

SYRIA OTHER OPPOSITION GROUPS

Party Portrait

Other than ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, the Syrian opposition comprises a broad array of often-competing groups that operate within an unofficial system of fluid and regionally-specific battlefield alliances. They range in ideology from relatively secular democrats, to Kurdish nationalists, to hardline Sunni radicals. Many of the groups comprise communities that previously suffered from the uneven and crony-capitalist economic policies of the Assad regime. The decentralization of the network of groups known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) means it holds relatively little clout; more powerful is the Southern Front coalition (some of whose members are FSA-affiliated), and the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham group. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-Arab-Christian coalition, are also fighting the regime.

Key Interests

- Remove the Assad regime from power. In light of their disadvantageous battlefield position, many groups may be recalibrating their goals seeking instead to remove Assad from power while leaving the regime largely intact and/or to achieve a stake in a post-conflict government
- Establish new government system: Create new, democratic government (for some groups), establish Islamic state based on sharia law (for others), underlying objectives can differ even within groups

Sources of Leverage

Political - Moderate opposition factions hold little political leverage due to their relative weakness on the battlefield and dependence on stronger, more hard-line groups in military endeavours. The strongest opposition elements on the ground are the radical Islamist Ahrar al-Sham and Kurdish-Arab-Christian SDF coalition. SDF can rely on foreign backing as the major opposition force combatting ISIS.

Military - Some groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, can leverage military strength and territorial control to gain international support.

Soft Power - Groups seek external support on the basis that they are the only credible groups within Syria that have a chance of rolling back the regime's gains and defeating ISIS to become a moderate governing body in Syria.

Regional Strategy

These groups have generally been willing to engage in bilateral and multilateral peace-talks, although the future of Bashar al-Assad as President has proved a sticking-point in the past. With their decline in battlefield fortunes, opposition groups may decide to pursue a negotiated end to the conflict while they still have some military and political power to bargain with, or to seek expanded aid from external sources. Some have also sought military and financial aid from foreign powers. Also foreseeable is a combination of both strategies whereby opposition groups seek increased military hardware and funds from abroad to underpin military efforts to reach a point of stalemate (the outright defeat of Assad being unlikely) in which negotiations would be in both parties' interests.

Powerful Individuals

Ali al-Omar (leader of Ahrar al-Sham), Riad Hijab (head of the High Negotiations Committee)

Potential Negotiation Moves

Negotiate - Pursue a policy of engaging in political negotiations, possibly at the same time as seeking increased foreign support to achieve territorial gains, put Syrian government forces under pressure

Regime Change - Improve military position generated increased support to increase the opposition's ability to press for regime change and inclusion in a new government during political negotiations.

Moderate Rhetoric - Attempt to moderate rhetoric of hard-line groups in order to attract backing from western states.

Internal Conflicts

The non-ISIS/Jabhat Fateh al-Sham opposition suffers from a lack of overall cohesion and a divide between foreign-based political groups and domestic military groups. The foreign-based Syrian National Coalition enjoys little support amongst Syrians in Syria, while the High Negotiations Committee, a Saudi-backed bloc of both political and military entities created to engage in peace talks, does not include several major groups on the ground in Syria. The 'moderate' network of Free Syrian Army-affiliated militias is militarily weak, lacks a broad national command. Stronger factions include the SDF, based in the primarily-Kurdish north of the country, and Islamists including Ahrar al-Sham.

Memberships

N/A

Allies

N/A

Partners

KURDS of Syria, ISIS (nb: some groups in this category partner with ISIS, while others are actively fighting ISIS), JORDAN, UNITED STATES (certain groups only)

Rivals

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS, SYRIA Jabhat Fateh al-Sham

Adversaries

LEBANON Hezbollah

Active Armed Opponents

SYRIA Government, RUSSIA, IRAN, ISIS (certain groups only)

Proxy

N/A

External Sponsor

QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA, TURKEY, UNITED STATES (certain groups only)

Aid Recipient

N/A

Aid Donor

KUWAIT