

Syrian Jihadism

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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, seen as more pragmatic, reformist and politically-minded.

Salafism

In modern terms, salafism is a strictly orthodox form of Sunni Islamism. It is 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 doctrinaire aspects of the creed, emphasizing personal piety over social involvement. They are often intolerant of other faiths, including non-Sunni Muslim minorities and Sufism, and 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 a salafi-jihadi group, although there are many others.

Introduction

How important are extremist religious factions within the Syrian uprising? This summer has seen a long string of articles in the Western press alerting readers to the growing influence of jihadi groups,¹ but the debate is not new. Since the early days of civil protest in March 2011, Bashar el-Assad's secular Baath Party government has tried to point the finger at violent Islamist groups backed by foreign governments. Syrian opposition leaders, on the other hand, have accused the regime itself of masterminding "jihadi" operations, to portray Assad as a force for stability and sow the seeds of sectarian strife.

The truth of the matter is that jihadi groups do play a role in Syria – still limited, but rapidly growing. Since autumn 2011, Syria's initially peaceful revolution has been overshadowed by a military conflict between the regime and various anti-government militias. By the turn of the year, this armed movement had taken a sharp turn towards Sunni Muslim religious rhetoric, while sectarian sentiment rose across the nation, and small but aggressive jihadi groups appeared in rebel ranks. These groups are now coalescing into larger movements, while even non-ideological rebels increasingly adopt Islamist rhetoric.

The "Islamization" of the Syrian conflict is primarily driven by two factors. First, the descent into sectarian conflict pits Sunni Muslims against supporters of the secular, Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar el-Assad. This polarization benefits jihadis by creating a demand for their brand of violent Sunni chauvinism. The second factor is the foreign support pouring in from regional governments and non-state organizations, which is disproportionately empowering Islamist groups.

¹ For example: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Al-Qaida turns tide for rebels in battle for eastern Syria", *The Guardian*, July 30, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/30/al-qaeda-rebels-battle-syria; Rod Nordland, "Al Qaeda Taking Deadly New Role in Syria's Conflict", *The New York Times*, July 24, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/07/25/world/middleeast/al-qaeda-insinuating-its-way-into-syrias-conflict.html?pagewanted=all; Neil MacFarquhar & Hwaida Saad, "As Syrian War Drags On, Jihadists Take Bigger Role", *The New York Times*, July 29, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/world/middleeast/as-syrian-war-drags-on-jihad-gains-foothold.html?pagewanted=all; 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/; Adrien Jaulmes, "En Syrie, des djihadistes en embuscade", *Le Figaro*, July 31, 2012, www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/07/30/01003-20120730ARTFIG00439-en-syrie-des-djihadistes-en-embuscade.php.

This report will examine the role of jihadis within in the larger Syrian uprising, discuss the main drivers of Islamist influence, and briefly list some of the extremist groups currently fighting the Syrian government.

Aron Lund,
Uppsala, Sweden,
August 27, 2012

A Sunni uprising

The Syrian civil war is a sectarian conflict – among other things. It is also a conflict along socio-economic and urban-rural lines, a classic countryside *jacquerie* against an exploitative central government, albeit internally divided by the country's religious divisions, which cut across other patterns of identity and loyalty. Then there is a political dimension to the struggle, with Bashar el-Assad's loyalists battling to preserve the current power structure against demands for democratization and economic redistribution. And, last but not least, the conflict has transformed into a proxy war for influence among several regional and international powers, adding another layer of complexity.

These dimensions of the Syrian conflict all modify each other. The sectarian conflict inside Syria, for example, is reflected in the regional power struggle. Syria's alignment with Iran, Iraq and the Hezbollah-backed government in Lebanon is partly an alliance of convenience, and partly a Cold War relic, but it is also an alliance of the region's non-Sunni governments. Conversely, the main regional supports for the opposition are the governments of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, all of them closely connected to Sunni Islamism. Neither the Syrian civil war nor the regional power struggle can be reduced to these religious elements, but they also cannot be understood without considering the way sectarian sentiment shapes attitudes and prejudices at the top and helps mobilize popular forces from below.

The regime is careful to preserve its secular image, and it refuses to openly acknowledge a religious dimension to the conflict, even as it is ruthlessly exploiting Syria's sectarian street politics. Much of the opposition media is equally reluctant to discuss the sectarian angle. Many activists conceive of their activism in terms of a battle for freedom against tyranny; they are oblivious to the sectarian angle, or aware but anxious to conceal it, in order to maintain moral purity and avoid alarming Western supporters.

Syria's traditional and exile-based opposition (such as the Syrian National Council, SNC) still plays an important role in mediating international impressions of the conflict. It remains more

or less multi-religious and in part ideologically secular.² But its influence is diminishing fast, and among the armed insurgents inside the country the situation is very different. As Fabrice Balanche has documented, major military conflict is limited to Sunni Arab areas only, while territories inhabited by religious minorities (such as Alawites, Druze or Christians) have by and large remained passively or actively supportive of the regime.³

Many Syrians, on both sides of the political divide, will dismiss any analysis of the Syrian conflict that focuses on sectarian loyalties as racist or orientalist. But the statistical evidence is overwhelming. For example, opposition casualty counts may be unreliable for exact figures, but they are highly useful to document general trends – and they very clearly illustrate the sectarian dimension of the conflict.

From March 2011 until August 2012, the Center for Documenting Violations in Syria (VDC)⁴ recorded 1832 deaths in the Deraa Governorate, which has some 850,000 inhabitants, mainly Sunni Arabs, with a small Christian minority. In the same period, the VDC reported only 17 dead in the neighboring Sweida Governorate, which has a mostly Druze Arab population of about 300,000. In the Homs Governorate, with some 1.5 million inhabitants, a majority-Sunni countryside is sprinkled with Alawite and Christian villages. According to the VDC, the combined effects of the government's crackdown on restive Sunni areas and tit-for-tat sectarian violence between civilian villages and neighborhoods, had led to 5798 recorded deaths in Homs by early August 2012 – the highest figure of any Syrian governorate. This contrasts with the situation in neighboring Tartous, a majority-Alawi governorate with some 700,000 inhabitants. There, the total number of dead stood at only 38.⁵ At this point, there is simply no denying the sectarian dynamics of Syria's civil war.

² On these segments of the opposition, see Aron Lund, "Divided they stand. An overview of Syria's political opposition factions", Foundation for European Progressive Studies & Olof Palme International Center, May 2012, http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/news/122_divided-they-stand-an-overview-of-syrias-political.

³ Fabrice Balanche, "Géographie de la révolte syrienne", *Outre-Terre*, no. 29, 3/2011.

⁴ <http://www.vdc-sy.org/>. All VDC figures cited in this report are from August 7, 2012. The VDC is linked to the Local Coordination Committees, an anti-regime activist group which has joined the Syrian National Council ("Cooperation Statement between (VDC) and (LCC)", Local Coordination Committees, July 4, 2011, www.lccsyria.org/1282).

⁵ The only real outlier in terms of religious demography and casualty numbers is the Raqqqa Governorate in north-central Syria. Its more than 800,000 inhabitants are mostly Sunni Arabs, but the number VDC-counted deaths stood at only 73 on August 7, 2012. Different hypotheses may be advanced for this, including the tribal nature of the area, the low population density in the countryside, well-organized pro-regime constituencies in some industrial areas subject to government patronage, et c., but the Raqqqa case clearly merits further study.

Sectarian makeup of the regime

The sectarian issues in Syria are rooted in a complex history of social disparities between (and within) religious communities, as well as in doctrinaire theological conflict, cross-border religious linkages, and political manipulation.⁶

SYRIA'S ETHNORELIGIOUS

DEMOGRAPHY (estimate):

Sunni Arabs:	65%
Alawites:	12%
Sunni Kurds:	9%
Christians:	9%
Druze:	3%
Others:	2%

In general terms, the Syrian government has, since the late 1960s, been dominated by a small group of Alawite Arab military families from the Latakia and Tartous governorates, and their tribal, political and personal allies from among a somewhat wider range of sectarian and regional backgrounds. At the center of this largely Alawite network stands the presidential family, the Assads, flanked by their second branch, the Makhloufs. In addition, larger communities of Alawites, Christians, Druze, secular Sunnis, and others anxious to preserve some aspect of the regime, will actively or passively support it.

Contrary to popular belief, there has always existed a rather significant bloc of Sunni Arab public support for the Assad family, without which it would have been unable to rule effectively. In the late Bashar el-Assad era, this pro-regime Sunni community has included much of the urban middle class, wealthy business circles, Baath Party members, military families, favored rural tribes, and other beneficiaries of regime patronage. Since late 2011, this “soft” side of the regime is crumbling. The growing trickle of state/army defections is nearly 100 percent Sunni, and must be regarded as an indication that the regime is coming apart at its sectarian seams, threatening to leave Assad with only the Alawite-military core of

⁶ See Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party*, I. B. Tauris & Co., rev. 4th ed, 2011; Hanna Batatu, *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1999; Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, Routledge, 2002.

his regime – enough to keep fighting, but not to reestablish a functioning national government.⁷

Sectarian makeup of the opposition

The opposition is to some extent a mirror image of the regime, i.e. largely Sunni. The non-armed opposition both inside and outside Syria retains some high-profile activists from a religious minority background, many of them formerly leading figures within the secular, pre-revolutionary dissident movement (including Alawites like Abdelaziz el-Khayyer or Aref Dalila, and Christians like Georges Sabra or Michel Kilo). However, this “political” opposition is by now marginalized by the military confrontation.

