rebels in the Khaldiya suicide belt video are clear where the blame lies for what - despite their declaration - seems like an imminent defeat.

They have been abandoned by the outside world, they say, and even by their own leadership in the FSA. They say that, starved of weapons, they had little against a Syrian regime armed with tanks, artillery, jets and Scuds.

### Too late?

For Western governments thinking about arming the rebels, there are many worrying questions: What if the weapons are used in a sectarian massacre of Shias and Alawites? What if the jihadis get hold of anti-aircraft missiles and use them in Europe or the US?

Against that, there is the risk that staying out will allow the Syrian inferno to light fires beyond Syria's borders.

One in four Syrians have fled their homes, many into neighbouring countries. There is a risk of destabilising the whole region.

Sectarian violence has already spread to Lebanon. A car bomb in Shia, Hezbollah-controlled southern Beirut, this week was payback for Hezbollah's involvement in the battle for Qusayr, it is said.

Jordan, straining with more than half a million refugees, is also said to be at risk.

To stop the killing, outside powers are trying to force both sides to the negotiating table.

President Assad will not go, presumably, unless he feels seriously in peril - that is one reason, it is argued, to arm the rebels.

But if the balance tips too far the other way, the rebels would not want to talk if they felt they were winning on the battlefield.

If Western governments do decide to step in, there are some rebels they might feel they could do business with, represented by the FSA's Supreme Military Council, the body on which the murdered commander, Kamal Hamami sat.

At the top of the Supreme Military Council sits General Salim Idris, the FSA's chief of staff. He talks, reassuringly for Western governments, not of revenge or of Sharia law, but of human rights and democracy.

The relatively secular rebel groups are in the minority. On many frontlines, they are not militarily as significant as other groups that Western governments would find problematic.

The hope in London, Paris and Washington, is that the "moderate" FSA will grow in power and influence with Western support.

The question is, as the regime's offensive continues, is it too late?

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