

SYRIA: THE EVOLUTION REVOLUTION

BY PETER POLACK

There is some bewilderment among laymen and military experts as to the military achievements of the rebel movement in Syria. The answer lies in a cocktail of religion, regime errors and a benchmark change in modern military strategy. Long ago, lines of ruffians, led by a few gentlemen on horseback, faced off whereupon they politely picked off each other. Silly as this now seems today, there are many still steeped in the military tactics of the past. Warfare is an evolutionary science sometimes changing on an annual basis. Guerrilla wars, over the years, have been

Youth, who were once denied opportunity now have a clear but limited choice: war or refugee camps. Nearly all have selected combat, what was only previously exposed to them in the unconscionable recesses of violent video games, but has now come home to roost. They now roam deserted structures in armed bands pausing often to marvel at the riches previously denied them. The poor and powerless have overnight become street, section, neighborhood or area commanders. Housing previously denied them has become mere corridors

military assets that became contests of stamina not strength. This was apparent from the capture of airbases like Taftanaz and Minnagh.

The rebel success in Syria has silenced seasoned experts and pundits alike. No one anticipated in the early days of demonstrations and pleas for change that the man on the street would form the basis of a new force whose main strength would be religion. Not since the Crusades has the world seen such an effective fighting force fuelled not by a caravan of supplies but daily prayers.

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contested with massive outside aid and increasing technology. This approach failed in Vietnam, Angola, Afghanistan and now Syria. The underlying weakness certainly in the case of the Western powers is a fear of large body counts. The Vietcong and now Islamist insurgents have no such hesitation.

As the Syrian struggle for freedom descended into conflict and armed struggle, the country began to depopulate at an exponential pace now measured in the millions. These refugees are for the most part women, children and the elderly, while young men remain — most of whom are unskilled or unemployed in the rebel sectors. That is not to say a policy of maximum employment by President Bashar al-Assad would have prevented this abyss. This war is about empowerment. These young adults have provided a ready and steady supply to throw at the brutal weapons of the regime.

to the front line while providing a daily reminder of oppression.

In this vacuum of power on the street corner entered Islamist forces such as the Al Nusra Front with its world caliphate agenda. Syria has provided a verdant field of opportunity. A country in conflict with little overall central government control as the regime busied itself in matters of defense reminiscent of pre-Taliban Afghanistan. This extreme religious ideology has defeated armor, drone, air power and disciplined troops from the best armies in the world. Sheer ferocious bravery with a modicum of wily guerrilla tactics has provided a recipe for growth and battlefield success.

The early Islamist units were the most disciplined with some command and control. They were often led or directed by experienced guerrilla fighters, many from outside Syria. Carefully crafted small assaults led to extended sieges of regime

The Syrian rebel movement is unique at many levels:

- There is no unified command and control. Rebel groups divided by extremity of Islamic belief, family, tribal and geographical factors do occasionally come together and disperse for offensives. The plans and implementation are fluid. A Syrian army officer who defected to the Free Syrian Army early in the uprising put adherence at 5 percent.
- The rebels have no formal logistical support chain. Experienced generals at the Pentagon can only marvel at this when compared to the heavy burden they endure. Perhaps the lesson is a lighter more independent force in country. The rebels have been ably assisted by the chaos of the conflict and the persistence of the Assad regime to leave lightly defended compounds or

those under threat with vast stores of ammunition, assorted weaponry and tanks for rebel resupply.

- The majority of the successful rebel forces are conjoined by religious ties not political or military.
- The fractured rebel force has created a nightmare for regime intelligence assessment configured for a single opposing command structure. Random attacks by numerous independent groups unknown in planning to affiliate or nearby rebel units avoid prevention or battlefield interpretation. Generals are reduced to firemen.

Much hope was originally placed on the Free Syrian Army as an umbrella organization to effect the military removal of the Assad regime. In this, the FSA mimicked the failed Iraqi National Congress of the disgraced Ahmed Chalabi another U.S. intervention that followed a long line of fallen puppet regimes and interventionists. In the fullness of time, the FSA failed to achieve popular recognition on the ground and lost relevance on a daily basis to the daring exploits of the Islamist forces. These small initial successes fed upon themselves to larger achievements that drew many new supporters.

The average Islamist fighter disciplined by his beliefs is given training sufficient to function be it a Kalashnikov or rocket-propelled grenade. There is no expectation of medical care or battlefield evacuation. These are the purest guerrillas since the Long March of China. These are everyday young men many unemployed from a disenfranchised class, who have been given a stark choice: The boredom of a refugee camp or the heady intoxication of a weapon, regard from peers and often

control of areas and opulent villas once the exclusive purview of regime supplicants.

The rebels have been ably assisted by the failures of the regime military apparatus. Seeking to maintain the role of government and engage in a bitter civil war while obsessing about public relations has led to a string of defeats from schizophrenic policies. The Syrian government has cornered itself in an endgame of static protection of assets and territory while economic ruin looms large on the horizon. Their depleting

eventual detriment. As the cities, towns and villages empty, the Syrian army has been able to deploy its strengths in technology but may have overreached with the sarin attack. The urge to join Salhuiddin on horseback will be overwhelming on the road to Damascus. Martyrs seeking the narcotic of death will face a wall of uncompromising cold steel if they rush from the shadows to open battle.

Assad knows he is losing ground and it is only a matter of time before the hawks around him are unleashed. This will be the true test of the new crusaders who will have no cover from civilians or intermixed neighborhoods or mountainous territory adjoining a friendly nation.

Self-sustaining ammunition and weapons from captures can only last so long and the decline will accelerate as the Islamist rebels become over confident to the point of overt confrontation.

Many FSA officers were defectors from the Assad regime and were not only viewed with suspicion but tried to militarize the man in the street. The Islamists radicalized the man in the street and created an untrained inexperienced fighter whose religious fervor and fearlessness of death turned the battlefield dynamic upside down. It was not the best equipped and most well trained force that would win. Afghanistan should have been the new benchmark but entrenched policy advisers persist; some still trading on the archaic Cold War dynamic. New military thought advocated by David Petraeus should not be dismissed or discontinued by a single peccadillo. **SW**

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military personnel and resources cannot be sufficiently bolstered by Iran and Russia who both face their own problems. Hezbollah is surrounded by enemies and repercussions from the Al-Qusayr siege have left them with a bitter aftertaste.

If the Angolan Civil War is any example, the Syrian conflict could last decades. Realistically it is in the interest of many that it is prolonged even among those who underestimate that it will be to their