Virtually all members of the armed insurgent groups, regardless of their ideological inclination, are Sunni Arabs. They hail mostly from agricultural regions and provincial towns, which have suffered economically from Bashar el-Assad’s reform program. Major cities and middle-class areas have mostly remained quiet, but the insurgency now has a firm foothold in the “poverty belt” of ramshackle suburbs ringing both Aleppo and Damascus, after decades of in-migration from deteriorating conditions in the countryside.

The insurgent movement comprises some tens of thousands of fighters. They are distributed over hundreds of autonomously organized militias, generally called “brigades” (*katiba*, pl. *kataeb*), regardless of their actual size. Many brigades are loosely gathered under some common umbrella, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), but most are locally organized and only active in their home areas. They are generally “gathered along village or extended family lines, with little ideological content”. Fighters tend to be “conservative and practicing Muslims” but organized and ideologically conscious Islamists form only a small minority.⁸

⁷ The vast majority of defectors from the Syrian regime during the uprising, including more than 20 brigade generals and major generals, hundreds of captains, majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels, former prime minister Riyad Hijab, Brig. Gen. Manaf Tlass and other members of the influential Tlass family, the Iraq ambassador Nawwaf el-Fares, Cyprus Ambassador Lamia el-Hariri, the former Sweden ambassador Mohammed Bassam Emadi, and others, have been Sunni Muslim Arabs. Alawite and Christian defections do happen, mostly at lower levels, but they remain such a rarity that the opposition will often try to highlight them in specially made video statements (For some background to the defection of Sunni officials, see Aron Lund, “Friends no more – Implications of the Tlass and Fares defections from the Syrian regime”, paper published by the Olof Palme International Center, July 13, 2012, www.palmecenter.se/en/Our-thoughts/News-Articles-Front-Page/120713-Difficult-situation-in-Syria-Analysis-of-the-two-last-defections/).

⁸ Adrian Jaulmes, “Une insurrection syrienne plus conservatrice qu’extrémiste”, *Le Figaro*, July 31, 2012, www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/07/30/01003-20120730ARTFIG00409-syrie-une-insurrection-musulmane-conservatrice.php.

Even so, most fighters are acutely aware of their Sunni Muslim identity, and over time, the insurgent movement has taken on a Sunni sectarian hue.

For example, the FSA-aligned Farouq Brigades⁹ in Homs began as a movement of army defectors, phrasing their propaganda in a mostly non-religious military and nationalist vocabulary. Since autumn 2011, symbols traditionally associated with Islamist militancy have instead come to the fore. For example, the group has switched to a black logotype over crossed swords, and several unit leaders have grown salafi-style chin beards. In sum, the Farouq Brigades were not created as an ideological organization, but they are gradually taking on the appearance and rhetoric of an Islamist group.

The growing prominence of Islamist imagery is perhaps more due to its usefulness in Sunni identity politics, than to the ideology itself. Religion is not the driving force of the rebellion, but it is the insurgent movement's most important common denominator. For Syria's revolutionaries, Islam functions both as a ready-to-use ideological prism, a sectarian identity marker, and an effective mobilization tool in Sunni Muslim areas – and, of course, as a source of spiritual comfort in wartime. Nir Rosen, an American journalist who has travelled extensively among the Syrian rebels, points out that many insurgents "were not religious before the uprising, but now pray and are inspired by Islam, which gives them a creed and a discourse."¹⁰

Assad as the Islamists' "perfect enemy"

The sectarian makeup of the Assad regime, and its alliances with Shia forces in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, were always major irritants to Sunni Islamists. Since the 1960s, Syrian scholars such as Muhibbeddin el-Khatib (1886-1969), the Muslim Brotherhood's Said Hawwa (1935-1989) and the contemporary salafi ideologue Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin (1938-) have contributed to the development of a virulent anti-Shia strand within modern Sunni Islamism, particularly salafi Islamism. Sheikh Surour's sectarian polemics, for example, were "a

⁹ Farouq Brigades, official page on Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/Al.Farouq.Battalions>

¹⁰ "Q&A: Nir Rosen on Syria's armed opposition", *Aljazeera English*, February 13, 2012, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/02/201221315020166516.html.

decisive influence” on the anti-Shia ideology of Abu Moussaab el-Zarqawi and the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda.¹¹

Syrian Islamism is a broad and nuanced movement, which includes both pro- and anti-regime elements;¹² nevertheless, the religious tension underlying secular politics in Syria tends to empower sectarian radicals in times of crisis. A 1979-1982 uprising against Hafez el-Assad also began in a wave of broad civil protest against tyranny and a faltering economy, but was quickly sidetracked into violent sectarian conflict. The ensuing bloodshed, culminating in the Hama massacre of 1982, left a legacy of sectarian hostility, which continues to affect Syria today.¹³ Despite the Assad regime’s occasional dealings with jihadi groups in Lebanon, Palestine or Iraq, the spectre of a religiously motivated uprising within the Sunni majority has always hung over it.

Even before the Arab revolutions of 2011, the author Nibras Kazimi labeled Syria’s government the jihadi movement’s ”perfect enemy”.¹⁴ The current conflict presents jihadis with excellent opportunities to fight, organize and recruit. A weakening central government is increasingly unable to exercise control in the periphery, and money, arms and volunteers are pouring in from pro-Islamist, anti-Assad forces abroad. The preexisting sectarian divide allows Islamist groups to pose as defenders of the majority population, and gives the most radical salafi-jihadis an opportunity to ”out-Sunni” their competition in terms of religious fervor and sectarian demagoguery. The opposing side is not only a secular tyranny, but also identified with a ”heretical” religious group, the Alawites – or ”Noseiris”, as jihadis prefer to call them, using an older, denigrating term. Most Sunni theologians agree that Alawites cannot be accepted as Muslims, and the stricter salafi interpretations, which rely on old fatwas by the medieval scholar Ibn Taimiya, call for their expulsion or even extermination. Last but

¹¹ Guido Stenberg, ”Jihadi Salafism and the Shi’is”, in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism. Islam’s New Religious Movement*, Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 121.

¹² See eg. Thomas Pierret, ”Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba’thi Syria”, in Fred Lawson (ed.), *Demystifying Syria*, Saqi, 2009; Line Khatib, ”Syria’s Islamic Movement and the Current Uprising: Political Acquiescence, Quietism, and Dissent”, *Jadaliyya*, February 21, 2012, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4415/syrias-islamic-movement-and-the-current-uprising_p.

¹³ Aron Lund, ”The Ghosts of Hama. The Bitter Legacy of Syria’s Failed 1979-1982 Revolution”, Swedish International Liberal Centre, 2011.

¹⁴ Nibras Kazimi, *Syria Through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy*, Hoover Institution Press, 2010.

not least, *el-Sham* (a word which can mean both Damascus and the Levant or Greater Syria) plays an important role in Muslim eschatology, as a battlefield near the end of days.¹⁵

As the Syrian opposition journalist Malik el-Abdeh puts it, "the salafi narrative is the only narrative that will make any sense if you're a religious Sunni in Syria today. The salafis are all about one thing: Ibn Taimiya, Ibn Taimiya, Ibn Taimiya. And what did he say? He said the Noseiris are more dangerous than Jews and Christians, you mustn't trust them. Over the past year and a half, this has come to be seen as true by many in Syria. Also, jihad is a fundamental part of their beliefs; for a salafi, what makes you Muslim is your capacity to go and fight a jihad. So this jihad-focused ideology, which is anti-Noseiri and anti-Shia, becomes very attractive to a young Sunni man who's been radicalized and wants to get out and fight."¹⁶

The Free Syrian Army (FSA)

Although there are no exact numbers available, it is safe to say that most Syrian rebels see themselves as part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *el-Jeish el-Souri el-Hurr*). However, this is not a monolithic organization. Apart from being a sort of general identifier for the armed opposition, the FSA label is used to denote a number of partially overlapping insurgent networks, each gathering a number of brigades active on the ground.

Outside Syria, the name is mainly used to refer to an organization headquartered in Turkey, allied with the SNC and materially supported by Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the USA, and other countries. This original FSA faction was created by military defectors in summer 2011. It remains led by Col. Riad el-Asaad, who claims the role of FSA general commander. He gained the support of some of the uprising's largest brigades early on,¹⁷ and remains the focus of international media attention. But while this exiled FSA leadership upholds direct contacts with some FSA units inside Syria (some of them quite significant) and has received verbal declarations of allegiance from many others, Col. Asaad's influence never extended far beyond the refugee camps in Turkey where he is based.

¹⁵ For a jihadi essay on the relevance of *el-Sham* and Syria, see Husain Bin Mahmud, "Damascus- the Base of Jihad on earth", Dar Al Murabiteen Publications, 2011.

¹⁶ Malik al-Abdeh, telephone interview, July 31, 2012.

¹⁷ Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Armed Opposition", Middle East Security Report 3, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

There are also a number of FSA Military Councils (*Majalis Askariya*) inside the country, currently nine. The councils generally represent the single strongest coalition of insurgent groups in their home areas, but this varies considerably from province to province. According to a source sympathetic to the Military Councils, they collectively gather some 50-60 percent of the total number of fighters identifying as “FSA” (excluding a significant minority of rebels who do not use the FSA label at all).¹⁸ The level of command and control inside the councils also varies. Where one Military Council commander may be able to issue orders to the commanders of local member brigades, another could be restricted to suggesting fields of cooperation and representing them externally.

