

SYRIA'S SALAFI INSURGENTS: THE RISE OF THE SYRIAN ISLAMIC FRONT

In December 2012, eleven Syrian militant groups joined to form the Syrian Islamic Front, a powerful Islamist alliance. This report examines the structure of the Syrian insurgency, and the growing role of salafi factions within it.

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INDEX

Introduction	3
Terminology	4

PART ONE: ISLAMISM IN SYRIA BEFORE THE UPRISING

Salafism and salafi-jihadism	5
Islamism in Syria before the uprising	7
Sectarian divisions in the Syrian revolution	8
Social factors promoting the rise of salafism	9
Salafism as a response to the uprising	9
Structure of the Syrian insurgency	10
The rise and fall of the Free Syrian Army	11
Post-FSA bloc formation within the insurgency	12
Salafi armed groups in Syria	13

PART TWO: THE SYRIAN ISLAMIC FRONT

The creation of the Syrian Islamic Front.....	15
The SIF as an Islamist “third way”	17
The ideology and goals of the SIF	18
The politics and military tactics of the SIF	19
Foreign and clerical support for the SIF	20
The salafis and non-Muslim minorities	21
Recruitment, structure and funding	23
The SIF leadership	24
Humanitarian and other non-military activity	25
Further unification inside the SIF	25
Unification # 1 – Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya	26
Unification # 2 – Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb	26
Future prospects for the SIF	27

PART THREE: THE SIF’S FOUNDING FACTIONS

1. Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham	28
2. Liwa al-Haqq	31
3. Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya	33
4. Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya	34
5. Kataeb Ansar al-Sham	35
6. Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir	36
7. Jaish al-Tawhid	37
8, 9, 10, 11: The Damascus factions	37
About the Author	40
Notes	40

INTRODUCTION

As the Syrian revolution descends further into sectarian civil war, radical Islamist groups gain in influence. The world's attention has so far been focused on Jabhat al-Nosra, a salafi-jihadi organization with links to the Iraqi wing of al-Qaida, but there are several other hardline Islamist groups in Syria.¹

Unlike the salafi-jihadi radicals, many Syrian Islamist groups are primarily interested in establishing an Islamic state in Syria – not in a global holy war. They lack the strong ideological and personal links that bind Jabhat al-Nosra to the international salafi-jihadi community and al-Qaida, and they are in some ways more moderate in their political outlook. Some are intellectually disciplined salafis, but others have opportunistically adopted elements of the salafi discourse, without much ideological sophistication. Fighters are drawn to the black-and-white moral scheme and Sunni-sectarian chauvinism of contemporary salafism, and, not least, to the possibility of financial support from Islamic charities in the Persian Gulf.

In December 2012, eleven of Syria's Islamist rebel factions gathered to form the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), a salafi coalition that since emerged as one of Syria's most important insurgent groups. This report is the first major study of the SIF and its member factions.

The SIF presents its creation a step towards the complete unification of Syria's Islamic movement, but it may also have been a way for its dominant faction, Ahrar al-Sham, to gather ideological allies under its own wings. Ahrar al-Sham and the SIF have now emerged as a wedge, or a link, between two rival flanks of the Islamist movement in Syria: the soft-Islamist rebel mainstream, which is backed by the West, and the salafi-jihadi radicals of Jabhat al-Nosra, which have been designated a terrorist movement by the USA.

The SIF may yet turn out to be just another one of Syria's many failed rebel alliances, but recent developments add to its credibility. In January 2013, three second-tier SIF groups united with Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham to create a movement called Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya. This both underlines the centrality of the Ahrar al-Sham core faction, and gives additional cohesion to the alliance. A similar step, on a smaller scale, was taken by three Damascus-based SIF factions. They merged as Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb on February 1, 2013.

The SIF's ideological position, halfway between the Islamist mainstream and the extremists of Jabhat al-Nosra, makes it a potentially pivotal actor. If the SIF decides to align with more moderate Islamist factions, it will pose a serious challenge to Jabhat al-Nosra. If the SIF instead decides to partner with Jabhat al-Nosra, radical salafism is likely to emerge as the dominant force of the Syrian rebellion.

Part one of this paper discusses the rise of salafism in Syria during the current conflict, and the role of religious alliances in the disorganized insurgency. Part two focuses on the SIF and its emergence as a salafi "third way" between Jabhat al-Nosra and more moderate Islamist groups. The third and final part takes a brief look at each of the eleven founding factions of the SIF.²

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TERMINOLOGY

ISLAMISM

Politicized Islam, which strives for the establishment of a religious state with sharia law. In a Syrian context, references to Islamism are generally taken to mean Sunni Islamism. There are many different Islamist schools of thought, but broadly speaking, the modern Sunni Islamist movement in the Arab world is polarized between salafism (see below) and the “Ikhwani” ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is seen as more pragmatic, reformist and politically-minded.

SALAFISM

In modern terms, salafism is a strictly orthodox form of Sunni Islamism, inspired by theologians in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, and sometimes disparagingly known as “Wahhabism”. Salafis tend to put great stress on ritual and doctrinal aspects of the creed, emphasizing personal piety over social involvement. They are often intolerant of other faiths, including non-Sunni Islamic minorities, and Sufism, and they generally shun nationalism and other non-religious ideologies. The so-called salafi-jihadi trend advocates global armed struggle (jihad) against the West and most contemporary Muslim rulers. Al-Qaeda is one such salafi-jihadi group, although there are many others.

Sariya-t, Saraya	Battalion, -s
Katiba-t, Kataeb	Brigade, -s
Liwa, Alwia-t	Division, -s
al-Sham	An Arabic word which describes both the greater Levant and the city of Damascus, but can also be used to refer to the modern state of Syria
Noseiri	An older term for Alawites, now considered derogatory
FSA	Free Syrian Army
NC	National Coalition for the Forces of the Revolution and the Syrian Opposition
SIF	Syrian Islamic Front
SJMCC	Supreme Joint Military Command Council
SLF	Syria Liberation Front
SNC	Syrian National Council

PART ONE

ISLAMISM AND THE SYRIAN UPRISING

SALAFISM AND SALAFI-JIHADISM

The term salafism has historically been used to designate several different ideological schools, which have in common that they seek the revival of a pure and authentic Islam. It refers to *al-salaf al-saleh*, the first generations of Muslims. Salafis stress that mankind must follow their example in all matters, since they knew Islam closer to its source, the Prophet Mohammed's revelation.

In contemporary usage, salafism refers to an ultraorthodox strand of Sunni Islam, which seeks to recast society in line with Quranic injunctions and sharia law. It draws inspiration from the work of the Damascus-based proto-salafi, Taqieddin ibn Taimiya (1223-1328). During the 20th century, it was developed as a modern ideology by theologians in Saudi Arabia.

Salafism seeks to rid itself of the traditions developed within Sunni Islam over the centuries, and return to the roots of Islam. It constantly stresses the concept of *tawhid*, or monotheism, which it believes that other Islamic groups fail to fully comprehend. Like Ibn Taimiya in his time, modern salafism strives to cleanse Islam from *bidaa*, "innovations" which do not derive directly from the Quran or the prophet's example. It is noted for its aggressive intolerance

towards other Islamic teachings, particularly Sufism and Shia Islam.

Salafism puts great emphasis on personal piety, and supplies the believer with a long list of ritual and social requirements. Many salafis distinguish themselves from the rest of society through particular manners of dress, speech and behavior, which they regard as the proper conduct for a Muslim. Traditionally, salafis have often secluded themselves from the general public and political life, and focused exclusively on Islamic studies and missionary activity (*daawa*). In modern times, some salafi groups have broken with this quietist tradition. Some have become very involved with social and political work, as an extension of their *daawa*. A militant trend, sometimes labeled "salafi-jihadism", has taken up arms to enforce their idea of an Islamic order.

Regardless of their approach to political activism, salafis share some political traits. They reject all secular ideologies, such as democracy, socialism, liberalism, nationalism, etc. In principle, they regard the global Muslim community, the *Umma*, as the only group of people to whom they owe allegiance and loyalty. They are often virulently anti-Western. The USA and European nations are regarded as impious and sinful

societies, as well as imperialist powers that encroach on Muslim lands and corrupt Islamic culture.

Saudi Arabia was always the main geographic center of salafism, and its “Wahhabi” religious establishment (after Mohammed bin Abdelwahhab, 1703-1792) has been the main incubator of salafi ideology. Since long before the founding of the modern Saudi state in 1932, the Wahhabi establishment has lived in a symbiotic relationship with the Al Saud family. It acts a conservative force, resisting modernization and Western influence, but it also helps legitimize the rule of Al Saud in the face of foreign rivals and internal opposition movements.

For example, the Saudi Grand Mufti, Abdelaziz bin Baz (1910-1999), would on the one hand preach that Muslims should hate and reject Jews and Christians; but on the other hand, he also supported normalization and peace with Israel, when the Saudi royal family wanted to take steps in that direction. In one of his most controversial fatwas, he ruled that non-Muslim US forces could set up camp on Saudi soil, after the king had sought US assistance in countering Saddam Hussein's 1990 occupation of Kuwait.

By the 1970s, the cohesion of the Wahhabi establishment had already begun to fray. Islamist exiles from other countries had flocked to Saudi Arabia, and they increasingly influenced the religious doctrines preached there.³ Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were opposed by the traditional Wahhabis because of their involvement in secular politics, and due to disagreements on finer points of doctrine, but their activist approach impressed a younger generation of religious students. Many were deeply influenced by the militant Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), and his excommunication of contemporary Muslim rulers. The 1979 occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, by a group of messianic radicals, also stirred up considerable unrest in Saudi Arabia's religious politics.

The rise of new strands of salafism didn't necessarily challenge the Saudi government, since many salafis were politically quietist, and focused only on moral issues and missionary activity. But by the 1970s and 1980s, a group of younger Saudi salafi scholars started to openly question their elders, and take a more active interest in political affairs. They were outraged by what they saw as the prostitution of religion in the service of the corrupt and tyrannical Al Saud monarchy, and they were highly critical of its alliance with the USA. Bin Baz's 1990 fatwa and the Saudi government's

complicity in the US invasion of Iraq set off a furious protest movement, led by this young guard of salafism. It targeted both the Al Saud family and the traditional religious establishment. This salafi “awakening” – or *sahwa* in Arabic – was met with blunt repression, and many of its leaders ended up in jail. Some of them, like Salman al-Awda (b. 1956), would later recant and join the government-backed religious establishment, but young salafi firebrands have continued to challenge the *status quo*.

The *sahwa*'s surge of oppositional salafism took place in conjunction with the development of “salafi-jihadism”, which is the religio-political doctrine of al-Qaida. The term itself, *al-salafiya al-jihadiya*, was not widely used until the late 1990s or early 2000s. Wherever it was coined, it seems to have been popularized by a small but influential 1990s community of radical ideologues exiled in London, a group which included Abu Hamza al-Masri, Abu Basir al-Tartousi, and Abu Qatada al-Filastini.⁴

The roots of the ideology, however, grew out of the 1980s war in Afghanistan. Most of the fighting against the Soviet occupation had been shouldered by Afghans themselves, but the war had drew a limited volunteer force of Islamists from the Arab world, who piggy-backed on the humanitarian and military aid programs that had been extended by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other governments. Many of them were escaping political persecution at home, like the Egyptian militants Ayman al-Zawahiri (b. 1951) and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (b. 1950). They gathered in Afghanistan with the help of key organizers and financiers within the international “Afghan Arab” network, like the Palestinian theologian Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989) and his young Saudi collaborator, Osama bin Laden (1957-2011).

Their years of fighting in Afghanistan, and of rubbing shoulders in the safehouses of northwestern Pakistan, would mold the Arab jihadis into a new type of transnational warrior community. The ideology that grew out of this melting pot of militant Islamist traditions was salafi-jihadism. It took the moral absolutism and conservatism of salafism, and combined it with the radicalism of Sayyid Qutb. The end result was a revolutionary liberation theology. Reflecting its roots, it focused almost entirely on armed struggle, as a good in-and-of-itself. For the salafi-jihadis, to bear arms for God is the primary duty of a Muslim man in our age, and to die a martyr is the only certain route to heaven.

Towards the end of the war, the “Afghan Arab” networks drifted off to pursue jihad in their home coun-

tries, but cross-border solidarity remained strong. During the 1990s and 2000s, the salafi-jihadi ideology coalesced further, as many began to return to Afghanistan after the failure of their uprisings in Algeria, Egypt, etc. The ideology was further developed by militant theologians like Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi,⁵ who would later become known as the mentor of the Iraqi jihadi leader Abu Moussab al-Zarqawi.⁶

The September 11, 2001 attacks in the USA turned Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida into the central actor among globalist salafi-jihadis. Many now fought on against the USA and its allies under the al-Qaida banner. With the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the salafi-jihadi movement radicalized in its perception of Shia Muslims, as it became embroiled in Iraq's sectarian conflict. Using anti-Western and/or anti-Shia resentment to recruit fighters, salafi-jihadi groups continued to proliferate across unstable or conflict-ridden areas of the Muslim world – Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Mali, and so on.

Most salafi theologians had applauded the jihadi mobilization in Afghanistan, but as the salafi-jihadi diaspora turned its guns on the Arab regimes, many recoiled from their former protégés. Radical *sahwa* clerics continued to embrace the salafi-jihadis, but quietist and regime-connected salafis were appalled by al-Qaida's anarchic behavior, and particularly its attacks on the government of Saudi Arabia. The official Saudi religious establishment condemned such attacks as impermissible extremism, and accused the jihadis of sowing dissent, or *fitna*. The salafi-jihadis, in turn, mocked the pro-regime theologians as *ulema al-sultan*, "the sultan's scholars", for serving corrupt non-Islamic governments rather than of God.

Neither of these salafi factions was a homogenous group. The concept of salafi-jihadism has in fact been defined more by politics than by religious arguments. Activist salafis who refuse to compromise with the Gulf Arab rulers and their allies have drifted towards the oppositional and jihadi camp by default. Quietist strands of the faith have stayed out of politics entirely, while the state-employed "establishment salafis" sought to spread the same ideology through peaceful *daawa*, by supporting conservative Islamic governments, and by steering jihadi efforts in line with Saudi foreign policy. In purely theological and ideological terms, however, the different wings of the salafi movement overlap very considerably.

ISLAMISM IN SYRIA BEFORE THE UPRISING

After it captured power in 1963, the Baath Party transformed Syria into a superficially secular state. At

a grassroots level, religious sentiment persisted, and the population remained sharply divided along sectarian lines.

The Alawite-dominated military regime of Hafez al-Assad, who took power in an internal coup in 1970, ruthlessly suppressed Sunni Islamism, which it considered an existential threat. In 1979, the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood declared war on Assad, leading to several years of sectarian clashes. The Islamist challenge was crushed after a failed uprising in the city of Hama, in February 1982, and the Brotherhood was rooted out of Syria. It has never been able to fully reorganize inside the country since then, although it remains a powerful faction within Syria's exile opposition.

For the remainder of the decade, the regime ruthlessly persecuted Islamist groups, until the 1990s saw a gradual loosening of restraints. The Brotherhood remained in exile, and was not in a position to exploit this change. Instead, new forces filled the void. These included both local networks, such as reorganized Sufi communities, and Gulf-sponsored missionary movements, which promoted some variety of salafism.

After the accession of Bashar al-Assad to power in Syria, in the summer of 2000, some political and economic reforms were enacted. Most notably, the regime relaxed its control over the media, and accepted the spread of modern communications technology. Gulf-funded satellite TV stations and the Internet became the primary purveyors of Islamist propaganda, while Syrian Sunni labor migration to the Gulf helped consolidate ties to the salafi religious scene.

In the same period, the regime began to grant non-political Islamist groups the space to organize social and humanitarian activities. While presented as a liberalizing measure, it was in fact a grudging concession, to offset the social crisis caused by a failing state-dominated economy. Many indigenous Syrian Islamic associations regained importance in this period, but foreign-backed salafi movements also filled the breach, aided by generous donations from the Gulf and from expat Syrians. The regime occasionally intervened against groups deemed too overtly sectarian, too political or too independent. Normally, however, even ultra-conservative salafi preachers could propagate their message, as long as they confined themselves to mosques and charitable work, and abided by the regime's red lines.

All the while, the regime cultivated its own *ulema*, or scholars, such as Ahmed Kuftaro (1915-2004),

Ahmed Badreddine Hassoun (b. 1949), and Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti (b. 1929). They were given considerable leeway to promote a moderate, ecumenical and regime-friendly understanding of conservative Sunni Islam. Many of these pro-regime scholars came from a Sufi background, and were hostile to the Saudi-inspired salafi movement, but they nevertheless contributed to the Islamist groundswell in Syria.⁷

By the late 00s, religion was back in force in Syria. Bookshops were filled with Islamic literature, and the vast majority of Sunni Muslim women were again using the *hijab*, or veil. Sectarian sentiment was also rising, fuelled both by the growing religiosity, and by the Sunni-Shia conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon.

While the regime tried to restrict access to the most radical jihadi propaganda, it would not, or could not, stop the flood of Saudi-sponsored religious material pouring into Syria. The growth of an indigenous salafi movement in the country in turn created ideological space for the radicals, who organized across the borders to Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and the regional Palestinian diaspora.

During Bashar's first decade in power, the regime tried to control the salafi-jihadi networks through a double strategy of containment and exploitation. It granted certain Lebanese and Iraqi groups a measure of discreet tolerance in Syria, and, in some cases, may even have helped them to organize attacks on Syria's enemies abroad. However, Assad's police state kept a close watch over the radicals, well aware of their anti-Alawite and anti-Baathist ideology, and struck hard against any attempt to organize in opposition to the Syrian regime. The mid-00s saw a handful of attacks and clashes between security forces and jihadis, but by and large, the salafi-jihadi movement seemed to be no more than a minor irritant for the Syrian regime.⁸

Most of the Levantine jihadi networks crisscrossing Syria were shut down after around 2008. As part of an under-the-table understanding with the USA, Iraq, and other governments, jihadi activists were run out of the country, jailed, or killed, and border controls were tightened. These years also saw a hardening of the regime's attitude to Islamism in general, and increased pressure on the indigenous Syrian salafi groups.⁹ Many former Iraq fighters were rounded up and jailed in the Seidnaia Prison outside Damascus. The growing crackdown was symbolized by a 2010 decision to ban women wearing the *niqab* face veil from teaching in schools.

When social and political revolutions erupted across the Arab region in early 2011, the Syrian regime immediately reacted with a series of quick concessions, intended to appease the surging Islamist opposition. The niqab ban was repealed, hundreds of Islamist prisoners were released in amnesties, a recently opened casino was shut down, and the regime indicated that it would open an Islamic TV channel.¹⁰ However, these limited concessions proved insufficient to stop the tide.

SECTARIAN DIVISIONS IN THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

The Syrian revolution began in the southern city of Daraa in March 2011, and quickly spread through large areas of Syria. Revolutionary demands originally focused on democracy and economic reform, but the new opposition movement did not arise out of a social vacuum. In socioeconomic and sectarian terms, the 2011 uprising was "the revolution of the rural Sunni working classes against the Alawite-dominated military elite and the urban bourgeoisie (both Muslim and Christian) that has profited from the Assad dictatorship."¹¹

While there was always degree of minority participation in the opposition, particularly among veteran dissidents and within the diaspora, the uprising had a Sunni Islamic touch from the beginning. Demonstrations set out from mosques after Friday prayer and were very heavily dominated by Sunni Arabs; so were the lists of arrested, dead, and wounded opposition supporters.

As the revolution gradually crossed over into an armed uprising, over autumn 2011, the religious divide deepened dramatically. The armed insurgency is effectively an all-Sunni affair. This, in turn, has helped push religious minorities and secularists into the arms of the government.

Sectarianism increasingly seems to override the socioeconomic factors underpinning the revolt. While the Sunni countryside rose in revolt during 2011, equally impoverished rural areas populated by Alawites, Christians and Druze have remained calm during two years of conflict. Flickers of protest have been reported among the minorities, and there are occasional instances of defections by religious-minority soldiers, but these are rare and politically insignificant.

Mixed-religion governorates have, virtually without exception, split along sectarian lines. On the central Syrian plain, the Sunni Arab town of al-Rastan is a hotbed of support for the revolution, while the Alawi town of al-Rabie is just as firmly in the pro-Assad camp. In

Homs City, the Sunni neighborhoods of Khalidiya and Baba Amr have joined the rebellion, and been devastated by regime artillery, while nearby Alawi housing blocs remain untouched, or serve as staging areas for the army. The overwhelmingly Sunni Arab Idleb Governorate is almost entirely up in arms against the regime, excepting the major cities, some military bases, and the two Twelver Shia villages of Fouaa and Kafraya. Conversely, the Sunni-populated Jabal al-Akrad region in northern Latakia has become an opposition stronghold, while the Alawite countryside further south is a bastion of support for Bashar al-Assad.

Certainly, the regime does have some lingering Sunni Arab support. It can count on many Baathist and army families, government employees, certain clans and tribes allied to the regime, middle class and wealthy business families, and others who have benefited from the rule of Bashar al-Assad. But as these Sunni components of the regime either defect¹² or begin to be seen as unreliable by the government, Assad's army is now slowly turning into what the US Syria expert Joshua Landis has described as "an Alawite militia".

This is not a reversible process. The brutal sectarian violence of 2012 has begun to physically reconfigure Syrian society, making a return to the *status quo ante* impossible to imagine. Many Syrians still nobly refuse to accept their country's internal breakdown, but sectarian cleansing has become a reality across large areas of Syria. Both sides have committed abuses based on the religious faith of their opponents. Government soldiers have been caught on tape trashing mosques and mocking the beliefs of tortured Sunni prisoners, and rebels have destroyed and looted Shia shrines and Christian churches.¹⁴

The massive displacement of Syrian civilians along sectarian lines will permanently alter the conditions for religious coexistence in Syria. Most of Syria's refugees are Sunni Muslim Arabs, who have escaped government bombardment and the economic collapse in rebel-held areas. More than 700,000 have already abandoned Syria for Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and they are likely to remain there for years to come. Hundreds of thousands of members of Syria's religious minorities have also been forced to leave their homes. According to one estimate, the seaside town of Tartous alone housed over 230,000 refugees in December 2012 – mostly Alawites, but also Christians and pro-government Sunnis.¹⁵ Religious communities are increasingly separated on the ground, undoing decades of hesitant but real religious integration, and turning Syria's psychological and cultural divides into material reality.

SOCIAL FACTORS PROMOTING THE RISE OF SALAFISM

Syria's sharp class and urban/rural divides are another part of the explanation for the rise of salafism in Syria since 2011. The revolution first took hold in the countryside and in working-class suburbs in the major cities.

Traditionally, rural Syria has been under the influence of secular Arab nationalism, and the Sunni Arab countryside remained quiet during the 1980s Islamist rebellion. In the 1990s and 2000s, the bankruptcy of Baathist ideology, the globalization of the world economy, and the redirection of regime patronage towards the urban economy all combined to bring about a dramatic downturn in rural living standards. Rural religious minorities were kept in line by their fear of Islamism, but the Sunni countryside became increasingly exasperated with the Assad regime, and began to embrace oppositional and Islamist politics.

The pro-regime Sunni Islamist networks failed to influence this development. They mostly catered to an urban audience, and relied on a bureaucratic and institutional framework of mosques, university faculties and cultural associations, which didn't reach far outside the cities. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood had always been an urban middle-class movement.

While the regime and the urban ulema vied for control over the urban Sunni communities, salafism spread unopposed through the socially deprived countryside. It seemed to enjoy particular success in areas such as Deir al-Zor and Deraa, which retain a tribal structure and are linked through guest-worker communities to the Gulf Arab states. Suburban slums populated by rural Sunni migrants from the countryside were similarly affected.

In a valuable 2010 survey of Syria's religious landscape, Abdulrahman Alhaj notes the rural origins of salafi detainees during Bashar al-Assad's first ten years in power. According to Alhaj, approximately 30 percent of the men imprisoned on charges of Islamist terrorism hailed from towns in the Damascus countryside, such as Zabadani or al-Tell, and the Ghouta suburbs that ring the capital. Other rural areas also seem to have been well represented, while "the proportion of those arrested who were from the large Syrian towns was tiny".¹⁶

SALAFISM AS A RESPONSE TO THE UPRISING

Late 2011 and 2012 saw political, social and sectarian factors lining up to a perfect match for the salafi

movement in Syria. Salafism already had a base of support in the conservative rural areas where the uprising began, and its most significant structural weakness had been balanced out by regime repression: certainly, the salafis lacked strong leadership and organization, but so did everyone else.

Since then, the Syrian salafi movement has grown tremendously. Thousands of young Sunni men have joined groups led by salafi radicals, where they are being further socialized into their ideology and worldview. Outside of these groups, many fighters have adopted a pseudo-salafi discourse, despite lacking formal Islamic education. Even defected Baathist military officers often feel compelled to adopt the outward trappings of salafism, to signal personal piety, or simply as a kind of anti-Assad fashion statement.

The reason lies in the violent and sectarian character of the Syrian war. Fighters are drawn to salafism not by fine points of doctrine, but because it helps them manifest a *Sunni* identity in the most radical way possible, while also providing them with a theological explanation for the war against Shia Muslims, a sense of belonging, and spiritual security.

