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Thomas Pierret

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Salafis at War in Syria: Logics of Fragmentation and Realignment

Thomas Pierret

Introduction

By March 2011, Salafism was a very marginal force on Syria's religious scene, as its growing popular appeal during the previous decade had been matched by increasing state repression.¹ Following the outbreak of the civil war, however, Salafi factions rapidly became the dominant force among the insurgency, to the extent that by October 2013 five of them featured among the seven most powerful rebel groups in the country, totalling several dozens of thousands of fighters: two of them were offspring of the Jihadi Islamic State in Iraq (*Jabhat al-Nusra*, hereafter *al-Nusra*, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, ISIS), and the three others would soon become the founding factions of the more pragmatic Islamic Front (*Ahrar al-Sham*, the Army of Islam, and *Suqur al-Sham*), along with the Islamist, but non-Salafi *Tawhid* Brigade.²

To a certain extent, the spectacular rise of Salafism in Syria was function of this doctrine's inherent features: in particular, an exclusive definition of the Islamic

¹ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria. The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 108-109.

² Joshua Landis, 'Syria's top five insurgent leaders', *Syria Comment*, 1 October 2013.

faith that perfectly suits the context of sectarian polarisation - Sunnis versus Alawites - that characterises the Syrian war, in addition to the broader, Sunni-Shia dimension the conflict has acquired as a result of the involvement of regional actors.³ Salafism's newly acquired hegemony also reflected the revenge of the country's peripheries over urban centres, as the villages, provincial towns and popular suburbs that had been home to most of the pre-2011 shadowy Salafi networks have also provided the bulk of the current insurgent leadership.⁴

At the same time, however, Syria's current 'military Salafism' is a largely imported phenomenon. Whereas before 2011 Ba'thist authoritarianism had succeeded in curtailing foreign interferences in Syria's religious scene, the subsequent collapse of state control over vast swathes of the country opened the latter to the influence of transnational Salafi networks based in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. Thanks to their efficiency and financial means, these networks rapidly established solid strongholds among rebel groups in dire need of external support.

Foreign support gave Syrian Salafi factions a military weight that was disproportionate to the actual social anchorage of their religious doctrine.

³ ICG (International Crisis Group), *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report 131, 12 October 2012, p. 5.

⁴ In that respect, it is remarkable that the few sizeable Islamist groups with significant roots in the urban middle-class (Fa-staqim Kama Umirt in Aleppo, Shabab al-Huda in Damascus) are not Salafi (interview with 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj, Gaziantep, 10 January 2014).

Indeed, given the weakness and disorganisation of the Salafi scene in pre-revolutionary Syria, the embrace of Salafism by many opposition fighters long remained superficial, if not opportunistic.⁵ Of course, this situation gradually changed as foreign Salafi donors encouraged genuine proselytising among insurgent groups and civilian communities. However, given the enormous material needs resulting from prolonged warfare, foreign support will long remain a key determinant of the structure and outlook of Syrian Salafism.

External Salafi involvement in a conflict through funding and foreign fighters has been a recurring pattern of Muslim politics since the Afghan war in the 1980s. However, the Syrian crisis has brought about a situation that is largely unprecedented, namely, the fact that competition among Salafi support networks of conflicting political orientations – Jihadis, political/Haraki, and quietist – has profoundly affected the structure of the insurgency as a whole. Such competition was not absent in 1980s Afghanistan,⁶ but it had a marginal impact outside the small community of foreign fighters, and the Afghan insurgency remained principally structured by local dividing lines. In Syria, on the contrary, the leading insurgent fronts were established at the instigation of - or with the goal

⁵ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 5.

⁶ Bernard Rougier, *Everyday Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam Among Palestinians in Lebanon*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 78-79.

in mind to attract support from - a specific segment of the transnational Salafi sphere.⁷

The involvement of the entire spectrum of regional Salafi networks in the Syrian conflict also contrasted with the situation of the decade that preceded the Arab Awakening. Indeed, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s the Afghan, Bosnian, and Chechen Jihads had been relatively uncontroversial causes in Gulf monarchies and had consequently attracted both militant and mainstream support, fundraising for Salafi militancy abroad had been gradually driven underground after 2001 as a result of the post-9/11 US 'war on terror' and al-Qaeda's terrorist campaign on Saudi soil.⁸

A factor that attenuated the bitterness of intra-Salafi rivalries in the jihads of the 1980s and 1990s was the fact that they were territorial wars against non-Muslim enemies on the outskirts of the *umma*, which meant that their outcomes were not directly consequential for Middle Eastern societies. On the contrary, the current Syrian conflict has been taking place at the heart of the region and started as part of a revolutionary wave that directly threatened all Arab regimes. Such a context

⁷ Ideological divisions among Salafi networks of support are only one aspect of the broader fragmentation of the Syrian insurgency's sources of funding, a situation that has significantly hindered attempts at unifying rebel groups. See Afshon Ostovar and Will McCants, *The Rebel Alliance. Why Syria's Armed Opposition Has Failed to Unify*, CNA Strategic Studies, March 2013.

⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, *Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

generated acute awareness among Salafis that the war's political consequences would inevitably extend beyond Syrian borders, and that whatever interpretation of Salafism would come out on top in the country would thereby acquire a major advantage region-wide.

This chapter presents the different nexuses of local military commanders, foreign private networks of support, and in some cases state sponsors, that stand behind the main Syrian insurgent coalitions of Salafi obedience. Each of the first four sections corresponds to one of the rebel fronts established in 2012 in order to promote a specific interpretation of Salafism: the Jihadi al-Nusra, the 'Salafi lite'/Haraki Syrian Islamic Front, the Haraki Syria Islamic Liberation Front, and the 'quietist' Front for Authenticity and Development. The last two sections analyse the circumstances of the reshuffling of the Syrian Salafi scene throughout 2013 with the merger of the Syrian Islamic Front and Syria Islamic Liberation Front into the Islamic Front, the split between al-Nusra and ISIS, and the growing polarisation between the latter and all other insurgent factions.

As one of the most pressing strategic issues worldwide, Syrian Salafi groups have been intensively scrutinised over the last years. This chapter makes extensive use of the abundant secondary material published on the subject and complement it with primary sources to provide a dynamic map of the Syrian Salafi scene. The aim is not only to detail the different forces on the ground and their respective transnational connections, but also to highlight the evolutionary

character of these nexuses' strategies and identities in the face of changing circumstances.