In the view of Col. Asaad’s Turkey-based FSA leadership, the Military Councils are simply his regional subcommands. Council commanders themselves seem to have a different idea about their relationship, and pay nominal respect at best to Col. Asaad. “If you ask any of the nine Military Council commanders, they will tell you they have no general commander”, explains Brian Sayers, director of government relations for the Syrian Support Group, an American organization which provides funds and training to the FSA Military Councils.¹⁹

In March 2012, five Military Councils jointly announced the creation of a new “internal” FSA leadership, appointing the Homs Military Council commander Col. Qasem Saadeddine as their top commander. Many viewed this as a move intended to displace Col. Asaad’s ineffectual exile leadership. Months later, the joint command does not appear to function well, if at all. Col. Saadeddine continues to appear in the media under this title, but his influence does not seem to extend beyond his own Homs Military Council.

In addition to these partly overlapping, partly rival umbrella networks, there are numerous other Syrian insurgent groups calling themselves FSA, which receive no support and take no orders from any of the leadership factions. Most Syrians indiscriminately use the FSA label to refer to any armed rebel unit, and many insurgent groups have accordingly adopted the FSA name and logotype without necessarily entering into an organized relationship with either

¹⁸ Meeting with Brian Sayers, director of government relations for the Syrian Support Group, Stockholm, August 27, 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Col. Asaad or their local Military Council. They may be fully independent, or in the process of allying with whatever faction they view as the “real” FSA, or aligned with some other group entirely. Constant splits, mergers and overlapping memberships further complicate any effort to keep track of relations between the various leadership bodies and the many purported FSA units inside Syria.

The FSA and Sunni Islamism

Most armed rebels in Syria are organized within their own communities, which are almost always Sunni Arab. They generally portray themselves and probably identify as Syrian nationalists fighting to end autocratic rule, but the overwhelming majority simultaneously depict their struggle in unambiguously Sunni Muslim terms, seeing no contradiction between the two. Col. Asaad’s FSA leadership in Turkey takes care to avoid Islamist rhetoric, and has made verbal attacks on jihadi groups, but, with some token exceptions, all known FSA leaders are Sunni Muslim Arabs. When the Turkey-based FSA formed a ten-member “temporary military council” headed by Col. Asaad in November 2011, all members were Sunni.²⁰ The various leaderships and local brigades inside the country are no different in composition; allowing for some rare exceptions, the FSA is an entirely Sunni Arab phenomenon.

Most of the FSA brigades use religious rhetoric, and they are generally named after heroic figures or events in Sunni Islamic history, e.g. the Khaled ibn al-Walid Brigade in Homs, and the Abu Obeida ibn al-Jarrah Brigade in the Rif Dimashq Governorate.) At the same time, most FSA factions, regardless of their Sunni Islamic discourse, seem to lack any solid ideological foundation. They function more as a kind of home-guard militias. If they are conservative and religious, this is no different from the majority population in their home areas.

Some FSA-aligned units appear more ideologically Islamist, and a few small units who self-identify as FSA seem to be ideologically salafi-jihadi or under some jihadi influence. These

²⁰ FSA, “el-jaish el-hurr, yushakkil majlisan askarian muaqqitan” (“The Free Army creates a temporary military council”), *el-Mundassa el-Souriya*, November 14, 2011, <http://the-syrian.com/archives/53251>; Noura Benkoriche, “La tentation de la lutte armée contre le pouvoir baasiste en Syrie. Passé (1976-1982) et présent (2011)”, *Le Débat*, no. 168, 1/2012.

reportedly include the Nour Brigade (primarily active in and around Saraqeb in the Idleb), the tribal-Islamist Dhoul-Nourain Brigade (Homs), the Islam Division (Damascus, see below under “Ansar el-Islam Gathering”), and the el-Bara bin Malek Brigade (Homs), which made waves in the media when it declared itself the first “martyrdom brigade” of the FSA, to cries of “Allahu Akbar” under black jihadi-style Islamic flags.²¹

An example from the FSA: the Tawhid Division

In July 2012, a number of mostly FSA-aligned rebel groups in the Aleppo countryside united to form the Tawhid Division (*Liwa el-Tawhid*). It is now among the largest armed units in Syria, and claims to control more than 8,000 fighters. Its leader is Abdelaziz el-Salama, a former honey-trader from Anadan (north-west of Aleppo), with “director of operations” Abdelqader el-Saleh running military affairs. The Tawhid Division does not formally repudiate Col. Riad el-Asaad’s central FSA command in Turkey or Col. Abdeljabbar el-Ogeidi’s Aleppo Military Council, but in practice it acts independently of both. In an Aljazeera interview, Saleh was mildly derisive of the exile leadership, and explained his understanding of the term “FSA” by saying that “the FSA is a label, so we are FSA, everyone who carries a gun is now called FSA”.²²

In its founding statement, the Tawhid Division listed a number of political goals, such as toppling the regime, protecting civilians, etc. There were no calls for an Islamic state, and no indication of a consistent Islamist ideology.²³ At the same time, the video of the event included Islamic banners, praise for “our lord Mohammed”, the month of Ramadan, “our religion”, and so on. The list of incorporated brigades included many distinctly Islamic names such as Nour el-Islam (“Light of Islam”) and the salafi-tinged Ibn Taimiya Brigade. The Tawhid Division’s logotype is based on the Syrian-nationalist imagery typical for FSA units, but it also includes the Islamic creed of “there is no God but God and Mohammed is his prophet”. *Tawhid* literally means “unification”, as in the unification of rebel brigades, but also

²¹ "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, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXnLvusZk1w.

²² "Liqa el-youm: Abdelqader el-Saleh ... Khafaya ma'arakat Halab" ("Meeting of the day: Abdelqader el-Saleh ... Secrets of the battle for Aleppo"), *Aljazeera*, August 11, 2012, www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/Odaec7cc-3046-4454-b01d-519edf3c3ff6

²³ "i'lan 'an tashkil liwa al-tawhid fi muhafazat halab" ("Declaration of the establishment of the Tawhid Division in the Aleppo Governorate"), YouTube clip uploaded by syriahro, July 21, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0A2mNa1zCpI. See also the group’s official Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/leuaaltawheed>.

refers to the oneness of God. While monotheism is a mainstream Muslim concept, using the word *tawhid* as part of an organization's name is common within the salafi movement, and carries strong Islamist connotations.

The Tawhid Division has fought alongside Islamists from non-FSA factions such as Jabhat al-Nosra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Fajr el-Islam. According to some sources, it is funded by exiled Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁴ Unlike these groups, however, the Tawhid Division is not primarily a religious movement, and it is not fighting to bring about a religious state. While some members and leaders appear to be convinced Islamists, others are not. Abdelqader el-Saleh on the one hand refers to the jihadi group Jabhat el-Nosra as "our brothers", saying he will cooperate with anyone fighting the regime; but, on the other hand, he strikes a decidedly un-salafi note by insisting on the equal rights of Christians and other religious minorities.²⁵

All things considered, there is no escaping the fact that the Tawhid Division is an essentially Sunni group, with a strong religious flavor and a political discourse tailored to the tastes of conservative Muslims. It carries its sectarian identity on its sleeve, and as such, it cannot but alienate non-Sunni and secular Syrians. It is not primarily an ideological group, but what ideology it has, is Islamist. And indeed: as Tawhid Division commanders consolidate their control over the villages ringing Aleppo, their preferred method for reestablishing order turns out to be rough rebel justice mixed with sharia law.²⁶

The Tawhid Division is no outlier on the sectarian and ideological scale of the Syrian rebel movement. Its political statements fairly well represent the rhetoric among mainstream FSA factions, mixing worldly goals with an unsystematic Sunni Islamist discourse. FSA units that use *more* religious rhetoric are not uncommon, but groups that portray themselves as *less* Sunni-sectarian and religious than the Tawhid Division are a rarity. as *less* Sunni-sectarian and religious than the Tawhid Division are a rarity.

²⁴ "Muslim Brotherhood undermining Syrian rebel unity", *el-Akhbar/AFP*, August 20, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/muslim-brotherhood-undermining-syrian-rebel-unity.

²⁵ "Liqa el-youm: Abdelqader el-Saleh ... Khafaya ma'arakat Halab" ("Meeting of the day: Abdelqader el-Saleh ... Secrets of the battle for Aleppo"), *Aljazeera*, August 11, 2012, www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/0daec7cc-3046-4454-b01d-519edf3c3ff6.

²⁶ Charles Levinson, "Kidnapping, Spats on Docket of Syria Rebel Boss", *The Wall Street Journal*, August 18, 2012, online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444233104577593432792462056.html; "Muslim Brotherhood undermining Syrian rebel unity", *el-Akhbar/AFP*, August 20, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/muslim-brotherhood-undermining-syrian-rebel-unity; Hugh Naylor, "Syrian rebels seek strict form of Sharia", *The National*, August 23, 2012, www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/syrian-rebels-seek-strict-form-of-sharia#full.