Roel Meijer has written that the basic attraction of salafism is its capacity to transform “the humiliated, the downtrodden, disgruntled young people, the discriminated migrant, or the politically repressed into a chosen sect (*al firqa al-najiya*) that immediately gains privileged access to the Truth.”¹⁷

It is a common pattern across the globe, now clearly manifested in Syria. By growing their beards and observing salafism’s religious and social code, Syrian fighters can transform themselves from the victims and perpetrators of a chaotic sectarian war, into heroes straight out of the Quran – the *mujahedin*, Islam’s holy warriors. They no longer need to fear death, since they can be certain of their place in heaven. They no longer need to grapple with self-doubt and moral qualms, since salafism tells them that they are acting on God’s command. They are no longer embroiled in a confused and dirty war for their family, village, or sect, or for the warlord that pays them – they are fighting a righteous jihad to defend the Muslim *Umma*. There’s no overestimating the power of such an ideology in a conflict like Syria’s.

STRUCTURE OF THE SYRIAN INSURGENCY

The insurgency against Bashar al-Assad is deeply divided. There are no reliable estimates of the number of armed factions currently operating in Syria, but

they number in the hundreds at least. Most are small, and gather only some tens of fighters. They typically grew out of a village community in the Sunni Arab countryside, after funding was secured from relatives or sympathizers abroad. As Ghaith Abdul-Ahad puts it, “[m]any of the battalions dotted across the Syrian countryside consist only of a man with a connection to a financier, along with a few of his cousins and clansmen.”¹⁸

Some groups still remain restricted to their villages of origin, and take no part in the conflict after the frontline moves away from their region.¹⁹ Others have joined the revolution full-time, and drift from battle to battle. Some have reliable funding channels, and can plan ahead according to their interests and those of the revolution. Others are continually starved for cash and ammunition. Their commanders are forced to switch opportunistically between different funding channels, to make ends meet and avoid internal challenges. In Aleppo, especially, some units have been reduced to fighting for *ghanima*, loot. Lawless areas of northern Syria face increasing problems with criminality, kidnappings, smuggling, and warlordism.

Since the start of the uprising, many rebel groups have gathered in larger alliances. Some factions now number thousands of men, with a handful of groups claiming more than ten thousand fighters each; Kataeb al-Farouq, Liwa al-Tawhid and Ahrar al-Sham are among the best known. Even so, there is no central command structure on the national level. Instead, the Syrian insurgency has evolved into a curious hybrid between supra-national and sub-national structures, where rival networks of foreign sponsors shop around for support among locally rooted groups, without the intermediary step of a national Syrian leadership.

The uprising is funded and supported by several states, including the USA, Turkey, France, Great Britain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states. It is also backed by many non-state actors, like pro-Saudi Sunni politicians in Lebanon, and Islamist networks in the Gulf. Some of these states/groups cooperate closely, while some others back rival rebel factions. For example, there have been reports about Saudi-Qatari differences transplanted onto the Syrian insurgency.²⁰

However, there is some level of overall coordination within the core group of state supporters. These governments have long sought to temper the insurgency’s divisions, and enforce unity from above. The idea is to gather the revolutionary forces along a main axis, to

reduce chaos in post-Assad Syria while simultaneously promoting a centrist leadership amenable to their own interests. Since these outside actors lack a presence on the ground, they are forced to work through indirect means. They have therefore sought to draw local fighters into coalitions by channeling money through favored middle-men in the exile opposition community. While this does not produce real unity, the idea has been that such coalitions can be cemented with time. These foreign-inspired efforts have resulted in the creation of several "joint leaderships" and alliances over the course of the uprising.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FREE SYRIAN ARMY

The earliest example of this strategy was the decision to endorse the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *al-jaiish al-souri al-hurr*), and try to develop it into an umbrella organization for Syria's rebels. The USA and other states also initially hoped that the FSA could emerge as an armed wing of the Syrian National Council (SNC), established in Turkey in September-October 2011.

The FSA was first set up by a group of military defectors gathered around Col. Riad al-Asaad, in Turkey in July 2011. This original FSA faction quickly fell under the influence of Turkish intelligence, which kept Col. Asaad under close control, screening his contacts inside Syria and abroad. The group did not have much actual reach into Syria, but from its inception, it was promoted as the revolution's "military leadership" by both the state-controlled pan-Arab media and many Western reporters. This helped it to succeed as a branding operation, if nothing else.

By late 2011, the FSA name and symbols were widely used by Syrian insurgents. When a new insurgent faction was created, its commander would typically release a video on YouTube, stating that he was forming a new brigade of the FSA. Many groups would even name Col. Riad al-Asaad as their supreme commander. These groups rarely had any form of organizational relationship with the Turkey-based leadership, but they helped bolster the political standing of the FSA commander, and encouraged others to follow suit.

As the months passed, it became evident that the FSA was not a functioning organization. Col. Asaad remained confined to a sequestered officers' camp in Turkey, under the thumb of Turkish intelligence. He was unable to do more than issue statements and dispatch an occasional bag of cash to rebels inside Syria. His FSA failed to expand organizationally, and never gained sufficient foreign funding to draw massive sup-

port among rebels inside Syria. Persistent challenges to Col. Asaad from other high-ranking military defectors, sometimes encouraged by rival states, added to the group's troubles. Gradually, Col. Asaad came to be identified with the rest of the exile community, widely stereotyped among opposition members as ineffectual and disconnected from the revolution inside Syria.

By mid 2012, Col Asaad had been decisively sidelined, and he was no longer taken seriously by the rebel mainstream in Syria. The FSA brand remained popular for several months more, but by autumn it had begun to seem like yesterday's news. New rebel groups were still being declared every week, but unlike in spring, they would rarely declare themselves part of the FSA. Factions that had previously used the FSA name and logotype stopped doing so, or invented other alliances in parallel.

In September 2012, some of the largest mainstream insurgent factions in Syria publicly ended their lapsed affiliation with the FSA, and formed a rival coalition called the Syria Liberation Front (SLF, *jabhat tahrir souriya*).²¹ This alliance, which initially appeared to have as little organizational substance as the FSA, had been brought together both by a shared Islamist ideology, and by shared sources of funding. In particular, some point to the influence of Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin, an exiled salafi theologian who has emerged as one of the most effective insurgent financiers during the Syrian war. Some of the SLF factions, notably Kataeb al-Farouq, also appear to enjoy Turkish government patronage.²²

The FSA had been catering to Western sensitivities by trying to appear secular and anti-jihadi, but the SLF instead cast its lot with local fighters and pronounced itself in favor of an Islamic state. Syria's minority of ideological salafi groups had all along avoided the FSA label, seeing it as a distraction at best, and associating it with godless secularism and Western imperialism at worst. Now, with the FSA project in tatters and Islamism the rebel movement's new mainstream, they felt vindicated.

Today, the FSA name remains in use by a number of competing spokespersons and command structures that claim to represent the rebellion under that name. They include Col. Riad al-Asaad (FSA), Brig. Gen. Mustafa al-Sheikh (FSA Military Council), Col. Qasem Saadeddine (FSA Joint Internal Leadership), and a handful of others. Each of these groups receive some level of foreign support and media attention, and they remain active as minor political figures, but none of

them controls a serious military force inside Syria. Many groups inside Syria also still refer to themselves as FSA, sometimes to distinguish themselves from radical religious factions, and sometimes reflecting financial ties to the exiled FSA leaderships.

In addition to this, the FSA name is widely used by both Syrians and outsiders as a general descriptive term for the insurgency, particularly its non-salafi factions. However, when employed in this sense, the term "FSA" does not refer to an organization. Instead, it is synonymous to expressions like "the resistance" or "the freedom fighters".

POST-FSA BLOC FORMATION WITHIN THE INSURGENCY

The SSG and the Military Councils

As the FSA leaderships in exile floundered, foreign sponsors of the revolution began to seek other ways forward. From early 2012, Qatar, the USA and other states helped promote regional rebel leaderships, known as Military Councils or Revolutionary Military Councils.

A recently created private charity known as the Syrian Support Group (SSG) took the lead in some of these efforts. Fronted mainly by North America-based expat Syrians and former US officials, the SSG went on a global campaign to market the Military Council structure, as the true leadership of the FSA. Many opposition members and others have assumed that the SSG is in fact acting on behalf of the US government, but SSG officials deny this.²³

The Military Councils were a mixed success. In some provinces, they emerged as reasonably effective joint leaderships of the insurgent mainstream, and as functioning funding channels. In other provinces, they failed to attract the leading local militias, and therefore remained irrelevant. In other cases, they splintered along regional or tribal lines, with different factions attaching themselves to rival foreign backers.

Nevertheless, the SSG promoted the Military Councils effectively abroad, presenting their commanders as the revolution's most moderate and pro-Western wing. Among other things, it cajoled Military Council-affiliated commanders into signing a pledge to embrace Syria's religious diversity, protect human rights and treat prisoners in accordance with international conventions. While such declarations were only ink on paper, it still helped set these factions apart from radical salafi forces.²⁴

The SNA and the JCRMC

More recent attempts to create a mainstream joint leadership for the uprising have not used the FSA moniker at all, recognizing that it has become divisive in the eyes of some armed factions.

For example, in September 2012, Saudi Arabia and other donors poured money into a conference in Turkey, bringing tens of influential rebel commanders to the table. It was decided to gather all armed factions under the name of the Syrian National Army (SNA), led by Gen. Mohammed al-Hajj Ali, the highest-ranking defector to date. However, the SNA project suffered the same fate as most such unity attempts. As soon as guerrilla commanders returned to their bases in Syria or southern Turkey, the new organization vanished into thin air.

Later in September, foreign donors helped cobble together the Joint Command of the Revolutionary Military Councils (JCRMC), fronted by Col. Mithqal al-Bteish al-Noeimi.²⁵ It comprised several Military Councils as well as powerful independent factions, including SLF groups like Kataeb al-Farouq. The JCRMC was supported by the government of Qatar, the salafi leader Adnan al-Arour, and others; it also seemed to enjoy US government backing.

According to some sources, the JCRMC funding apparatus quickly fell under the control of Sheikh Arour, who relied on a group of officers from his native Hama region. This led to complaints of favoritism from fighters affiliated with the Military Council structure. The JCRMC was then undermined by international realignments among the revolution's international supporters, apparently related to the Qatari-Saudi rivalry. In the end, it never managed to establish itself as a functioning command structure.²⁶

The NC and the SJMCC

In November 2011, Qatar and the USA helped push for the creation of the National Coalition for the Forces of the Revolution and the Syrian Opposition (NC), as a leadership for the political opposition, headed by Ahmed Moadh al-Khatib. It absorbed the previous leadership-in-exile, the Syrian National Council (SNC).

A month later, at a conference in Antalya, the Supreme Joint Military Command Council (SJMCC) was established, to lead the armed resistance.²⁷ Brig. Gen. Salim Idriss was elected head of its General Staff. This group drew the support of a wider coalition than the JCRMC (which then faded away), or of the related Military Council structure (which had begun to unravel

anyway).²⁸ The SJMCC was clearly intended to function as a military counterpart to the NC. Although this relationship has not been formally declared, Khatib and Brig. Gen. Idriss have held joint meetings.²⁹

Most of Syria's mainstream insurgents have declared their support for the SJMCC, hoping to access foreign funding and arms shipments. These groups include most of the soft-Islamist, Ikhwani and other mainstream Islamist factions, and even some pragmatic salafis. For example, most of the SLF factions are part of the SJMCC, and so are many independent groups, e.g. Jamal Maarouf's Shuhada Souriya, a powerful insurgent group in the Idlib region. The SJMCC is therefore seen to define the mainstream of the insurgency. Many activists and journalists even describe Brig. Gen. Idriss as "the new commander of the FSA".

There is so far nothing to indicate that the SJMCC functions any better than its predecessors. Brig. Gen. Idriss has kept a low profile, and the armed groups which helped create the SJMCC do not seem to be paying much attention to the command structure that they are ostensibly part of. If the idea was to link armed groups to the exile leadership of the NC, through the SJMCC, it is clearly failing. In late February 2012, the SLF leader Ahmed Eissa al-Sheikh (a salafi who is part of the SJMCC leadership, in his capacity as commander of Suqour al-Sham) issued a statement denouncing the NC and its leader, Ahmed Moadh al-Khatib, for seeking negotiations with the government.³⁰

On the other hand, recent reports allege that Saudi Arabia (perceived to be a main backer of the SJMCC) has started funding major arms shipments to Syrian rebels since December 2012. If these reports are true, the SJMCC structure could perhaps consolidate itself as an arms pipeline for affiliated rebel groups.³¹

SALAFI ARMED GROUPS IN SYRIA

A minority of hardline Islamist groups within the insurgency has tried to avoid association with the Western-backed insurgent alliances from the very beginning. They never referred to themselves as part of the FSA, and ridiculed its exile—d commanders when they claimed to represent the revolution. They regard the SNC and NC diaspora politicians as Western-backed usurpers, and have not been part of military leadership projects such as the SNA, JCRMC, or SJMCC.

The salafi-jihadis

The most radical fringe of the Syrian insurgency is dominated by Jabhat al-Nosra li-Ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad ("The Front for Sup-

porting the People of al-Sham by the Mujahedin of al-Sham on the Battlefields of Jihad"), or Jabhat al-Nosra for short. This salafi-jihadi group seems to have grown out of the Iraqi wing of al-Qaida, and it was listed as a terrorist group by the US Department of the Treasury in December 2012.³²

Within the salafi-jihadi camp, there is also a small number of radical factions, often run by foreign fighters. These groups, which are ideologically very close to Jabhat al-Nosra, and sometimes closely allied to it, include:

Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin ("The Mujahedin Shoura Council"), a small, extremist salafi-jihadi network active mainly in the Aleppo Governorate. It is composed largely of foreign fighters and expat Syrians, who work alongside Jabhat al-Nosra. It has been involved in clashes with other rebels who disapprove of its radical posture.³³

Kataeb al-Muhajerin ("The Migrants' Brigades").

This appears to be an umbrella term covering a number of small, independent networks of foreign jihadis, which travel and fight alongside Jabhat al-Nosra and Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin in the Aleppo region. They include Chechnyans, Central Asians, Turks, Pakistanis, and other nationalities, as well as some expat Syrians and other Muslims from European emigrant communities. A group of Swedish jihadis in the Aleppo province has set up websites under the name Kataeb al-Muhajerin, but other factions also seem to be using it.³⁴

Jund al-Sham ("The Soldiers of al-Sham"), an independent jihadi faction led by Lebanese radicals, which operates across Lebanon's northern border. Its creation was announced on December 24, 2012, in a statement by its emir, Abu Suleiman al-Muhajer. This is allegedly a cover name for Khaled Mahmoud, a Lebanese Islamist who was formerly imprisoned in Lebanon for involvement with Fath al-Islam.³⁵

Fath al-Islam ("The Conquest of Islam"), a shadowy jihadi network created in 2006, by Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese jihadis. It was suspected by many opponents of the Assad regime to be under the control of Syrian intelligence. In 2007, Fath al-Islam was nearly destroyed by the Lebanese army, but it eventually reorganized itself through contacts with the Iraqi jihadi movement, and began to attack the Syrian government. Fath al-Islam has claimed some operations in Syria since the start of the uprising, but many of its key commanders have been killed.³⁶

Many of the fighters in these groups have a history of involvement in jihadi causes, particularly the Iraqi resistance against the USA. Foot soldiers may be recruited locally in Syria, but on the leadership level, these organizations are clearly part of the global salafi-jihadi trend, and they view Syria as a front in their larger war against the West and Arab secularism.

Mainstream or “nationalist” salafis

This contrasts with the local roots of some other salafi factions, which lack the globalist perspective of the salafi-jihadi factions. They adhere to the same basic doctrine, but many of Syria's homegrown salafi factions set themselves apart from the hardline salafi-jihadis through small but significant gestures towards a relative moderation and pragmatism.

Such divisions within the salafi movement are not unique to Syria. During the Iraqi rebellion, most armed groups adopted a salafi discourse. Nevertheless, there was a subtle difference between the committed, globalist salafi-jihadis and the homegrown Iraqi salafi factions. The former were mainly organized within al-Qaida in Mesopotamia (now: Islamic State of Iraq, *dawlat al-iraq al-islamiya*), while the latter joined factions such as the Islamic Army of Iraq.

There was no clear distinction between them in ideological terms. The “homegrown” salafi factions would often express admiration for Osama bin Laden, and demand the installation of a Sunni Islamic theocracy, and they cooperated closely with al-Qaida against US forces. Nevertheless, they had local roots in a way that the globalist jihadis didn't, and were primarily concerned with the future of Sunni Muslims in Iraq. Many were motivated by a mixture of salafi ideology, tribal affiliation, anti-occupation nationalism, and the growing sectarian conflict with Iranian-backed Shia Islamist forces. Some analysts described them as “nationalist salafis”, for lack of a better term. In 2005-2006, the USA even managed to encourage an anti-Qaida movement among the Sunni Arab tribal communities in Western Iraq, which involved many members of these “nationalist” salafi resistance groups.

In Syria, there is a similarly nuanced, sliding scale within the salafi section of the insurgency. “When it comes to the salafis, we have to separate between two things”, explains Abdulrahman Alhaj, an expert on Syrian Islamism. “There are publicly declared salafi groups who have an experience of [armed] salafi work outside Syria, and who have a systematic salafi thinking. These groups, the *salafiya-jihadiya* [salafi-jihadism], are not many, but they affect people's thinking.”

“The others are young, extremist people. They are Sunni Muslims who just follow this path because there is a lot of violence. Day after day, they come face to face with violence, so they adopt salafism, but they are not really part of the *salafiya-jihadiya* ideologically. Like Ahrar al-Sham: they are not part of the salafi-jihadi movement. There are of course real salafis among them, but mostly they are just extremist Sunnis without a systematic salafi ideology. It's very different from Jabhat al-Nosra.”³⁷

Influence of the “establishment salafis”

These divisions are accentuated by the involvement of Gulf Arab governments in sponsoring the uprising. The regime-connected salafi establishment in Saudi Arabia and other such states has found itself in a difficult position.

On the one hand, government-backed salafi preachers are forced to pay lip service to Jabhat al-Nosra and similar movements, due to their popularity among the Syrian rebels. On the other hand, they and their government backers fear the growing influence of salafi-jihadi groups, which strive to overthrow the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Sheikh Adnan al-Arour, an influential Syrian salafi televangelist who lives in Saudi Arabia, provides an example of how the Gulf-backed clerics treat the salafi-jihadi problem. In an October 2012 broadcast, Sheikh Arour cautiously distanced himself from jihadi extremists, without mentioning Jabhat al-Nosra: “First and foremost, we oppose the killing of civilians based on their creed, faith, background, origin or ethnicity. Second, we are against *takfir*, i.e. the practice of branding other Muslims as infidels. “Third, these people must return to Islam's scholars” – i.e., the jihadis must respect mainstream salafi theologians, rather than rely on their own subversive clerics. Arour also sought to preempt jihadi counter-arguments: “When they say that there are no scholars, that these are ‘the scholars of the sultan’ and so on, that is exactly what the Kharijites said!” (The Kharijites were an early Islamic breakout faction, remembered among Sunnis chiefly as extremists whose uncompromising attitude hurt the Muslim community as a whole.)³⁸

Government-backed salafis like Sheikh Arour will not publicly condemn or challenge Jabhat al-Nosra, since this would amount to political suicide.³⁹ But Arour and his allies do have another option: to support less radical salafi movements, which are willing to play a pragmatic role in Syrian and regional politics, which listen to salafi mainstream scholars, and which can be counted on to respect the interests of the Gulf states.

PART TWO

THE SYRIAN ISLAMIC FRONT

THE CREATION OF THE SYRIAN ISLAMIC FRONT

On December 21, 2012, the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF, *al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya*) announced its creation through a video, which showed SIF factions attacking government forces and distributing humanitarian aid.⁴⁰ The SIF spokesperson, Abu Abderrahman al-Souri, read the following statement:

We, who are the widest spectrum of Islamic brigades working on the soil of beloved Syria, hereby announce the creation of the Syrian Islamic Front. It is a comprehensive Islamic front, representing Islam as a religion, a creed, a path, and a conduct.

Its beliefs spring from the path of Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamaa, understood as that of the pious ancestors, without extremism or negligence. It aims to overthrow the Assad regime, and to build a civilized Islamic society ruled by God's law [sharia], in which Muslim and non-Muslim alike will enjoy the justice of Islam.

To realize its goals, the Front relies on many different means. The military movement aims to overthrow the regime and establish security. The civil movement follows various paths – political, missionary, educational, relief, and humanitarian – within the confines of sharia rulings.

In addition to this, the Front is considered one of the [many] Islamic forces working in the Syrian society, and therefore it works to preserve a unified discourse and a coalition, and to avoid division and differences, while striving for understanding with everyone who works for Islam, with whom it is possible to cooperate based on a common understanding of devoutness, piety, and a righteous vision.

The Front contains all of the following:

<i>Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham</i>	<i>in all of the governorates</i>
<i>Liwa al-Haqq</i>	<i>n Homs</i>
<i>Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya</i>	<i>in Aleppo and its countryside</i>
<i>Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya</i>	<i>in the Idleb countryside</i>
<i>Kataeb Ansar al-Sham</i>	<i>n Latakia and its countryside</i>
<i>Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir</i>	<i>in the Aleppo countryside</i>
<i>Jaish al-Tawhid</i>	<i>in Deir al-Zor</i>
<i>Kataeb Suqour al-Islam</i>	<i>in Damascus and its countryside</i>
<i>Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila</i>	<i>in Damascus and its countryside</i>
<i>Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa</i>	<i>in Damascus and its countryside</i>
<i>Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb</i>	<i>in Damascus and its countryside⁴¹</i>

Thus, the brigades of the Syrian Islamic Front are spread across all of Syria's soil, protecting their faith, defending their people, and liberating their land. The gates are open for all Islamic brigades working on the soil of beloved Syria to join.

And Praise God, Lord of the Worlds

8 Safar 1434

corresponding to

21 December 2012

This statement marked the end of several months of negotiations between Syrian Islamist groups. "It was a difficult and tough process," explains Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, a leading member of the SIF:

“It took us roughly two to three months to complete. Negotiations with the other groups were easy, in the sense that everybody agreed that we needed an umbrella group for all the groups with a similar ideology, and that they should come together and offer the Syrian people a unified vision.

“The problem was rather to create a unified organization, especially since we are talking about groups that are spread all over the country. Also, the northern areas were not as free then as they are now, and all the while, we were being attacked by army and shabbiha all across the country.

Abu Ezzeddin explains that the negotiations were also delayed by the fact that the SIF's founders wanted to gather as many member factions as possible, before announcing its creation publicly. "We knew that it would be easier to do it then, than after it had been announced." The SIF's initiators had initially invited "everybody" to share in the talks, but some – like Jabhat al-Nosra – turned down the invitation.⁴²

The SIF also faced other problems. While its preliminary negotiations were ongoing, another Syrian Islamist alliance was also trying to establish a joint leadership. This group, the Syria Liberation Front (SLF), had been formed in September 2012 by some of the nation's largest Islamist factions, including Kataeb al-Farouq and Suqour al-Sham. The talks between the SLF and the groups that would later form the SIF didn't succeed, for various reasons. Some sources point to ideological differences, or power-sharing issues. Another source notes a dispute in September 2012, when a faction within Kataeb al-Farouq was accused of assassinating a rival Islamist commander, and says that this incident threw the negotiations off track.⁴³ According to Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, there

were some remaining political differences between the SLF and the SIF, but "the general idea is the same", so they should not be insurmountable. He claims that there is still an ongoing dialogue between the groups.

However, in December 2012, the final constellation of the SIF had emerged, and so "ultimately, we took a decision to announce it with the eleven groups we had."⁴⁴

After the publication of the December 21, 2012 communiqué, the SIF leadership went on a media offensive. Abu Abderrahman al-Souri conducted interviews with leading Arabic media channels, the group set up accounts on Facebook and Twitter, while member factions went out into their local environment to spread the news. They also began attaching the SIF name to their own communiqués, and distributed SIF statements through their websites. When video clips were released by member groups, a SIF graphic was invariably added, to market the alliance and streamline factional propaganda.

The SIF won a rush of positive publicity through the capture of the important Taftanaz helicopter airfield in the Idlib Governorate, on January 11. The operation was run by SIF members Ahrar al-Sham, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya, and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, in cooperation with the salafi-jihadi faction Jabhat al-Nosra, and a group from the SLF's Suqour al-Sham.⁴⁵

In mid-January 2013, the SIF released its official charter.⁴⁶ It further clarified the SIF's position on political and ideological matters, portraying it as a dedicated salafi group which will fight to establish a state guided by sharia law at all costs, while also making some gestures towards moderation and tolerance for minority groups. This was in line with how Abu Abderrahman al-Souri had attempted to position the group in his media appearances: as a religiously impeccable, hardline opposition faction, but still a responsible actor capable of steering Syria away from chaos and anarchy, which will not attack non-Muslims without cause.

At the end of the month, the SIF presented a new step forward: the merger of four of its factions into one single organization, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya. At the same time, three SIF factions in Damascus united under the name Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmutaleb. This reduced the total number of SIF factions from eleven to six. These developments added to the credibility of the SIF. By mid-February, the group had come to be seen as one of the most influential factions in the Syrian war, and a main representative of the salafi flank of the insurgency.