Fronting for the Islamic State in Iraq: Jabhat al-Nusra

In a context like Syria's civil war, where armed struggle is part of the political mainstream, what sets Jihadis apart from other Salafis is their embrace of a *military* agenda that extends beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the Syrian uprising:⁹ That kind of agenda was illustrated by ISIS' two-front insurgency in Iraq and Syria, and by al-Nusra's establishment of a Lebanese branch in late 2013.¹⁰ Besides the routinised use of suicide bombings, transnational military activism has been the one main distinctive feature of Jihadi groups in Syria. It has been more distinctive than their project of a new Caliphate, which has been promoted more vocally and consistently, for half a century, by the non-Salafi/non-Jihadi Hizb al-Tahrir ('Liberation Party'). Transnational military activism has also be more specific to Jihadis than the recruitment of foreign fighters: Jihadi groups have been the main, but not exclusive, recipients of such foreign volunteers: the Umma Brigade, a moderate Islamist group based in the province of Idlib which initially fought under the Syrian flag and maintained close relations with the Free Syrian Army (FSA), was

⁹ François Burgat and Romain Caillet, 'Une guérilla "islamiste" ? Les composantes idéologiques de la révolte armée', in François Burgat (ed.), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie. Les clés pour comprendre les acteurs et les défis de la crise (2011–2013)*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013, p. 60.

¹⁰ Aron Lund, 'Osama al-Shehabi: An al-Qaeda Leader in Lebanon', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 December 2013.

established by veteran of the Libyan civil war Mahdi Harati;¹¹ in the context of its war against ISIS in early 2014, the Islamic Front challenged the latter's claim to be the *muhajirin* ('migrants') organisation *par excellence* through a media campaign featuring interviews with foreign fighters entitled 'I fight with the Islamic Front'.¹²

Jihadism became a visible component of the Syrian insurgency in January 2012 with the establishment of *jabhat al-nusra li-ahl al-sham* ('The Support Front for the People of the Levant'). Al-Nusra was set up by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, a Syrian militant about whom we possess very little reliable information, on behalf of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), at the time an unruly al-Qaeda affiliate.¹³ Although al-Nusra's ties with ISI were kept secret until al-Baghdadi disclosed them in April 2013, they were evoked early on by the US government.¹⁴

Al-Nusra's early beginning (by January 2012, the militarisation of the uprising was less than six-month old) made the group the first rebel organisation to be

¹¹ Mary Fitzgerald, 'The Syrian Rebels' Libyan Weapon', *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2012.

¹² See for instance 'Kuwayti ... ana mujahid ma'a al-jabhat al-islamiyya (Kuwaiti ... I fight with the Islamic Front), 14 January 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UydqhXFyVis>.

¹³ On tensions between al-Qaeda and ISI before 2011, see Cole Bunzel, 'The Islamic State of Disobedience: al-Baghdadi Triumphant', *Jihadica*, 5 October 2013.

¹⁴ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 10-11; Aron Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, Swedish Institute for International Affairs UI Brief 13, 14 September 2012, pp. 25-30.

explicitly created outside, or more exactly, against, the loose framework of the FSA. At a time when most armed groups were still pledging to fight for a democratic revolution, al-Nusra mimicked its Iraqi matrix by adopting an ultra-Islamist, sectarian and anti-Western rhetoric, concealing the identity of its leaders, and carrying out spectacular suicide bombings against government targets located in densely populated urban areas. For several months, al-Nusra's attitude was seen as so detrimental to the image of the revolution that many Syrian opponents suggested that the group was in fact a creature of Asad's intelligence.¹⁵

The situation began to change in the summer of 2012, as al-Nusra's manpower rapidly increased through the recruitment of Syrian fighters, including many defectors from other rebel factions. This success resulted from the Jihadi group's combativeness against regime forces, discipline in a context of military stalemate that was driving many rebel units to go rogue, and efficient management of relief activities among local communities.¹⁶ These qualities were not only a by-product of Jihadi ideology, but arguably owed much to the nature of the group's leadership, a cohesive vanguard of long-standing militants that gave al-Nusra a

¹⁵ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 11-12 ; Burgat and Caillet, 'Une guérilla "islamiste" ?', p. 72; 76.

¹⁶ See for instance Rania Abouzeid, 'Aleppo's Deadly Stalemate: A Visit to Syria's Divided Metropolis', *Time*, 14 November 2012.

distinct advantage over most other rebel factions, whose fragmented command structures had been hastily improvised from 2011 on.¹⁷

Within less than a year, al-Nusra had changed tremendously. From a small, secretive organisation mostly made up of foreigners, the group had morphed into a several thousand-strong guerrilla force of predominantly Syrian fighters. The 'nationalisation' of al-Nusra coincided with the adoption of a more pragmatic approach. In December 2012, a Syrian commander of al-Nusra denied the fact that the latter had 'some other goal elsewhere' than in Syria.¹⁸ This statement was at least indicative of the group's eagerness to tailor its discourse to a Syrian audience that had little appetite for global Jihad. In an address released the same month, al-Jolani adopted a conciliatory tone by stressing the need to preserve good relations with other rebel groups and to 'turn a blind eye on their errors'.¹⁹ In practice, al-Nusra joined forces with affiliates of the more mainstream Syrian Islamic Front and Syria Islamic Liberation Front to set up the Sharia Committee (*al-hay'a al-shar'iyya*), a judicial-executive authority whose

¹⁷ On the influence of pre-war social networks on the success of insurgent groups, see Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion. Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014.

¹⁸ Rania Abouzeid, 'Interview with official of Jabhat al-Nusra', *Time*, 25 December 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/12/25/interview-with-a-newly-designated-syrias-jabhat-al-nusra/>.

¹⁹ Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, '*Ahl al-sham fadaynakum bi-arwahina* (O People of the Levant, We Will Sacrifice Ourselves for Your Sake)', 27 December 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmBRUakQJRA>.

stated goal was to enforce a modicum of (Islamic) order in the rebel-held districts of Aleppo.²⁰

In November 2012, al-Nusra's denunciation of the Syrian National Coalition (the main political arm of the opposition abroad) as a 'conspiratorial project' served as a reminder that the Jihadi organisation could certainly not qualify as 'moderate'.²¹ Despite that, however, its image had dramatically improved among the rest of the opposition, as illustrated by the quasi-unanimous reprobation (including among the National Coalition itself) that met al-Nusra's blacklisting as a terrorist organisation by the US government in December 2012.²²

'Jihadi Lite': Ahrar al-Sham and the Syrian Islamic Front

The Syrian Islamic Front (*al-jabhat al-islamiyyat al-suriyya*, hereafter SIF) was established in December 2012. Contrary to al-Nusra, a centralised vanguardist structure that was a 'front' only in name, the SIF was a genuine coalition of pre-existing groups stemming from the country's different provinces.²³ The purpose

²⁰ Thomas Pierret, 'Implementing "Sharia" in Syria's liberated provinces', *The Foundation for Law, Justice and Society*, 7 August 2013.

²¹ Aron Lund, 'Aleppo and the battle for the Syrian revolution's soul', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 4 December 2012.

²² *Al-Safir*, 12 December 2012, <http://assafir.com/#!/ArticleWindow.aspx?ArticleID=295822>.

