

World

Islamist takeover fear drives rebel chiefs back to Assad

Syria

Hannah Lucinda Smith Antakya

Four top rebel commanders in Syria have switched sides to join President Assad's forces in a further sign of disarray in fragmenting opposition ranks.

The men, from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), are thought to have become disillusioned with an opposition that is becoming increasingly dominated by Islamist factions and alliances. Islamists have been doing much of the recent fighting. There is also a strong sense that the recent gains made by Assad's forces make it pragmatic for FSA officers to go back to the regime.

The defections are expected to improve Mr Assad's standing in the June presidential elections.

Brigadier Mohammed Abu Zaid, the former president of the military court in Aleppo, Colonel Marwan Nahila, the head of the military council in Homs, and Colonel Abu al-Wafa, the head of the military council in Damascus, are thought to have defected to the regime last week. The news was announced by both pro- and anti-government media channels yesterday, and has been verified by other senior FSA figures.

All three men were members of the Syrian military before the start of the uprising in 2011, and had defected to join the fledgling FSA at the start of the armed conflict.

The fourth defector, Sergeant Fadi Deeb, was working under the command of Colonel Mustafa Hashem, the commander of the FSA's western front. Sergeant Deeb is believed to have defected last month as the opposition began its Anfal offensive in Latakia province.

The defections come at a time of deep confusion and crisis in the ranks of the FSA. The growth of extremist Islamist factions within the opposition, including the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Isis), has weakened the moderate opposition over the past year.

In December one of the largest rebel brigades, Aleppo's Liwa al-Tawhid, cut



A man is rescued after an airstrike claimed to be by pro-regime forces on Aleppo

its ties with the FSA to form a new rebel alliance called the Islamic Front. A second rebel alliance in Idlib province, the Syrian revolutionary front, is more closely linked with the supreme military council of the FSA and the Syrian national coalition.

Among the rank and file of the Syrian rebels, there is a growing feeling that the FSA is no longer a relevant force on the battlefield. Abu Mohammed, a fighter with the Islamic Front in Tel Rifaat who was initially part of the Liwa al-Tawhid, said that the opposition was now organised according to allegiances with outside funders. "When all the groups were FSA, no one supported us," he said. "Then every group started to collect support from their own connections. Now as the Islamic front, we are not FSA any more."

None of the officers has made public statements since their defections, but in an interview with Sout Raya, a Syrian radio station based in Istanbul, Mohammad Fateh, a former FSA spokesman, said that some FSA officers were going back to the regime because they believe that it is winning. He also offered the possibility that "the regime had some officers defecting and joining the FSA to infiltrate it". The timing of

tics." Government forces have made significant gains on the ground in recent weeks, particularly in Homs, which has been a rebel stronghold. An activist in the city, speaking on Tuesday, estimated that up to 1,000 rebel fighters had surrendered to the regime in the past month. It is thought that the city could fall in the next few days.

Joshua Landis, a Syria expert, said he believes that more FSA leaders could defect if Assad continued to make gains on the ground. "I believe we will see many more such defections should Assad continue to retake rebel territory, where families and communities must make the difficult choice of whether to fight, flee or find an accommodation with Assad's rule," he said. "All Syrians must decide how best to save their lives and those of their families and followers."

The defections and gains on the ground have come at a fortuitous time for Mr Assad, who is preparing to defend his position in elections on June 3. "I think the regime might use the defections to strengthen [his] position in the coming elections," said Abu al-Tayyib, a former media activist from Damascus. "It might use them to say to the Syrian people that everybody is coming back to where they belong, and that the others on the other side are only terrorists."

It has been announced that Syrians living outside the country will be able to vote in the presidential elections, but it is unlikely that people living in swathes of the country that are controlled by rebel forces will be able to take part. Syrian law states that anyone who stands for election must have lived in the country for the past ten years, meaning that the opposition figures who have fled the country will be barred. The US has dismissed the election plans as "a parody of democracy".

Syrians living in exile in Istanbul reacted to the defections with shock. "I had little hope of going back to Syria, but now that little hope is gone," said a man who gave his name as Ayman. "I don't understand what's happening."