THE SIF AS AN ISLAMIST “THIRD WAY”

The eleven factions that originally formed the SIF all belonged to the uprising's Islamist wing, and most of them had a clear salafi imprint. The largest and dominant group among them was Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, which later absorbed three other SIF groups to create Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya. The Ahrar al-Sham network, created in 2011, has long been among the most important factions in the Syrian insurgency. From the outset, it has been committed to salafism, and kept a wary distance from Western-backed coalitions within the armed movement.

It is close to the radical jihadis in rhetoric and ideology, but there are subtle differences. Ahrar al-Sham does recruit foreign fighters, but it is clearly focused on Syria, and all known leaders are Syrians. It does not possess the sort of intimate links to the salafi-jihadi *internationale* that Jabhat al-Nosra does. For example, Jabhat al-Nosra was immediately embraced by administrators on the handful of web forums that cater to al-Qaida sympathizers, like Shumoukh al-Islam⁴⁷ and Ansar al-Mujahedin.⁴⁸ Some of these forums even pre-promoted Jabhat al-Nosra's first video before its release, indicating that the credibility of the group had been vouched for. Jabhat al-Nosra now has its own (unofficial) jihadi web forum.⁴⁹

By contrast, Ahrar al-Sham releases its statements through its own websites, rather than through the salafi-jihadi online forums. It took the better part of 2012 before Ahrar al-Sham even began to attract serious attention among forum users. In a May 2012, Ahrar al-Sham's media spokesperson on the Ansar al-Mujahedin forum even had to defend his group's Islamist credentials and deny claims that Ahrar al-Sham is an FSA splinter faction. One user critically wrote that “Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham and some of the groups spread through Homs and Latakia [...] are groups whose discourse is clearly salafi in creed, but the goal of their fighting has not been clarified to distinguish it from that of the FSA and the secular groups.”⁵⁰ With

time, Ahrar al-Sham has become more widely accepted on the jihadi forums, where users are impressed by its strong track record of attacks and other activities.

In statements, interviews and ideological documents, the SIF has articulated a position nearly identical to that of that of its dominant group, Ahrar al-Sham. It seeks to demonstrate a strict salafi identity, and makes no attempt to hide its opposition to secularism and democracy. But it also tries to highlight a streak of pragmatism and moderation, intended to reassure both Syrians and foreign policymakers. In this way, it sets itself apart as an Islamist “third way”, different from both the most radical fringe of the uprising, and from its Western-backed Islamist mainstream.

The SIF and Western-backed opposition groups

The SIF has never referred to itself as a part of the FSA. It has received no support from the NC exile leadership, which it does not recognize, and it has no links to the SJMCC military alliance, or the Military Council structures. One spokesperson admits that there is “cooperation with some of those who are part of the [NC] or the [SJMCC] on the ground, in so far as this serves the interest of the people”.⁵¹

In general, the SIF is critical about the Western-backed diaspora dissidents. “The exile opposition, secularists and others, have contributed only words, worth nothing compared with the sacrifices of our people [in Syria]. As for the [NC], and whatever else that has and will be formed: these are mere theatrics, which are trusted by some decent people, but have been designed to absorb the revolution and draw it into a political solution.”⁵²

One of the SIF's political leaders, Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari from Liwa al-Haqq, paints a more nuanced picture. “At first we all supported the SNC,” he claims:

Despite all their defects we kept supporting them for a higher purpose, in the interest of the country. But really, we have now reached a point where good intentions are not enough. The kind of strong resolve, commitment, and leadership that we needed – it was lacking and it is still lacking within that part of the opposition. We'd love to help them succeed. We don't want conflicts with opposition groups abroad. But our priority is our people, and when criticism is necessary, these things need to be said.

He claims to want to “provide constructive criticism that serves the cause of the revolution”, and says it is necessary to maintain contacts with all parts of the opposition.⁵³

The SIF and Western nations

Salafism has a well-deserved reputation for anti-Western demagoguery, and many SIF factions evince great hostility towards the USA and Europe in their public propaganda. However, the SIF leadership seems to want to project a more pragmatic image. Jabhat al-Nosra has been listed as a terrorist group, and is therefore untouchable for Western diplomacy. The SIF, on the other hand, apparently wants to come across as a reasonable and responsible actor, albeit a hawkish one.

When asked how the SIF intends to deal with the USA and other Western nations, which are likely to view it as a radical faction similar to al-Qaida, Abu Ezzeddin responds in great detail. He states that the SIF is eager to reach a *modus vivendi* with the West, and that it is currently seeking to initiate contacts with different foreign actors. According to Abu Ezzeddin, the SIF has already held secret meetings with a diplomat from a European nation. "We insisted on this," he says, "because we want to open communication channels":

"We don't want Western opinion makers to base their information on stereotypes, or on people who portray us as radical groups. We do not believe that we fit the description of what is popularly known in the west as "radical Islamists" or "jihadis". It's going to be a huge challenge for us to change that perception, but we want to initiate contacts. We're not going to agree on everything, and that will be a challenge. But the West should still be interested in talking to the side that can offer stability and influence things on the ground."

"We know that the West and the international community would prefer to deal with secular opposition groups, or what they call "moderate" opposition groups. But the reality is that we think the West wants to work with people who can really make a difference, and who can negotiate deals and implement them. In Syria, that is going to be factions like the SIF."

"We're not shying away from who we are, in terms of what kind of state we want, or what we think about negotiations with the regime. Read our charter, and it's pretty clear. We're not trying to hide behind some false image of "Islam light". We want the Islam we believe in. But at the same time, we don't want faulty decisions to be made by either side, based on faulty information. And to prevent that we need clear communication channels between both sides."⁵⁴

The SIF and Jabhat al-Nosra

Regarding Jabhat al-Nosra, the SIF is at pains to deny that there are any rifts between the groups, saying

that Jabhat al-Nosra are "our brothers and partners in the trenches and battles".⁵⁵ Websites belonging to the SIF and its member factions show no sign of hostility to Jabhat al-Nosra. Quite to the contrary, SIF fighters and factions routinely post messages of support and praise for Jabhat al-Nosra.

"We have nothing against Jabhat al-Nosra," explains Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari:

"I think that although they are very much linked to al-Qaida, their mother organization, what's being written in that regard is poorly researched and poorly understood. The behavior of Jabhat al-Nosra has been dramatically different from that of the Islamic State of Iraq [i.e. the Iraqi wing of al-Qaida]. They're acting very cleverly in Syria, and they have avoided most of the mistakes of the other branch. They have an excellent relationship with the population. Their relationship with other factions is also excellent. Even leaders of other factions have lots of respect for them."

"Our position is that as long as they haven't done anything wrong on the ground, and as long as they are fighting the regime, we don't have a problem with them. The USA has classified a lot of groups as "terrorists" using criteria that are perhaps more suited to American interests, which are not necessarily our interests."⁵⁶

While tactically cooperating with Jabhat al-Nosra, and defending it against the American terrorism charges, the SIF leadership has also gently pushed back against those salafis who suggest that Jabhat al-Nosra should lead the Syrian Islamist movement. In an interview with the *al-Badil* weekly, a representative of the SIF noted that "we don't think that there is a single Islamic faction which has an absolute truth."⁵⁷

Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari puts it more bluntly: "We are not the same, and if we were the same, we would have been in the same group. But we have an excellent relationship with them on the ground."⁵⁸

THE IDEOLOGY AND GOALS OF THE SIF

The SIF defines itself as a Sunni, salafi group, which strives to establish an Islamic state and extend Islamic morals throughout society. Its central leadership is clearly salafi in character. The member factions are all Islamist, and most of them define themselves as salafis, although their level of ideological sophistication varies. The Liwa al-Haqq in Homs is an exception from the rule, since it openly states that it is *not* a salafi group, but a coalition of many different Islamist factions; it includes many salafis, and even some more

extreme salafi-jihadis, but also Muslim Brotherhood-type Islamists, and members of local Sufi orders.

Regardless of the doctrine espoused by a group's commander or media division, or by the SIF's central leadership, the foot soldiers of all factions tend to be locally recruited men with no previous background in politics. One can of course expect them to be conservative and religious, since they have cast their lot with the SIF instead of more moderate factions, but they are certainly not all salafis or even ideologically stringent Islamists.

News reports and anecdotal evidence from activists makes it clear that most low-level recruits to Syria's "salafi" factions are really just religiously conservative Sunni men, including many who have turned religious during the war. They will often care very little about the theoretical distinctions between various strands of Islamism. Of course, socialization into a salafi militant environment might change that, given time; and many SIF factions probably make some effort to raise the religious and ideological consciousness of their fighters, through teaching sessions, sermons, etc.

The SIF's goal: a Sunni Islamic theocracy

The goals of the SIF are clearly defined, although details about their implementation have been left for a later date. In the words of the SIF's January 2013 charter, it seeks "to build a civilized Islamic society in Syria, ruled by the law of God". Even though it has grown out of an armed jihad, the SIF sees its mission as both civilian and military. Its charter gives equal attention to "the military movement, which aims to topple the regime and extend security, and the civilian movement, from which springs missionary, educational, humanitarian, media, political and [public] service [movements]".

For the SIF, the struggle will not end with the resignation or death of Bashar al-Assad. After the fall of the dictator, Syria must be physically rebuilt and restructured as an Islamic state. In its charter, the SIF lists six goals:

- To overthrow the regime and extend security on the soil of beloved Syria.
- To work to consolidate the faith of the individual, of society, and of the state.
- To preserve the Islamic identity of society, and to build a complete Islamic personality.
- To rebuild Syria on a sound foundation of justice, independence and solidarity, in correspondence with Islamic principles.
- Real participation in the development of society.
- To prepare scholarly leaders in the various fields of life.⁵⁹

The SIF calls for a Sunni Islamic theocracy in Syria. It accepts no compromise on the matter of sharia law, which will always take precedence over man-made rules and customs. For the SIF, the task of human rulers is simply to interpret and implement sharia in an efficient, impartial and non-corrupt manner. In response to questions about whether the SIF will impose such a system by force after the fall of Assad, it simply states that the Syrian revolution has always been an Islamic revolution, and the majority of Syrians are Muslims who want sharia law, so there is no need to force anyone.⁶⁰

The SIF also unambiguously rejects liberal democracy and secularism. Its spokesperson, Abu Abderrahman al-Souri, has made harsh attacks on leftist, nationalist and other non-Islamist ideologies, and states that democracy is headed for the "garbage heap of history".⁶¹ However, the SIF does make some allowance for democratic practices within a theocratic framework. It claims to strive for *shoura*, or "consultation" among Muslims, and insists that no Syrian can be above the law; even the country's future leaders must answer to sharia law and be held accountable to religious courts.

"Islamic sharia cannot be put to a vote", explains the SIF, but elections could still be used as a system to appoint representatives and leaders: "We separate between voting to select the best among candidates, and voting on the sovereignty [*hakimiya*] of sharia; the first is acceptable to us, as long as it is regulated by the sharia, but the second is of course not acceptable."⁶² However, as long as elections serve to choose between "candidates who recognize the sovereignty of sharia and its hegemony over the state, then we don't see a problem with that".⁶³ On the question of multiple political parties in post-Assad Syria, the SIF states that "we welcome any party that is bound by the strictures of sharia".⁶⁴

THE POLITICS AND MILITARY TACTICS OF THE SIF

On military and political matters, the SIF takes a hawkish position, dismissing the idea of a negotiated solution. In late January 2013, the head of the NC, Moadh al-Khatib, announced that he was willing to negotiate with the Assad regime under certain conditions. This drew criticism from many parts of the opposition, including the SIF, which responded sharply and derisively. The SIF leader Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi wrote that "he who wants to negotiate with the regime of the tyrant of Damascus should first of all have a look at his own size and his representation on the field, so that he does not lose his new master, after he has already lost

the revolutionaries and the mujahedin of the interior".⁶⁵ A few days later, the SIF's Political Bureau stated that it rejects "any dialogue with the miscreant regime and those that aided it in slaying people".⁶⁶

While the SIF has clearly distanced itself from the Western-backed exiles in the SNC and the NC, it also condemns opposition infighting. In February 2013, a delegation of SNC officials was attacked with a remotely controlled bomb, while seeking to visit northern Syria through the Bab al-Hawwa crossing from Turkey. Most opposition members blamed the Assad regime, but some media reports speculated that Jabhat al-Nosra or other radical salafis could have been involved.⁶⁷ The SIF quickly made its position clear, by issuing a statement that blamed "this cowardly deed" on the Assad regime, promising "the tyrant's gang a harsh and earth-shaking response".⁶⁸

Interestingly, the term "jihad" never once appears in the SIF charter. The charter does however deal to some extent with military affairs. SIF factions are so far not especially notorious for attacks on civilians, but the group rejects the laws of war as commonly understood. In an early statement, it issued a blanket justification of attacks on regime supporters, regardless of whether they carry arms or not: "The Front announces that every individual, group, or tribe that collaborates with the regime in its aggression, is a legitimate military target, in order for them to stop their support to this murderer and his criminal gangs. Anyone who does not distance himself from them, and excuses himself from participation in the killing and aggression against our people, will certainly suffer the same fate as the traitor regime's gang."⁶⁹

Suicide bombings

Suicide bombings are typically a favorite tactic of jihadi groups. Most mainstream salafis have enthusiastically supported suicide bombings against their enemies in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflicts. Radical salafi-jihadi factions assign a particular importance to these "martyrdom operations", and will often portray such attacks as the epitome of jihadi heroism. For example, Jabhat al-Nosra has made suicide attacks a central plank of their propaganda, in typical salafi-jihadi style. The group has released several videos where attackers are shown preparing their bombs, reading statements to the camera, and finally detonating themselves at a government target.⁷⁰

By contrast, no SIF faction is known for regularly using suicide bombers. A video release from Ahrar al-Sham shows what was possibly a suicide attack, in June

2012,⁷¹ but apart from this, there is hardly any evidence of a SIF faction using the tactic. Instead, most SIF groups seem to rely on conventional guerrilla tactics, such as remotely detonated bombs, hit-and-run raids, and ambushes.

It may be that the SIF's leaders are influenced by salafi figures who oppose suicide attacks in all or most circumstances, like Abu Basir al-Tartousi or Adnan al-Arou. On the other hand, no SIF group seems to have publicly spoken out against suicide attacks, and the explanation could simply be that they lack the capacity to organize them.

FOREIGN AND CLERICAL SUPPORT FOR THE SIF

At this stage, the SIF is not officially affiliated with any well-known theologians, although it is presumably seeking endorsement from as many salafi opinion makers as possible. In response to a direct question, it denies having a special relationship to the Kuwaiti sheikh Shafi al-Ajami, saying that he is simply one of among the supporters of the revolution.⁷²

The SIF is informally supported by Abu Basir al-Tartousi (real name: Abdelmoneim Mustafa Halima), an influential if somewhat unorthodox⁷³ Syrian salafi-jihadi theologian. Abu Basir was previously based in London, but he joined the rebels in Syria in May 2012. Since then, he has travelled between Turkey and Syria with various Islamist groups, until he, very recently, returned to London.

Abu Basir's official Facebook site, al-Moarada al-Islamiya lil-Nizam al-Souri ("The Islamic Opposition to the Syrian Regime"), now routinely distributes statements and information from the SIF.⁷⁴ During his time in Syria in 2012, Abu Basir al-Tartousi was seen with SIF members like Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya⁷⁵ and Ansar al-Sham.⁷⁶ Although he also appeared alongside non-SIF Islamist groups (e.g. Hama's Tajammou Kataeb al-Haqq⁷⁷), this has led many to believe that Abu Basir is officially affiliated with the SIF. One usually well-informed source even claims that Abu Basir is a member of the SIF, and Abu Basir has previously been named in the media or on jihadi forums as the emir of this or that Islamist faction, including Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya and Ansar al-Sham.

Such rumors have always been denied by Abu Basir himself, who presents himself as a nonpartisan "adviser" to the revolution as a whole.⁷⁸ When questioned on the matter, a SIF leader also explicitly denies that Abu Basir is a member of the front.⁷⁹ The group insists that

he is simply "one of the brothers whom we love and exalt", acknowledging that it does seek his advice.⁸⁰

In a further sign of contacts between Abu Basir and the SIF, the official SIF Facebook page has posted his commentary on the SIF charter. It is a broadly positive review, but Abu Basir urges the SIF to take a clearer stance on some issues. For example, he suggests that the SIF should state that it seeks to promote Islam not only in Syria, but in all the world.⁸¹

Another review of the charter has been written by the Jordanian salafi Iyad Quneibi. He also received it quite positively, but indicated that there is room for some improvement. Noting that the charter "contained formulations which were clearly intended to be reassuring about questions often posed in the media", e.g. about the safety of non-Muslim minorities (see below), he asked readers not to "be hasty in condemning such expressions or read into them what they do not say". He thus argued for a good-faith interpretation of the SIF charter, even while noting that it occasionally strays from orthodox salafi terminology.⁸²

Foreign fighters

Some SIF member factions are known to have accepted foreign volunteers into their ranks, prior to the creation of the SIF. This particularly applies to Ahrar al-Sham, the dominant faction within the SIF. Ahrar al-Sham and other SIF members must certainly still have foreigners fighting for them, although most jihadi volunteers apparently prefer to enroll with Jabhat al-Nusra and the other salafi-jihadi groups.

Since the creation of the SIF, there have been a limited number of reports about foreigners in its ranks. For example, in February 2013, two Danish Muslims were apparently killed while fighting for an SIF group in the Damascus region. One of them was identified as Slimane Haddj Abderrahmane, a Danish-Algerian former inmate at the US prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.⁸³

THE SALAFIS AND NON-MUSLIM MINORITIES

The contemporary salafi movement is fiercely Sunni chauvinist, and very hostile to Shia Islam in particular. Shia Muslims are derogatorily referred to as *rafida*, or rejectionists, and Iranian state influence is perceived as part of a vast Shia conspiracy, sometimes secretly allied to the USA, global Zionism, Freemasonry, and other nefarious forces.

The anti-Shia attitudes within contemporary salafism have deep historical roots, but have also been influenced by 20th century conflicts.⁸⁴ The conflict between

the Gulf Arab monarchies and Iran overlaps neatly with the Sunni-Shia divide, and both sides have used religion to mobilize their citizens. Senior Saudi clerics have repeatedly condemned Shia Islam and called for radical measures to curb its influence. In 1991, the Saudi scholar Abdullah bin Jibrin (1933-2009) even declared that the Shia are "polytheists" and can therefore be lawfully killed by Sunni Muslims. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Syrian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood produced a stream of anti-Shia and anti-Alawi tracts, reflecting its own struggle with the Alawi-led Baathist regime. The Syrian salafi ideologue Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin (b. 1938), a former member of the Brotherhood, helped spread these ideas further in the 1980s and 1990s. After 2003, the anti-Shia theme was picked up and reinforced by Abu Moussaab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006), the al-Qaida leader in Iraq. Zarqawi launched brutal sectarian attacks on Iraqi Shia civilians, to an extent considered morally dubious and politically damaging even by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. The Lebanese salafi-jihadi movement has also been virulently critical of Shiism, and in particular of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah guerrilla.

In Syria, there are very few "mainstream" Shia of the so-called Twelver sect, which forms the majority of the population in Iran, Bahrain and Iraq. However, there is a large minority of Alawites (10-15 percent) and some Druze (2-3 percent).

These sects were traditionally seen by Twelver Shia as *ghulat*, or "extremists" who had seceded from the proper teachings of Shia Islam. In modern times, some Shia theologians have accepted the Alawite claim to be Shia Muslims, albeit mostly for political reasons.⁸⁵ Sunni theologians take a harder line, and the salafi movement completely refuses to accept Alawites and Druze as Muslims.

Most salafis, and indeed many other Sunni Muslims, refer to a series of fatwas by the medieval scholar Taqieddin ibn Taimiya (1223-1328). He ruled that Alawites, then referred to as "Noseiris", are "are more heretical than the Jews and the Christians, even more so than many polytheists", and determined that they are apostates (*murtaddoun*), who can be legitimately killed and plundered.

As Yaron Friedman has shown, Ibn Taimiya's grasp of Alawite history and theology was shallow at best, and he repeatedly confused Alawi teachings with Ismaili Islam.⁸⁶ Even so, the modern salafi movement has embraced Ibn Taimiya's fatwas, without questioning the veracity of his claims or conclusions.

The position of Christians is not as problematic for salafis as that of the Alawite and Druze minorities, or even the Twelver Shia. As a non-Muslim “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitab*), Christians enjoy a clearly defined albeit subservient position in the salafi conception of an Islamic state. As long as they submit to Islamic rule, pay a special *jizya* tax, and do not interfere with Muslim society, they can be left alone to rule themselves according to Christian custom. The marginal role played by Christians within the Assad regime also makes this question less immediately relevant to Syrian Islamists, than the fate of the Alawite minority.

Salafi-jihadis and Jabhat al-Nosra

Syria's sectarian war has created a great deal of animosity between Sunnis and Alawites. On the Sunni rebel side, the salafi-jihadis are particularly unforgiving, but their anti-Alawi attitude is nothing new. For example, Abu Basir al-Tartousi has long used the Ibn Taimiya fatwas to call for the overthrow of the Syrian regime. The jihadi theoretician Abu Moussaab al-Souri also routinely used these fatwas to demonize Alawites and the Assad regime, before he was captured in 2005.⁸⁷

In June 2012, Abul-Mondher al-Chinguetti (the pen name of a radical salafi-jihadi theologian) issued a fatwa on the treatment of Syrian minorities in the current conflict. He noted that while it is perfectly legal to launch unprovoked attacks on Alawite and Druze communities, minority citizens that do not actively aid the Assad regime should be left alone for the moment, as a tactical consideration: “If these sects do not support the regime and are not engaged in aiding it, then any operation targeting them will lead to great evil, and its results will not compensate for the consequences. Rather, Muslims must attempt to ensure the neutrality of these sects, so that they do not assist the regime against them.” He concluded that Syria's jihadis must be very cautious to “restrict their targets to the tyrant and his soldiers without harming any citizen, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.”⁸⁸

A few months later, Chinguetti's stance seemed to have hardened. On October 21, he issued a more detailed fatwa, quoting the Ibn Taimiya texts. Chinguetti now declared that “jihad is obligatory for every Muslim against this polytheist sect.” He even proposed that “defeating the Noseiris [i.e. Alawites] is the path to liberating Jerusalem” and said that every Muslim “must wage jihad on the Noseiris like he is waging jihad on the Jews, there is no difference.”⁸⁹

Syria's leading salafi-jihadi group, Jabhat al-Nosra, works in this salafi-jihadi tradition, but it has kept a

lower profile on sectarian matters than most of the global jihadi community. The reason is probably that it wants to downplay its own extremism in the eyes of conservative, non-jihadi Sunnis. In the same vein, it claims to carefully choose its targets. In its propaganda videos, Jabhat al-Nosra has sought to demonstrate that it will often cancel attacks for fear of harming non-combatant Muslims.⁹⁰

A May 20, 2012 Jabhat al-Nosra statement claiming responsibility for a suicide attack in Deir al-Zor typifies the group's discourse. After thanking God for the fact that “no civilian perished in this martyrdom operation, to the best of our knowledge”, the statement went on to promise that “these blessed operations will continue until the soil of al-Sham [i.e. the Levant/Syria] is cleansed from the filth of the Noseiris and the Sunnis are relieved of their oppression.”⁹¹

Jabhat al-Nosra has so far paid little attention to Syrian Christians, except to occasionally clarify that they will not be targeted simply on religious grounds.⁹²

The SIF: Leveraging the minority question

This is perhaps the area where the SIF diverges most clearly from the salafi-jihadis, and even from the international salafi mainstream. As committed salafis, the SIF leaders are likely to share the view of Alawites as apostates, but the group has nevertheless developed a somewhat less inflammatory discourse. Without straying too far from the orthodoxy, it has repeatedly stated that non-Sunnis who are not fighting for Assad have nothing to fear. Several member factions use threatening language against Alawites, but the SIF's central leadership has so far kept this to a minimum, and generally seems to want to avoid the minority issue. It has referred to Syria's Alawites and Druze as people of other religions, rather than as apostates and unbelievers. The Ibn Taimiya fatwas seem to have been conveniently forgotten, or at least left aside for the moment.