²³ For more details on the SIF's components, see Aron Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents: the Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front*, Swedish Institute for International Affairs UI Brief 17, 17 March 2013.

of their unification was not so much tactical coordination²⁴, but fund-raising through the creation of a 'brand' that would clarify the identity of the front's components in the eyes of potential donors, and magnify these components' military weight thanks to a single logo featuring on all the videos of their operations.

From the onset, the SIF was overwhelmingly dominated by *Ahrar al-Sham* ('the Freeman of the Levant'), which by June 2012 had become one of the most powerful insurgent organisations in the country. Ahrar al-Sham presented an extremely ambiguous profile that could be labelled as 'Jihadi lite'.

The founding leadership of most SIF affiliates was firmly rooted in the pre-2011 Jihadi community, in particular among former inmates of the prison of Seydnaya – Syria's 'Jihadi Academy' – who were released by the regime in the months that followed the uprising of March 2011.²⁵ Such was the case of Ahrar al-Sham's leader Hasan 'Abbud (Abu Abdallah al-Hamawi), chief religious scholar Muhammad Ayman Abu al-Tut (Abu al-Abbas al-Shami), and emir in Aleppo Muhammad Bahaya (Abu Khalid al-Suri), a veteran Jihadi with personal ties to

²⁴ Tactical coordination between insurgent groups is usually dealt with at the local level by the FSA's Military Councils and ad hoc operation rooms.

²⁵ Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, passim; Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj, '*A-salafiyya wal-salafiyyun fi suriyya: min al-islam ila al-jihad* (Salafism and Salafis in Syria: From Reform to Jihad)', *Al Jazeera*, 20 May 2013.

al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.²⁶²⁷ Ahrar al-Sham's anchorage within Jihadi networks extended beyond Syrian borders: one of its early muftis was a Jordanian,²⁸ and until the summer of 2012, the group was said to be the main magnet for (Arab) foreign fighters in the north of Syria.²⁹

In spite of this, Ahrar al-Sham's strategy immediately set it apart from al-Nusra. First, the group insisted it was totally independent from any foreign organisation, a claim buttressed by the fact that, contrary to al-Nusra, it was not endorsed by al-Qaeda-related online forums. In May 2013, Ahrar al-Sham denounced al-Nusra's decision to officially pledge allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, warning against the dangers of 'regionalising the conflict' and 'bringing in other parties'.³⁰

Second, although the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham conformed to the vanguard model and consequently enjoyed a tightly institutionalised command structure,³¹ the group expanded along a distinctly 'parochial' model by securing the

²⁷ Aron Lund, 'Say Hello to the Islamic Front' and 'Who and what was Abu Khalid al-Suri?', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 22 November 2013 and 24 February 2014; Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj Ibrahim in *al-Hayat*, 28 February 2014.

²⁸ *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 7 November 2013, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=101292>.

²⁹ Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, p. 31.

³⁰ Aron Lund, 'Major salafi faction criticizes Jabhat al-Nusra', *Syria Comment*, 4 May 2013.

³¹ Interview with Abd al-Rahman al-Hajj, Istanbul, 7 January 2014.

allegiance of entire pre-existing local rural battalions (*kata'ib*) that kept their names and, initially at least, only superficially embraced the Salafi orientation of their umbrella organisation.³²

Third, Ahrar al-Sham's posture towards non-Jihadi partners was far more flexible than that of al-Nusra. Although it expressed no sympathy for the Western-backed opposition in exile, it joined the Syria Revolutionaries Front,³³ a short-lived rebel coalition whose politburo included Muslim-Brotherhood affiliated members of the Syrian National Council, the National Coalition's ancestor.³⁴ The group also distanced itself from al-Nusra's aforementioned rhetorical onslaught against the National Coalition,³⁵ and although Ahrar al-Sham never integrated FSA structures, it cooperated with the latter's provincial Military Councils, and representatives of the movement attended a high-profile meeting convened by FSA Chief of staff Salim Idris in Ankara in June 2013.³⁶ Even more remarkably, Ahrar al-Sham rapidly opened channels of

³² *Al-Hayat*, 21 August 2012, <http://alhayat.com/Details/427912>; on the parochial model, see Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*.

³³ Not to be confused with the coalition of the same name established in late 2013 by FSA commander Jamal Ma'ruf.

³⁴ Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, p. 29; on the Muslim Brotherhood's occasional funding of Ahrar al-Sham, see Raphaël Lefèvre, 'The Syrian Brotherhood's armed struggle', *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 14 December 2012.

³⁵ Lund, 'Aleppo and the battle'.

³⁶ Al Jazeera, 20 June 2013,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=simuv4yIVgU&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

communication with Western states,³⁷ arguably as a means to reassure the latter about its agenda and consequently avoid being blacklisted.

Fourth, Ahrar al-Sham's political platform was consistently presented in an ambiguous manner that did not reflect ideological flexibility, but testified to the movement's feeling of embarrassment towards its own doctrinaire agenda. Jihadi ideologues who scrutinised the charter of the SIF formulated polite regrets at the fact that although not explicitly compromising on key issues such as the Islamic state and the legal inferiority of non-Muslims, the document featured vague phrasing that left the door open for various interpretations.³⁸ In an Al Jazeera interview, Ahrar al-Sham's leader 'Abbud showed utterly uncomfortable – and eventually silent – about the specifics of the state his movement aimed to establish.³⁹

Ahrar al-Sham's relative pragmatism must be understood in the light of the unique context in which it emerged, that is, the Arab Awakening. Starting with Sayyid Qutb in the 1960s, the militant Islamists' vision of politics was shaped by a highly elitist, 'vanguardist' model well illustrated by the name of the Syrian group in which the elders among Ahrar al-Sham's cadre had fought during the

³⁷ Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, p. 18.

³⁸ Abu Basir al-Tartusi, 'A Note on the Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front' (in Arabic), *Jihadology*, 22 January 2013; Iyad Qunaybi, 'A Look at the Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front' (in Arabic), *Jihadology*, 22 January 2013.

³⁹ Al Jazeera, 9 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRPb4nFU2UA>.

1979–82 insurgency: the ‘Fighting Vanguard’. Likewise, the name ‘al-Qaeda’ refers to a solid ‘basis’ of committed militants. This elitist model was itself a product of specific historical circumstances, namely the radicalisation of Islamism in the face of single-party regimes suppressing popular participation in politics, the worldwide fashion of armed (especially left-wing, Guevarist) vanguardism in the 1960s-1970s, and the crystallisation of global Jihadi ideology among a small community of Arab veterans of the Afghan war in the 1990s. On the contrary, the Arab revolutions of 2011 confronted radical Islamists with the fact that ‘people power’ could bring about actual political change. Acknowledgement of the political agency of the masses and of the fact that they could not be expected to unanimously agree with a rigorist Salafi platform explains the SIF’s promise to adopt ‘gradualism’ in the implementation of its agenda.⁴⁰ Tellingly, ‘Abbud later derided al-Nusra’s maximalist agenda as “the jihad of the elites”.⁴¹

The ideological revisions entailed by the Arab Awakening among some radical Islamists also found an illustration in the writings of Abu Basir al-Tartusi, aka Abd al-Mun‘im Mustafa Halima (b. 1959), a leading Syrian, London-based Jihadi theoretician who endorsed the charter of the SIF.⁴² Before that, al-Tartusi’s

⁴⁰ ‘Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 January 2013.