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Sergeant Deeb's defection could also suggest that the more secular rebel leaders are being squeezed out of an opposition that is becoming dominated by Islamist factions and alliances. The Anfal offensive has been led by the jihadist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Ah-rar al-Sham, with the smaller FSA groups taking a secondary role.

Also speaking to Sout Raya, Colonel Ahmed Rahhal, of the FSA general staff, said that he believed that the aims of the revolution had been overtaken by personal interests. "Everyone is fighting for power," he said. "On the ground we have warlords, and in the offices we have people trading in poli-



A man braves the heat from a burning building after an air strike by pro-Assad forces in Syria's second city of Aleppo. The rebel-held city has been pounded by barrel bombs for several weeks



A large fire burning in a city street, likely the result of an air strike.

KHALED KHATIB/AP/GETTY

Everest the hard way: climbers opt to tackle North Face
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Senior Paris policemen accused of gang raping Canadian tourist
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FSA strikes jihadist-held stronghold

Syria

Deborah Haynes, Laura Pitel

Syrian rebels launched their biggest offensive yesterday against thousands of jihadists in the north who have used terrorist tactics and imposed strict Islamic rules on minorities.

About 1,500 members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were involved in the push towards the city of Raqqa, which is controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (Isis), according to an opposition spokesman.

At least five villages in the province of the same name were seized and eight Isis militants killed, Omar Abu Layla said. A few FSA fighters died when a car bomb detonated. Speaking from Turkey, Mr Abu Layla said: "There will be happy news for Syria in the coming hours and days."

Opposition activists in Raqqa, which borders Iraq, called yesterday the day of "cleansing Raqqa from the gangs of Baghdadi". There were referring to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Iraqi-born leader of Isis and a veteran al-Qaeda-linked militant during the conflict in Iraq.

Sarmad al-Ahmed, an activist who recently fled the city with his family to Turkey, said that life under Isis was dangerous. The group, which wants to create an Islamic caliphate in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, imposed a strict Islamic code on the people of Raqqa and punished anyone who disobeyed. "Everyone is being killed," he said.

Mr Ahmed, who asked to go by a false name, is part of a campaign group called Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, which uses peaceful methods such as publishing leaflets and holding protests to expose the harm being caused. More than 150 members of his group, however, have been arrested, he said, adding that life under Isis was worse than under the Assad regime.

He put the number of Isis militants in Raqqa at up to 5,000. The offensive against Isis has been building for months, but opposition sources said they would have more chance if Britain, the US and other allies armed them. "The international community should support the moderate battalions of the FSA," Mr Abu Layla said.

Mayor's plan to hit Ukraine poll — hang a voter by the testicles

Separatists have mixed motives, writes Tom Coghlan in Slovyansk



After two weeks as the self-proclaimed rebel mayor of Slovyansk, the problems of governance are mounting for Vyacheslav Ponomaryov, 48.

The principal authority in the town seized by pro-Russian separatists, Mr Ponomaryov already faces allegations that he murdered a local pro-Kiev government deputy whose body was dredged from a river on Saturday.

"You are twisting the facts," Mr Ponomaryov raged yesterday afternoon,

seizing the phone from his press officer, Stella Khorosheva. "You are using sources who have completely forged this stuff that I killed the deputy."

Also problematic has been the mayor's assertion, in a newspaper interview on Wednesday, that he was ready to do "everything" required to prevent presidential elections being held in eastern Ukraine on May 25.

"We will capture someone and hang him up by his testicles. For real," he told the startled journalist. For good measure he added that he had been to sort out the local banks carrying a "whip". It wasn't a real whip, he explained, just a colloquial expression for a pistol.

The Russian media have presented the separatists occupying towns in eastern Ukraine as a collective of concerned and patriotic citizens. The truth is a little different. While the movement

seems to have its foundations in the economic woes and corruption that plague Ukraine, most of those actively fronting the so-called People's Republic of Donbass are a motley crew of war veterans, elderly communists, conspiracy theorists, gangsters and Greater Russia fantasists.

Mr Ponomaryov is a local soap magnate with a mouthful of gold teeth and two missing fingers who talks in vague terms about being involved in "special operations" in the past. His counterpart in the regional capital Donetsk, Denis Pushilin, 32, is known principally for his work with MMM, a company notorious for running Ponzi schemes that consumed the savings of thousands of Russians in the 1990s. When he stood for parliament last year he won 77 votes.