On the other hand, the SIF is very clear about the fact that Syria should be completely ruled by sharia law, as a Sunni Islamic state, and that minorities can expect no concessions on that point. When asked to explain the role of minorities in the future Syria, SIF spokesmen often rely on an elegantly ambiguous phrase from its founding statement, assuring minorities that all Syrians will be equally blessed with “the justice of Islam.”⁹³

Section 4 of the SIF charter is dedicated to the status of non-Muslims in the future Syria. It starts off by noting that “Islam is the religion of the state, and the main

and only source of legislation", but also stresses that there can be "coexistence" with "mutual obligations and rights" within the framework of sharia law. In fact, "a difference in religion is no excuse for oppressing anyone". At the same time, the charter warns against the mixing of religions, perhaps referring to ecumenical efforts and joint Muslim-Christian ceremonies, such as those promoted by the pro-Assad religious establishment. (The SIF also clearly states its opposition to the division of Syria along religious or ethnic lines, in an oblique reference to the Kurdish issue.)⁹⁴

When asked by an online questioner what will be the fate of the Noseiris (Alawites) and the Shia, the SIF responds that "everyone will be judged for what he has done, regardless of his sect or [religious] community. This applies even to offenders among the Sunnis, like al-Bouti and Hassoun". (This refers to Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti and Chief Mufti Ahmed Hassoun, two leading pro-regime Sunni theologians.)⁹⁵

In February 2013, the SIF released a short video showing how the group "reassures the Christian inhabitants of al-Yaaqoubiya", a town near Jisr al-Shughour in the Idlib Governorate. The video depicts two mujahedin standing outside a Christian family's home, waving an Ahrar al-Sham flag and loudly declaring, to a perplexed middle-aged man, that the Christians of al-Yaaqoubiya are a "people of the book" whose property will be protected. The Christian gentleman does not look very reassured, but he waves to the fighters and shares half-heartedly in an *allahu akbar*, before returning inside.⁹⁶

RECRUITMENT, STRUCTURE AND FUNDING

The SIF is a front composed of member organizations that cooperate and support each other, but have retained their individual organizational identities and leaderships. When it was founded in December 2012, the SIF consisted of eleven organizations. Since then, the number has shrunk to six, after some member groups merged with each other.

The number of individual fighters of the SIF is hard to estimate. Adding up the member factions, the number almost certainly exceeds ten thousand. When joining the SIF in December 2012, Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb stated on its Facebook page that the SIF contained "close to 30,000 fighters".⁹⁷

Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, a member of the SIF Political Office, says that a detailed study was made when the SIF was created. According to this study, all the member factions combined had "roughly 30,000" fighters

under their command. According to him, Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham fighters represented about a third of this figure. He lists his own group, Liwa al-Haqq, as the second-largest or possibly third-largest faction.⁹⁸

Recruitment

Syria's pre-revolutionary opposition groups were normally very careful about recruitment. They often relied on a qualified and selectively admitted cadre, even at the expense of rapid membership growth. Some operated in a manner more similar to secret societies than political parties, and would admit new members only after extensive tests. These habits live on with many groups.

For example, to join the Muslim Brotherhood, a person must be suggested as a candidate by at least two full members; he must then graduate from various training sessions and a lengthy period of trial membership, before his application can finally be accepted or rejected by the central leadership.⁹⁹ The result is a numerically limited but very loyal and disciplined cadre.

Jabhat al-Nosra also appears to follow this elitist strategy. Its leaders "carefully chose their members, and it sets many conditions, unlike other groups who are not very particular," says Abdulrahman Alhaj, an expert on Syrian Islamism.¹⁰⁰ According to a recent report from the Quilliam Foundation, Jabhat al-Nosra requires "personal assurance, from two commanders on the front line stating that the recruit has the necessary skills, religious commitment and attitude to join the group. The first step of becoming a member is fighting on the front line. During this time, potential recruits are tested for bravery, dedication, and loyalty to the [Jabhat al-Nosra] ideology."¹⁰¹

In contrast to this, some of Syria's newly formed salafi groups have been trying to expand as rapidly as possible. They were often formed around a religious core leadership, but it then recruited far and wide among local Sunni Muslims. In many cases, these organizations will welcome any aspiring fighter (or group of fighters) who enjoys a good personal reputation among the locals, and seems to fulfill basic demands of religious commitment.¹⁰² These terms are of course still stricter than those of most non-Islamist factions, some of which have gained an unsavory reputation for corruption and theft.

Structure

Most SIF member factions were originally created as alliances of smaller groups. They include many semi-independent subfactions,¹⁰³ which have joined as a bloc. New fighters are still being added to the SIF in

this way. For example, in January 2013, a small insurgent group in the village of al-Burhaniya (Homs Governorate) announced in a videotaped statement that they would join Kataeb al-Bara, group fighting in the district capital, al-Quseir. Kataeb al-Bara is a member faction of Liwa al-Haqq, which is in turn a member of the SIF.¹⁰⁴ The SIF thereby extended its armed presence into al-Burhaniya, but only after a process of spontaneous local alliances; it didn't take place as the result of central planning, and the new recruits could not have been vetted by the central leadership.

In many ways, the SIF is not an effective alliance, but a mere agglomeration of local units. These will often be rooted in a particular village community or a family/clan group, which remains loyal to its own commander. Unless a local group is under particularly strong salafi religious influence, its allegiance to the SIF and its ideology can be presumed to be shallow at best.

The SIF leadership is therefore unlikely to be able to use the forces at its disposal in a truly efficient manner, or to shift fighters around between different fronts. Any attempt to force units on the ground to act against their own perceived interests, or transfer resources from one group to the next, could easily result in disadvantaged factions deciding to simply terminate their allegiance to the SIF. These problems are likely to persist for a long time.

Funding

The SIF's sources of funding are something of a mystery. It claims to rely on war booty and donations from various benefactors, but it provides no details on who these benefactors may be.¹⁰⁵ One SIF representative says that although "the SIF is not affiliated with a specific religious figure" its "funding comes from mainly salafi sources, or Islamic sources in general."¹⁰⁶

The largest SIF faction, Ahrar al-Sham, is known to have received donations from Kuwaiti salafis such as Hajjaj al-Ajami and Hakim al-Moteiri, and, at least previously, from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁰⁷ (See the chapter on Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham.) Liwa al-Haqq has also received sporadic donations from Hajjaj al-Ajami.¹⁰⁸

It is possible that the SIF receives support directly from one or more of the Gulf Arab monarchies, but at the time of writing, there is no publicly available evidence of this, and a SIF leader denies it.¹⁰⁹

More plausibly, the SIF may be financed by private businessmen or religious figures with the tacit accep-

tance of official governments. In several cases, Gulf Arab states are known to have shut down financing networks suspected of funding jihadi radicals like Jabhat al-Nusra.¹¹⁰ Despite this, the government in Kuwait does not appear to have intervened against Hajjaj al-Ajami's donations to Syrian salafi rebels, to take but one example.

In response to a question on the SIF's relationship to Arab governments, a spokesperson for the group responded simply that it welcomes all support in the struggle against Bashar al-Assad, but will take no orders from anyone, "whether governments, institutions, or individuals".¹¹¹

THE SIF LEADERSHIP

Despite its commitment to Islam, the SIF is in organizational terms a negotiated political alliance, not a religious entity. It does not have an "emir", like some Islamist groups, and members do not pledge personal allegiance (*bayaa*) to the SIF leader. Instead, the SIF is run by a Leadership Council, made up by representatives appointed by each member faction. The highest leader (*al-qaid al-amm*) is simply the head of this council, and considered a political appointee, not a religious figure. Since the creation of the SIF, the post has been held by Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, the leader of Ahrar al-Sham (for more on him, see the chapter on Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham). There are also specialized organs, like a political office, an aid branch, etc. Like the Leadership Council, these offices are staffed by representatives of the SIF member factions.¹¹²

Despite the fact that posts are distributed among all member groups, the upper echelons of the SIF seem to be mostly controlled by Ahrar al-Sham members. "Oh, they're very much dominated by Ahrar al-Sham", says one Syrian Islamic opposition activist, who has worked with rebels in the Idlib and Aleppo governorates, including SIF factions. "But with the SIF they've adopted a new name, a new profile, a new concept, and expanded more."¹¹³

Some insiders seem to agree: "In all fairness I think Ahrar al-Sham are the pivotal part of the Front", says a member of the SIF Political Office. He is himself a member of Liwa al-Haqq, but makes no bones about the central role played by Ahrar al-Sham: "They're militarily strong and well respected, and have good relations to other groups. They headed many of the most famous operations, like Taftanaz. Yeah, they're the main cornerstone of the SIF."¹¹⁴

So far, very few SIF leaders have publicly revealed their identities, but the group has stated that it will release the names of additional leaders at suitable time.¹¹⁵

The most well-known SIF member is its public spokesperson, Abu Abderrahman al-Souri. His real name is Mohammed Talal Bazerbashi, a leading member of the Ahrar al-Sham network.¹¹⁶ According to a Syrian activist, Bazerbashi first entered into the rebellion as commander of a small Islamist militia in his hometown, Idleb City. The group, known as al-Katiba al-Khudra ("The Green Brigade"),¹¹⁷ was first affiliated to a larger Islamist faction in Idleb City, known as Liwa al-Tawhid ("The Monotheism Division"). Eventually, Bazerbashi and his group broke away to help found the Ahrar al-Sham network, where al-Katiba al-Khudra remains active as a member unit. According to a eulogy on the Ahrar al-Sham Facebook site, its most recent leader, "Abu Urwa", was killed in the Hassake Governorate in early January 2013.¹¹⁸ Bazerbashi then apparently functioned as commander of a northern wing of Ahrar al-Sham, although it is unclear whether this referred simply to northern Idleb or larger areas of northern Syria. Before taking up the SIF job, he also sat on a sharia court established by rebels in Idleb.¹¹⁹

In the video announcing the creation of the SIF, Bazerbashi sat flanked by two other men. One of them, who later reappeared as the unnamed spokesperson of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, was "Sheikh Abu Hamza", an Aleppo-based commander of Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya. The identity of the third man remains unknown, but it is likely that he represents another member group.

HUMANITARIAN AND OTHER NON-MILITARY ACTIVITY

The SIF insists that it is not simply an alliance of armed militias, but a movement that caters to all of society's needs. It has tried hard to highlight the non-military side of its work. The video that launched the SIF included several clips of member factions distributing humanitarian aid and provisions to civilians.¹²⁰ Several SIF groups run their own aid programs. In particular, Ahrar al-Sham, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya and Ansar al-Sham have published videos demonstrating their involvement in humanitarian activities. These have included the distribution of food, tents and blankets to refugees, but also teaching sessions and Quranic classes for children,¹²¹ and the establishment of sharia courts to replace the collapsing Baathist governance structures.

The SIF has tried to coordinate, improve and unify the aid work of its member factions. At least one meeting has

been held between the member factions, to reorganize aid efforts and divide territories between them. Among its accomplishments, the SIF lists the distribution of 400 tons of flour in the liberated areas of Idleb, Aleppo, Homs, Deir al-Zor and rural Latakia Governorates. It claims to have provided thousands of refugees with water, food baskets, baby milk, and blankets, and more than a thousand tents. Over 6000 refugees had allegedly been clothed already, and by January 2013, SIF activists were in the process of helping some 18,000 more, housed in refugee camps close to the Turkish border. Aid had not only been distributed through the SIF, but also via local, non-SIF-controlled aid committees, including "some of the local councils" – probably a reference to the local governance structures affiliated to the NC.¹²²

Much of the aid that the SIF claims credit for seems to have been organized and funded by independent aid groups, although SIF factions played a role in its distribution. The first SIF video release included footage of banners from Qatar Charity (Qatar al-Khairiyya, based in Qatar)¹²³ and the IHH (Insani Yardım Vakfı, "Humanitarian Relief Foundation", based in Turkey)¹²⁴ The SIF's Ansar al-Sham faction has also broadcast videos where its members help in distributing provisions from a convoy marked with IHH and Turkish Red Crescent logos.¹²⁵

Qatar Charity and IHH are influenced by religious interests, but both operate legally, and are generally considered to be serious aid organizations. They are certainly not SIF fronts, although both organizations have been separately accused of collaborating with radical Islamist groups in other circumstances. The IHH also drew international attention for its involvement in the May 2010 "Freedom Flotilla" solidarity action with Gaza, which was bloodily suppressed by Israel.

The SIF videos have been interpreted as evidence that these groups help fund the SIF, or provide aid directly to SIF factions. However, it is possible that SIF factions in the Syrian-Turkish border regions have simply been subcontracted to provide logistics and armed escort for the aid convoys, whether due to a shared Islamist ideology or for purely practical reasons.

FURTHER UNIFICATION INSIDE THE SIF

In January and February 2013, seven of the SIF's eleven founding factions announced that they would further unify their forces within the SIF framework. The first and most important merger saw four groups, based mainly in the north, unite under the name *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya*:

- Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham (national)
- Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya (Aleppo Governorate)
- Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya (Binnish, Idlib Governorate)
- Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila (Damascus region)

The second internal SIF unification project was limited to the Damascus countryside, and particularly its western Zabadani region, where three groups combined to form *Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb*:

- Kataeb Suqour al-Islam
- Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa
- Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb

This meant that out of the SIF's eleven founding factions, six now remain as separate entities within the front:

- Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya (national)
- Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb (Zabadani, Damascus region)
- Liwa al-Haqq (Homs Governorate)
- Kataeb Ansar al-Sham (northern Latakia Governorate)
- Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir (Maskana, eastern Aleppo Governorate)
- Jaish al-Tawhid (Deir al-Zor Governorate)

UNIFICATION # 1 – HARAKAT AHRAR AL-SHAM AL-ISLAMIYA

In late January 2013, four SIF member factions announced that they would take a further step, by now "merging completely" under the name of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya ("The Islamic Movement of the Free People of al-Sham"). The groups involved were Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, and Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila. They declared their intent to fight "the criminal Noseiri [Alawite] regime" and to "build an Islamic society ruled by the laws of Islam".¹²⁶ The statement was read by an unnamed person, who previously appeared in the original SIF announcement. Judging from previous video releases, it appears to be the man known as "Sheikh Abu Hamza", an Aleppo-based leader within Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya.¹²⁷

A new Facebook site was set up for the group,¹²⁸ although it kept Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham's Twitter account¹³⁰ and website address.¹³¹ It seems clear that the group is dominated by the former Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham leadership. This was by far the largest of the four organizations involved, with Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya a somewhat distant second. The new name, modeled on Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham's, also indicates

that the three other groups may have more or less been absorbed into the larger faction.

The founding communiqué of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya made clear that the group would remain a part of the SIF, and that this was simply an example of further unification within the framework of that alliance. According to Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, formerly the leader of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham and now the president of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, "the [SIF] is a coalition in which every entity retains its own structure. As for [Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya], it is a merging union [*ittihad indimaji*] in which the entities come together with a unified leadership and a single structure."¹³¹

The creation of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya would seem to further strengthen the Ahrar al-Sham leadership's influence, and increase its weight as the central bloc within the SIF. The new faction is far larger than any other SIF member, and probably represents about half of the SIF's combined fighting force. Therefore, it also adds cohesion to the SIF as an alliance.

UNIFICATION # 2 – KATAEB HAMZA BIN ABDELMUTTALEB

The Zabadani-based SIF group Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb had announced already in late January on its Facebook page that it would soon create a network of "brigades in the capital Damascus, brigades in the eastern Ghouta, brigades in Zabadani, a brigade in Wadi Barada, brigades in the Zabadani suburbs, and a lot of other brigades which will soon be officially announced, God willing"¹³² On February 1, these predictions were realized. After Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila had helped create Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, the three remaining Damascene SIF groups announced a new merger, using the slightly modified name *Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb fi Dimashq wa-Rifi-ha* ("The Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb Brigades in Damascus and Its Countryside").¹³³ Their leader is Abu Adnan al-Zabadani, an important figure in the Islamist insurgency in Damascus. (For more on Abu Adnan al-Zabadani, and the background of these factions, see the section on Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb.)

In mid-February 2013, Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb issued a second statement confirming its allegiance to the SIF, and saying that it accepted to enter into an alliance with other "military factions working in the Zabadani area".¹³⁴

Unlike Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, which stated that it had merged all forces into a single organizational structure, Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb may be

simply an alliance-within-the-alliance, where each faction retains its local organization and leadership. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly a step towards closer cooperation and unity, and a sign that the SIF project is, so far, going ahead as planned.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR THE SIF

The SIF is already one of the most important Syrian insurgent groupings. It has united eleven different Islamist organizations to create a national network of many thousands of fighters. If it can avoid major splits, its importance is certain to grow.

Some Syrian insurgent alliances have found it difficult to unify their ranks, because their member groups are too evenly matched, or too entrenched in their local environment. Comparing the SIF and the SLF, Noah Bonsey points out that the SLF members Liwa al-Tawhid, Kataeb al-Farouq, Alwiya Suqour al-Sham, and Liwa al-Islam



have all proven to be among the most powerful groups within their respective areas of operation over the last six months (and in some cases longer). The [SLF]'s situation thus differs from that of the [SIF], in which Ahrar al-Sham is clearly the dominant faction (and was so even before it absorbed Harakat al-Fajr, et al) and is thus well positioned to steer the coalition toward adopting concrete political and ideological stances in line with its own agenda.¹³⁵

An activist who has worked with rebels in northern Syria agrees that Ahrar al-Sham is the central pillar of the SIF. He cautions that it may still disintegrate, but suggests that it “has got a huge potential, if they manage to keep it together. Ahrar al-Sham is a stable group, and they're not 100 percent extremists. They've got a very strong profile.”¹³⁶

If the SIF manages to pick up serious foreign sponsorship, most likely from one or several conservative Gulf Arab monarchies, its influence could rise exponentially. With the financial muscle necessary to extend patronage to mainstream Islamist and pseudo-Islamist factions, it could easily draw thousands of new fighters into its orbit.

Its ideological position also gives it a special significance. The SIF represents a strengthening of the salafi bloc in Syria, but at the same time, it tips the balance of power among the salafis towards the center. Syria's most hard-line jihadi groups, like Jabhat al-Nusra and Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin, now face stiff competition on the religious flank of the uprising. They may be forced to moderate their behavior to gain allies of their own, although intra-salafi competition could also go the other way, and take the form of a race towards the most radical positions.

On the other hand, the SIF also threatens to undercut support for the more moderate Islamist groups. Organizations like the SLF are likely to harden their rhetoric in response, and try to develop a more sophisticated political program, in order to stave off the ideological challenge from the SIF.

If the SIF plays its hand well, its future policy choices could decisively influence the future of the rebel movement. If it chooses to engage with the rebel mainstream and the international community, it could become a central actor, while contributing to the marginalization of Jabhat al-Nusra and the salafi-jihadi *ultras*. But if it instead chooses to ally with its ideological brethren in the jihadi movement, and help them push back against the Western-backed factions, the center of gravity within the insurgency could move squarely into the radical religious camp.

The SIF's success can certainly not be taken for granted. It faces tremendous challenges, and could also prove to be a short-lived phenomenon.

If the SIF fails to acquire a sufficient level of funding to sustain its ambitious bid for salafi leadership, it is likely to fragment with time, like so many Syrian rebel alliances before it. This is an area where the USA and other Western nations actually have some leverage, since the SIF – unlike Jabhat al-Nusra – doesn't derive its funds entirely from criminal and secret sources. If Western states were to put very hard pressure on the Gulf Arab governments, enough funding channels could be cut to cripple or severely disrupt the SIF's activity. Of course, that would also seriously hamper the anti-Assad insurgency as a whole.

Other developments within the insurgency could also blindside the SIF, through no fault of its own. The slow but certain rise of Jabhat al-Nusra could eventually make the SIF's “third way” strategy untenable. If rebels capture more religiously mixed areas, SIF units could become embroiled in ethnic cleansing and other atrocities, undermining their attempts to display a relative moderation. Rebel infighting could have similar consequences. A foreign military intervention might resurrect the NC and other Western-backed and exiled opposition factions, and parachute their members into leading positions within the insurgency. The use of chemical weapons, or an internal coup in the Assad regime, could also completely shift the parameters of the Syrian conflict. Last but not least, a sudden collapse in Assad's defenses in Aleppo or Damascus would be likely to have unpredictable effects on the balance-of-power within the insurgency.

PART THREE

THE SIF'S FOUNDING FACTIONS

1. KATAEB AHRAR AL-SHAM

"The Free People of al-Sham Brigades"

Size and influence: Very large

Area of operations: Nation-wide, but particularly northwestern Syria

(Merged into Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya in January 2013)

Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham emerged in early 2012, and quickly became one of the leading salafi groups in Syria. For most of the year, news reporting and activist testimonies from northern Syria indicated that it was stronger than the elitist and ultra-secretive Jabhat al-Nusra in numerical terms. This began to change by mid/late 2012, when Jabhat al-Nusra started to grow rapidly in both size and influence.

One reason for this was that Ahrar al-Sham's fighters engaged in classical guerrilla warfare. Its member brigades have been involved in armed raids, ambushes, sniper attacks, and mortar and rocket shelling of government bases, all across rural Syria. They have not, however, engaged in the type of sophisticated, high-profile urban suicide bombings that have become a trademark of Jabhat al-Nusra.

The theatrical nature of these attacks in central Damascus and Aleppo helped raise Jabhat al-Nusra's public profile to a point where it became widely recognized as the leading salafi faction in Syria. Meanwhile, Ahrar al-Sham was picking off isolated military targets in rural areas of Idlib, Hama and Aleppo, far from the media spotlight. It certainly gained some ground, but failed to capitalize on its victories to the same extent as Jabhat al-Nusra. Only with the creation of the SIF in December 2012, did Ahrar al-Sham seem able to upstage Jabhat al-Nusra politically.

Origins and date of creation

In interviews, Ahrar al-Sham fighters have claimed that they began to organize secretly before the start of the Syrian revolution,¹³⁷ and the group describes itself as the first to take up arms in Syria. Some Ahrar al-Sham member units do indeed seem to have joined the armed struggle at a very early date, in the summer of 2011, but it is unlikely that Ahrar al-Sham existed as a national network at that time.

Regardless of when it was actually created, the group seems to have decided to go public in early 2012. By April 2012, Ahrar al-Sham had begun publishing voice messages online.¹³⁸ These were followed by a string of video releases through social networking sites, and,

by summer 2012, it had set up a regularly updated website, as well as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter accounts, etc.

There have been persistent allegations that the leaders of Ahrar al-Sham were originally members of Jabhat al-Nusra, who broke away to create their own group, but there's no real evidence to support this theory.¹³⁹

Structure and leadership

Ahrar al-Sham describes itself an independent Syrian group, which is not "an extension of any organization, party, or group".¹⁴⁰ It is composed of autonomous, locally based member brigades. Most of these factions are active in rural areas of Syria's northwest, particularly in the Idleb and northern Hama governorates, but there are Ahrar al-Sham units in most areas of Syria. These groups are supported and coordinated by a central leadership, which has offices dealing with religious questions, humanitarian work, and missionary activities, as well as a media department.

Ahrar al-Sham has released very little information about its leadership. Some reports claim that the group was formed by former inmates at Seidnaia, a political prison, after they were released in an amnesty in early 2011.¹⁴¹

The "general leader" (*al-qaid al-amm*) of Ahrar al-Sham is called Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi. There are no known photographs of him, and his *nom de guerre* contains no information except that he is from Hama. In January 2013, Abu Abdullah became the leader of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, a successor group to Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham (see below), and he is also the highest leader of the SIF.¹⁴² He has released one major statement in his own name, for Eid al-Adha in October 2012.¹⁴³ However, he also runs a personal Twitter account, where he occasionally interacts with followers. The Twitter account uses the address "aboobaid2", which seems to be based on a different name or cover name, "Abu Obeid".

Other Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham leaders include Abul-Hassan al-Idlebi, who has been presented as the group's "military official" (*al-masoul al-askari*). Unlike Abu Abdullah, Abul-Hassan has participated in TV interviews, even showing his face without a mask.¹⁴⁴ Another co-founder and leading member of Ahrar al-Sham is Mohammed Talal Bazerbashi, from Idleb City, who now serves as the SIF spokesperson (for more on Bazerbashi, see the section on the SIF leadership). In early 2013, news reports indicated that a man called

"Abu Anas" runs the Ahrar al-Sham forces in northern Syria, its stronghold.¹⁴⁶

Ahrar al-Sham subunits have their own local leaderships, including both military officials and religious functionaries. The overwhelming majority of its fighters seem to be locally recruited civilians, but there are at least some military defectors among them. For example, Ahrar al-Sham's Katibat Salaheddin subunit in the Hama Governorate announced the death of its military leader Abu Hamza in October 2012, revealing him to have been an army defector, 1st Lt. Labib Suleiman al-Deikh.¹⁴⁷

The Syria Revolutionaries' Front (SRF)

Ahrar al-Sham has experimented with alliances before the SIF. In May and early June 2012, it helped create Syria Revolutionaries' Front (SRF, *jabhat thuwwar souriya*), an Islamist alliance that claimed to include more than 100 armed groups. Most of these were the Ahrar al-Sham subfactions. Apart from Ahrar al-Sham, the SRF only included some smaller factions in e.g. Homs, Deir al-Zor (including Jaish al-Tawhid, which later joined the SIF) and the Damascus region, but it never gained wide traction.

The SRF was initially supported by a dissident figure from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the SNC co-founder Ahmed Ramadan. Other SNC factions quickly forced him to end his involvement with the SRF, but in an August 2012 interview Ramadan remained vaguely supportive of it, and stated that he didn't believe that its members were extremists.¹⁴⁸

Soon after the creation of the SRF, Ahrar al-Sham dropped out. It rejoined only after the SRF had clarified that it was not a part of the SNC or the FSA, and sharpened its Islamist profile.¹⁴⁹ This did not do much to revive the flagging fortunes of the SRF, which gradually faded away over the autumn.

Foreign financial support

Little is known about the exact sources of funding for Ahrar al-Sham, but it is clear that the group has been financed by Islamist figures in the Gulf monarchies. A donation network run by the Kuwaiti salafi preacher Hajjaj al-Ajami provided the group with money around the time of the SRF's creation, and may have continued to do so.¹⁵⁰ The popular Saudi-based Syrian salafi preacher Adnan al-Arouf is also said to have supported the group, at least politically,¹⁵¹ and many other salafi donation networks have probably been involved.