⁴¹ *Al-Safir*, 19 May 2014, <http://www.assafir.com/Article/5/351144/MostRead>.

⁴² Lund, *Syria’s Salafi Insurgents*, p. 21.

fascination with Syria's popular insurgency had led him to praise the FSA, rebuke the latter's Jihadi detractors, and reproach al-Nusra for its secrecy and extremism.⁴³

The pragmatic stance of Ahrar al-Sham was also related to its proximity to the Turkish-Qatari axis. The movement's founding meeting reportedly took place in Istanbul,⁴⁴ which suggests early liaison with the Turkish intelligence. Later on, Ahrar al-Sham's SIF acknowledged financial support from IHH, a Turkish charity closely tied to the AKP government, as well as from the Qatar Charity.⁴⁵ According to a media officer of Ahrar al-Sham, the latter's participation in the June 2013 FSA meeting in Ankara was a result of encouragement from the 'Qatari brothers', whose chief client in the National Coalition Mustafa al-Sabbagh was jointly chairing the meeting alongside General Idris.⁴⁶

The partnership between Ahrar al-Sham's seasoned Jihadi leaders and regional governments was probably brokered by the private Salafi networks who, initially at least, provided the movement with much of its financial resources. In that respect, another major difference between Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra was that

⁴³ Burgat and Caillet, 'Une guérilla "islamiste" ?', p. 72, 76; Cole Bunzel, 'Jihadism's Widening Internal Divide: Intellectual Infighting Heats Up', *Jihadica*, 29 January 2013.

⁴⁴ Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴⁶ Al Jazeera, 20 June 2013,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=simuv4yIVgU&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

whereas overt support for the latter across the region remained minimal outside the radical underground, the former was immediately and publicly endorsed by well-known figures in Kuwait. Taking advantage of their country's very high GDP per capita and lax policies towards fundraising, these activists did not only collect donations in the emirate, but also turned the latter into a hub for money coming from neighbouring countries and in particular from Saudi Arabia, where private fund raising for Syrian insurgents was officially banned in May 2012.⁴⁷

Ahrar al-Sham's Kuwaiti supporters were Haraki Salafis known for their hostility to Saudi Arabia and good relations with Qatar and Turkey.⁴⁸ Umma Party leader Hakim al-Mutayri, reportedly participated in the Istanbul meeting that led to the creation of Ahrar al-Sham,⁴⁹ which subsequently benefited from fund raising campaigns run by figures such as former MP Walid al-Tabtaba'i, the extremely popular TV preacher Nabil al-'Awdi (the most influential tweeter on Syria in 2012)⁵⁰ and his friend Shafi al-'Ajami, as well as Hajjaj al-'Ajami, the head of the

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Playing with fire: Why private Gulf financing for Syria's extremist rebels risks igniting sectarian conflict at home', *Saban Center for Middle East Policy* 16, 6 December 2013, p. 21-22.

⁴⁸ See Zoltan Pall's chapter in this volume as well as Carine Lahoud-Tatar, *Islam et Politique au Koweït*, Paris: PUF, 2011, p. 190-211

⁴⁹ Lund, *Syria's Salafi Insurgents*, p. 30.

⁵⁰ Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon and Sean Aday, *Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2014, p. 23.

Popular Committee for the Support to the Syrian Revolution.⁵¹ Tellingly, whereas the aforementioned fundraisers were barred from operating in Saudi Arabia,⁵² their representatives in Qatar were working out in the open.⁵³

The *Sururiyya* Goes Syrian: The Syria Islamic Liberation Front

Besides Ahrar al-Sham and its SIF, donations collected by Haraki Salafis in Kuwait also went to rebel factions affiliated with another coalition, the Syria Islamic Liberation Front (*jabha tahrir suriyya al-islamiyya*, hereafter SILF), established in September 2012.⁵⁴ Although it was part of the same regional alignment, the SILF presented several differences with the SIF.

First, whereas Ahrar al-Sham was the unchallenged mainstay of the SIF, power within the SILF was evenly distributed between its four main components: *Suqur al-Sham* in Idlib, the Islam Brigade in Damascus, the Faruq Battalions in Homs, and the Tawhid Brigade in Aleppo.

Second, whereas the SIF leadership was clearly dominated by Salafi ‘graduates’ of the Seydnaya prison, the profiles of SILF commanders were more diverse, to

⁵¹ Lund, *Syria’s Salafi Insurgents*, p. 29; ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 30; Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*.

⁵² See Hajjaj al-‘Ajami’s account on Youtube, 19 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWKYy1bG7qA>.

⁵³ Dickinson, *Playing with Fire*, p. 8, 10.

⁵⁴ Tweet by Shafi al-‘Ajami, 13 June 2013.

the extent that major components of the front were not Salafi. Tawhid's first military commander 'Abd al-Qadir Salih, who died in an airstrike in November 2013, was a small merchant affiliated with the Tabligh, a non-Salafi and apolitical missionary movement based in South Asia,⁵⁵ and his brigade initially placed itself under the spiritual guidance of the League of the Syrian Ulama's president Muhammad Ali al-Sabuni, a non-Salafi scholar enjoying close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁶ The Faruq Battalions were run in a more collegial fashion by very diverse figures who had no record of Jihadi activism: their early figurehead was Lieutenant 'Abd al-Razzaq Tlass, the first army officer to defect in June 2011; real power was said to be in the hands of Amjad al-Bitar, a religious sheikh who owed his influence in the group to his connections with fund-raising networks in the Gulf, but whose Salafi credentials were questionable; by June 2013, al-Faruq was led by Osama al-Junaydi, a young lawyer from the city of Homs.⁵⁷

Former Salafi inmates of the Seydnaya prison were present in the SILF leadership. Two of them, Ahmad 'Abu Isa' al-Sheikh and Zahran 'Allush, were the

⁵⁵ See his profile in the *New York Times*, 1 February 2013,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/02/world/middleeast/the-saturday-profile-hajji-marea-a-rebel-commander-in-syria-holds-reins-of-war.html>.

⁵⁶ Thomas Pierret, 'Les oulémas : une hégémonie religieuse ébranlée par la révolution', in François Burgat (ed.), *Pas de printemps pour la Syrie*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013, p. 103.

