

Free Syria Army: Hezbollah present on the battlefield

By Misbah al-Ali

BUKHSHIN, Turkey: Hezbollah fighters are on the ground in Syria, according to Riad al-Asaad, the commander of the rebel Free Syrian Army, who also told The Daily Star that the option of establishing a buffer zone on the Syrian borders is off the table. Asaad spoke to The Daily Star from a heavily secured Turkish refugee camp, known as the Officers' Camp, where much of the FSA's leadership is now based. In a wide-ranging interview, the former Syrian Air Force Colonel discussed both the situation of his troops and that of the regime of embattled President Bashar Assad.

Given Hezbollah's rhetorical support for the Syrian regime, it has long been speculated that the party might also be providing backup on the battlefield. Asaad said that "as for the involvement of Hezbollah fighters, we have confirmed that it is involved in events inside Syria, especially in Talkalakh and Homs. We have seen heavily armed [Hezbollah] convoys and several buses."

He added that the FSA had been remiss in not highlighting this in the media earlier.

As the conflict, now in its 16th month, continues to rage and casualties increase, some have pushed for the establishment of a buffer zone between Turkey and Syria, or between Lebanon and Syria, to provide cover for Syrian refugees.

Asaad said this was no longer an option for both domestic and international reasons. "First, the situation in Syria is improving in our favor, and developments are happening quickly. This puts the issue of a buffer zone and the request behind us," Asaad said.

As for a buffer zone on the Lebanon-Syria border, he said that "the unstable political situation prompts us to take things slowly. As long as Syrian refugees are being dealt with in a humane way, we want to strengthen the close ties [between Lebanese and Syrian people], without putting Lebanese forces in a tough spot."

Asaad said that many army officers were abandoning their posts, calling the forces' morale "completely collapsed." This is in part due to "a plan being discussed by Assad's advisers to target Sunni officers, deeming them sleeper cells." Asaad said the FSA had evidence that a circular was issued in February urging the army to reduce the influence of Sunni officers, resulting in the imprisonment of 3,000 them. This, he said, was because the Syrian president "only trusts his sect."

According to Asaad, the Syrian Army's elite 4th Division, headed by Maher Assad, "has

completely collapsed. They have a shortage of equipment.”

The FSA commander does not deny that his group has targeted Maher Assad or Assef Shawkat, Syria’s deputy defense minister, saying that “the FSA has a plan to target high-ranking officers and personalities in the regime ... there is conflicting information about the results of the operations that took place.”

Like the 4th division, Asaad contended that FSA is also lacking in equipment. “We don’t have modern weapons, or modern communication systems,” he said. The FSA “depends on the support of the people, the will of our fighters and simple ... weapons that we obtain from our operations against Assad’s army or the modest support that reaches us.”

Asaad denied reports that the FSA had received weapons, communications systems and satellites from foreign governments. “The U.S. support is not what it should be, and Arab support is very weak. We still haven’t received support except for in political stances. These are important and necessary, but we have a huge deficiency in everything else, and we need real logistical support.”

Despite this “deficiency,” the commander is positive. He said that the situation in Damascus and Aleppo had shifted in the uprising’s favor. In Idlib and Deir al-Zor, “there are signs that the regime’s control is nearly obsolete and perhaps in the near future we will declare them completely liberated.”

In the beleaguered city of Homs, Asaad said “the regime is trying to end the rebellion at a high cost – by killing innocents – and it says that there are 1,500 FSA fighters still in Homs. We respond that the number [of FSA fighters] might be much higher than this.”

The FSA, Asaad continued, “is confident that the situation in Syria is better than excellent on all levels.”

Of the countries that have not come out in support of the uprising, most vocally Russia and China, the commander said that without their support “the regime would have collapsed a long time ago.

“Russian support has exceeded political and diplomatic support,” he said, listing the shipments of “modern Russian weapons” recently received by regime forces, including helicopters and T-28 tanks. He added that Russian experts are providing the regime with expertise, particularly in dealing with rockets and planes.

One issue that he said caused the FSA “great embarrassment,” was the abduction of 11 Lebanese Shiite pilgrims last month in Syria. Asaad added that the kidnappers were not FSA members, despite claims to the contrary.

However, Asaad said the FSA had been in contact with the kidnappers and added that “the case will be resolved soon.” He said: “I understand some of the kidnapped will be released shortly, and the others will follow.”

As for the FSA’s stance on the recent Syrian downing of a Turkish jet, Asaad said that “in order to remain, Bashar Assad will cause as much chaos as possible in the region, because his army

is decaying.”

The Syrian end-game remains to be seen, but one option not in Asaad’s sights is the division of Syria along sectarian lines. “If the regime seeks the option of an Alawite state to protect itself, we will continue fighting to preserve the unity of the Syrian people,” he said. “We will not opt for sectarian options inside Syria. Our choice is to establish a democratic state inside Syria, for all of its people.”

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