According to one source with good insights into Syrian

Islamist politics, “Ahrar al-Sham was established at a meeting in Istanbul, quite a while back now.” This individual claims that the driving force behind the establishment of Ahrar al-Sham was a group of Gulf-based salafis who used their money and influence to unite Syrian Islamist factions: “It was basically Hakim al-Moteiri from Kuwait and a number of guys from Qatar, salafis all of them. They decided they wanted to start something really big and finance it really well.”¹⁵²

Hakim al-Moteiri is a well-known Kuwaiti salafi politician and ideologue. In 2005 he founded Hezb al-Umma, an unrecognized political party in Kuwait, which recently created branches in post-revolutionary Libya and Syria. The Syrian wing of the party¹⁵³ presents itself as a very moderate salafi group, and states clearly that it will protect religious minorities.¹⁵⁴

Ahrar al-Sham has also, at some stage, been funded by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, or at least by factions within the Brotherhood. This would seem to be a strange match, since Ahrar al-Sham's salafi ideology differs in important respects from the Brotherhood's more pragmatic type of Islamism.

The French scholar Raphaël Lefèvre, author of the *Ashes of Hama*, a book on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, gives two reasons for the Brotherhood's support for Ahrar al-Sham. The first is that the Brotherhood's exiled leadership has been anxious to gain a foothold within the armed movement. Since it cannot and will not work with the al-Qaida connected salafi-jihadis of Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham has appeared as the acceptable salafi alternative. The second reason is Ahrar al-Sham's early success in absorbing former Brotherhood families in the Idlib and Hama regions. This created family linkages between the two groups. As Brotherhood members tried to support their relatives, and the group's exiled leadership attempted to coopt armed units inside Syria, money flowed from the Ikhwani diaspora to Ahrar al-Sham members inside Syria. However, Lefèvre also reports that the two Islamist groups may have drifted apart during the winter of 2012. In any case, it is clear that Ahrar al-Sham is in no way under Brotherhood control.¹⁵⁵

Ideology

Ahrar al-Sham provided the ideological model on which the SIF is based. It presents itself as a salafi group, unbending in its support for Islamic theocracy and sharia law. It is superficially very similar to the radical salafi-jihadi groups, and, like Jabhat al-Nusra, it accepts jihadi foreign fighters into its ranks. Media reports in mid-2012 claimed that most foreigners in

the Aleppo and Idlib governorates were fighting for Ahrar al-Sham,¹⁵⁶ although anecdotal evidence and more recent reports point to Jabhat al-Nusra, Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin and Kataeb al-Muhajerin as the primary recipients of foreign fighters.

Appearances aside, Ahrar al-Sham's homegrown brand of salafism is not quite as doctrinaire and aggressive as that of Jabhat al-Nusra and other salafi-jihadis. Ahrar al-Sham brigades often emerged from within the grassroots resistance in their own villages and towns. The group is focused entirely on Syria, and lacks the globalist perspective typical of al-Qaida and its international affiliates. Spokesmen occasionally try to highlight a degree of religious moderation, e.g. by promising that non-Sunni minorities have nothing to fear from them. In December 2012, Ahrar al-Sham even gained some international goodwill for freeing a team of international reporters, including Westerners, from kidnappers in northern Syria.¹⁵⁶

Ahrar al-Sham subfactions

The number of local units affiliated to Ahrar al-Sham has grown rapidly since the group went public in early 2012. In May, it listed a total of 27 subfactions. 17 of these were based in the Idlib Governorate, while the remaining ten were distributed across Hama (6), Aleppo (3), and rural Damascus (1). In July, the number had grown closer to 50. The group was still strongest in Idlib and Hama, but it now had a wider national spread. It still remained weak in Homs and Deraa, and had no members at all in Deir al-Zor. In mid-January 2013, just before Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham merged with three other SIF factions, it had 83 member factions:¹⁵⁷

8 groups in the Damascus region: Katibat Jund al-Sham, al-Zubeir bin al-Awam, Katibat Fajr al-Sham, Katibat Fajr al-Islam, Katibat Hudheifa bin al-Yaman, Katibat Zaid bin Thabet, Katibat Abdullah bin Salam, Katibat Mohammed bin Muslima

4 groups in the coastal region: Katibat Nusour al-Sahel, Katibat Obada bin al-Samet, Katibat Nusrat al-Mazloun, Katibat ibn Taimiya

5 groups in the Aleppo Governorate: Katibat al-Shahba, Katibat Ansar al-Haqq, Katibat Burj al-Islam, Ammar bin Yaser, Katibat Hassane bin Thabet

14 groups in the Hama region, as part of Liwa al-Iman:¹⁵⁸ Katibat Abil-Fida, Katibat Salaheddine, Katibat Abu Obeida Amer bin al-Jarrah, Katibat Imadeddin Zengi, Katibat al-Hamza bin Abdelmutaleb, Katibat al-Zubeir bin al-Awam, Katibat al-Bara

bin Azeb, Katibat Shuhada al-Arbacin, Katibat al-Mulazem Awwal Raid Muqallad, Katibat Tareq bin Ziad, Katibat al-Fatihin, Katibat Abna al-Islam, Katibat al-Furqan, Katibat al-Qaaqaa

5 groups in the Homs Governorate: Katibat Junoud al-Rahman, Katibat al-Hamra, Katibat Ansar al-Sunna wal-Sharia, Katibat Adnan Oqla, Katibat Ibad Allah

8 groups on the Ghab Plain (western Hama Governorate): Katibat al-Sayyeda Aisha, Katibat Othman bin Affan, Katibat Ali bin Abi Taleb, Katibat Ahrar Jable, Katibat Omar bin al-Khattab, Katibat Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Katibat Qawafel al-Shuhada, Katibat Ansar al-Haqq

5 groups in Ariha and Jebel al-Zawiya (south-central Idleb Governorate): Katibat Ibad al-Rahman, Fawares al-Sunna, Katibat Rijal Allah, Katibat Abu Dujana, Katibat Sariya al-Jebel

9 groups in the northern Idleb Governorate: Katibat Ajnad al-Sham, Katibat Abu Talha al-Ansari, Katibat Jaber bin Abdullah, Katibat Said bin Zayed, Katibat Saad bin Moadh, Katibat Ahfad Ali bin Abi Taleb, Abu al-Darda, Ahbab al-Rasoul, al-Katiba al-Khudra

17 groups the south-eastern Idleb Governorate: Katibat Abdullah bin Amer, Katibat al-Aqsa, Katibat al-Mujahedin, Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Iman, Bayareq al-Islam, Saham al-Layl, Katibat al-Hussein, Katibat al-Qaaqaa, Katibat al-Ansar, Katibat al-Furqan, Katibat al-Ahwaz, Katibat Riyah al-Jenna, Katibat Khaled bin al-Walid, al-Kharsa, al-Murabitin ala al-Din, Katibat Hamza Sayyed al-Shuhada, Katibat al-Shahid Youssef Yassin

1 group in the Deraa Governorate: Katibat al-Yarmouk

7 groups in the Jazira region (north-east Syria): Katibat al-Meqdad bin al-Aswad, Katibat Ahrar al-Jazira, Katibat Tel Homeis, Katibat al-Qadisiya, Abu Muhajer, Moussa bin Noseir, Katibat Ali bin Abi Taleb

As is clear from the figures provided above, most of these factions are concentrated in the Idleb (31) and Hama (22) governorates. These areas of northwestern Syria are the Ahrar al-Sham heartland, but they are also home to many other large rebel factions, including Alwiya Suqour al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nosra, Shuhada Suriya, and others. Paradoxically, therefore, Ahrar al-Sham is but one powerful force among many in the area where it is strongest.

The number of brigades alone cannot, of course, measure the group's actual strength on the ground. Some subfactions are larger and more active others. For example, Ahrar al-Sham has listed only five member brigades in the Aleppo region, but it forms an important part of the insurgency there. One Ahrar al-Sham group in particular, Katibat al-Shahba, is very active. Some groups from neighboring governorates have also moved to the Aleppo frontline.

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya

In January 2013, Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham announced the creation of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, a new group formed by itself and three other SIF members: Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya of Aleppo, and the smaller groups Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya in Idleb, and Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila in Damascus. These organizations were completely merged, with all 83 subfactions of Ahrar al-Sham transferred to the new group. However, the new movement will still be headed by Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, the Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham leader, and it seems that Ahrar al-Sham has more or less absorbed the three smaller groups.

2. LIWA AL-HAQQ

"The Truth Division"

Size and influence: Medium

Area of operations: Homs

The central Syrian governorate of Homs has been one of the main battlegrounds of the Syrian civil war. It is both a strategic communications hub and a religiously mixed area, where sectarian conflict blossomed early on. Despite this, Syria's main Islamist groups have been strangely absent from the area. The reason is, most likely, that Homs was such an early starter in the armed insurgency, allowing local groups, like Kataeb al-Farouq and Katibat al-Ansar to fill a niche that Jabhat al-Nosra and Ahrar al-Sham could otherwise have slipped into. Only in late 2012 did these two groups begin to become seriously active in the Homs region.

Creation of Liwa al-Haqq

After the brutal government invasion of the Baba Amr neighborhood in spring 2012, there were several attempts to unify the rebel forces in Homs. The Homs Revolutionaries' Union (*ittihad thuwwar homs*) was born in May 2012, gathering many Islamist factions, including some that would later join Liwa al-Haqq. Eventually, it transformed into a militia among the others, with an armed wing called al-Murabitoun.¹⁵⁹ On August 11, 2012, a group of Islamist-leaning brigades

in Homs formed Liwa al-Haqq. It originally contained four groups, although these branched out into many more subfactions.¹⁶⁰ The Liwa al-Haqq leader Abu Rateb describes its creation as a development of the Homs Revolutionaries' Union, and as a step towards further unity.¹⁶¹

Since then, Liwa al-Haqq has been growing slowly but surely, supported by donations from individual supporters and Islamist charities.¹⁶² It is now the second-largest faction in Homs, after Kataeb al-Farouq, although the insurgent scene in Homs is extremely divided. Clashes between opposition groups remain rare, but a government siege of rebellious neighborhoods in Homs City, has contributed to the divisions. Some groups are based in the countryside surrounding Homs, while others have been trapped inside the city.¹⁶³

Member factions and ideology

In late February 2013, Liwa al-Haqq included the following ten groups: Katibat al-Siddiq, Katibat al-Furati, Katibat al-Huda, Katibat al-Naser li-Din Allah, Katibat Sebaa al-Birr, Katibat Shuhada Baba Amr, Kataeb Atbaa al-Rasoul, Katibat al-Ansar, Kataeb al-Bara, Katibat al-Bara bin Malek, and Katibat Seif Allah.¹⁶⁴ Together, they control "a few thousand fighters".¹⁶⁵ All of these groups portray themselves as Islamist, but many have their roots in older FSA factions, and their use of religious rhetoric varies considerably. According to Abu Rateb, Liwa al-Haqq is open to any group that fulfills basic demands of decency and morals.¹⁶⁶

One leading member, Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, explains that, uniquely among the SIF factions, Liwa al-Haqq is not in fact a salafi group. It is Islamist, but the member factions belong to many different Islamic schools of thought: "Some people are salafis, some are Sufi, some are even Ikhwani, and Liwa al-Haqq is a combination of all of these currents. We have battalions which are purely salafi or Sufi." He disputes the characterization of the group as radical or extremist: "The spectrum really ranges from average conservatives and Sufis, and all the way to salafi-jihadis. We are definitely not a single stripe of opinion. We became popular because we were seen as *ibn al-balad*, people from the area." Abu Ezzeddin claims that this is a reason for the success of Liwa al-Haqq in Homs, and says that "the diversity in terms of ideology has been put aside, while the siege of Homs has also brought fighters together."

He also points out that, regardless of what ideological doctrine a certain organization propagates, the majority of fighters on the ground are "just conservative

Muslims who, due to the situation, have drawn closer to their religion".¹⁶⁷

Katibat al-Ansar

Abu Ezzeddin is a member of Katibat al-Ansar ("The Supporters' Brigade"), a salafi faction, which, he says, is the single largest group in Homs City. Judging from reports in the news media, rebel statements and lists of claimed attacks, this does not seem implausible. Katibat al-Ansar certainly seems to be among the leading groups within Liwa al-Haqq.

The group was formed in Homs in March 2012, after the Baba Amr fighting. It quickly distinguished itself from the rebel mainstream for the stridently religious tone of its propaganda material. According to Abu Ezzeddin, Katibat al-Ansar also stands out among the rebel factions in Homs for its high percentage of university students and professionals with a middle class background, many of whom had been activists and leaders in the early non-violent protest movement in Homs. After the Baba Amr offensive in February 2012, many were forced to flee their neighborhoods to the Old City of Homs, where they joined up with local activists. It was at this point that Katibat al-Ansar was created. Inhabitants of the Old City eventually became a majority within the group.¹⁶⁸

The main body of Katibat al-Ansar remains based inside the Old City of Homs, which is now encircled by the Syrian army. It also has affiliate factions outside of the city, like in Quseir on the Lebanese border, in the Qalamoun area north of Damascus, and as far away as in Palmyra, deep in the eastern desert.¹⁶⁹

In May 2012, Abu Ali al-Ansari, Katibat al-Ansar's military leader, was reported to have died in combat.¹⁷⁰ According to the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, he had been a member of Fath al-Islam, a shadowy jihadi group created in Lebanon in 2006,¹⁷¹ but there is no corroborating evidence for this claim, and it is denied as "totally false" by the group's representative, Abu Ezzeddin. The current leader of Katibat al-Ansar goes by the name Abu Azzam al-Ansari.¹⁷²

Other Liwa al-Haqq factions

Another major Liwa al-Haqq faction is Kataeb Atbaa al-Rasoul ("The Followers of the Prophet Brigade"). It was formed very early on in the uprising, and registered some of its websites and Internet accounts already around July 2011. Its core is the original Katibat Atbaa al-Rasoul unit, described as the "leadership brigade", which is based in the old city of Homs. It has since added at least four other subsidiaries, namely

Katibat Abdullah bin Massoud (Homs), Katibat Ansar al-Haqq (eastern Damascus suburbs),¹⁷³ Sariyat Tareq Abu Farhan (northern Homs countryside), and Sariyat Saim Abu Hamad (Homs countryside).¹⁷⁴

Another quite visible Liwa al-Haqq group is Katibat al-Furati ("The Furati [i.e. from the Euphrates] Brigade"). It is named for Mahmoud Abdellatif, a.k.a. Sheikh Mahmoud al-Furati, a young religious scholar from a military family in the Bab al-Sabaa district in Homs. He was an early leader within the armed movement in Homs. Two of his brothers and his father – a brigadier general from Deir al-Zor, named Abdellatif Ibrahim Abdelghani – were arrested for aiding the opposition in July 2011.¹⁷⁵ Mahmoud al-Furati himself was killed by sniper fire in March 2012, at the age of 25, while leading his brigade in Homs.¹⁷⁶

Another Liwa al-Haqq member group, Katibat al-Bara bin Malek, drew media attention when it first appeared in a video statement in February 2012, with black al-Qaida-style flags in the background. It then proclaimed itself "the first martyrdom brigade" of the FSA.¹⁷⁷ Such open use of jihadi symbols and rhetoric was rare within the armed opposition at the time, but since then, it has become quite widespread.

Leadership

Liwa al-Haqq is led by a man known as Sheikh Abu Rateb. In contrast to the secretive leaders of many salafi armed groups in Syria, Abu Rateb issues statements via the Liwa al-Haqq websites, appears in video recordings and interviews, and holds sermons in the famous Khaled ibn al-Walid mosque, in the rebel-controlled Khalidiya neighborhood of Homs. Before the uprising, Abu Rateb worked in business, and was not known as a political leader.¹⁷⁸

The Liwa al-Haqq military wing is headed by Abderahman Suweis, a 47-year old former paratrooper officer in the Syrian armed forces (a major or colonel, depending on the source). Suweis was arrested while serving in Lebanon in 1999, accused of membership in the outlawed Islamist group Hezb al-Tahrir.¹⁷⁹ He spent eleven years in prison, and was released in an amnesty at the start of the uprising in 2011.

Some leaders of Liwa al-Haqq's member factions also appear publicly. They include Raed al-Jouri, head of Katibat Shuhada Baba Amr, one of the most well-known and active Liwa al-Haqq groups;¹⁸⁰ and 1st Lt. Mohammed Rajab of Katibat Seif Allah, a group in the Houla area northwest of Homs that recently joined Liwa al-Haqq.¹⁸¹

The leadership of Liwa al-Haqq is made up of representatives from all member factions, according to the head of its political office, Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari. The group's leaders are mostly inside Homs, but some work with their brigades in the surrounding countryside, or even outside Syria. "People have different tasks depending on where they are, what they can do, and where they can move. We have people inside the Old City, in the rural area around Homs, in a center in northern Syria, and even some representatives in regional countries, like Turkey, Lebanon and the Gulf."¹⁸²

3. HAKARAT AL-FAJR AL-ISLAMIYA

"The Islamic Dawn Movement"

Size and influence: Medium

Area of operations: Aleppo

(Merged into Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya in January 2013)

Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya seems to have formed in 2012 in Aleppo. A Syrian activist who has worked with rebels in the city describes it as a tightly knit salafi group, "small in numbers, but important in action".¹⁸³ It has made no attempt to hide its strict salafi inclination, and has been described as one of the more hardline Islamist militant factions in Syria.¹⁸⁴

It does not appear to rely much on foreign fighters. Judging from the frequent reports of "martyrs" on the Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya website, almost all members who died in 2012 were native Syrians (most of them from Aleppo). The rare reports of foreign fighters in Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya ranks included a Syrian-Kuwaiti man who died in December 2012, and a Saudi who was killed fighting for the group in November 2012.

Leadership

According to the Syrian activist, the Harakat al-Fajr leadership has its roots among Syrian Islamists formerly incarcerated in Seidnaia, a political prison outside Damascus. Not all of them are from Aleppo.¹⁸⁵ However, little is known about these men, and the group has never named its leader.¹⁸⁶

The only leading member that has been publicly identified is "Sheikh Abu Hamza", the commander of Katibat Jund al-Rahman, a subfaction based in Aleppo City. Videos released by Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya show Abu Hamza preaching in mosques in Aleppo,¹⁸⁷ and he appeared in the December 21, 2012 statement that announced the creation of the SIF. In late January 2013, he read the statement that declared the creation of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya.¹⁸⁸

Subfactions

In Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya's "Statement No. 7", first posted on September 30 2012, and reposted again on November 1, the group described its structure and explained the geographical distribution of its 19 member brigades:

6 groups in Aleppo City: Katibat Suyouf al-Sunna, Katibat Abul-Zubeir, Katibat Jund al-Rahman, Katibat al-Abbas, Sariya Hudheifa bin al-Yaman, Katibat Rayat al-Haqq

4 groups in the northern Aleppo countryside: Katibat Abu Hudheifa, Katibat al-Aqsa, Sariyat Abu Abdullah lil-Mahamm al-Khassa

2 groups on the western outskirts of Aleppo City: Katibat Abu Islam, Katibat Nuseiba al-Ansaria.

2 groups in the western Aleppo countryside: Katibat Abul-Hassan, Katibat Ezz al-Sham

1 group in the eastern Aleppo countryside: Tajammou Jund al-Islam (see below).

4 groups in the Idlib countryside: Katibat al-Bara bin Malek, Katibat Suqour al-Sunna, Katibat Suyouf Allah, Katibat Rijal Allah ¹⁸⁹

Tajammou Jund al-Islam: In early October 2012, a number of Islamist armed brigades and civilian groups in and around al-Bab, east of Aleppo, merged their organizations to create a movement called Tajammou Jund al-Islam ("The Gathering of Islam's Soldiers").¹⁹⁰ Jund al-Islam openly declares its allegiance to Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, but works under a different name, in towns like al-Bab, Qabasiya, and Taaneh.¹⁹¹

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya

In January 2013, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya announced that it had merged into a new group, called Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, within the SIF framework. In a statement, it said that it will "begin a new page in Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, with a jihad that will not end until the word of God is held highest." A final statement eulogized the martyrs who had fallen under the Harakat al-Fajr banner, saying that this was the most appropriate way to honor the group's decision to dissolve itself as a separate entity.¹⁹²

4. JAMAAT AL-TALIAA AL-ISLAMIYA

"The Islamic Vanguard Group"

Size and influence: Small

Area of operations: Binnish, Idlib countryside

(Merged into Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya in January 2013)

Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya formed out of an Islamist network in Binnish in the Idlib Governorate. This small,

rural town is strategically situated on the road connecting the cities of Aleppo and Idlib, and close to what was until recently Syria's largest helicopter base, at Taftanaz.

The Idlib countryside is overwhelmingly Sunni, but two of Syria's rare Twelver Shia villages, Fouaa and Kafraya, are located in the area near Binnish and Taftanaz. Almost alone in the region, these two villages support the regime. To avoid sectarian bloodletting, local elders and militant commanders negotiated a truce with the army in 2012, according to which Binnish excused itself from the uprising. Intermittent bouts of sniper fire and kidnappings continued to take place, from both sides, but the deal spared Binnish some of the destruction meted out to neighboring Taftanaz. The two Shia villages have in turn avoided the devastating consequences of an all-out conflict with their Sunni environment.¹⁹³

Katibat al-Shahid Ahmed Assaf

Despite the truce deal, fighters from Binnish have long formed an important part of the Idlib insurgency, through a group known as Katibat al-Shahid Ahmed Assaf.¹⁹⁴ This organization was initially part of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, but left it to work independently. It kept Ahrar al-Sham's distinctive logotype design, simply replacing the words "Ahrar al-Sham" with its own name.

Later in 2012, Katibat al-Shahid Ahmed Assaf formed its own umbrella organization, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamia. The Ahmed Assaf group appeared to be its main component, but Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamia also included at least three other militias in the Idlib Governorate: Katibat al-Ansar and Katibat Shuhada Seidnaia, which both seemed to be based in or around Binnish, and Sariyat Ahmed Yassin, which is active near Maarat al-Nouman.¹⁹⁵ While Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya has mainly been fighting in the Idlib Governorate, at least one member of Katibat al-Shahid Ahmed Assaf was killed fighting in Aleppo in late 2012, and brought back to Binnish to be buried.¹⁹⁶

Taftanaz and the end of the Binnish truce

Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya reaped its greatest victory in January 2013, when it participated in a joint attack on the Taftanaz airfield, alongside its SIF allies and other Islamist factions. Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya was well rewarded for its participation: in a video interview after the operation, its "military emir", Abu Jamil al-Souri, was shown driving off in a car loaded with arms captured at the base.¹⁹⁷

The fall of the Taftanaz airfield severely restricts the Assad regime's ability to resupply isolated bases

and towns in the Idlib-Aleppo-Hama region, and it represented an important victory for the opposition. It also appears to have had consequences for the Binnish-Fouaa truce arrangement, which collapsed in the following month. In mid-February, a large group of Shia civilians seem to have been kidnapped by rebels; pro-regime fighters from of Fouaa and Kafraya then retaliated by kidnapping even greater numbers of civilians from Sunni towns in the area.¹⁹⁸ Local insurgent groups responded with threats to raze the Shia villages and kill their inhabitants. One FSA faction stated that unless all female hostages were released, "we will not spare a child, woman, or old man among you".¹⁹⁹

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya

In late January 2013, Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya rejoined its old allies in Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham and two other SIF factions. Together, they formed a new bloc within the SIF, to be called Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya. The Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya umbrella was dissolved into the larger group. Its member groups remain individually active as subfactions Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya. Katibat al-Shahid Ahmed Assaf posted pictures of the February 1 Friday demonstration in Binnish, where a small group of demonstrators held up placards supportive of the new group.²⁰⁰

5. KATAEB ANSAR AL-SHAM

"The Supporters of al-Sham Brigades"

Size and influence: Medium

Area of operations: Northern Latakia/North-Western Idlib

Latakia and Tartous are the only two Syrian governorates to be populated mostly by Alawites, and the mountainous countryside has been strongly supportive of the regime during the uprising. The coastal cities of Latakia, Tartous and Baniyas are religiously mixed, but Sunni neighborhoods are firmly controlled by the army and its allied Alawite militias. In northern Latakia, however, there is a Sunni-populated area known as Jabal al-Akrad, or "Mountain of the Kurds" (despite the name, most inhabitants are Arabs).²⁰¹

In mid-2012, Sunni insurgents flowed into Jabal al-Akrad from the Idlib Governorate and across the Turkish border, to support local fighters. They seized control over several Sunni villages, and battles have since rolled back and forth. The rebels have failed to advance decisively into Alawite territory, but the regime also appears incapable of dislodging the rebels

from Sunni areas along the border. Recently, fighting raged in al-Haffa, a Sunni town to the north of al-Qardaha, the Assad family's home village.