⁵⁷ Interview with Faruq Battalions leader Osama al-Junaydi, Al Jazeera, 17 June 2013,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJIda5B1QHU>; ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 5.

respective commanders of Suqur al-Sham and the Islam Brigade.⁵⁸ However, it seems that neither al-Sheikh nor ‘Allush were as integrated into pre-2011 Jihadi networks as Ahrar al-Sham’s commanders were. This plausibly explains the more localised character of their organisations as well as their comparative lack of institutionalisation and consequent reliance on kinship relations. By 2014, all of the Islam Brigade’s most visible figures were members of the ‘Allush family, with Zahran as supreme commander, and two cousins, Muhammad and Islam, as head of the politburo and military spokesman, respectively.

A third major difference between the SIF and the SILF was the latter’s distinctly more moderate outlook. By the establishment of the SILF in September 2012, all its major components, except for the Islam Brigade, had the Syrian national flag on their logos. Despite occasional exceptions, their official stance on religious minorities, including Alawites, was rather conciliatory. On democracy, SILF affiliates adopted positions broadly similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood by combining calls for the implementation of *sharia* with support for a competitive electoral system.⁵⁹

All SILF affiliates joined General Idris’ Supreme Military Council in December 2012, and maintained relations with the political opposition abroad at some

⁵⁸ Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, p. 36; ‘Allush’s father ‘Abdallah is a traditional Salafi sheikh from Duma (Damascus) who was barred from any religious activity in the mid-1990s. He is now based in Saudi Arabia.

⁵⁹ ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 18; Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, p. 37.

point. Before it took part in the establishment of the SILF, Suqur al-Sham was the leading faction within the Committee for the Protection of Civilians, a front organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which also provided Tawhid with financial support.⁶⁰ Before the creation of the Islam Brigade, its head of politburo Muhammad 'Allush was a member of the Syrian National Council.⁶¹ SILF affiliates cautiously, but formally, endorsed the Council and/or the National Coalition,⁶² and Tawhid commander Salih hosted the head of the opposition's interim government Ghassan Hitto when he visited Aleppo in March 2013.⁶³

Like for Ahrar al-Sham, but to a much greater extent, the SILF's pragmatism was function of its proximity to the Qatar-Turkey axis. Tawhid's endorsement of the Coalition and interim government coincided with the apex of Qatari influence on the political opposition. Al-Faruq's northern branch was relied upon by the Turkish intelligence to guard the border, an experience that eventually proved unsuccessful given the corruption of the Syrian insurgent group.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Youtube, 4 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKay85etOVw>; Lefèvre, 'The Syrian Brotherhood's Armed Struggle'.

⁶¹ See his interview in the Salafi Haraki magazine *al-Bayan*, 1 March 2012, <http://albayan.co.uk/article.aspx?id=1670>.

⁶² Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, p. 37 and 'Aleppo and the battle'; Osama al-Junaydi, interview on al-Jazeera.

⁶³ *All4Syria*, 24 March 2013, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/76305>.

⁶⁴ Interviews with a Syrian opponent, Istanbul, 7 January 2014.

Like the SIF, the SILF derived the bulk of its private funding from Gulf-based Haraki Salafis. However, its most dedicated supporters were not the Kuwaitis, but members of a current called 'Sururi', after Syrian ideologue Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin (b. 1938), the tutelary figure of Haraki Salafism. A native of the province of Der'a, Zayn al-'Abidin joined the Muslim Brotherhood before going into exile in Saudi Arabia in 1965. Although he left the kingdom in 1973 and relocated successively to Kuwait, Great Britain, Jordan and, recently, Qatar, he left a durable imprint on the Saudi Islamist scene. His combination of Salafi doctrines and Muslim Brotherhood-like concerns for political issues was a major source of inspiration for the Sahwa movement, detailed in chapter 5 by Stéphane Lacroix, as well as for Kuwaiti Harakis.⁶⁵

For most of his career, Zayn al-'Abidin did not display much interest in the politics of his homeland and rather directed his criticisms at the regime of the country in which he had most of his admirers: Saudi Arabia.⁶⁶ After 2011, however, the Salafi ideologue capitalised on his extensive regional networks to raise funds for the Syrian opposition. In the military realm, he openly expressed his preference for the SILF, claiming that the latter comprised no less than 60 to

⁶⁵ Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam. The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011; Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, p. 81.

⁶⁶ Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, p. 154-55. For a recent example, see interview with al-Hiwar TV, 9 December 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oevC1vhwU7Y>

70% of all rebel fighters'.⁶⁷ The SILF maintains close ties with the Sham Islamic Committee (*hay'at al-sham al-islamiyya*), a Sururi humanitarian and missionary organisation whose leaders are based in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.⁶⁸ The Committee's operations in Syria, which included providing the SILF with Salafi booklets,⁶⁹ were partly funded by the powerful Qatari 'Id Charitable Foundation,⁷⁰ a major patron of Haraki Salafism worldwide.⁷¹

Whereas some Kuwaiti Harakis have radicalised and moved closer to Jihadi factions, the Sururis have firmly remained in the mainstream and therefore constitute a factor of relative moderation for the groups they sponsor. Zayn al-'Abidin and his followers have cooperated with mainstream traditionalist religious scholars within organisations such as the League of the Ulama of Sham (2012) and the Syrian Islamic Council (2014).⁷² Zayn al-'Abidin expressed his

⁶⁷ Interview on Al-Hiwar TV, 8 December 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwpN-2w9J38&feature=youtu.be>.

⁶⁸ Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, p. 37; interview with a member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Tunis, 10 December 2012.

⁶⁹ SILF Facebook page, 9 March 2013.

⁷⁰ Video report, 2 February 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XnwCmTsSkA>.

⁷¹ Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, p. 85-86.

⁷² Thomas Pierret, 'The Syrian Islamic Council', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 May 2014.

opposition to the presence of foreign fighters⁷³ and the Committee issued a fatwa legitimising the use of the Syrian national flag by rebel groups.⁷⁴

The Quietists' Baptism of Fire: The Front for Authenticity and Development

Describing Salafi networks that actively support armed struggle as 'quietist' may seem contradictory. It is all the more the case when these networks are centred in the Kuwaiti Association for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage (*jam'iyya ihya' al-turath al-islami*, hereafter al-Turath), whose members participated in parliamentary elections as early as 1981.⁷⁵ However, these Salafis are 'quietist' to the extent that contrary to the Jihadis and Harakis, they profess unconditional loyalty to incumbent Muslim regimes and in particular to the Saudi monarchy.⁷⁶ Consequently, they first opposed the 2011 uprisings in general, but on Syria, they gradually changed their mind and aligned themselves with Riyadh's support for the opposition. The best illustration of that U-turn was certainly the case of Saudi-based Syrian TV preacher 'Adnan al-'Ar'ur: a couple of weeks before

⁷³ Interview, al-Hiwar TV, 9 June 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0I-o_XQ7-M.

⁷⁴ Fatwa released on 13 May 2012, <http://islamicsham.org/fatawa/275>.

⁷⁵ Lahoud-Tatar, *Islam et Politique*, p. 113-17.