Foreign funding

One reason for the increasingly strident religious tone of Syria's armed opposition is that Islamist groups tend to have easier access to funding. Apart from the USA, all the main state sponsors of the Syrian revolution are all Sunni Islamist, albeit of varying tendencies: Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The majority of non-state funding channels also lean Islamist: Islamic aid organizations, Syrian business families in the Gulf, and family/clan support within communities affected by the violence. The effect is that Islamist groups often appear better able to attract volunteers and allies than their local non-Islamist rivals, since they can purchase better equipment, and in some instances even offer a monthly salary.²⁷

Money matters, not only for the efficiency of armed groups. It also shapes alliances and ideology. "You will find that most of the time coalitions of armed groups are only formed when an external financial backer requests that there be 'unity' between the various factions," says Syrian journalist Malik al-Abdeh. "A conference is then convened and unity declared and monies are paid out. These coalitions quickly fragment and crumble when the external backer changes strategy or when the factions themselves fall out over how money is dispensed or who is benefiting politically from the alliance."²⁸

In March 2012, a series of agreements underwritten by the USA, Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia arranged for the transfer of several millions of USD per month from the Gulf states to the FSA's Turkey-based leadership, via an SNC liaison office.²⁹ This mechanism had several purposes: it marries the political leadership of the SNC to the FSA leadership, helps fund the rebellion, and centralizes financing of the rebel movement, so that a chaotic and cash-starved internal opposition will be forced to coalesce around an SNC-FSA axis. According to a pro-opposition Syrian financier, speaking to *The Guardian*, "[t]he local brigade commanders on the ground swear allegiance to whoever supports them and the expat community sending

²⁷ Hazem el-Amin, "el-Islamiyoun el-akhtar tanziman wa-tamwilan wa-ghumoudan wal-aqall 'addadan wa-nufoudhan" ("The Islamists are best organized, funded and vague, and least numerous and influential"), *el-Hayat*, August 14, 2012, alhayat.com/Details/426355.

²⁸ Malik al-Abdeh, e-mail to the author, August 21, 2012.

²⁹ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, then a member of the Executive Board of the SNC, Uppsala, Sweden, March 2012.

them money is completely divided [...] You can only unify these units with a unified source of money.”³⁰

While attempting to build up the SNC-FSA alliance as the centrepiece of the Syrian opposition, these same states have also tried to hamper the development of rival, non-state Islamic donor channels. In May 2012, a number of Saudi religious scholars were ordered to stop collecting funds privately, and instead direct their followers to officially sanctioned aid agencies.³¹ A salafi-led aid group known as the Ulema Committee to Aid Syria was forced to shut down its activity.³² Such actions are not without consequences for the regimes implementing them, which are already wary of Islamist dissidence. ”How will our people in Syria feel, having been so happy with the Ulema Committee to Aid Syria yesterday”, tweeted the influential salafi preacher Mohammed el-Arifi, ”but today being distressed by the ban on it, with its members in all areas signing pledges [after government pressure] not to collect!”³³

High-ranking members of the Saudi religious establishment have since decreed that it is unlawful for Saudis to finance or fight in the Syrian jihad on their own initiative. According to Ali bin Abbas el-Hakami and Abdullah bin Mohammed el-Mutlaq of the regime-backed Senior Ulema Commission, ”the FSA is responsible for the fighting and jihad in Syria, and should be supported”, but only through official channels set up by the Saudi government.³⁴ Other states have issued similar rulings via the mosques, to stem the flow of volunteers and money to Syrian extremist groups.³⁵

However, private donations keep trickling into Syria, and the insurgents remain heavily reliant on informal methods of transfer. For example, a financing network run on behalf of the Syrian salafi theologian Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin (funded mainly by Gulf donors) appears to be active in supporting both humanitarian and paramilitary Islamist groups,

³⁰ Julian Borger, ”Syria crisis: west loses faith in SNC to unite opposition groups”, *The Guardian*, August 14, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/13/syria-opposition-groups-national-council.

³¹ ”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”), *el-Jarida*, May 29, 2012, aljarida.com/2012/05/29/2012495286.

³² ”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, *el-Muslim*, almoslim.net/node/165719.

³³ Tweet by Mohammed el-Arifi, 19.25, May 28, 2012, <https://twitter.com/MohamadAlarefe/status/207160681399726081>

³⁴ Naim Tamim al-Hakim, ”udwan fi hayat kibar el-ulema: el-daawa lil-khurouj ilal-jihad fi souria khurouj an ta'at wali el-amr” (”Two members of the Senior Ulema Commission: calls for going to jihad in Syria is disobedience to the ruler”), *el-Sharq*, June 7, 2012, www.alsharq.net.sa/2012/06/07/329647.

³⁵ ”Tunisian spokesman calls on preachers to stop pushing jihad in Syria among the youth”, *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/tunisian-spokesman-calls-on-preachers-to-stop-pushing-jihad-in-syria-among-the-youth/2012/06/08/gJQAiXsuNV_story.html.

primarily in southern Syria.³⁶ Islamic organizations and expat Syrian financiers continue to be a favored source of support even for non-ideological rebel commanders, due to the minimal red tape and corruption, and their proven track record of getting money into Syria. Meanwhile, the SNC-FSA funding mechanism, which was partly intended to help moderate factions outspend extremist groups, does not appear to be working well. The SNC president Abdulbaset Sieda complains of a general lack of resources: “Billions were spent in Iraq and Afghanistan, but we only received some 15 million dollars from Qatar and Saudi Arabia during these past six months.” In his view, the mainstream political opposition is too underfunded to effectively support the revolutionary movement inside Syria, and so gain its trust and loyalty. “If the SNC and FSA do not receive the support that we need to stop government attacks on Syrian villages, well – there are others around, who are already sending guns and extremists to Syria”, says Sieda. “People are losing hope now, they’re ready to strike a deal with the Devil”.³⁷

Regardless of the amount of money spent, there are also practical obstacles for the funding of Syrian opposition groups. State donors lack well-established support mechanisms on the ground, and the disorganized, intransparent and sometimes corrupt nature of opposition groups seeking their aid creates moral, political and financial dilemmas. Much money is apparently lost on the way, spent on overhead costs, or never distributed. Security issues, bureaucracy and poor coordination between donors all hamper the effort.³⁸

In practice, most state donors apparently continue to provide direct support to groups on the field, bypassing the planned, centralized SNC-FSA mechanism. To minimize the risk of arms and money falling into the hands of extremist groups, various intelligence services (including the CIA) monitor rebel groups and try to identify suitable recipients,³⁹ although this is likely to be a both time-consuming and very uncertain process.⁴⁰

³⁶ I am thankful to Malik al-Abdeh for information on the Surouri movement.

³⁷ Interview with Abdulbaset Sieda, SNC president, Uppsala, Sweden, August 13, 2012.

³⁸ Greg Miller, "Syrian activists say pledges of U.S. communications aid are largely unfulfilled", *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-activists-say-pledges-of-us-communications-aid-are-largely-unfulfilled/2012/08/20/14dff95a-eaf8-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html.

³⁹ Eric Schmitt, "C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition", *The New York Times*, June 21, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?pagewanted=all

⁴⁰ At least one influential jihadi scholar has ruled that it is religiously permissible for jihadis in Syria to use non-Islamic terminology and cooperate with the FSA, in order to access Western and Gulf funding intended for non-jihadi rebel groups (Abul-Mondher el-Chinguetti, "ma hukm isti'mal lafzat el-hurriya wal-ta'amul ma'a el-jaiish el-hurr" ["What is the ruling in regard to using the word Freedom and cooperating with the FSA?"]), *Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, Question 6372, June 6, 2012, www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6372&pageqa=1&i=).

In summer 2012, a private organization called the Syrian Support Group (SSG) was granted a license from the US Department of the Treasury to provide direct support to the FSA.⁴¹ The SSG is formally controlled by a group of Syrian expats and denies receiving any state support, but in practice it appears to act on behalf of the US government, providing plausible deniability for Washington's funding of the Syrian insurgency. Interestingly, the SSG has opted to bypass the SNC and the Col. Asaad faction of the FSA completely. Instead, it deals directly with the regional FSA Military Councils. With preparations now in place, SSG funding of the Military Councils was expected to commence in early fall 2012, but it has not yet made its mark on the insurgency.⁴²

In an interview with *Time Magazine*, a member of the jihadi Ahrar el-Sham Brigades noted the inefficiency of the FSA's state support in contrast to their own privately funded religious channels, saying that FSA members "get more support than we do, but our support is delivered to us, theirs doesn't make it to them. [...] Their support stays in Turkey, it doesn't make it to the revolutionaries here. If our supporters send us 100 lira, we get 100 lira."⁴³

Foreign fighters

The Syrian conflict is attracting foreign volunteers in growing numbers. Not all foreign fighters are jihadis, but Islamists are disproportionately over-represented, and many will be further radicalized through war and socialization into jihadi organizations.

The foreign fighter traffic is closely watched by various intelligence agencies, since it is believed to greatly increase the risk of regional and international "blowback". As Thomas Hegghammer points out, "[f]oreign fighters matter because they can affect the conflicts they join, as they did in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics. Perhaps more important, foreign fighter mobilizations empower transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy [...] Indeed, a majority of al-Qaida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups

⁴¹ Mark Hosenball, "Obama authorizes secret support for Syrian rebels", *Reuters*, August 1, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/02/us-usa-syria-obama-order-idUSBRE8701OK20120802.

⁴² Meeting with Brian Sayers, director of government relations for the Syrian Support Group, Stockholm, August 27, 2012.