Ansar al-Sham

Kataeb Ansar al-Sham presents itself as an organization "spread across the soil of the occupied Syrian homeland",²⁰² but the vast majority of its fighters are located in the Jabal al-Akrad region of Latakia. Ansar al-Sham units are also active along the road that runs from Latakia past the northern edge of the mountains, towards the Syrian interior. It connects the regime strongholds on the coast with Idlib and Aleppo. One of the Ansar al-Sham factions in this area is Katibat Jawhar Dudayif, formed by Cpt. Mohammed Abdi, and composed of several battalions. It is named for the Chechen rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev (1944-1996).²⁰³ Another unit, Katibat Omar bin al-Khattab, is active in the Jisr al-Shughour area, a communications hub that straddles the Latakia-Aleppo road; it has used remotely detonated bombs to disrupt government control over the area.²⁰⁴

The largest Ansar al-Sham operation so far appears to have been the capture of a government outpost near the Turkish border called Burj al-Dimous. Five different Ansar al-Sham brigades took part in the attack, alongside units from other rebel groups, such as Katibat Ansar Souriya.²⁰⁵

Kataeb Ansar al-Sham has also cooperated with other rebel factions in or near its own area of operations. Before the creation of the SIF, it conducted joint training sessions with Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya.²⁰⁶

Like many other Islamist rebel groups, Ansar al-Sham has increasingly moved into civilian affairs, attempting to build support and provide order after the collapse of Syria's central government. It has formed a humanitarian wing, Haiat Ansar al-Sham lil-Ighatha. It is used not only to help the needy, but also to market the group, which keeps the cameras running while holding Quran classes, and distributing food and provisions to refugees.²⁰⁷ Among the SIF factions, only Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya seem to have given the same level of attention to humanitarian affairs.

Member factions

The leaders of Ansar al-Sham are not known by name, but the group appears to have been founded by members of a Latakia-based brigade, Katibat Zeid bin Haritha, which is still part of Ansar al-Sham.²⁰⁸ In September 2012, Ansar al-Sham's member units were listed as follows:

11 groups in Latakia: Katibat Zeid bin Haritha, Katibat Suqour al-Ladhiqiya, Katibat Asad al-Sunna, Katibat Saif al-Islam, Katibat Salaheddin, Katibat al-Tawhid, Katibat al-Quwat al-Khassa, Katibat al-Shuhada, Katibat Jawhar Dudayif, Katibat Ahfad Mohammed al-Fateh, Katibat Abu Obeida bin al-Jarrah.

3 groups in Idleb: Katibat Aisha Umm al-Muminin, Katibat Moussab bin Omeir, Katibat Omar bin al-Khattab.²⁰⁹

1 group in Aleppo: Saraya al-Majd.

Ideology and clerical support

Despite its membership in the SIF and a generally Islamist tone in its propaganda, Ansar al-Sham seems to have produced very few clear ideological statements. Its publicly declared goals are to "raise the word of God, liberate Syria, and overthrow Bashar al-Assad's shameless regime". Its slogan is "victory or martyrdom".²¹⁰

Member factions are made up by a mixed bunch of fighters: defected soldiers, ragtag bands of armed locals, and fighters in flamboyant salafi-style beards and dress. Some groups have a more Islamist vocabulary, while others haphazardly combine salafi rhetoric with nationalist and populist slogans.

In autumn 2012, Ansar al-Sham hosted the influential jihadi theologian Abu Basir al-Tartousi on a visit to northern Latakia.²¹¹ This prompted speculation in the British media that Abu Basir – formerly based in London – is in fact the head of Ansar al-Sham, but this is untrue. Abu Basir has collaborated with several different groups, and he does not seem to enjoy any special ties to Ansar al-Sham. According to an official refutation by his spokesperson, "[t]he Sheikh is not known to have formed or led any group in Syria, he is known as simply a servant and an adviser to all the heroic rebels".²¹²

Ansar al-Islam has also produced videos that show how its members reverently receive Khaled al-Kindou, an exiled Islamic preacher from the coastal city of Baniyas, on his first visit to Syria in three decades. Kindou is a member of the League of Syrian Scholars, a religious association that is informally aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹³ As with Abu Basir al-Tartousi, Kindou simply seems to have relied on Ansar al-Sham to bring him across the border and give him a tour of the frontlines; there is nothing to indicate that he plays a role in its leadership.

6. KATIBAT MOUSSAAB BIN OMEIR

"The Moussaab bin Omeir Brigade"

Size and influence: Small

Area of operations: Maskana, Aleppo countryside

Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir, named for a companion of the prophet, is a minor rebel group from Maskana. This is a small town in the rural parts of the eastern Aleppo Governorate, on the southwestern shore of Lake Assad. It has had a twofold strategic significance during the uprising. Not only does Maskana straddle the Raqqa-Aleppo highway; it is also located just north-east of al-Jarrah, a military airfield.

Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir has long been involved in attacks against both al-Jarrah, and another nearby military airfield, Koweiris. In February 2013, the al-Jarrah airfield was finally captured. The operation was led by SIF units, and included fighters from both Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir and Ahrar al-Sham. Several planes were caught on the ground. While it was not a major airport, the loss of al-Jarrah will further undermine Assad's flagging air superiority in northern Syria.²¹⁴

Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir appears to be a small and locally rooted group, although it has declared at least some subfactions: Sariyat al-Ghuraba (emir: Abu Mihjan al-Fadli), Sariyat Usoud al-Sunna (emir: Abu Hussein al-Salafi), Sariyat al-Qassam (former emir: Ezzeddin Suleiman, d. January 1, 2013). It seems possible that Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir is to some extent clan-based, given that these parts of the Aleppo Governorate retain a tribal culture. Some leaders and members of the group use the *nisba* surname "al-Fadli", to signify their belonging to the al-Fudoul tribe.

Originally, the scarce online propaganda of Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir did not portray it as a very strict Islamist faction, although at least some members dressed up in typical salafi style. The group has released only a few videos online, including one clip of members horsing around and playing football while on a break from fighting.²¹⁵ After joining the SIF, Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir has "salafized" its public profile and begun to communicate more actively with the online activist community. For example, it has set up a new Facebook page, and created a new Islamic-looking logotype.²¹⁶

7. JAISH AL-TAWHID

"The Monotheism Army"

Size and influence: Medium?

Area of operations: Deir al-Zor

The Deir al-Zor Governorate in eastern Syria mostly consists of desert, but it is home to a string of Sunni Arab towns along the lush, cultivated banks of the Euphrates, which flows from Syria into Iraq. It is a tribal area, where clan loyalties play a dominant part in local politics, and stretch far beyond the border. During the US occupation of Iraq, Islamists and tribal groups on the Syrian side of the border helped smuggle arms and fighters into Iraq. Since the Syrian conflict erupted, these flows have been reversed.

In December 2012, western Iraq saw renewed protests by the Sunni Arab populations in Ramadi, Falluja and other cities, against the Shia government of Nouri al-Maliki. The reasons are mainly local, but unrest in Syria has contributed to the spike in tension. If an armed uprising should again erupt in western Iraq, as seems probable, the two insurgencies could easily melt into one. Sunni opposition groups on both sides are already linked to each other by ideology, tribal affiliations, and common interests.

Jaish al-Tawhid

Jaish al-Tawhid is one among many Islamist factions active in the Deir al-Zor region, where it has worked alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and other local rebel factions, such as Liwa al-Furqan and Liwa al-Qadisiya in Deir al-Zor. It is difficult to judge its influence in the area, but it does not appear to be among the largest factions.

Older videos produced by the group indicate that it may formerly have been referred to as Kataeb al-Tawhid. In the summer of 2012, it joined the Syria Revolutionaries Front (SRF; for more on this group, refer to the section on Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham).²¹⁷ Several current Jaish al-Tawhid subfactions seem to have joined it at about the same time, probably enticed by the promise of foreign funding for the SRF.

While Jaish al-Tawhid makes every effort to come across as a committed salafi group, and posts pictures of jihadi ideologues like Osama bin Laden and Abdullah Azzam to its Facebook page, its public propaganda does not show much ideological sophistication. The group has probably formed along clan lines to some

extent, although its leadership could of course still include committed salafi activists.

Member factions

Jaish al-Tawhid subfactions are now spread through several towns in the Deir al-Zor region. Liwa Tareq bin Ziyad was formed in August 2012 to unite rebel factions in the countryside west of Deir al-Zor City, under the leadership of Col. Khaled Mahmoud.²¹⁸ Liwa al-Risala is active east of Deir al-Zor, centered in the town of Mayadin, and includes at least one subfaction called Katibat al-Rahba. Liwa al-Mansour was formed in October 2012, in al-Shoeitat in the eastern Deir al-Zor countryside.²¹⁹ Liwa Dhi-Qar also appears to be active in the villages east of Mayadin.

These groups are sometimes further subdivided into smaller factions. Katibat Abul-Qasim²²⁰ and Katibat al-Khulafa al-Rashidin both fight in or around the city of Deir al-Zor, where they have been directed by the Jaish al-Tawhid field commander Abu Abderrahman al-Dimashqi.²²¹ Other groups within the Jaish al-Tawhid framework include Katibat Ahabab al-Mustafa (led by Abul-Moutassem-Billah), Katibat Yezid bin Mouawiyah, and Katibat Aisha Umm al-Mouminin.²²²

8, 9, 10, 11: THE DAMASCUS FACTIONS

8. *Kataeb Suqour al-Islam*

– "The Hawks of Islam Brigades"*

9. *Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila*

– "Fighting Faith Brigades"***

10. *Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa*

– "Special Assignments Battalions"

11. *Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb*

– "Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb Brigade"

Combined size and influence: Small/medium

Area of operations: Damascus & Rif Dimashq Governorates

(* Merged to create *Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb* in February 2013)

(** Merged into *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya* in January 2013)

The Damascus insurgency was a slow starter, but it has grown to become one of the most lethal fronts of the war, surpassing even Homs in numbers killed.²²³ The region is administratively subdivided into two governorates, Damascus (comprising the capital itself) and Rif Dimashq ("Damascus Countryside"), which physically surrounds the Damascus Governorate. In terms of demography and infrastructure, the division is less clear. The city of Damascus has in recent years swelled far beyond the borders of the Damascus Governorate, and enveloped several of

its former suburbs and satellite towns in the Rif Dimashq Governorate.

The agricultural region around the capital is known as al-Ghouta. It was formerly renowned for its lush gardens, dotted with little farms and villages. Rapid urbanization has meant that much of this area is now built-over with drab concrete suburbs and slums, housing migrants from the surrounding countryside and other parts of Syria. While the city center has been spared major fighting, the impoverished, conservative areas of al-Ghouta are a core area of the insurgency.

Beyond al-Ghouta, the Rif Dimashq Governorate contains a number of other Sunni towns, as well as many scattered minority areas. For example, there are Druze and Christian neighborhoods in Qatana and Jdeidet Artouz. The region north of Damascus includes old Christian villages and monasteries. Some other minority areas are of a more recent date, like the post-1948 Palestinian refugee camps in southern Damascus. In the Sayyeda Zeinab area, southeast of the capital, large numbers of Twelver Shia immigrants from Iraq have settled around a shrine that is believed to house the grave of Zeinab, the daughter of Ali bin abi Taleb. Many garrison towns, like Qatana, also have military neighborhoods that are mainly populated by Alawite families.

The rise of Abu Adnan al-Zabadani

Abu Adnan al-Zabadani is a prominent figure within the SIF, as the main leader of its forces in Damascus. According to the very well-informed British-Syrian journalist and researcher Malik al-Abdeh, Abu Adnan's real name is Mohammed Adnan Zeitoun. He is a 29 year old man from Zabadani, close to the Lebanese border.²²⁴ The Zeitoun family includes both members with Islamist sympathies a regime sympathizers. Although Mohammed Zeitoun was born in a mixed marriage, to a Sunni Muslim Syrian father and a Lebanese Shia mother, he embraced salafism at an early age, and in 2008, he crossed the border into Iraq to join the fight against US forces. He was arrested by Syrian intelligence on the way back, and released from Seidnaia Prison in late 2010.

Zeitoun rose to fame in his hometown of Zabadani during the autumn of 2011, when the opposition turned violent. He first gathered a group of around 40 fighters, but his following grew as he demonstrated his capacity as a leader, organizer and military tactician. According to Abdeh, Zeitoun was also "noted for his skilled use of improvised explosive devices", presumably as a result of his time in Iraq.

In January 2012, the Syrian regime was compelled to negotiate a cease-fire with the rebels in Zabadani, the first of its kind during the uprising. Zeitoun – or Abu Adnan al-Zabadani, as he was now known – was able to claim credit for this, further bolstering his reputation as a rebel leader. Around this time, he helped organize the creation of Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb, on January 15, 2012. It was divided into two branches, one in Zabadani, and one in the neighboring town of Madaya. Abu Adnan assumed leadership of the Zabadani branch, which at the time only numbered about 50 members.

Regime forces returned in mid-February, forcing Abu Adnan and his men to flee into the mountains. Despite the harsh winter weather, some crossed over into Lebanon. However, the overstretched regime forces quickly withdrew, allowing the insurgents to seep back into Zabadani. Abu Adnan now began to reorganize his branch of Katibat Hamza, which had grown to about 250 members, into the region's most powerful Islamist faction. "This group is salafi-oriented", explains Malik al-Abdeh. "It only accepts Islamists, or people who pray and are religiously observant. To join, a recruit has to swear an oath of allegiance."

Tajammou Ansar al-Islam fi Qalb al-Sham

In the summer of 2012, a group of Kuwaiti and Qatari Islamists met in Istanbul to organize funding for Syrian rebel groups, but before releasing the funds, they demanded that the insurgents should first unify their ranks. This resulted in a meeting being called in Douma, in the eastern Ghouta region. It gathered seven Islamist-leaning Damascene factions: Liwa al-Islam, Kataeb al-Sahaba, Liwa al-Furqan, Liwa Ahfad al-Rasoul, Kataeb Dar' al-Sham, Liwa al-Habib Mustafa, and Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb.²²⁵ Douma is a stronghold of Liwa al-Islam, one of the most well-known salafi groups in Damascus,²²⁶ and its leader, Zahran Alloush, appears to have been a driving force behind the meeting.

A month later, in August 2012, the seven commanders declared the creation of Tajammou Ansar al-Islam fi Qalb al-Sham ("the Gathering of Islam's Supporters in the Heart of al-Sham", i.e. Damascus), which became the largest Islamist alliance in Damascus. Malik al-Abdeh estimates that at its height in mid/late 2012, the group included some 8,000 or 9,000 fighters.

Despite his young age, Abu Adnan was elected leader (*al-qaid al-amm*) of Tajammou Ansar al-Islam. He remained in eastern Damascus thereafter, coordinating joint operations and appointing leaders and religious

officials to areas under the group's control. Katibat Hamza stayed on in the Zabadani region, commanded by some of Abu Adnan's associates.

During the autumn, personal and political conflicts began to appear among the Damascus Islamists. Zahran Alloush announced that Tajammou Ansar al-Islam had joined the SLF, a nation-wide Islamist alliance, but this was denied by other members of Tajammou Ansar al-Islam. In the end, Liwa al-Islam went into the SLF by itself, while also remaining part of Tajammou Ansar al-Islam.

From there, the cracks widened. A rival Tajammou Ansar al-Islam leader, known as Abu Moadh al-Agha, began putting pressure on Abu Adnan, who in turn began shifting loyal commanders around to retain control over his forces. In November 2012, he appointed a man named Abderrahim to head his old unit, Katibat Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb, and then reassigned the outgoing Katibat Hamza commander, Abu Moussaab, to the leadership of Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa (a small Tajammou Ansar al-Islam faction).²²⁷ At about this time, he also joined the negotiations that would eventually lead to the creation of the SIF.

Kataeb Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb and the SIF

On December 21, the SIF was declared. It included four groups from Damascus. Of these, at least two were linked to Abu Adnan: Katibat Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb and Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa. A third Damascus group, Liwa Suqour al-Islam, also appears to be connected to the Zabadani area.²²⁸ These groups thereby ended their affiliation with Tajammou Ansar al-Islam.

The following day, Abu Adnan was relieved of office by Abu Moadh al-Agha, who had gained the backing of most other member factions. On the same day, Abu Moadh also expelled Liwa al-Islam, thereby cutting two founding factions from Tajammou Ansar al-Islam's membership roster. (Liwa al-Islam remains a member of the SLF, and has not so far approached the SIF.)²²⁹

The reasons for the split remain unclear. Abu Adnan was blamed by Abu Moadh for recent military setbacks, but other factors may have been more important. "My feeling about why Zeitoun was overthrown is that, well, obviously he accepted and encouraged private financiers from the Gulf, but he also resisted pressure", says Malik al-Abdeh. "He made it clear that all decisions would be taken locally, he wouldn't let them impose things from abroad. He actually said that to one financier: 'You can't buy us with money'. This went down well with his followers on the ground, but I imagine it wasn't as popular with the financiers."

After his ouster from the Tajammou Ansar al-Islam leadership, Abu Adnan returned to his stronghold in Zabadani, to reorganize his remaining power base. After a series of meetings with allies and local commanders, Katibat Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb, Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa, and Liwa Suqour al-Islam (all of them now members of the SIF) announced on February 1, 2013, that they had merged their forces into a single organization, Kataeb Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb.²³⁰ The new group is led by Abu Adnan al-Zabadani, who has thereby regained some influence, as the SIF's most important leader in the Damascus region.

The Damascus insurgency, however, remains divided into numerous competing factions. The Islamist scene alone now counts at least five different alliances: the SIF, the SLF, Tajammou Ansar al-Islam, Jabhat al-Asala wal-Tanmiya, Haiat Durou' al-Thawra (i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood), plus Jabhat al-Nosra, and many other independent groups.²³¹

Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila

The fourth SIF faction in the Damascus region, Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila, first announced its existence in September 2012, in a communiqué signed by its media official, Abu Moutassem. Apart from this, the group has made no public statements, and released no videos. It does not show up in news reporting from the Damascus region or elsewhere. It is either very secretive or – more likely – very small.

In its September statement, Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila presented itself as "a front of Islamic fighting brigades" struggling against the "the criminal occupier Noseiri regime". It said at the time that "we were not born out of the Syrian revolution. Rather, what we have announced about ourselves today is an extension of an Islamic jihadi work going back thirty years, or more." This is presumably a reference to the 1979-1982 Islamist uprising in Syria, but the group gave no evidence for this claim. Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila also stated that its goal was "to call for the establishment of an Islamic state, and to work to implement Islamic sharia, so that all may live under it in security and peace", and made clear its opposition to democracy and Western-style elections.²³²

Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila did not join Abu Adnan al-Zabadani and the other Damascus factions in creating Kataeb Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb. Instead, it merged into the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya bloc, which was announced a few days before Kataeb Hamza bin Abdeltuttaleb, in late January 2013. It thereby ended its separate existence, and became one of over a hundred factions within Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

[1] For more on Syria's salafi and jihadi groups, see Aron Lund, "UI Briefing 13: Syrian Jihadism", Swedish Institute for International Affairs, August 2012, ui.se/Files.aspx?f_id=77409; Elisabeth O'Bagy, "Jihad in Syria", Middle East Report 6, Institute for the Study of War, September 2012, understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf; International Crisis Group (ICG), "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition", Middle East Report N° 131, October 2012, crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.aspx; Noman Benotman & Roisin Blake, "Strategic Briefing: Jabhat al-Nusra", Quilliam Foundation, January 2013, quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf.

[2] Please note that this report does not provide a comprehensive list of salafi factions in Syria, and that the groups analyzed are not representative of the insurgency in its entirety, or even of its Islamist wing.

[3] Interestingly, Syrian theologians played an important role in confronting the pro-regime Wahhabi establishment and developing modern salafism into an ideological force that transcended the Saudi Arabian context. They include Nasreddin al-Albani (1914-1999), an Albanian who lived most of his life in Syria, and Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin, who was born in 1938 in Syria's Deraa Governorate.

[4] Real names: Mustafa Kamel Mustafa (Egyptian, b. 1958), Abdelmoneim Mustafa Halima (Syrian, b. 1959), Omar Mahmoud Othman (Jordanian-Palestinian, b. 1960). See Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi-Salafis or Revolutionaries", in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism. Islam's New Religious Movement*, Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 251 ff.

[5] Real name: Issam bin Mohammed bin Taher al-Barqawi, a Jordanian-Palestinian theologian born in Nablus in 2004.

[6] Real name: Ahmed Fadil al-Khalayila, born in Zarqa, Jordan in 1966 and killed by US forces in Iraq in 2006.

[7] For more on the Syrian regime's interaction with non-oppositional Sunni Islamic movements, see Thomas Pierret, "Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria", in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi Books, 2009. I have also benefited from the forthcoming anthology, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Religion, Culture and Society*, edited by Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg.

[8] For a discussion of some of these embryonic jihadi networks, see Nibras Kazimi, *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy*, Hoover Institution Press, 2010.

[9] Kareem Fahim, "Syria's Solidarity With Islamists Ends at Home", *The New York Times*, September 3, 2010, nytimes.com/2010/09/04/world/middleeast/04syria.html.

[10] Yara Bayoumy, "Syria lifts niqab ban, shuts casino, in nod to Sunnis", *Reuters*, April 6, 2011, uk.reuters.com/article/2011/04/06/uk-syria-assad-niqab-idUK-TRE7353SH20110406; "Minister of Awkaf: New Religious Satellite Channel to be Launched Soon", *SANA*, June 23, 2011, sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/23/354428.htm; Phil Sands, "Last roll of dice for only Syrian casino", *The National*, January 5, 2011, thenational.ae/business/travel-tourism/last-roll-of-dice-for-only-syrian-casino.

[11] Malik al-Abdeh, "How I understand the Syrian revolution", *Syria in Transition*, March 1, 2012, syriaintransition.com/2012/03/01/how-i-understand-the-syrian-revolution.

[12] For some reflections on the implosion of Sunni support for the regime, see Aron Lund, "Friends no more – Implications of the Tlass and Fares defections from the Syrian regime", *Olof Palme International Center*, July 13, 2012, palmecenter.se/en/Our-thoughts/News-Articles-Front-Page/120713-Difficult-situation-in-Syria-Analysis-of-the-two-last-defections.

[13] Cecily Hilleary, "QUICKTAKE: Is an Alawite State in Syria's Future?", *Voice of America*, December 20, 2012, middleeast-voices.voanews.com/2012/12/quicktake-is-an-alawite-state-in-syrias-future-32398.

[14] "Syria: Attacks on Religious Sites Raise Tensions", *Human Rights Watch*, January 23, 2013, hrw.org/news/2013/01/23/syria-attacks-religious-sites-raise-tensions.

[15] Neil MacFarquhar and Anonymous, "In Ravaged Syria, Beach Town May Be Loyalists' Last Resort", *The New York Times*, December 22, 2012, nytimes.com/2012/12/23/world/middleeast/syrian-resort-town-is-stronghold-for-alawites.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[16] Abdulrahman Alhaj, *State and Community. The Political Aspirations of Religious Groups in Syria, 2000-2010*, Strategic Research & Communication Centre, UK, 2010.

[17] Roel Meijer, "Introduction", in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism. Islam's New Religious Movement*, Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 13.

[18] Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "How to Start a Battalion (in Five Easy Lessons)", *London Review of Books*, Vol. 35, No. 4, February 21, 2013, lrb.co.uk/v35/n04/ghaith-abdul-ahad/how-to-start-a-battalion-in-five-easy-lessons.

[19] For an example of a group which grew disillusioned with the revolution and simply reverted to farming, after government forces were driven out of its area, see "Beautiful Syria revolt marred by corruption, rebel leader says", *NOW Lebanon/AFP*, February 12, 2013, now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyrialatestnews/beautiful-syria-revolt-marred-by-corruption-rebel-leader-says.

[20] Martin Chulov & Ian Black, "Arms supplies to Syrian rebels dry up amid rivalries and divisions", *The Guardian*, October 10, 2012, guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/10/arms-supplies-syrian-rebels-rivalries.

[21] "al-bayan al-taisi li-jabhat tahrir souriya" (The founding statement of the SLF"), Kataeb al-Farouq website, September 12, 2012, al-farok.com/archives/1037; Syria Liberation Front website, syrialiberationfront.com. The SLF includes Kataeb al-Farouq (mainly Homs and northern Syria), Liwa al-Islam (Damascus), Alwiya Suqour al-Sham (Idlib), Kataeb al-Ansar (Deir al-Zor), and many other smaller factions in Homs and elsewhere. In January 2013, another of Syria's largest factions, the Aleppo-based Liwa al-Tawhid, joined the SLF ("indimam liwa al-tawhid li-jabhat tahrir souriya" ["Liwa al-Tawhid joins the SLF"], Liwa al-Tawhid, January 10, 2013, lewaaltawheed.com/?p=2869).

[22] Interview with Syrian activist involved in rebel financing, late 2012; interview with Syrian Islamist activist, 2013.

[23] Interviews with Syrian Support Group officials including Brian L. Sayers and David W. Fält, 2012.

[24] The pledge is available on syriansupportgroup.org/the-fsa.

[25] "al-majales al-askariya al-thawriya bi-souriya tatawawhad" ("The Revolutionary Military Councils in Syria unite"), Aljazeera, September 29, 2012, aljazeera.net/news/pages/aff8bdf5-d74d-4c41-b044-d75fcf47fb27.

[26] Interview with Syrian activist involved in rebel financing, late 2012.

[27] SJMCC on Facebook, facebook.com/SRGS.Joint.Forces. The SJMCC has appeared under several different names. Many journalists and activists refer to it by the name of its highest command body, the "General Staff" (haiat al-arkan al-amma), and often assume that it is the "General Staff of the FSA". Logotypes on the official SJMCC Facebook account include the name haiat al-arkan al-amma lil-qiyada al-askariya wal-thawriya al-mushtaraka, i.e. "The General Staff of the Joint Military and Revolutionary Leadership". This is not the name under which the group was originally launched. For simplicity's sake, I have used the original name and its abbreviation, SJMCC, in this report.