⁷⁶ Al-Turath initially had a Haraki component in the person of its influential Egyptian ideologue 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq. However, the latter's expulsion from the association in the early 1990s was followed by a marked quietist turn (Pall, *Salafism in Lebanon*, p. 65-76).

demonstrations started in Syria, he was still ordering Syrians *not* to imitate Tunisian and Libyan revolutionaries; a few months later, he became famous thanks to a pro-revolution weekly programme entitled *With Syria Until Victory*.⁷⁷

When the Saudi state started to throw its weight behind Syrian rebels in the first months of 2012, it privileged nationalist defector officers over Islamist civilian commanders in a way that was not dissimilar to Riyadh's support for the military against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.⁷⁸ Accordingly, al-'Ar'ur expressed support for schemes aimed at placing the insurgency under the aegis of defector officers,⁷⁹ and engaged in a rhetorical feud with Kuwaiti Harakis Shafi and Hajjaj al-'Ajami, whom he accused of sowing division and extremism by bypassing the officers-led Military Councils in favour of Islamist factions.⁸⁰ The 'Ajamis, on their part, replied by branding the Military Councils as devices used by Saudi Arabia and the US to prevent funds from reaching Salafi battalions.⁸¹

⁷⁷ (Date unknown), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaGe7V-xrDY>. On al-'Ar'ur, see ICG, *Tentative Jihad*, p. 29; Pierret, 'Les oulémas', p. 104-105.

⁷⁸ Thomas Pierret, 'External Support and the Syrian Insurgency', *Foreign Policy*, 9 August 2013.

⁷⁹ Pierret, 'Les oulémas', p. 105.

⁸⁰ See for instance al-'Ar'ur's speech in a private mansion, 13 November 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnFXgO3oNp0>

⁸¹ See Shafi al-'Ajami's interview on Khalijiyya TV, 11 July 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LIQ32O89nTk>.

This background explains the contradictory features of the Saudi-aligned Salafi coalition established in November 2012, the Front for Authenticity and Development (*jabhat al-asala wal-tanmiya*, hereafter FAD), which always remained a lightweight by comparison with other Salafi coalitions. The backbone of the front is the humanitarian-missionary Association of the People of the Trace (*jam'iyyat ahl al-athar*, hereafter Ahl al-Athar), and the battalions of the same name. Ahl al-Athar itself is funded by al-Turath, whose member 'Abd al-Mani' al-'Ajami is frequently visiting refugee camps in Turkey.⁸² The FAD is led by Khalid al-Hammad, a Turath-affiliated Syrian cleric based in the emirate.

Given the lack of quietist Salafi infrastructure in Syria before 2011, the FAD had to recruit a heterogeneous alliance of ex-Jihadis (Nur al-Din Zanki Battalions),⁸³ early defectors of Asad's military (ex-Faruq leader 'Abd al-Rahman Tlass), and tribesman from the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor.

The FAD's alignment on the Saudi agenda translated into a moderate outlook. Its name is reminiscent of that of post-Islamist parties, its platform barely makes any reference to Islam or even to any kind of post-Asad political ambition,⁸⁴ and its visual material proudly features the Syrian flag. Obvious proximity with Riyadh also sparked strong suspicion among other Salafi factions, to the extent

⁸² See for instance, 30 October 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCfd5NUDI0s>

⁸³ Interview with a member of the Syrian opposition, Istanbul, January 2014; Pierret, 'External Support'.

⁸⁴ 'Ru'yatuna (Our vision)', official website, <http://www.asala-tanmia.com/index.php/> رؤيتنا

that FAD leader Khalid al-Hammad felt compelled to intervene on al-'Ar'ur's TV programme to deny his front was a Syrian version of the 'Awakening Councils' set up by the US army in Iraq to fight the Sunni insurgency during the previous decade.⁸⁵

Radical Mainstream: the Islamic Front

In November 2013, the main components of the SIF and SILF (minus the Faruq Battalions, which had disintegrated in previous months due to intra-leadership rivalries) announced their merger into the Islamic Front (*al-jabhat al-islamiyya*, IF). The move had been announced for a long time and it did not come as a surprise given the two coalitions' close operational cooperation and partly overlapping sources of external support. However, the unification was also a reflection of recent developments.

The first of these developments was a process of radicalisation during 2013. This was, to a large extent, the product of the increasingly clear-cut sectarian character of the war, as the first half of the year witnessed the creation by the regime of a predominantly Alawite auxiliary militia called the National Defence Army, as well as the massive involvement of the Lebanese Hizbullah in the conflict. By February, the Syrian flag had disappeared from Suqur al-Sham's logo, and in July, Zahran 'Allush released a video message featuring virulent sectarian

⁸⁵ Wisal TV, 2 April 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QulCpSvqW6M>.

content.⁸⁶ Accordingly, the IF platform was unprecedentedly outspoken in its demand for an Islamic state and rejection of democracy and secularism. The document also paid homage to the foreign fighters who had come to the Syrian people's rescue.⁸⁷

This radicalisation coincided with a shift away from the National Coalition and FSA. In September 2013, future IF members had associated with al-Nusra to proclaim their rejection of the National Coalition,⁸⁸ and the creation of the IF itself followed failed Qatar-brokered negotiations with the FSA in which Islamist factions asked for a reform of the FSA command that would give them significant influence.⁸⁹ These moves were driven by a complex combination of factors: Saudi Arabia's takeover of the National Coalition in July, which encouraged Qatar to retaliate through its partners among armed groups;⁹⁰ bitter disappointment at the Obama administration's failure to respond militarily to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in August, striking a devastating blow to the standing of the Western-backed National Coalition and FSA; and the need to

⁸⁶ Joshua Landis, 'Zahran Alloush: His ideology and beliefs', *Syria Comment*, 15 December 2013.

⁸⁷ Aaron Zelin, 'Rebels Consolidating Strength in Syria: The Islamic Front', *WINEP Policywatch* 2177, 3 December 2013; Aron Lund, 'The politics of the Islamic Front, Part 4: The State', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 January 2014.

⁸⁸ Aron Lund, 'Islamist groups declare opposition to National Coalition and US strategy', *Syria Comment*, 24 September 2013.

⁸⁹ *Orient News*, 6 November 2013, http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=6068.

⁹⁰ Interview with a Syrian opponent, Istanbul, January 2014.

bolster the Islamist credentials of mainstream Salafi factions in a context of looming conflict with ISIS.