⁴³ Rania Abouzeid, "Going Rogue: Bandits and Criminal Gangs Threaten Syria's Rebellion", *Time Magazine*, July 30, 2012, world.time.com/2012/07/30/going-rogue-bandits-and-criminal-gangs-threaten-syrias-rebellion.

today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilizations.”⁴⁴

According to one estimate, between 800 and 2,000 foreigners are currently fighting in Syria. This is believed to be less than 10 percent of total rebel manpower, but the foreign contingent is likely to be heavily populated by ideological jihadis, and it brings with it funds and military know-how that further empower extremist segments of the rebel movement.⁴⁵

The main entry-points for foreign fighters into Syria are the border regions of northern Lebanon, where local activists exploit old smuggling trails to convey arms, provisions and volunteers to Syrian rebels;⁴⁶ and southern Turkey, where Antakya has emerged as a main logistics hub.⁴⁷ The single largest group of volunteers appears to be the Lebanese, aided by powerful Islamist networks in the Tripoli region. In the south, the Jordanian government tries to limit the traffic of fighters,⁴⁸ but Jordanian salafis nevertheless boast that more than 100 of them currently fight for Jabhat el-Nosra in Syria.⁴⁹ Media reports indicate that tens of Libyans, Tunisians, Kuwaitis and Saudis have also joined the battle, while individuals or small groups have been spotted from countries including Algeria, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and even Chechnya and Pakistan.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad." *International Security* 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11), p. 53.

⁴⁵ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Assad's Self-Fulfilling Prophecy", *Pravda Slovakia*, August 14, 2012, available on www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assads-self-fulfilling-prophecy.

⁴⁶ Radwan Mortada, "Wadi Khaled: The Free Syrian Army Base in Lebanon", *el-Akhbar*, part I: February 6, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/content/wadi-khaled-free-syrian-army-base-lebanon-i; part II, February 8, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/wadi-khaled-free-syrian-army-base-lebanon-ii>; Part III, February 8, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/wadi-khaled-free-syrian-army-base-lebanon-iii>.

⁴⁷ Interview with the Syrian opposition journalist Malik al-Abdeh, telephone, July 31, 2012.

⁴⁸ Mohammed el-Najjar, "el-urdun yuhakim sitta sa'ou lil-jihad fi souria" ("Jordan tries six who went for Jihad in Syria"), *Aljazeera*, June 6, 2012, www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/a8d5ee74-585e-457a-9dce-0d85c6d6763a;

"wakil el-jihadiyin yatahaddath 'an tanzim 'ahl el-sham'" ("The counsel of the jihadis speaks about the Ahl el-Sham Organization"), *el-Quds el-Arabi*, July 24, 2012,

<http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\24z496.htm&arc=data\2012\07\07-24\24z496.htm>; Taylor Luck, "Infiltrators arrested on border with Syria — security source", *The Jordan Times*, April 17, 2012, jordantimes.com/infiltrators-arrested-on-border-with-syria---security-source.

⁴⁹ "Abu Sayyaf: 100 min el-tayyar el-salafi yuqatiloun fi Souria" ("Abu Sayyaf: 100 from the Salafi movement are fighting in Syria"), *Kull el-Urdun*, August 24, 2012, www.allofjo.net/index.php?page=article&id=34394.

⁵⁰ Rashed el-Sheraki, "asharat al-kuwaitiyyin yuqatiloun ila janib al-jaiish al-souri al-hurr" ("Tens of Kuwaitis fight alongside the FSA"), *al-Qabas*, June 10, 2012, www.alqabas.com.kw/node/82125; Nicholas Blanford, "Exclusive: Veteran Lebanese fighter trains new generation of jihadis – for Syria", *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 30, 2012, www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0530/Exclusive-Veteran-Lebanese-fighter-trains-new-generation-of-jihadis-for-Syria; "Tunisian spokesman calls on preachers to stop pushing jihad in Syria among the youth", *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2012,

www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/tunisian-spokesman-calls-on-preachers-to-stop-pushing-jihad-in-syria-among-the-youth/2012/06/08/gJQAIxsuNV_story.html; Borzou Daragahi, "Libya 'cannot stop' fighters joining Syria rebels", *The Financial Times*, February 9, 2012, www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0976ef5e-5248-11e1-a155-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1xO461s8V; Ulrike Putz, "Foreign Fighters Join Syrian Rebels: Jihadists Declare Holy War Against Assad Regime", *Der Spiegel*, March 30, 2012, www.spiegel.de/international/world/foreign-jihadists-declare-war-on-syria-s-assad-a-824875.html.

Two groups in particular have been identified with the foreign fighter phenomenon: Jabhat el-Nosra and the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades. Both are among the most extreme salafi groups in the Syrian rebel movement, and Jabhat el-Nosra in particular is closely tied to the transnational jihadi environment. When asked by an *el-Hayat* reporter, an FSA commander in the Hama countryside singled out these two groups for using foreign fighters, claiming however that they comprise less than 20 percent of the manpower in Jabhat el-Nosra and less than 5 percent in Ahrar el-Sham.⁵¹

Examples of Western-based salafis joining the uprising remain rare, but they do exist. A French citizen of Lebanese and Algerian descent who had trained in jihadi camps in Afghanistan in the late 1990s died while fighting in Quseir (south-western Homs Governorate) in early August 2012, allegedly as a member of an unspecified FSA brigade.⁵² Another example is a British convert to Islam who is now fighting with the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades in Aleppo.⁵³ The British photographer James Cantlie, who was held prisoner by jihadis near the Turkish border, reported that there were Britons among his captors.⁵⁴ A prominent case concerns the influential Syrian salafi-jihadi theologian Abu Basir el-Tartousi (who supports the FSA rather than Jabhat el-Nosra). Normally based in London, he recently traveled to the conflict zone to lend his support to the revolution.⁵⁵

Syrian jihadist groups

There is no official al-Qaeda faction in Syria. Attempts to create such a group, to be called al-Qaeda fi Bilad el-Sham (“al-Qaeda in the Levant”), were disrupted by government repression in the mid-to-late 2000s.⁵⁶ A number of smaller jihadi groups have been active in Syria during the 2000s, mostly linked to the Iraqi resistance movement and/or the Palestinian

⁵¹ Hazem el-Amin, "el-Islamiyoun el-akhtar tanziman wa-tamwilan wa-ghumoudan wal-aqall 'addadan wa-nufoudhan'" ("The Islamists are best organized, funded and vague, and least numerous and influential"), *el-Hayat*, August 14, 2012, alhayat.com/Details/426355.

⁵² Discussion thread with biographical information on the Ansar el-Mujahedin forum, <http://as-ansar.org/vb/printthread.php?t=67042>.

⁵³ Richard Spencer, "British convert to Islam vows to fight to the death on Syrian rebel front line", *The Daily Telegraph*, August 16, 2012, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9481246/British-convert-to-Islam-vows-to-fight-to-the-death-on-Syrian-rebel-front-line.html.

⁵⁴ James Longman, "Syria conflict: British fighters seek jihad", *BBC*, August 16, 2012, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19283578.

⁵⁵ "el-sheikh abi basir el-tartousi nafar ilal-jihad fi bilad el-sham" ("Sheikh Abu Basir el-Tartousi enlisted in the jihad in the Levant"), YouTube video uploaded by AITwhed1, May 11, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgihhPIECag

⁵⁶ Camille el-Tawil, "el-Wajh el-akher lil-'Qaeda' (6/4) ... 'el-Qaida fi Ard el-Kenana' mashrou' fashala qabla an yabda", *el-Hayat*, September 28, 2010, daralhayat.com/portalarciendah/185506.

refugee community in Lebanon. Among them are Osbat el-Ansar (“League of Adherents”), a Palestinian group concentrated in the Ein el-Hilwe camp in southern Lebanon; Fath el-Islam, which will be described in some detail below; and Jund el-Sham (“Soldiers of the Levant”), a now defunct jihadi group which on several occasions clashed with Syrian authorities in the mid-2000s. Individual Syrians have also been active in jihadi organizations outside of the Levant, most notably Abu Moussaab el-Souri, a maverick guerrilla theoretician and sometime al-Qaeda member.⁵⁷

Since the uprising began in March 2011, and particularly during 2012, several new groups have formed. Today, the radical religious fringe of the Syrian rebel movement is composed of a plethora of small and mostly local networks, some of which even lack a name, alongside vaguely defined religious factions within the larger non-jihadi movements, and a small number of disciplined and doctrinaire salafi-jihadi groups. Distinctions are often hard to make. There are those that share only some features of contemporary salafi-jihadi ideology. For example, many insurgent groups will speak of jihad and use symbols associated with the transnational salafi-jihadi movement, like the black-and-white flag popularized by al-Qaeda in Iraq,⁵⁸ but not all of them are truly motivated by salafi-jihadi ideology. There are also organizations, which, while sincerely Islamist, cannot be considered a part of the salafi-jihadi movement, e.g. those aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. On the ground, within single villages or clans, political factions can sometimes cooperate in perfect harmony, sharing bases, arsenals and even members, regardless of their theoretical and doctrinaire differences. Joint operations including both jihadi and non-jihadi groups are common,⁵⁹ and many

⁵⁷ Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri*, Columbia University Press, 2008. It is generally believed that Abu Moussaab (real name: Mustafa Sitt-Maryam Nassar), who was captured by the CIA in Pakistan in 2005 and handed over to Syrian authorities, has been released by the Assad regime in late 2011 or early 2012. His current whereabouts are unknown. See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Confirmed by online jihadis: Abu mus'ab al-Suri has been released from prison", *Jihadology*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.jihadology.net/2012/02/02/confirmed-by-online-jihadis-abu-mu%E1%B9%A3ab-al-suri-has-been-released-from-prison>.