[28] According to a source close to the Military Councils' foreign support network.

[29] Joint SJMCC and NC statement published on the SJMCC page on Facebook, December 28, 2012, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=460630157317733.

[30] "bayan muzalzal min qaid alwiya suqour al-sham hawla moadh wal-ittilafi" ("Earth-shaking statement from the leader of Alwiya Suqour al-Sham about Moadh and his Coalition"), YouTube clip uploaded by 05425154577, February 2, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=a_1rCxGmUHY.

[31] C. J. Chivers & Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms", The New York Times, February 25, 2013, nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=3&Eliot+Higgins,+More+Background+On+Croatian+Weapons+In+Syria, Brown Moses, February 26, 2013, brown-moses.blogspot.se/2013/02/more-background-on-croatian-weapons-in.html.

[32] "Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime", US Department of

the Treasury, December 11, 2012, treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1797.aspx.

[33] Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin was co-founded and led by Firas al-Absi, alias Abu Mohammed al-Shami. He was a Saudi-born Syrian expat from an Aleppine family, with a long history of involvement in jihadi causes. Under his leadership, the group helped capture the Bab al-Hawwa border crossing with Turkey in the summer of 2012, but it was then forced out by the northern wing of Kataeb al-Farouq, a large Islamist network within the SLF, which enjoys some level of Turkish government patronage. During this dispute, Absi was kidnapped by unknown gunmen, and executed on September 3. Kataeb al-Farouq were widely blamed for the assassination, and criticized within the Syrian Islamist movement. On January 9, the Idlib commander of Kataeb al-Farouq's northern wing, Thaar Waqqas (alias Abu Ali Sarmada), was killed in apparent retaliation. Media and opposition sources blamed Jabhat al-Nusra, but the jihadi group denied responsibility and clarified that Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin is an independent faction. Jabhat al-Nusra instead offered to mediate between Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin and Kataeb al-Farouq, urging both groups to lay their differences aside. — See Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Syria: the foreign fighters joining the war against Bashar al-Assad", The Guardian, September 23, 2012, guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/23/syria-foreign-fighters-joining-war; "al-shahid al-batal thaer waqqas qaid katibat farouq al-shamal fi mohafazat idlib" ("The hero martyr Thaar Waqqas, leader of Katibat Farouq al-Shamal in the Idlib Governorate"), Kataeb al-Farouq website, January 9, 2013, al-farok.com/archives/2167; Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Turf war feared after Syrian rebel leader killed", Reuters, January 11, 2013, reuters.com/article/2013/01/11/us-syria-crisis-assassination-idUSBRE90A07N20130111; Aaron Y. Zelin, "New statement from Jabhat al-Nusra: 'Press Release #4: Denying Killing the Commander of Kataib al-Faruq'", Jihadology, January 12, 2013, jihadology.net/2013/01/12/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nusra-press-release-4-denying-killing-the-commander-of-kataib-al-faruq.

[34] Aron Lund, "Swedes, jihadis & anti-air missiles in northern Syria", Syria Comment, December 18, 2012, joshualandis.com/blog/?p=17077.

[35] Radwan Mortada, "Khaled Mahmoud: A Prisoner in Lebanon Turns Emir in Syria", al-Akhbar, January 4, 2013, english.al-akhbar.com/node/14562; Washington Post, January 26, 2013, washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/closer-ties-emerge-between-sunni-militants-from-lebanon-and-syria-officials-say/2013/01/26/451f0bec-66f9-11e2-9e1b-07db1d2ccd5b_story.html. This group should not be confused with the mid-00s jihadi organization called Jund al-Sham.

[36] For more on Fath al-Islam's activity during the Syrian uprising, see Aron Lund, "UI Briefing 13: Syrian Jihadism", Swedish Institute for International Affairs, August 2012, ui.se/Files.aspx?f_id=77409; Aron Lund, "Holy Warriors", Foreign Policy, October 15, 2012, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/15/holy_warriors?page=full.

[37] Interview with Abdulrahman Alhaj, Skype, January 2013.

[38] "rai el-sheikh 'adnan el-arour bi-djabhat el-nusra" ("The opinion of Sheikh Adnan al-Arou on Jabhat al-Nusra"), YouTube clip uploaded by shada alhuria, October 7, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvLmoT9IETU>.

[39] Sheikh Arour has repeatedly denied that he is opposed to Jabhat al-Nosra as a faction, saying he is simply opposed to unnamed "extremist takfiris" and infiltrators who may tarnish the reputation of the revolution. "I personally have not criticized any brigade, I criticize splintering and extremism", he said in November 2012. ("al-sheikh adnan al-arour yanfi ta'ni-hi bi-jabhat al-nosra" ("Sheikh Adnan al-Arour denies his criticism of Jabhat al-Nosra"), YouTube clip uploaded by Shada alhuria, November 5, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDAn_m2wKFw).

[40] "i'lan tashkil al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya" ("Announcement of the creation of the Syrian Islamic Front"), YouTube clip uploaded by almrds, December 22, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=YySOTYEwKLw.

[41] The original statement does not clarify that all four of Kataeb Suqour al-Islam, Kataeb al-Iman al-Muqatila, Saraya al-Mahamm al-Khassa, and Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb were active in the Damascus region. I have slightly adjusted the text, to make this obvious.

[42] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013. On the subject of Jabhat al-Nosra, he added: "Yes, we invited them. We invited everybody, they were one of the factions. It is a fundamental part of our policy to open communication channels with all groups. Our relationship with the Free Army is excellent too."

[43] Interview with an anonymous Syrian source. See note 33, on the Majlis Shoura al-Mujahedin/Kataeb al-Farouq dispute.

[44] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[45] The Suqour al-Sham faction is called Liwa Dawoud (facebook.com/Sokour.Alsham.Lewaa.Dawood). For more on the Taftanaz battle, see Andrew J. Tabler, Jeffrey White, & Aaron Y. Zelin, "Fallout from the Fall of Taftanaz", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 14, 2013, washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fallout-from-the-fall-of-taftanaz.

[46] The charter was posted at facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/136004689894218 on January 20, 2013, with a link leading to docs.google.com/document/d/1fACS9tltlmZDmOmIB1ZtiJLZaAckWOT0yhtRwoskgIE/edit. An unofficial English translation is available at "The Charter of the Syrian Islamic Front", Abu Jamajem, January 29, 2013, abujamajem.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/the-charter-of-the-syrian-islamic-front.

[47] Shumoukh al-Islam, shamikh1.info.

[48] Ansar al-Mujahedin, as-ansar.com.

[49] Jabhat al-Nosra, jalnosra.com.

[50] Thread started by Abu Badr Naser, "nurid tawdihan an al-jamaat al-muqatila halian fi souriya" ("We want clarification on the groups that are currently fighting in Syria"), Ansar al-Mujahedin, May 8, 2012, as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=61128

[51] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, February 28, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/29567844404; Syrian Islamic

Front on Ask.fm, January 26, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/23389817140; Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22824411444; Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22823966772

[52] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22824495156

[53] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[54] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[55] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 17, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22388417076.

[56] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[57] "alwia wa-kataeb muqatila tatawahhad fi 'al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya" ("Fighting divisions and brigades unite in the Syrian Islamic Front"), al-Badil, January 6, 2013, al-badeel.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=584:-q-q-&catid=38:reports&Itemid=398.

[58] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[59] SIF Charter, docs.google.com/document/d/1fACS9tltlmZDmOmIB1ZtiJLZaAckWOT0yhtRwoskgIE/edit.

[60] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 21, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22389103668.

[61] Post on Facebook by Mohammed Talal Bazerbashi (Abu Abderrahman al-Souri), January 9, 2013, facebook.com/talal.bazerbashe/posts/196084403863254.

[62] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 23, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/23195717940.

[63] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22827230260.

[64] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22882261556.

[65] Tweet by Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, January 31, 2013, twitter.com/aboobaid2/status/296785368638951426.

[66] Syrian Islamic Front Political Bureau statement, February 6, 2013, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=295350787257010; Arabic original: "al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya || bayan al-maktab al-siyasi" ("SIF || Political Bureau statement"), February 6, 2013, ahraralsham.com/?p=119.

[67] Sinan Abu Mazer, "Syria opposition says it was target of Turkey bus blast", Reuters, February 12, 2013, reuters.com.

com/article/2013/02/12/us-syria-crisis-turkey-idUS-BRE91B19M20130212.

[68] "bayan al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya hawla hadithat al-tafjir allati waqqa'at fi ma'abar bab al-hawwa al-hudoudi" ("Statement of the SIF about the explosion incident that took place at the Bab al-Hawwa border crossing"), SIF statement, February 13, 2013, al-ahraralsham.com/?p=232.

[69] Statement by the SIF Political Bureau, January 16, 2013, available at the al-Jaish al-Souri al-Hurr web forum, syrianarmy-free.com/vb/showthread.php?t=32328

[70] Many or most of the suicide attackers sent by Jabhat al-Nosra are allegedly foreign jihadi volunteers. (Interview with a Syrian activist who prefers to remain anonymous, 2012.)

[71] "kataeb ahrar al-sham/nasf hajez al-salam – amaliya naw'iya" ("Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham/Blowing up the Salam Checkpoint – Qualitative operation"), YouTube clip uploaded by user syria005, June 8, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=RFCV9P90ak4. This video shows a moving car detonating at a government checkpoint in early summer 2012. However, it is not entirely clear that the explosion is in fact the result of a suicide operation. The video subtitles do not identify it as such, and it is possible that the bomb was detonated remotely. A statement allegedly issued by Ahrar al-Sham, which claims credit for the attack on behalf of its Katibat Ansar al-Haqq subfaction, mentions that the car was piloted by remote-control (Statement from the Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham media office, June 7, 2012, available at facebook.com/city.hama/posts/380729221983425). An edited version of the video has added a grainy picture of the alleged suicide bomber, but this clip was released several months later, and not by Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham itself. ("ahrar al-sham aqwa amaliya istishhadiya wa-munaffidh-ha" ("Ahrar al-Sham. The strongest suicide operation and its perpetrator"), YouTube clip uploaded by al-thawra al-souriya didd bashar al-assad manbij, January 11, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=2oZUYahoOI8).

[72] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 17, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22388417076.

[73] For example, Abu Basir opposes suicide attacks on religious grounds (Abu Basir al-Tartousi, "Suspicious of Sin in Martyrdom or Suicide Attacks," Abu Basir al-Tartousi's official website, November 11, 2005, en.altartosi.com/suicide.htm.). This is a controversial position within the salafi-jihadi movement, which takes great pride in "martyrdom operations" and praises their perpetrators as heroic martyrs. Abu Basir has also been very hostile to Jabhat al-Nosra. This sets him apart from the salafi mainstream, including the SIF, and it has caused a series of angry exchanges with rival salafi-jihadi theologians (Aron Lund, "Holier Than Thou: Rival Clerics in the Syrian Jihad", Jamestown Terrorism Monitor, July 16, 2012, jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39615&tx_ttnews[backPid]=26&cHash=a19d11911b763b34f4d3173a18944140; Joas Wagemakers, "Al-Qaida Advises the Arab Spring: Abu Basir's Scrapbook", Jihadica, July 28, 2012, jihadica.com/al-qaida-advises-the-arab-spring-abu-basirs-scrapbook; Cole Bunzel, "Jihadism's Widening Internal Divide: Intellectual Infighting Heats Up", Jihadica, January 2, 2013, jihadica.com/jihadism's-widening-internal-divide-intellectual-infighting-heats-up).

[74] al-Moarada al-Islamiya lil-Nizam al-Souri, facebook.com/moaradaislamiya.

[75] "liqa ma'a al-sheikh abi basir al-tartousi fi 'umq al-aradi al-souriya" ("Meeting with Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartousi deep inside Syrian territory"), YouTube clip uploaded by AlfajrArmy, August 8, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=uJfBkUgkSU8.

[76] "al-sheikh abu basir al-tartousi fi burj al-dimous ma'a al-jesh al-hurr" ("Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartousi with the FSA in Burj al-Dimous"), YouTube clip uploaded by Mohammed al-Rifai, October 19, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=NGwYpBEEjJU.

[77] See photograph on Abu Basir's Facebook site, December 20, 2012, facebook.com/photo.php?pid=1343113&l=49809f9fea&id=187950447913652; Tajammou Kataeb al-Haqq, facebook.com/Battalion.of.right.co.

[78] "Notification regarding recent references in the British 'Daily Telegraph'", PDF document dated October 21, 2012, Abu Basir al-Tartousi's website, abubaseer.bizland.com/hadath/Read/hadath%2093.pdf.

[79] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[80] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22827939124.

[81] Abu Basir al-Tartousi, "malhouzat ala mithaq al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya" ("Remarks on the charter of the Syrian Islamic Front"), facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/272703236190966; docs.google.com/document/d/1S1qqHITm3QfPwTQ7DI-hXQ146Ma6hT0tr2Q3r-Jijxr0/edit.

[82] Iyad Quneibi, "munasahat al-duktour iyad quneibi (nazra fi ithaq al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya)" ("Advice from dr Iyad Quneibi. [A look at the charter of the Syrian Islamic Front]"), facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/412476212165499; docs.google.com/document/d/1Yt1WNWnyQQY4qPaRJ-XFi-a19OnSUPQBfiyY34f6-GBI/edit.

[83] Frank Hvilsom, Morten Skjoldager, Claus Blok Thomsen, "Danskere rejser til Syrien for at tage del i oprør", Politiken, February 18, 2013, politiken.dk/udland/ECE1901925/danskere-rejser-til-syrien-for-at-tage-del-i-oproer.

[84] Guido Stenberg, "Jihadi Salafism and the Shi'is", in Roel Meijer (ed.), Global Salafism. Islam's New Religious Movement, Columbia University Press, 2009.

[85] Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism", in Martin Kramer (ed.), Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution, Westview Press, 1987.

[86] Yaron Friedman, "Ibn Taymiyya's Fatawa against the Nusayri-Alawi Sect", Der Islam, Vol. 82, 2005.

[87] See e.g. Abu Moussaab al-Souri, "durous mustafada min al-tajruba al-jihadiya al-musallaha fi souriya" ("Lessons learned from the armed Jihad ordeal in Syria"), Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, AFGP-2002-600080, Arabic original: ctc.usma.edu/posts/lessons-learned-from-the-jihad-ordeal-in-syria-original, English translation: ctc.usma.edu/posts/lessons-learned-from-the-jihad-ordeal-in-syria-english-translation.

— Abu Moussaab al-Souri's real name is Mustafa Sitt-Maryam Nasar, born in Aleppo in 1958. He is a former member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and its jihadi splinter faction, al-Taliaa al-Moqatila, who later joined the jihad in Afghanistan and collaborated closely with al-Qaida. He was captured in Pakistan in 2005, and later handed over to Syrian authorities. Abu Moussaab was allegedly held by Syria's Military Intelligence Directorate, but some rumors indicated that he was released in early 2011. Since then, little has been heard on the matter. (For a detailed biography of the man and his work, see Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, Hurst Publishers, 2007)

[88] Abul-Mondher al-Chinguetti, fatwa No. 6360, Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, June 11, 2012, tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6360.

[89] Abul-Mondher al-Chinguetti, "hal qital al-noseiriya fard ala al-muslimin" ("Is fighting the Noseiris a duty for the Muslims?"), Markaz al-Maqrizi lil-Dirasat al-Tarikhiya, almaqreze.net/ar/news.php?readmore=1939.

[90] Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manarah al-Bayda Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nusra: 'Fulfillment of the Vow #1'", Jihadology, May 22, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/05/22/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nusra-fulfillment-of-the-vow-1; Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manarah al-Baydah foundation for media production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nusra: 'Fulfillment of the Vow #2'", Jihadology, August 19, 2012, <http://www.jihadology.net/2012/08/19/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-fulfillment-of-the-vow-2%E2%80%B3>.

[91] Aaron Y. Zelin, "New statement from Jabhat al-Nusra: 'Bombing of the Headquarters of the Military Security and Air Force Intelligence in Dayr az-Zor (Deir al-Zour)'", Jihadology, May 20, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/05/20/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nusra-bombing-of-the-headquarters-of-the-military-security-and-air-force-intelligence-in-dayr-az-zur-deir-al-zour/

[92] Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manarah al-Bayda' Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nusra: 'Fulfillment of the Vow #1'", Jihadology, May 22, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/05/22/al-manarah-al-bay-a-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nusra-fulfillment-of-the-vow-1; Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manarah al-Baydah foundation for media production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nusra: 'Fulfillment of the Vow #2'", Jihadology, August 19, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/08/19/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8Da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-fulfillment-of-the-vow-2%E2%80%B3.

[93] This phrase seems to be modelled on a line in an earlier communiqué from Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, which promised that "Muslims and non-Muslims will enjoy the justice of Islam" in the future Islamic state of Syria (yan'am bi-ha al-muslim wa-ghair al-muslim bi-adl al-islam). — Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya statement, November 23, 2012, [facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=371353769620575](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=371353769620575).

[94] "Ahdaf al-Jabha", SIF Charter, docs.google.com/document/d/1fACS9tltlmZDmomlB1ZtiJLZaAckWOT0yhtRwoskgIE/edit.

[95] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22824495156; see also e.g. Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, February 28, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/29566212404.

[96] "ahrar al-sham tatmain sukkan al-yaaqoubia al-masihiyin ba'd tahrir-ha" ("Ahrar al-Sham reassures the Christian inhabitants of al-Yaaqoubiya after its liberation"), YouTube video uploaded by omar alsham, January 28, 2013, [youtube.com/watch?v=zMIhaxuhygo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMIhaxuhygo).

[97] Statement on the Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb Facebook site, December 22, 2012, [facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=405303516216964](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=405303516216964).

[98] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[99] Interview with Molham al-Droubi, member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leadership, e-mail, January 25-26, 2013.

[100] Interview with Abdulrahman Alhaj, Skype, January 2013.

[101] Noman Benotman & Roisin Blake, "Strategic Briefing: Jabhat al-Nusra", Quilliam Foundation, January 2013, quilliam-foundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf —The recent swelling of Jabhat al-Nusra ranks makes it unlikely that these terms are being consistently applied. The more Jabhat al-Nusra grows, the more likely it is that it will have to sacrifice internal cohesion and organizational discipline, and accept the incorporation of local networks en bloc, thereby bringing e.g. regional and tribal loyalties into the group. Such internal divisions are currently concealed by the centralized messaging strategy of its al-Manara al-Beida media wing, but must surely affect the group on the ground.

[102] Interview with a Syrian activist who has been involved with rebel groups in Idlib and Aleppo, January 2013.

[103] For one list of SIF factions and subfactions, see Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Syrian Islamic Front's Order of Battle", al-Wasat, January 22, 2013, thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/syrian-islamic-fronts-order-of-battle. See also Part Three of this report, where the member groups are listed with their subfactions, in so far as this information is available.

[104] [youtube.com/watch?v=ZaYCoCq8Vv4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaYCoCq8Vv4&feature=youtu.be)"indimam katibat al-shahid hassan al-aoud ila kataeb al-bara" ("Katibat al-Shahid Hassan al-Aoud joins Kataeb al-Bara"), YouTube clip uploaded by katebat albaraa, January 18, 2012, [facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/131518353681232](https://www.facebook.com/Islamic.Syrian.Front/posts/131518353681232).

[105] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22824411444.

[106] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[107] Interview with Raphaël Lefèvre, an expert on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, e-mail, November 2012; interview with Syrian activist involved with rebel groups in Idlib, October 2013; interview with Abdulrahman Alhaj, an expert on Syrian Islamism, Skype, January 13, 2012; interview with anonymous source, February 2013.

[108] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[109] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013. Abu Ezzeddin states unequivocally that neither the SIF centrally, nor Liwa al-Haqq as an individual faction, have received any form of state support. As for other member groups, he says he has no insight into their finances.

[110] "al-saudia tamna'u wal-kuwait tad'am jam' al-tabarru'at al-'ashwaiya li-souria" ("Saudi Arabia bans and Kuwait supports spontaneous donations to Syria"), al-Jarida, May 29, 2012, al-jarida.com/2012/05/29/2012495286; "lajnat al-ulema li-nosrat souriya tu'lan iqaf hamlat al-tabarru'at" ("The Ulema Committee to Support Syria announces the end of its donation campaign"), May 28, 2012, al-Muslim, almoslim.net/node/165719.

[111] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 17, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22404115508.

[112] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[113] Interview with Syrian activist, January 2013.

[114] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[115] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22500562484.

[116] Mohammed Talal Bazerbashi on Facebook, facebook.com/talal.bazerbashe.

[117] al-Katiba al-Khudra on Facebook, facebook.com/AlktybaAlkhadraa.

[118] Photo posted by Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham on Facebook, January 10, 2013, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=430559940346583.

[119] Interview with Syrian activist, January 2013. The leadership of Idlib's Liwa al-Tawhid – which bears no relation to the Liwa al-Tawhid group in Aleppo – is dominated by members of the al-Sayyed Issa, a very prominent family in the traditional establishment of Idlib City. It is an independent Islamist group, but may entertain some informal connections to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

[120] Jabhat al-Nosra has followed the same strategy. Ever since its creation in early 2012, it has promoted its own humanitarian work, e.g. through video clips of fighters distributing food and blankets in rebel-held villages. The group now appears

to be heavily involved in bread distribution in Aleppo, where, in November 2011, it apparently helped establish a salafi aid organization known as Haiat al-Shabab al-Muslim ("The Muslim Youth Commission", facebook.com/MuslimYouthCommittee). Haiat al-Shabab al-Muslim now regularly distributes aid in the Aleppo region. It has also set up a subsidised bus company to reestablish a local transport network for civilians in rebel-held areas.

[121] "Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham || el-Dawrat el-shar'iya el-khassa bil-attfal" ("Ahrar el-Sham Brigades || Special sharia classes for kids"), YouTube video uploaded by Ahrar Alsham, August 6, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=P0i4k5D2yr4.

[122] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22567443252.

[123] Qatar Charity, qcharity.com.

[124] IHH, ihh.org.tr.

[125] "haiat ansar al-sham lil-ighatha || tawzi' al-ighatha lil-dakhil" ("Haiat Ansar al-Sham lil-Ighathat || Distributing Provisions in the Interior"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, January 5, 2013 youtube.com/watch?v=zp8afZ4cn8A.

[126] "bayan al-i'lan an harakat ahrar al-sham al-islamiya" ("Announcement of the creation of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya"), YouTube clip uploaded by omar alsham, January 31, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=YciNoYz9EYM.

[127] "khutbat al-eid lil-sheikh abu hamza (harakat al-fajr al-islamiya)" ("Eid speech by Sheikh Abu Hamza [Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya]"), YouTube clip uploaded by AlfajrArmy, October 31, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=k_CBjy9MEOU; "harakat al-fajr al-islamiya - rasail min ard al-ribat" ("Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya - Messages from the land of al-ribat [i.e., frontline garrisons]"), YouTube clip uploaded by AlfajrArmy, November 15, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=DCfHXP5bjpA.

[128] Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya on Facebook, facebook.com/Ahrar.Alsham.Islamic.Movement.

[129] Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya on Twitter, twitter.com/ahraralsham.

[130] Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya website (formerly the Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham website), ahraralsham.com.

[131] Tweet by Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, January 31, 2013, twitter.com/aboobaid2/status/297098820804804608.

[132] Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb, on its official Facebook page, January 28, 2013, facebook.com/KtybtHmztBnbdAlmtilb/posts/151789521640990.

[133] Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb on Facebook, facebook.com/kataeb.hamza.

[134] Statement by Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb, February 14, 2013, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=296901233768632.

[135] Joshua Landis, "Noah Bonsey: 'Liberation Front Represents Mainstream National Militant Alliance'", Syria Comment, February 11, 2013, joshualandis.com/blog/?p=17696.

[136] Interview with Syrian activist, January 2013.

[137] Rania Abouzeid, "TIME Exclusive: Meet the Islamist Militants Fighting Alongside Syria's Rebels", Time Magazine, July 26, 2012, world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels.

[138] Post by Shehab al-Shami to the Ansar al-Mujahedin forum, April 22, 2012, as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=59975.

[139] The rumors probably have their origin in a curious video release from late January 2012, by what may have been an embryonic version of Ahrar al-Sham. In the clip, a banner reads "Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham", and, in smaller print, "Idleb Jabhat al-Nosra". The masked man reading the statement identifies himself as "Cpt. Abdullah Rashid". It is an amateurish production, very different from the semi-professional editing which would distinguish Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham's public releases from early summer onwards. Jabhat al-Nosra had announced its own creation a day earlier, on January 24, but the Idleb video was not published by its official media wing, al-Manara al-Beida, or otherwise promoted by the group. ("al-i'lan an tashkil kataeb ahrar al-sham fi madinat idleb 2012-1-25" ["Announcement of the formation of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham in the city of Idleb, 2012-1-25"], YouTube clip uploaded by bint al-sham, January 27, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=TSDQRuXi7xo). On February 7, the Idleb faction released another video, showing the interrogation of a group of captured policemen. Since then, it has been impossible to track online. There were also other releases around this period using the name Ahrar al-Sham, including a group based in eastern Syria ("al-i'lan an tahskil katibat ahrar al-sham 2012.2.19" ["Announcement on the creation of Katibat Ahrar al-Sham 2012.2.19"], YouTube clip uploaded by bint al-sham, February 21, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=dT3hurPVhSc).