In Saudi Arabia, the establishment of the IF was hailed by major figures of the Sahwa like Salman al-'Awda and Nasir al-'Umar,⁹¹ who had hitherto refrained from vowing support for specific insurgent fronts in Syria. More surprisingly, the IF also received warm support from 'Adnan al-'Ar'ur. Since early 2013, the latter had been promoting the Islam Brigade in his TV show,⁹² and had gradually renounced to support the FSA's shaky structures. In September, 'Allush's group, soon renamed the 'Army of Islam', took the lead of an operation room established with funds provided by al-'Ar'ur and the Turath-aligned Council of the Backers of the Syrian Revolution in Kuwait. The latter was chaired by Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri, a former MP of the Salafi Gathering (*al-tajammu' al-salafi*), al-Turath's parliamentary wing.⁹³ Although the FAD apparently hoped

⁹¹ Website of Nasir al-'Umar, 6 December 2013, <http://almoslim.net/node/195146>.

⁹² See for instance Zahran 'Allush's intervention on 7 February 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9T-eA621yA>.

⁹³ See al-'Ar'ur's visite to al-Mutayri on 11 September 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIUIJu4Xgpo>. The operation room's initial line-up also included the Damascus branch of Ahrar al-Sham, but the latter rapidly broke with the command structure on the basis that the Islam Brigade was getting a disproportionate share of the funding (Ahrar al-Sham's website, 30 September 2013, <http://ahraralsham.net/?p=2857>).

that ‘Turathi’ money could be used to convince the Army of Islam to rally to its own ranks,⁹⁴ ‘Allush remained loyal to the SILF and IF.

The long-standing ties of ‘Allush’s father with the Saudi religious establishment probably facilitated this realignment,⁹⁵ but the move also reflected a partial shift in the Saudi strategy.⁹⁶ In light of the FSA’s poor performance, at least one of the kingdom’s decision-making centres (probably Prince Bandar bin Sultan’s intelligence) considered that no progress on the southern front could be made without cooperating with the most powerful rebel group in Damascus. Saudi support for the Army of Islam was also said to be a means to keep ISIS in check around the Syrian capital.⁹⁷ Showing support for the Army of Islam may also have been a means to offset the resentment generated among Saudi Islamists by Riyadh’s backing of the July 2013 coup in Egypt.

It should be noted that Saudi support for the Army of Islam did not amount to an embrace of the IF as a whole, as Ahrar al-Sham – the dominant force in the front - was still not deemed acceptable in Riyadh. Qatar and Turkey therefore remained the chief source of support for the IF, as suggested by a 20 January 2014

⁹⁴ Tweeter conversation between Khalid al-Hammad and Muhammad ‘Allush, 2 October 2013.

⁹⁵ Website of the late Saudi Mufti ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz, <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/mat/10231>.

⁹⁶ See Muhammad ‘Allush’s interview in the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 November 2013.

⁹⁷ ‘Saudi Arabia boosts Salafist rivals to al Qaeda in Syria’, *Reuters*, 1 October 2013,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/01/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight->

[idUSBRE9900RO20131001](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/01/us-syria-crisis-jihadists-insight-idUSBRE9900RO20131001).

statement in which the latter praised the role of the two aforementioned states, but failed to mention Saudi Arabia.⁹⁸ It is Qatar which, in following May, helped Ahrar al-Sham escape renewed threats of US blacklisting by securing IF's signature on the Honour Charter (*mithaq sharaf*), a document in which Syrian rebel factions expressed their rejection of foreign fighters and transnational jihad, and called for a "state of justice, law and liberties" rather than for an Islamic state.⁹⁹

Support for one of the IF's components by Saudi-aligned Salafis did not mark the end of their feud with the Kuwaiti Harakis. On the contrary, al-'Ar'ur stepped up his attacks against Hajjaj and Shafi al-'Ajami by blaming them for their support for the insurgency's most radical fringe.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, in a further illustration of the ongoing realignments between rebel factions and external networks of supports, the 'Ajamis had been increasingly open concerning their financial backing of Jihadi outfits: Shafi boasted about the fact that his operation rooms in Syria made 'no discrimination between al-Nusra and the other groups',¹⁰¹ and pictures were circulated on social networks showing Hajjaj in company with members of Suqur al-'Izz, an independent Jihadi group led by Saudi volunteers,¹⁰² as well as with

⁹⁸ <http://eldorar.com/node/39566>,

⁹⁹ Skype interview with a leader of one of the factions that signed the document, 18 May 2014.

¹⁰⁰ TV programme of 29 July 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-ymUwpFK3c>.

¹⁰¹ 11 July 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Ogi5S0AXrI.

¹⁰² Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'The Syrian rebel groups pulling in foreign fighters', *BBC*, 24 December 2013.

Chechen ISIS commander Abu 'Umar al-Shishani.¹⁰³ In August 2014, the two 'Ajamis were targeted by US sanctions on the basis of their support for terrorist organisations.¹⁰⁴

An even more spectacular case of conversion of a relatively established figure to Jihadi romanticism was that of the Saudi Abdallah al-Muhaysini. The son of the head of the religious police in the Burayda and himself a popular preacher, al-Muhaysini left his mosque in Mecca and relocated among the mujahidin in Syria. From there, he called for the unity of all Syrian Salafi factions, including al-Nusra and ISIS, and raised funds for them through representatives based in Kuwait and Qatar. Whereas al-'Ar'ur and his likes were seeing the IF as a bulwark against the rise of Jihadi hardliners, al-Muhaysini expressed hopes that the new umbrella organisation would move out of the mainstream by absorbing al-Qaeda's offspring in Syria.¹⁰⁵ In early 2014, however, the all-out war that broke out between ISIS and the rest of the rebellion dealt a fatal blow to that ecumenical project.

Countdown to Armageddon: the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham

¹⁰³ ICG, *Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition*, Middle East Report 146, 17 October 2013, p. 13.

¹⁰⁴ "Treasury designates three key supporters of terrorists in Syria and Iraq", 6 August 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2605.aspx>.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, 'Popular Saudi cleric endorses Islamic Front, calls for cooperation with al-Qaeda', *Long War Journal*, 14 December 2013.

In April 2013, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the merger of his organisation with its Syrian 'extension' al-Nusra in order to form ISIS. Al-Jolani opposed that decision and, in order to bolster his legitimacy, officially pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, who ruled against the merger.¹⁰⁶

Al-Baghdadi's decision must be analysed in the light of his chief strategic goal, which was not to topple the Syrian regime but, as ISIS' name indicates, to establish a state in the power vacuum spanning from Western Iraq to Northern Syria. Yet, by April 2013, two developments were threatening that project: the first was al-Nusra's participation in the governance of liberated areas on a par with other rebel factions rather than as the exclusive power holder; the second were attempts by the National Coalition and a newly formed interim government at rebuilding administrative and police structures in liberated areas, in addition to General Idris' efforts to reorganise the FSA.