⁵⁸ Often incorrectly referred to as “the flag of al-Qaeda”, this black banner bears the Islamic creed of “there is no God but God”, with the second part “Mohammed is his prophet” inscribed in an imperfect circle below. Its design is inspired by a seal allegedly used by the prophet Mohammed. The flag does not formally represent any one group, but it is very strongly associated with the salafi-jihadi movement. For an illustration, see http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/No_god_but_God.jpg.

⁵⁹ For example, this video purports to show a joint operation between the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades, the Suqour el-Sham Division, and “others” belonging to some unit of the FSA: “Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham || Amaliya mushtarika ma'a Suqour el-Sham wa-akhirin” (“Ahrar el-Sham Brigades || Joint operation with the Suqour el-Sham and others”), YouTube video uploaded by abo sofyam, August 14, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdDBpjy2REA.

families have members in different factions. For example, Abdelaziz el-Salama, leader of the FSA's Tawhid Division in Aleppo, has a cousin who is a Jabhat el-Nosra commander.⁶⁰

The following list of organizations should not be taken as representative of the rebel movement at large, or as an exhaustive list of Syrian jihadi groups. It focuses on the most well-known and clearly defined salafi-jihadi groups, and also includes some interesting borderline cases that do not quite fit the bill; it does not list e.g. Muslim Brotherhood groups.

Jabhat el-Nosra

Jabhat el-nosra li-ahl el-sham min mujahedi el-sham fi sahat el-jihad ("The Front for Aid to the People of the Levant from the Mujahedin of the Levant in the Battlefields of Jihad") is not Syria's largest jihadi group, but certainly the best known, and the one most likely to gain official approval by al-Qaeda. It has already been endorsed by several internationally or locally prominent jihadi thinkers (including Abul-Mondher el-Chinguetti of the influential *Minbar el-Tawhid wal-Jihad* website,⁶¹ the Jordanian Abu Mohammed el-Tahawi,⁶² and Lebanon's Abul-Zahra el-Zubeidi⁶³) and is clearly seen by most of the global salafi-jihadi community as "their" group in Syria.

Jabhat el-Nosra publicly declared its existence in a video message in January 2012.⁶⁴ Its reputation has been built on a campaign of spectacular suicide and car bomb attacks in Syria's

⁶⁰ Richard Spencer, "Dispatch: the Syrian ghost town that shows the future of Aleppo", *The Daily Telegraph*, August 22, 2012, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9492916/Dispatch-the-Syrian-ghost-town-that-shows-the-future-of-Aleppo.html.

⁶¹ Abul-Mondher el-Chinguetti, "ma hukm isti'mal lafzat al-hurriya wal-ta'amul ma'a al-jaish al-hurr" ("What is the ruling in regard to using the word Freedom and cooperating with the FSA?"), *Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, Question 6372, June 6, 2012, www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/display_question?qid=6372&pageqa=1&i=-.

⁶² Abu Mohammed el-Tahawi, "al-nosra bil-intisar li-jabhat al-nosra" ("Aiding the victory of Jabhat al-Nosra"), March 14, 2012, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=154359>, also available on <http://jihadology.net/2012/03/14/al-masadat-media-foundation-presents-a-new-statement-from-shaykh-abu-mu%E1%B8%A5ammad-al-%E1%B9%ADa%E1%B8%A5awi-victory-with-triumph-for-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah>.

⁶³ Abul-Zahra el-Zubeidi, "al-fawaid al-shar'ia fil-i'lan an jabhat al-nosra al-jihadiya" ("The Sharia Benefits in Announcing the Jihadi Jabhat al-Nosra"), Shumoukh el-Islam, May 15, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=161736>, also available on <http://jihadology.net/2012/05/15/al-masadat-media-foundation-presents-a-new-article-from-shaykh-abu-al-zahra-al-zubaydi-shariah-benefits-in-the-announcement-of-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah>. For more on Abul-Zahra el-Zubeidi, whose real name is Osama el-Shihabi, see the section on Fath el-Islam.

⁶⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents: 'Declaration of the Victory Front (Jabhat al-Nuṣrah): For the People of Syria from the Mujāhidīn of Syria in the Fields of Jihād'", *Jihadology*, January 24, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/01/24/al-manarah-al-bayda-foundation-for-media-production-presents-for-the-people-of-syria-from-the-mujahidin-of-syria-in-the-fields-of-jihad-jabhat-al-nuṣrah-the-front-of-victory.

urban centers, presented in carefully framed video statements.⁶⁵ It has also carried out numerous assassinations of pro-regime figures (mainly military officers, but also civilians, e.g. journalists), engaged in hostage taking and executions, and planted roadside bombs against army forces.⁶⁶

The group is secretive and elitist, includes many foreign fighters, and has a limited visible street presence.⁶⁷ Judging from its publicly known track record, Jabhat el-Nosra rarely engages security forces in open combat. However, media reports during the summer of 2012 indicate that this may be changing. Small groups of Jabhat el-Nosra members are now often reported to be fighting alongside FSA brigades and other jihadis, particularly in the Idleb, Deir el-Zor and Aleppo regions. In Aleppo, a local Jabhat el-Nosra commander claimed in mid-August to have some 300 armed fighters under his command.⁶⁸ Judging from Jabhat el-Nosra's videos and statements, the Deir el-Zor branch stands out for engaging government forces directly, in small-arms ambushes and assaults on isolated army outposts.

Anecdotally, Jabhat el-Nosra appears to be strongest in the Damascus and Deir el-Zor regions, with considerable activity also in the Aleppo and Idleb countryside, and to some extent rural Deraa, Hama, etc. A survey of written statements by Jabhat el-Nosra reveals that a large majority of them concern operations in the Damascus countryside, but whether this corresponds to the density of Jabhat el-Nosra's armed presence on the ground is difficult to tell.

⁶⁵ Early examples included the attacks in Damascus (Jan. 6, 2012) and Aleppo (Feb. 10, 2012) in Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: 'Battle of Revenge for the Free of ash-Shām (Syria)'", *Jihadology*, February 27, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/02/27/al-manarah-al-bay%e1%b8%8da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-video-message-from-jabhat-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-battle-of-revenge-for-the-free-of-ash-sham-syria; and a March 17 twin suicide bombing in Damascus, in Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: '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-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-fulfillment-of-the-vow-1.

⁶⁶ For a full list of Jabhat el-Nosra communiqués, refer to Aaron Y. Zelin's excellent site *Jihadology*: <http://jihadology.net/category/jabhah-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah>.

⁶⁷ Hazem el-Amin, "el-Islamiyoun el-akhtar tanziman wa-tamwilan wa-ghumoudan wal-aqall 'addadan wa-nufoudhan'" ("The Islamists are best organized, funded and vague, and least numerous and influential"), *el-Hayat*, August 14, 2012, alhayat.com/Details/426355.

⁶⁸ Justin Vela & Liz Sly, "In Syria, group suspected of al-Qaeda links gaining prominence in war to topple Assad", *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-group-suspected-of-al-qaeda-links-gaining-prominence-in-war-to-topple-assad/2012/08/19/c7cfd666-ea22-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html.

In its public propaganda, Jabhat el-Nosra has been anxious to preempt accusations of "Iraq-style" extremism. It has not indiscriminately targeted civilians or conducted large-scale sectarian massacres, although it does murder civilian supporters of the regime. While consistently threatening and aggressive towards Alawites, a March statement about the bombing of an intelligence facility in a Christian-inhabited Damascus neighborhood, included a clarification: "we inform the Nazarenes (Christians) that they were not a target".⁶⁹ The group has also produced video clips to demonstrate that it would rather cancel an attack than endanger Muslim passers-by. It also tries to demonstrate a charitable side, by showing clips of fighters handing out food and provisions to the civilian population in "liberated" villages.⁷⁰

The most credible theory of Jabhat el-Nosra's background is that it was formed by Syrian and other Levantine jihadis who had been fighting with al-Qaeda's "Islamic State in Iraq" (ISI, *Dawlat el-Iraq el-Islamiya*), or who were active in pro-ISI support networks in surrounding countries. US political and intelligence sources have repeatedly pointed to links between Jabhat el-Nosra and the ISI.⁷¹ Support for the theory of an al-Qaeda link can also be found in the fact that the transnational jihadi community immediately embraced the group. Indeed, some major jihadi web forums ran pre-release advertisements for Jabhat el-Nosra's first video, as if it had been vouched for by trusted sources. Jabhat al-Nosra also appears to have a considerable presence in those regions of eastern Syria that traditionally served as entrypoints into Iraq (Mayadin, Deir el-Zor, Al-Bu Kamal), and the rare interviews with Jabhat el-Nosra members often reveal a connection to the Iraqi resistance movement.⁷²

⁶⁹ Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new statement from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: 'Operation Against the Directorate of Air Security and the Department of Criminal Security in Damascus'", *Jihadology*, March 21, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/03/21/al-manarah-al-bay%e1%b8%8da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-operation-against-the-directorate-of-air-security-and-the-department-of-criminal>.

⁷⁰ Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: '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-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-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>.

⁷¹ Jonathan S. Landay, "U.S. officials: Al Qaeda behind Syria bombings", *McClatchy*, February 10, 2012, www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/02/10/138593/us-officials-al-qaida-behind-syria.html; Zeina Karam, "Islamists seek influence in Syria uprising", *The Guardian*, March 22, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10156718>.