[140] Ahrar al-Sham page on Facebook, now defunct, facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/info.

[141] Herve Bar, "Ahrar al-Sham jihadists emerge from shadows in north Syria", AFP, February 13, 2013, en-maktoob.news.yahoo.com/ahrar-al-sham-jihadists-emerge-shadows-north-syria-174832097.html.

[142] Syrian Islamic Front on Ask.fm, January 19, 2013, ask.fm/SislamicFront/answer/22500562484.

[143] "kataeb ahrar al-sham: kalima bi-munasebat eid al-adha al-mubarak" ("Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham: Speech on the occasion of the blessed Eid al-Adha"), Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham website, October 26, 2012, ahraralsham.com/index.php?page=articles&op=view_articles&id=247.

[144] "kataeb ahrar el-sham mudakhelat el-masoul el-askari alal-jazira" ("Ahrar el-Sham Brigades, interview with the military official on Aljazeera"), YouTube video uploaded by Ahrar Alsham, August 29, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=GKbdwLhvlK4.

[145] Herve Bar, "Ahrar al-Sham jihadists emerge from shadows in north Syria", AFP, February 13, 2013, en-maktoob.news.yahoo.com/ahrar-al-sham-jihadists-emerge-shadows-north-syria-174832097.html.

[146] "istishhad al-qaid al-askari fi katibat salaheddin: abu hamza" ("Martyrdom of the military leader of Katibat Salaheddin: Abu Hamza"), statement by Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, October 11, 2012.

[147] "i'lan insha haykaliya jadida lil-mu'arada el-sourya .. wal-majlis el-watani yatanassal" ("Announcement of the creation of a new military structure for the Syrian opposition ... and the National Council disavows it"), al-Quds al-Arabi, June 4, 2012, alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\04z496.htm&arc=data\2012\06\06-04\04z496.htm; "tasrih sahafi hawla alaqa al-jabha bil-majlis al-watani el-souri" ("Press statement about the relationship between the Front and the Syrian National Council"), Syria Revolutionaries' Front, June 5, 2012, srfront.org/?p=124; Interview with Ahmed Ramadan, Stockholm, August 2012.

[148] "jabhat thuwwar souriya || indimam kataeb ahrar el-sham" ("Syria Revolutionaries' Front || Inclusion of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham"), Syria Revolutionaries' Front, June 4, 2012, srfront.org/?p=130; Statement on Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham Facebook site, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=203116579815588.

[149] Statement from Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham, August 31, 2012, ahraralsham.com/Archive/index.php?page=articles&op=view_articles&id=175.

[150] Neil MacFarquhar & Hwaida Saad, "As Syrian War Drags On, Jihadists Take Bigger Role", The New York Times, July 29, 2012, nytimes.com/2012/07/30/world/middleeast/as-syrian-war-drags-on-jihad-gains-foothold.html.

[151] Interview with a source requesting anonymity, February 2013.

[152] Hezb al-Umma in Syria on Facebook, facebook.com/om-mahSyria.

[153] "al-bayan al-tasisi li-hezb al-umma al-souri" ("Founding statement of the Syrian Hezb al-Umma"), YouTube clip uploaded by ommahsyri, December 28, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=jEBEDcgfa5s.

[154] Interview with Raphaël Lefèvre, e-mail, November 2012.

[155] Erika Solomon, "Insight: Syria rebels see future fight with foreign radicals", Reuters, August 8, 2012, reuters.com/article/2012/08/08/us-syria-crisis-insight-idUSBRE8770BK20120808.

[156] Mike Bruner, "Richard Engel and NBC News team freed from captors in Syria", NBC News, December 18, 2012, world-news.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/12/18/15985279-richard-engel-and-nbc-news-team-freed-from-captors-in-syria?lite.

[157] List transcribed from the Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham website, on January 19, 2013, ahraralsham.com/index.php?page=pages&id=4.

[158] Some of the Ahrar al-Sham brigades in Hama are part of a regional subfaction, known as Liwa al-Iman ("the Faith Division"). This group was also a member of the Syria Liberation Front (SLF), an Islamist alliance to which Ahrar al-Sham's central leadership does not belong. In February 2013, Liwa al-Iman announced its withdrawal from the SLF, and merged into Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya, the successor organization of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham. It is therefore also a part of the SIF. (Statement by Liwa al-Iman, February 5, 2013, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=383225681774215) Note that the Liwa al-Iman Facebook site lists only 13 member brigades: Katibat Salaheddine, Katibat Imadeddin Zengi, Katibat Abil-Fida, Kati-

bat Abu Obeida bin al-Jarrah, Katibat al-Fatihin, Katibat Ansar al-Sunna wal-Sharia, Katibat al-Hamza bin Abdelmutaleb, Katibat al-Zubeir bin al-Awam, Katibat al-Furqan, Katibat al-Qaaqaa, Katibat al-Mulazem Awwal Raid Muqallad, Katibat Tareq bin Ziad, Katibat al-Bara. (Liwa al-Iman on Facebook, January 19, 2013, facebook.com/Allman.Brigade/info.)

[159] For more on the Homs Revolutionaries' Union, see "Middle East Report N° 131: Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition Crisis Group", International Crisis Group, October 12, 2012, crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.aspx; Homs Revolutionaries' Union and al-Murabitoun Facebook site: facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs; For a list of member factions, see facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/319355741472220.

[160] The founding members of Liwa al-Haqq were: Katibat Atbaa al-Rasoul, Katibat al-Ansar, Katibat Shuhada Baba Amr, and Kataeb al-Fath al-Moubin. The last group was itself at this time an alliance of smaller units, namely Katibat al-Sheikh Mahmoud al-Furati, Katibat al-Saqr, Katibat al-Huda, Katibat Siham al-Layl, Katibat Sebaa al-Birr, Katibat Ahrar al-Qalamoun, and Katibat al-Naser li-Din Allah (Liwa al-Haqq founding statement, available on al-Boraq, a webforum connected to the Iraqi Islamic Army, alboraq.info/showthread.php?t=262538).

[161] "kalima li-sheikh abu rateb min qalb masjid sayyed-na khaled ibn al-walid" ("Speech of Sheikh Abu Rateb from the heart of the Our Lord Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque", YouTube clip, uploaded by yousuf916, September 28, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=cCGCYOoisgE.

[162] Most money allegedly comes in the form of gifts from individuals, and Liwa al-Haqq claims not to have accepted any state funding. It will not identify donors, but says it has received occasional donations from the Kuwaiti salafi figure Hajjaj al-Ajami, who is major sponsor of Syrian Islamist groups. (Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.)

[163] Apart from the SIF's Liwa al-Haqq, insurgent groups in the Homs Governorate currently include Liwa Talbisa, Liwa Rijal Allah, Liwa Fajr al-Islam, Kataeb Ahl al-Athar (part of the Jabhat al-Asala wal-Tanmiya, a salafi alliance), Katibat Shuhada Tal-Kalakh, Katibat Mouawiya lil-Maham al-Khassa, Liwa al-Quseir, several subunits of Kataeb al-Farouq, several other small SLF factions which are allied to Kataeb al-Farouq, al-Murabitoun (the armed wing of the Homs Revolutionaries' Union), Firqat al-Farouq al-Mustaqilla, Liwa al-Nasr, Katibat Thuwwar Baba Amr, Harakat al-Tahrir al-Wataniya, the Lebanese jihadis of Jund al-Sham, the SIF's Ahrar al-Sham factions (currently five: Katibat Junoud al-Rahman, Katibat al-Hamra, Katibat Ansar al-Sunna wal-Sharia, Katibat Adnan Oqla, and Katibat Ibad Al-lah), and groups affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood (like Liwa Dar' Ahrar Homs, Liwa Dar' al-Haqq, and Liwa Dar' al-Hudoud), Jabhat al-Nosra, and many others.

[164] Liwa al-Haqq website, checked February 27, 2013, l-al7aq.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13&Itemid=28; "indimam katibat seif allah fil-houla ila liwa al-haqq" ("Katibat Seif Allah in Houla joins Liwa al-Haqq"), YouTube clip uploaded by alhomysy mogahed, February 14, 2013, youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=X1Zpvvg64AM.

[165] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[166] "kalima li-sheikh abu rateb min qalb masjid sayyed-na khaled ibn al-walid" ("Speech of Sheikh Abu Rateb from the heart of the Our Lord Khaled ibn al-Walid Mosque", YouTube clip, uploaded by yousuf916, September 28, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=cCGCYOoisgE.

[167] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[168] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[169] See reporting on l-al7aq.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=67&Itemid=247 and facebook.com/k.alansar, and "liwa al-haqq || indimam saraya al-malhama al-kubra li-katibat al-ansar" ("Liwa al-Haqq || Saraya al-Malhama al-Kubra joins Katibat al-Ansar"), YouTube clip uploaded by ABOALLITH888, September 22, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=QINuDANdklo.

[170] "Shabakat Ansar el-Sham O Katibat el-Ansar Homs al-Shahid Abu Ali al-Ansari" ("The Ansar al-Sham Network: The Ansar Brigade, Homs, the Martyr Abu Ali al-Ansari"), YouTube clip uploaded on May 14, 2012, by kald1981304, youtube.com/watch?v=dfj-o7phSAQ.

[171] Radwan Mortada, "Bilad al-Sham: Jihad's Newest Hot Spot", al-Akhbar, August 6, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/node/10806. For more on Fath al-Islam's role in the Syrian revolution, see Aron Lund, "UI Brief 13: Syrian Jihadism", Swedish Institute for International Affairs, August 2012, ui.se/Files.aspx?fb_id=77409.

[172] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[173] l-al7aq.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=312:2012-12-16-20-14-50&catid=66:2012-10-23-00-17-57&Itemid=246.

[174] Kataeb Atbaa al-Rasoul on Facebook, facebook.com/ktaeb.atbaa.alrassoul/info; "liwa al-haqq||katibat atbaa al-rasoul tashkil katibat ansar al-haqq" ("Liwa al-Haqq || Katibat Atbaa al-Rasoul, creation of Katibat Ansar al-Haqq"), YouTube clip uploaded by alhomysy mogahed, December 16, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=Rwni50mjutA.

[175] "al-shahid mahmoud abdellatif al-fourati" ("The martyr Mahmoud Abdellatif al-Fourati"), Qisas Shuhada al-Thawra al-Souriya, October 19, 2012, syrian-martyrs.com/ar/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=228:2012-10-19-08-55-11&catid=5:soldiers-martyrs&Itemid=2.

[176] Post on the al-hurriya lil-amid abdellatif ibrahim al-abdelghani wa-ibni-hi mustafa abdellatif al-abdelghani Facebook site, March 27, 2012, www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=384488298242892.

[177] "homs el-samed el-jeish el-hurr i'lan tashkil katibat el-bara

bin malek 2012 2 16" ("Steadfast Homs Free Army Declaration of the establishment of the el-Bara bin Malek Brigade 2012 2 16"), YouTube video uploaded by armyfreehoms, February 16, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=ZXnLvusZk1w.

[178] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[179] "kataeb homs tatahid taht rayat liwa al-haqq" ("The brigades of Homs unite under the banner of Liwa al-Haqq"), News Center, August 15, 2012, scn-sy.com/ar/news/view/7868.html; list of Hezb al-Tahrir prisoners from 2002, published by the Syrian Human Rights Committee, shrc.org/data/aspx/d7/487.aspx.

[180] "al-sheikh raed al-jouri qaid katibat shuhada baba amr yatafaqqud al-juraha" ("Sheikh Raed al-Jouri, leader of Katibat Shuhada Baba Amr, inspects the wounded"), Liwa al-Haqq website, November 7, 2012, l-al7aq.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=266:2012-11-07-21-33-34&catid=65:2012-10-23-00-17-31&Itemid=245.

[181] "indimam katibat seif allah fil-houla ila liwa al-haqq" ("Katibat Seif Allah in Houla joins Liwa al-Haqq"), YouTube clip uploaded by alhomysy mogahed, February 14, 2013, youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=X1Zpvyg64AM.

[182] Interview with Abu Ezzeddin al-Ansari, member of the SIF Political Office and head of the Liwa al-Haqq Political Office, Skype, February 27, 2013.

[183] Interview with Syrian activist, January 2013.

[184] Interview with Abdulrahman Alhaj, an expert on Syrian Islamism, Skype, January 13, 2013.

[185] Interview with Syrian activist, January 2013.

[186] In summer 2012, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya published a video interview with Abu Basir al-Tartousi (see above). The video spread on several jihadi forums, accompanied by claims that Abu Basir is the emir of Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, but this is false. (Sinam al-Islam, snam-s.net/vb/showthread.php?t=15133; Hanein, hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=290392).

[187] "khutbat al-eid lil-sheikh abu hamza (harakat al-fajr al-islamiya)" ("Eid speech by Sheikh Abu Hamza [Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya]"), YouTube clip uploaded by AlfajrArmy, October 31, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=k_CBjy9MEOU; "harakat al-fajr al-islamiya - rasail min ard al-ribat" ("Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya - Messages from the land of al-ribat [i.e., frontline garrisons]"), YouTube clip uploaded by AlfajrArmy, November 15, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=DCfHXP5bjpA.

[188] "i'lan tashkil al-jabha al-islamiya al-souriya" ("Announcement of the creation of the Syrian Islamic Front"), YouTube clip uploaded by almrds, December 22, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=YySOTYEWKLw; "bayan al-i'lan an harakat ahrar al-sham al-islamiya" ("Statement on the creation of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya"), YouTube clip uploaded by omar alsham, January 31, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=YciNoYz9EYM.

[189] Statement No. 7, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya

on Facebook, November 1, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=362785477144071.

[190] The group included three armed brigades (Katibat Sheikh al-Islam ibn Taimiya, Katibat Omar bin Abdelaziz, Katibat al-Shahid Moadh Hajj Abdo), one sharia and media center affiliated with the first of these brigades (al-Maktab al-Shar'i wal-l'ami li-Katibat al-Tawhid), and one additional group of media activists (al-Markaz al-l'ami fi Madinat al-Bab). See the declaration posted to Katibat Sheikh al-Islam ibn Taimiya's Facebook page on October 3, 2012, facebook.com/shaikhaleslam11/posts/476178752404164.

[191] Tajammou Jund al-Islam on Facebook, sfacebook.com/jond.islam.

[192] Statement by Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya, January 31, 2013, facebook.com/AlfajrArmy/posts/468663756532964.

[193] E-mail interview with a Syrian opposition activist, very well connected in the Idleb Governorate, in October 2012.

[194] It is variously known as Katibat al-Mujahed Ahmed Assaf, Katibat al-Mujahed al-Batal Ahmed Assaf, etc.

[195] Information gathered from the Facebook pages of Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya (facebook.com/tale3a.islamea), Katibat al-Shahid Ahmed Assaf (facebook.com/shahed.ahmadassaf) and the Tansiqiyat Ahrar Binnish fi Suriya (facebook.com/Free.Binnish.S.Y.R), and "jamaat al-taliaa al-islamiya II maarakat wadi al-daif" ("Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya II The Wadi al-Daif battle"), YouTube clip uploaded by Abu Abderrahman, October 15, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=HgyKJcswjgg.

[196] "haml al-shahid ahmed kabbi ala al-aktaf -binnish2012-11-8" ("Carrying the martyr Ahmed Kabbi on the shoulders Binnish 2012-11-8 ") ala alyoutube.com/watch?v=A6cb09rPI7k.

[197] "muqabala ma'a al-amir al-askari li-jama'at al-talia'a al-islamiya ba'd tahrir al-matar" ("Interview with the military emir of Jamaat al-Taliaa al-Islamiya after the liberation of the airport"), YouTube clip uploaded by ibrahimbanyee, January 11, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=DosjUusZXVU.

[198] Anne Barnard & Hwaida Saad, "Syrians Freed in Abductions That Stoked Fears of More Strife", The New York Times, February 16, 2013, nytimes.com/2013/02/17/world/middleeast/syrian-kidnappings-raise-fear-of-expanded-conflict.html?_r=0.

[199] "tahdhir li-ahali al-fouaa bi-isti'adat al-harair aw-tadmir bal-dat al-fouaa bi-man fi-ha" ("Warning to the inhabitants of Fouaa to return the women, or their village will be destroyed with whoever is in it"), YouTube clip uploaded by asier310, February 19, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=fui1IGjyd_U. — The man reading the statement is Lt. Col. Ahmed al-Qanateri, commander of Liwa Omar al-Mukhtar (an FSA-designated faction in the southwestern Idleb Governorate), and military leader of Ittihad Kataeb wa-Alwiat Salaheddin ("The Union of Salaheddin Brigades and Divisions", ettihadsyria.com), a minor insurgent alliance formed in September 2012 to unite various FSA groups.

[200] "tahniah min ahali binnish bi-munasebat ilan harakat ahrar

al-sham al-islamiya al-jadida" ("Congratulations from the people of Binnish on the announcement of the new Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya"), Katibat al-Mujahed al-Batal Ahmed Assaf website, February 1, 2013, facebook.com/shahed.ahmadassaf/posts/137334219765123.

[201] Herve Bar, "Jabal Akrad at forefront of Syria's revolution", The Daily Star, September 18, 2012, dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Sep-18/188397-jabal-akrad-at-forefront-of-syrias-revolution.ashx#axzz2lcyY99Fp.

[202] "tadribat kataeb ansar al-sham wa-harakat al-fajr al-islamiya" ("Training drills of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, December 30, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=-FGSs9l3rFE.

[203] "ansar al-sham - bayan tashkil katibat jawhar dudayif" ("Ansar al-Sham – Statement on the creation of Katibat Jawhar Dudayif"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, October 14, 2012, "youtube.com/watch?v=hQYqzeFOkaM.

[204] "kataeb ansar al-sham II tafjir abawat bi-junoud al-assad jisir al-shughour" ("Kataeb Ansar al-Sham II Detonating IED against Assad's soldiers, Jisir al-Shughour"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, January 4, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=rOonFkkc3_o.

[205] "kataeb ansar al-sham amaliya mushtareka tahrir khirbat al-jouz wa-burj al-dimous" ("Kataeb Ansar al-Sham. Joint operation, liberating Khirbat al-Jouz and Burj al-Dimous"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, October 12, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=U8-hBc58mWs.

[206] It is not entirely clear which faction organized these training sessions. A video from the camp was released in two copies, using the same raw footage but edited differently, by Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya and Kataeb Ansar al-Sham. The tapes show the same group of masked fighters studying and practising combat tactics, exercising, shooting firearms, and so on. Harakat al-Fajr released its tape in July 2012, claiming full credit for running the camp, but in December 2012, Ansar al-Sham released its own version, describing it as a joint Ansar al-Sham/Harakat al-Fajr project. If nothing else, it this illustrates the unreliability of Syrian rebel propaganda. — "tadribat kataeb ansar al-sham wa-harakat al-fajr al-islamiya" ("Training drills of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, December 30, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=-FGSs9l3rFE ; "harakat al-fajr || muaskar al-fajr lil-iedad al-madi wal-imani flv.1" ("Harakat al-Fajr || The Fajr Camp for Training of Body and Faith"), YouTube clip uploaded by AlfajrArmy, July 6, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=hC_p--mE6Lk.

[207] See, for example, "kataeb ansar al-sham || al-maktab al-shari lil-kataeb" ("Kataeb Ansar al-Sham || The Sharia office of the Brigades"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, January 5, 2013, youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=bXk0qXTcldk; "tawzi' al-hadaya fi mukhayein al-beida - al-jabha al-islamiya" ("Distribution of gifts in the Ein al-Beida camp - Islamic Front"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, January 5, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=fgU3R3DUDkw.

[208] "bayan tashkil kataeb ansar al-sham" ("Statement on the creation of Kataeb Ansar al-Sham"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham September 21, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=7x99tSC_Kzw.

[209] The last of these groups, Katibat Omar bin al-Khattab, is specifically listed as fighting in the Jisir al-Shughour area of Idleb, close to the Latakia Governorate.

[210] "tadribat kataeb ansar al-sham wa-harakat al-fajr al-islamiya" ("Training drills of Kataeb Ahrar al-Sham and Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiya"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, December 30, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=-FGSs9l3rFE.

[211] "al-sheikh abu basir al-tartousi fi burj al-dimous ma'a al-jish al-hurr" ("Sheikh Abu Basir al-Tartousi with the FSA in Burj al-Dimous"), YouTube clip uploaded by Mohammed al-Rifai, October 19, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=NGwYpBEEJJU.

[212] "Notification regarding recent references in the British 'Daily Telegraph'", PDF document dated October 21, 2012, Abu Basir al-Tartousi's website, abubaseer.bizland.com/hadath/Read/hadath%2093.pdf.

[213] "kataeb ansar al-sham II ziarat al-sheikh khaled kindou" ("Kataeb Ansar al-Sham II The visit of Sheikh Khaled Kindou"), YouTube clip uploaded by Kataeb Ansar al-Sham, November 8, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=WNDzfGbrmWY; League of Syrian Scholars member list, islamsyria.com/page.php?PID=48.

[214] "Syrian rebels 'capture' air base in Aleppo", Aljazeera English, February 12, 2013, aljazeera.com/news/middle-east/2013/02/201321214119606560.html.

[215] "katibat moussaab bin omeir tal'ab kurat al-qadam" ("Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir plays football"), YouTube clip uploaded by maskanainf, January 27, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=f8mltxBod6o.

[216] Katibat Moussaab bin Omeir / Maskana on Facebook, facebook.com/free.maskanaa.

[217] Syria Revolutionaries' Front, srfront.org.

[218] "jaish al-tawhid – souriya || liwa tareq bin ziyad 2012-8-15" ("Jaish al-Tawhid – Syria || Liwa Tareq bin Ziyad 2012-8-15"), YouTube clip uploaded by altawheedarmy, August 15, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=iGJL6GaK6Ug.

[219] "al-mansour" ("al-Mansour"), YouTube clip uploaded by altawheedarmy, October 27, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=8eIX-ggytUQ.

[220] Statement from the SIF/Jaish al-Tawhid, SIF Facebook site, January 24, 2013, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=301480223310733.

[221] "jawla tafaqqudiya lil-qaid al-maydani abu abderrahman al-dimashqi.mp4" ("Inspection tour by field commander Abu Abderrahman al-Dimashqi.mp4"), YouTube clip uploaded by altawheedarmy, January 5, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=dV8bt9JKRuU.

[222] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Syrian Islamic Front's Order of Battle", al-Wasat, January 22, 2013, thewasat.wordpress.

com/2013/01/22/syrian-islamic-fronts-order-of-battle; and "bayan tashkil katibat al-khulafa al-rashidin" ("Statement on the creation of Katibat al-Khulafa al-Rashidin"), YouTube clip uploaded by altawheedarmy, February 11, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=KrEdJdGWDHU.

[223] See statistics on vdc-sy.org, an opposition-linked rights group.

[224] For most of the information on Abu Adnan al-Zabadani (Mohammed Zeitoun), I rely on Malik al-Abdeh, interviewed via Skype on February 20, 2012.

[225] "tajammou' ansar al-islam bayan" ("Ansar al-Islam Gathering statement"), YouTube video uploaded by Martyrs12, August 17, 2012, youtube.com/watch?v=oPaNqfzG-8o.

[226] This is based largely on the fact that it claimed responsibility for a high-profile bombing in July 2012, which killed Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, Defense Minister Daoud Rajha, and several other high-ranking officials (Statement No. 1, Liwa al-Islam, lewaa-aleslam.com/statements/statement1.pdf).

[227] Statement by Abu Adnan al-Zabadani, Tajammou Ansar al-Islam leader, November 7, 2012, facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=173694529438570.

[228] The leader of Liwa Suqour al-Islam, an early military defector by the name of Cpt. Wassim Shehab Saleh, has since been killed in combat. ("al-shahid al-naqib wassim shehab saleh - qaid liwa suqour al-islam" ("The Martyr Captain Wassim Shehab Saleh - Leader of Liwa Suqour al-Islam"), Rumouz al-Thawra al-Souriya, January 16, 2013, syriasy.blogspot.se/2013/01/blog-post_5558.html).

[229] "Clarifying statement", from the Political Bureau of Liwa al-Islam, December 22, 2012, facebook.com/lowaaAlislam/posts/427822760623214; Abdullah Ali, "inqilab fi tajammou ansar al-islam yutih bi-mudir amaliyat maktab al-amn al-qawmi" ("A coup inside Tajammou Ansar al-Islam deposes the director of the National Security Bureau operation"), Arabi Press, December 27, 2012, arabi-press.com/?page=article&id=57716.

[230] "bayan indimaj kataeb hamzat bin abdelmuttaleb" ("Statement on the merger of Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb"), YouTube clip uploaded by Mohammed Azzam, February 1, 2013, youtube.com/watch?v=U5D2i-Mu4Es; Kataeb Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb on Facebook, facebook.com/kataeb.hamza

[231] Aron Lund, "The Islamist mess in Damascus", Syria Comment, February 9, 2013, joshualandis.com/blog/?p=17680.

[232] The statement is available in a thread on the Muslim forum, started by the user "Dimashqi" on September 22, 2012, muslim.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-493317.html.



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