ISIS' project of state-building is, of course, an idiosyncratic one, as demonstrated by the proclamation of the Caliphate by the group (now renamed "Islamic State") following its June 2014 successful offensive in Iraq. Given Syria's importance in the eschatological tradition of Islam, this project is arguably imbued with quasi-millenarian expectations in the eyes of many followers of the group. Even

¹⁰⁶ On ISIS' inception, see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, 'The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham', *MERIA* 17, no. 3, December 2013.

without that, al-Baghdadi's 'state' provides Salafis across the world with the opportunity to perform the *hijra* (emigration) to a place where, in the absence of a competing state authority, the laws of God can be fully implemented without resorting to the unholy compromises that characterise the usual conduct of political affairs. This extreme purism probably explains why ISIS has proved more appealing than al-Nusra among foreign volunteers. Among ISIS fighters, initial anxiety about the vulnerability of such a unique experience translated into a paranoid view of the outside world (including other rebels) that was manifested in Takfiri tendencies, that is, in a propensity to excommunicate any dissenter.

Such is the background that helps making sense of a strategy that has not only been largely disconnected from the goals of the Syrian revolution, but also profoundly detrimental to the latter. Although 'Da'esh' (a derogatory acronym used by ISIS' detractors) tried and sometimes managed to secure some popular support by allying with tribes,¹⁰⁷ carrying out outreach activities and fighting criminality with an iron fist, it also alienated large segments of the population through summary executions of 'blasphemers' and war prisoners, desecration of churches and Sufi mausoleums, as well as arrests and abduction of civil society activists, (Syrian and foreign) journalists, and local notables.

¹⁰⁷ Romain Caillet, 'Échec de l'offensive de l'Armée syrienne libre contre l'État islamique en Irak et au Levant', *Orient XXI*, 4 février 2013.

At the military level, ISIS focused on the consolidation of its hold over liberated areas in the north and east of the country at the expense of direct confrontation with the regime at least until the summer of 2014. One year before that, the group assassinated a prominent FSA commander in Latakia, then turned against FSA units across the country. In that context, the group's particular focus on the control of border towns (Jrablus, Dana, A'zaz) raised fears that it was trying to cut off the insurgents' supply lines with Turkey.

ISIS' aggressiveness was not reserved for the 'secular', 'Western-backed' FSA. In October 2013, it abducted al-Nusra's emir in Raqqa Abu Sa'ad al-Hadrami, who had secured the rallying of former FSA brigades that were seeking his protection against ISIS.¹⁰⁸ Throughout the autumn, the execution of several members of Ahrar al-Sham by ISIS gradually deepened the rift between the two factions.¹⁰⁹ In the Islamist Twittersphere, ISIS partisans were increasingly branded as 'Kharijites', in reference to an extreme school of thought of early Islamic history.

The showdown eventually came in January 2014 and pitted ISIS against FSA affiliates, the Army of the Mujahidin (a recently created moderate Islamist alliance comprising FAD units), the IF and al-Nusra. ISIS initially suffered severe

¹⁰⁸ 'Raqqa's FSA Brigades Join Jabhat al-Nusra', 20 September 2013,

<http://beta.syriadeeply.org/2013/09/raqqas-fsa-brigades-join-jabhat-al-nusra/#.Ux-jFSizvfg>. Al-

Hadrami was executed by ISIS in January 2014 during the showdown with other rebel groups.

¹⁰⁹ Aron Lund, 'Pushing back against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: The path to conflict',

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 6 January 2014.

setbacks, as it had to evacuate most of its positions in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo (except for the eastern part) and Deir ez-Zor in order to consolidate its defences in Raqqa, from which it expelled all rival factions. In addition to the demise of its no. 2 and reported strongmen Hajji Bakr, the group also lost much of its support among the transnational Jihadi sphere. Even the best intentioned mediators were appalled by ISIS' refusal of arbitration by an independent sharia court, a stance justified by the fact that a 'state' cannot accept such an infringement upon its sovereignty.¹¹⁰ Al-Muhaysini himself lost hope when ISIS conditioned the acceptance of his peace initiative on the other rebel groups' excommunication of the National Coalition, FSA, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Al-Baghdadi was also disavowed by Jihadi luminaries like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, and eventually by al-Zawahiri himself.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The post-2011 Syrian Salafi scene was initially shaped by the action of three main transnational alignments. The nexus constituted by al-Nusra and its mother organisation ISI seized the opportunities offered by the Syrian uprising to revitalise the Jihadi project, with a fundamental ambiguity that would later spark the al-Nusra-ISIS conflict: whereas ISIS' efforts have been aimed at the

¹¹⁰ Cole Bunzel, 'The Islamic State of Disunity: Jihadism Divided', 30 January 2014.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*; Aron Lund, 'A public service announcement from al-Qaeda', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 February 2014.

immediate establishment of a Caliphal state, al-Nusra has behaved as a 'mere' Islamist movement building the bases of its future influence.

Although partially rooted in pre-2011 Jihadi networks, the axis formed by the SIF-SILF/IF can be characterised as 'Haraki' because of its relatively conciliatory approach to dealing with non-Salafi actors in the opposition, and overt cooperation with regional states, namely Qatar and Turkey. A combination of ideological coherence and pragmatism put this axis on top of the insurgency until mid-2014, when the IF was weakened by internal rivalries (essentially between the Army of Islam and Ahrar al-Sham), loss of economic assets to ISIS in the eastern provinces, growing restrictions on private fundraising in Gulf countries, and above all, the decimation of Ahrar al-Sham's leadership (including 'Abbud) in a September 2014 bomb attack.

Quietestist, Saudi-aligned Salafis have suffered from the inherent contradictions of the Saudi strategy, as they had to back the least Islamic segment of the insurgency (defector officers), before throwing their weight behind the somewhat heteroclite FAD, whose modest performances prompted a partial reorientation towards a more robust element of the Haraki nexus, namely, the Army of Islam.

Convergence towards the centre, that is the Haraki segment, was also witnessed at the other end of the Salafi spectrum with the temporary 'normalisation' of al-

Nusra. In Deir ez-Zor for instance, al-Nusra's cooperation with mainstream rebel factions (including the FSA) to prevent the return of ISIS to the province during the summer and spring of 2014 went as far as a total merger into the so-called Consultative Council of the Mujahidin of the Eastern Region.¹¹² This unprecedented experience was rapidly put to an end by ISIS' capture of the province in July, a failure that weakened al-Nusra's inclusivist wing (Abu Mariya al-Qahtani) in favour of its more exclusivist counterpart (Sami al-'Uraydi).¹¹³

By the time of updating this chapter, in early October 2014, Syria's Salafi insurgency is witnessing a new watershed moment due to the quasi-simultaneous assassination of much of Ahrar al-Sham's leadership, and the beginning of the US-led bombing campaign against the Syrian bases of ISIS and, to a lesser extent, Jabhat al-Nusra. The future is more unpredictable than ever, but one can reasonably expect Syrian Salafi factions to show at least as flexible and adaptable in the years to come as they proved to be since 2011.

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¹¹³ Charles Lister, "The 'real' Jabhat al-Nusra appears to be emerging", *Huffington Post*, 7 August 2014.

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