⁷² Rania Abouzeid, "TIME Exclusive: Meet the Islamist Militants Fighting Alongside Syria's Rebels", *Time Magazine*, July 26, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels/#ixzz23RjwPIbS>; Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Al-Qaida turns tide for rebels in battle for eastern Syria", *The Guardian*, July 30, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/30/al-qaida-rebels-battle-syria.

Neither al-Qaeda nor Jabhat el-Nosra itself have acknowledged such ties. Although the al-Qaeda emir Ayman el-Zawahiri has praised the Syrian revolution,⁷³ he has refrained from endorsing any particular organization. In fact, no al-Qaeda spokesperson has even mentioned Jabhat el-Nosra by name, half a year after the group's emergence, indicating the existence of some kind of no-comments policy. Jabhat el-Nosra fighters on the ground do not admit to having any ties to al-Qaeda, judging from the scarce interview material available.⁷⁴

According to one Syrian opposition source who has had personal access to Jabhat el-Nosra members and mid-level leaders in the Idleb Governorate, the organization "was created by Syrians who have been around the world fighting, who have a very strong connection to al-Qaeda. The founders have been fighting in Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and so on, so they possess much experience and have the connections needed to get both money and weapons."

⁷³ Aaron Y. Zelin, "As-Sahāb Media presents a new video message from al-Qā'idah's Dr. Ayman al-Zawāhirī: 'Onward Oh Lions of Syria'", *Jihadology*, February 11, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/11/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-onward-oh-lions-of-syria>.

⁷⁴ Rania Abouzeid, "TIME Exclusive: Meet the Islamist Militants Fighting Alongside Syria's Rebels", *Time Magazine*, July 26, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels/#ixzz74>

Aaron Y. Zelin, "As-Sahāb Media presents a new video message from al-Qā'idah's Dr. Ayman al-Zawāhirī: 'Onward Oh Lions of Syria'", *Jihadology*, February 11, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/11/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-onward-oh-lions-of-syria>.

⁷⁴ Rania Abouzeid, "TIME Exclusive: Meet the Islamist Militants Fighting Alongside Syria's Rebels", *Time Magazine*, July 26, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels/#ixzz23RjwPIbS>; Justin Vela & Liz Sly, "In Syria, group suspected of al-Qaeda links gaining prominence in war to topple Assad", *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-group-suspected-of-al-qaeda-links-gaining-prominence-in-war-to-topple-assad/2012/08/19/c7cfd66-ea22-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html?wprss=rss_middle-east.

⁷⁴ Interview with a Syrian activist who prefers to remain anonymous.

⁷⁴ Mohammed Al Shafey & Paula Astatih, "FSA and Islamists express doubts about Al-Nusra Front", *el-Sharq el-awsat*, March 22, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28956.

⁷⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new statement from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: 'Operation Against the Directorate of Air Security and the Department of Criminal Security in Damascus'", *Jihadology*, March 21, 2012, <http://jihadology.net/2012/03/21/al-manarah-al-bay%E1%B8%8da-foundation-for-media-production-presents-a-new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah-operation-against-the-directorate-of-air-security-and-the-department-of-criminal>.

⁷⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "al-Manārah al-Bayḍā' Foundation for Media Production presents a new video message from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: '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-nu%rah-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>.

⁷⁴ Jonathan S. Landay, "U.S. officials: Al Qaida behind Syria bombings", *McClatchy*, February 10, 2012, www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/02/10/138593/us-officials-al-qaida-behind-syria.html; Zeina Karam, "Islamists seek influence in Syria uprising", *The Guardian*, March 22, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10156718>.

⁷⁴ Rania Abouzeid, "TIME Exclusive: Meet the Islamist Militants Fighting Alongside Syria's Rebels", *Time Magazine*, July 26, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/07/26/time-exclusive-meet-the-islamist-militants-fighting-alongside-syrias-rebels/#ixzz23RjwPIbS>; Ghaiḥ Abdul-Ahad, "Al-Qaida turns tide for rebels in battle for eastern Syria", *The Guardian*, July 30, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/30/al-qaida-rebels-battle-syria.

⁷⁴ Justin Vela & Liz Sly, "In Syria, group suspected of al-Qaeda links gaining prominence in war to topple Assad", *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2012, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-group-suspected-of-al-qaeda-links-gaining-prominence-in-war-to-topple-assad/2012/08/19/c7cfd66-ea22-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html?wprss=rss_middle-east.

The same source adds that Jabhat el-Nosra freely receives non-Syrian volunteers, and that although the foreigners rarely participate in battles, they carry out the majority of suicide operations and conduct training for local members. However, the source also claims that some members of Jabhat el-Nosra are known to him for collaborating with the Assad regime during the Iraq war, and states that he believes that the group is “indirectly” manipulated by the regime.⁷⁵

Many Syrian dissidents, including leaders of the SNC and the FSA, have voiced similar suspicions.⁷⁶ Having long refused to acknowledge a jihadi presence in Syria at all, they blame Jabhat el-Nosra’s activity on the government, although often with very little evidence. A small number of jihadi theologians have also kept their distance. The most notable example is Abu Basir el-Tartousi, a major salafi-jihadi thinker from Syria who has been quite hostile to Jabhat el-Nosra, and instead endorses the FSA as his “heroic Mujahedin” of choice.⁷⁷

Some of the jihadi criticism against Jabhat el-Nosra focuses on its closed and intransparent nature. Its leader (referred to by the *nom de guerre* el-Fateh Abu Mohammed el-Joulani, which indicates that he is from the Israeli-occupied Golan/Joulan Heights), appears only through distorted voice recordings, and the group refuses to comment on its background. While this could be attributed to an understandable need for secrecy, the lack of identifiable members is disquieting to some jihadis, and it has helped fuel the rumors that Jabhat el-Nosra is a regime creation.

Questions also surround one alleged Jabhat el-Nosra operation in particular. On May 10, two explosions in the southern Qazzaz neighborhood of Damascus damaged a compound housing Branch 251 of the Military Intelligence Directorate, better known as the Palestine Branch. For

⁷⁵ Interview with a Syrian activist who prefers to remain anonymous.

⁷⁶ Mohammed Al Shafey & Paula Astatih, “FSA and Islamists express doubts about Al-Nusra Front”, *el-Sharq el-awsat*, March 22, 2012, www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28956.

⁷⁷ Abu Basir al-Tartousi, “al-muarada al-islamiya lil-nizam al-souri”, Facebook post, February 27, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/332542243454471>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “New article from Shaykh Abū Basīr al-Ṭarṭūsī: ‘Question and Answer About the Mujāhidīn of the Free Syrian Army’”, *Jihadology*, February 15, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/02/15/new-article-from-shaykh-abu-basir-al-tartusi-question-and-answer-about-the-mujahidin-of-the-free-syrian-army. For more on Abu Basir el-Tartousi (real name: Abdelmoneim Mustafa Halima) and the conflicts among jihadi scholars concerning the Syrian uprising, see Aron Lund, “Holier Than Thou: Rival Clerics in the Syrian Jihad”, *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 14, July 16, 2012, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39615&cHash=ae5805038349487757e5e256bcc7566d](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39615&cHash=ae5805038349487757e5e256bcc7566d).

decades, the building has served as Syria's most infamous interrogation and torture center,⁷⁸ and the Assad regime's inability to protect such a core security facility constituted a serious blow to government prestige. However, the bombing also killed several passers-by, and it was instantly condemned as a terrorist attack by governments and politicians around the world.

The SNC wasted no time in blaming the regime for staging the attack "to prove its claims of the existence of 'armed terrorist gangs' in the country",⁷⁹ and the FSA also accused Assad of having orchestrated the bombing.⁸⁰ State media just as quickly decided that jihadis had carried out the bombing, and published what was allegedly a Jabhat el-Nosra statement of responsibility. This statement was soon revealed to be a forgery, and Jabhat el-Nosra's official media wing el-Manara el-Beida officially repudiated it on May 13. However, the new and genuine Jabhat el-Nosra communiqué neither confirmed nor denied responsibility for the Qazzaz attack itself, noting only that "no comment and no information has been issued by Jabhat el-Nosra about the explosions this Thursday".⁸¹ Opposition groups therefore continued to insist that the attacks had been staged as part of a regime conspiracy.⁸² Months later, in August 2012, Jabhat el-Nosra still hasn't commented on the attack, despite the continuing controversy, and despite renewed regime accusations against it.⁸³

Adding to the confusion, a hitherto unknown pro-jihadi group called the Levant Division Center for Media and Research released a professional-looking 15-page study of the operation to its recently created Twitter account⁸⁴ and several jihadi forums in June 2012. The study, signed "Abderrahman Mohammed el-Nimr", concluded that the attack had been of great

⁷⁸ For some information on the Palestine Branch, and other torture centers in Syria, see "Torture Archipelago", Human Rights Watch, July 3, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/fr/node/108415/section/7>.

⁷⁹ "SNC Condemns Damascus Explosions and Holds the Regime Responsible", Syrian National Council, May 11, 2012, www.syriancouncil.org/en/news/item/669-damascus-explosions-implicate-regime.html.

⁸⁰ "bayan el-'aqid khaled el-habboush qaid el-majlis el-'askari dimashq wa-rifi-ha hawla tafjirat dimashq 2012 05 10" ("Statement of Col. Khaled el-Habboush leader of the Military Council in Damascus and its countryside about the explosions in Damascus 2012 05 10"), YouTube video uploaded by sameralsaka123, May 10, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdUWEGTkZcY.