At the barricades in Slovyansk on Thursday, masked men handed out

printed documents setting out the separatist vision. It was a heady brew of religion-tinged nationalist fervour for a resurrected "Holy Russ" of Slavs.

Barricades around the city carry images of Tsar Nicholas II, murdered



Slovyansk's rebel mayor, Vyacheslav Ponomaryov

by the Bolsheviks in 1918. The men manning them rail against Europe and America and often repeat a claim that western culture forces homosexuality on its young people. "America is the source of the greatest evil in the world," said Ruslan, a friendly English-speaker

who lived in south London in the 1990s as an asylum seeker until he was deported after a conviction for fraud. "There can be no more democracy. You will listen to people with guns," he added, flashing a smile of rotten teeth.

Support among the local population is hard to gauge. Many express fear of "fascists" from western Ukraine and there appears widespread support for a referendum on joining Russia. However, there is also weariness and scepticism about some of the men claiming to represent them. "Mostly they are just people with too much spare time," said Diana, 18, rolling her eyes.

The administrative centre in Donetsk, where separatist protesters stage 24-hour marathons of speeches and music, attracts just a few hundred people on most days. Yet frustration is not hard to find amid the derelict factories

and slag heaps. "The authorities destroyed this city for 23 years," said Natalia Lysinko, 62. "The milk factory, the bread factory, light industry, all the collective farms — all are gone. The income from our pensions is not enough and we have to grow vegetables for food. It is not that we want to join someone else. We just want to live."

Armed separatists in Slovyansk seized a bus carrying observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ukraine said.

The group, which included seven OSCE representatives and five members of the Ukrainian armed forces, were being held in the state security agency building. The leader of the pro-Russian militia holding them claimed there was a Kiev spy among the group, which included four Germans.

A Ukrainian military helicopter was destroyed yesterday as the country's acting prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, accused the Russian government of trying to start a "third world war".

Seen any large beards? China offers a £4,750 reward

China

Leo Lewis Beijing

Officials in a volatile Chinese region have unveiled a menu of financial rewards for informants who alert the authorities to sightings of large beards, "weird" clothes or banknotes daubed with religious slogans.

The cash payments, which range from £470 to £4,750 depending on the quality of information provided, are part of a drive to discourage women in Shaya, in Xinjiang province, from wearing veils.

The campaign, known as "project beauty", means that residents of some Xinjiang cities have been barred from entering banks and official buildings unless they are clean-shaven or without veils.

Described as the "No 1 element of

good social stability maintenance", the attempt to elicit information on sizeable volumes of facial hair and unusual clothing is designed to root out activities supposedly associated with a shift towards religious fundamentalism and separatism.

The social fault lines in China's far western province of Xinjiang lie along the divisions between the Muslim Uighur minority and the Han Chinese, who have moved in large numbers to the region and act as a sometimes unwelcome reminder of Beijing's control from afar.

Fears within the Communist party leadership of a separatist movement

receiving the support of foreign Islamic terror groups in the province have intensified in recent months. When a car was driven by a family of Uighurs into crowds in Tiananmen Square last October, state media drew particular attention to "flags and literature" supposedly associated with groups calling for regional independence.

Civil rights groups believe that Beijing has exaggerated the threat to justify heavy-handed clampdowns.

The system of cash rewards has come about in a phase of acute tension in a region that is prone to ethnic violence. Dozens have died



since the start of the year in clashes between police and ethnic Uighurs.

China is still reeling from a knife attack in the southern city of Kunming where a squad of seemingly well-trained terrorists attacked crowds at a station and left 30 people dead.

The stabbings, involving several female assailants, were described by state media as "China's 9/11" and stoked fears that China could suffer regular jihadist-style attacks.

The rewards, which have been calibrated to be highly attractive in a region of low economic growth and average incomes, encourage people to inform on "illegal religious activities" — a deliberately broad phrase. Cash is being offered to those who inform on people "instigating or indulging" young people in religious practices such as fasting or scripture studies.