⁸¹ Aaron Y. Zelin, "New statement from Jabhat al-Nuṣrah: "Alert Regarding Statement Attributed to Fake Palestinian Branch of Jabhat al-Nuṣrah" [sic], *Jihadology*, May 14, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/05/14/new-statement-from-jabhat-al-nuṣrah-alert-regarding-the-statement-attributed-to-the-fake-palestinian-branch-of-jabhat-al-nuṣrah.

⁸² Martin Chulov, "Syrian security forces set off Damascus bombs blamed on al-Qaida – defectors", *The Guardian*, May 18, 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/18/syrian-military-defectors-damascus-blasts?CMP=tw_t_gu.

⁸³ M. Ismael & H. Sabbagh, "Syrian TV Shows Documentary on Bombings Planned and Carried out by Al Qaeda-Affiliated Jabhat al-Nasra in Damascus", *SANA*, June 10, 2012, www.sana.sy/print.html?sid=424423&newlang=eng; "Terrorists of Damascus Bombing were from Jordan & Al Qaeda", *Press TV*, YouTube video uploaded by ardalanhamrah, June 10, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEcktgwpuN0.

⁸⁴ Levant Division Center for Media and Research on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/lewaalsham>.

political value, and that Jabhat el-Nosra was the "most likely" perpetrator.⁸⁵ The Levant Division Center then ceased all activity, as quickly as it had appeared.

Ahrar el-Sham Brigades

The Ahrar el-Sham Brigades (*Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham*: "Brigades of the Free of the Levant") are a network of jihadi groups spread over several Syrian provinces, with a stronghold in the country's north-west. It is likely to be Syria's largest jihadi organization in numerical terms, and ranks among the most important rebel factions in Syria. It was established in late 2011, although some member brigades apparently began organizing themselves already in early 2011, before the Syrian revolution erupted.⁸⁶ Little is known about its leadership, but its "military responsible" appears unmasked in interviews under the name Abul-Hassan.⁸⁷

The group takes care to describe itself as "independent" and states that it is "not an extension of any organization, party, or group". It is overtly Islamist, espouses jihadi rhetoric, and declares that it strives to establish a "righteous and just Islamic rule".⁸⁸ However, Ahrar el-Sham propaganda also utilizes some nationalist imagery, and does not fully resemble the formulaic salafi-jihadi discourse. The Ahrar el-Sham Brigades do not seem to possess the same strong links as Jabhat el-Nosra to the international salafi-jihadi community, even though they accept non-Syrian volunteers. (Most foreigners fighting in the Idleb and Aleppo Governorates are said to be Ahrar el-Sham members.⁸⁹)

Ahrar el-Sham has posted videos of its attacks to the Internet since early 2012 at least, but it took several months before the international media began to pay attention. By early summer 2012, scattered references to the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades had begun to crop up in reporting from the Idleb and Aleppo governorates. From summer 2012, Ahrar el-Sham has stepped up

⁸⁵ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Luwā' ash-Shām Center for Media, Research, and Documentation presents: "A Penalty of the Unjust: The Destruction of the Palestinian Branch and Patrols: Examining the Operation and Its Implications", *Jihadology*, June 18, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/06/18/luwa-ash-sham-center-for-media-research-and-documentation-presents-a-penalty-of-the-unjust-the-destruction-of-the-palestinian-branch-and-patrols-examining-the-operation-and-its-implications.

⁸⁶ 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/

⁸⁷ "kataeb ahrar el-sham mudakhalat el-masoul el-askari alal-jazira" ("Ahrar el-Sham Brigades, interview with the military responsible on Aljazeera"), YouTube video uploaded by Ahrar Alsham, August 29, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKbdwLhvIK4>.

⁸⁸ The official Ahrar el-Sham Brigades page on Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/info>

⁸⁹ Erika Solomon, "Insight: Syria rebels see future fight with foreign radicals", *Reuters*, August 8, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/08/us-syria-crisis-insight-idUSBRE8770BK20120808.

its media work considerably. Since July the group runs a website,⁹⁰ a Facebook page,⁹¹ and a Twitter account.⁹² In this, they differ from the more secretive Jabhat el-Nosra organization, which only communicates through jihadi web forums.

Member brigades seem to act autonomously on the field, but communication efforts are centralized through the leadership, with a single graphic profile and style. Ahrar el-Sham routinely releases videos documenting attacks or eulogizing "martyrs" fallen in battle. It has also released footage from social activities in "liberated" areas. For example, one video clip shows young children studying Islam under a sheikh from the el-Tawhid wal-Iman Brigade, an Ahrar el-Sham faction in the Maarrat el-Nouman region of Idlib Governorate.⁹³ In August 2012, the Shahba Brigade of Ahrar el-Sham made headlines around the world by posting a video showing a brutal extrajudicial execution of four captured regime supporters in Aleppo, causing international criticism of the Syrian insurgent movement (although few were able to identify the organization responsible).⁹⁴

Apart from guerrilla fighting and ambushes, Ahrar el-Sham member units use remotely triggered bombings against patrolling army units, and harass government forces with sniper and mortar fire. They have used suicide bombers to attack checkpoints and bases. In late August, the group carried out a major raid on a military airport near Taftanaz in Idlib province, using truck-mounted guns and other weapons. The operation brought together six Ahrar el-Sham member brigades with a group from the Umma Division and another independent unit, indicating an emerging capacity to coordinate large groups of fighters.⁹⁵ Ahrar el-Sham has not, however, been involved in high-profile urban bombings of the kind that Jabhat el-Nosra practices.

⁹⁰ Ahrar el-Sham Brigades official site: <http://www.ahraralsham.com>.

⁹¹ Ahrar el-Sham Brigades on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham>.

⁹² Ahrar el-Sham Brigades on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ahraralsham>.

⁹³ "Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham || el-Dawrat el-shar'iya el-khassa bil-atfal" ("Ahrar el-Sham Brigades || Special sharia classes for kids"), YouTube video uploaded by Ahrar Alsham, August 6, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0i4k5D2yr4.

⁹⁴ Statement and video on "Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham || Katibat el-Shahba || halab", July 31, 2012,

<https://www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/posts/266959640071132>. The murdered prisoners were allegedly from the Berri family. Members of this family have for decades exploited a close relationship with the Syrian intelligence apparatus, and the family has a reputation for involvement in Aleppo's criminal underworld. During the uprising, some members of the Berri clan – which is Sunni Muslim – were instrumental in organizing the state-supported civilian gangs ("shabbiha" in opposition parlance) which are used to put down anti-regime protests in Aleppo.

⁹⁵ "kataeb ahrar el-sham mudakhelat el-masoul el-askari alal-jazira" ("Ahrar el-Sham Brigades, interview with the military responsible on Aljazeera"), YouTube video uploaded by Ahrar Alsham, August 29, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKbdwLhvIK4>.

According to its website, the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades are made up of nearly fifty jihadi groups, such as the Qawafil el-Shuhada (Idleb), Ansar el-Haqq (Idleb), and Salaheddine Brigade (Hama). They exist in most of Syria's Sunni-populated governorates, but are particularly concentrated in the Idleb Governorate (half of the brigades listed), with Hama a distant second. Press reports appear to confirm that the group has a strong foothold in the Sunni countryside stretching from the northern Ghab Plain west of Hama, towards Idleb and the Turkish border, east of the Alawite mountains. Also judging from its own website, the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades are conspicuously weak in some Sunni-majority governorates otherwise known for intensive rebel activity: Homs (only two brigades, in the Houla region and Tel-Kalakh respectively), Deraa (one brigade, no location specified) and Deir el-Zor (no presence).⁹⁶

Fath el-Islam

The origins of Fath el-Islam ("Conquest of Islam") are the subject of numerous conflicting conspiracy theories. The group was originally founded in November 2006 as a jihadi breakout organization from Fath el-Intifada (sometimes known in English as "Fatah Uprising"). This is a marginal non-PLO Palestinian faction, which itself broke with Yasser Arafat's mainstream Fatah movement in 1983, and which has for decades served as a loyal proxy of the Syrian government.

In May 2007, violent clashes erupted between the Lebanese army and hundreds of Fath el-Islam members, of several different nationalities, holed up in the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli. The fighting lasted for months. It left parts of Nahr el-Bared in ruins, and decimated Fath el-Islam. The group retained a low-key presence in Lebanon and Syria, but generally refocused its attention on rebuilding the network, partly through contacts with the Iraqi wing of al-Qaeda.⁹⁷

Fath el-Islam's creator and initial leader was Shaker el-Absi, a Palestinian previously involved with jihadi attacks against US targets in Jordan, who had recently, for unknown

⁹⁶ The official Ahrar el-Sham Brigades page on Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/info>. This information is clearly out of date, but it remains the most comprehensive list of Ahrar el-Sham member factions available.

⁹⁷ Radwan Murtada, "al-baith an amir li-bilad al-sham [2/3] | al-imara min fath al-islam ila kataeb abdallah azzam" ("The search for an emir of the Levant [2/3] | The Emirate from Fath al-Islam to the Abdullah Azzam Brigades"), *el-Akhbar*, January 24, 2012, www.al-akhbar.com/node/33434.

reasons, been released from a Syrian prison. During the Nahr el-Bared conflict in 2007, Absi disappeared. He eventually emerged in Syria, where Fath el-Islam was behind a rare bomb attack in Damascus, in September 2008. In December of that year, Fath el-Islam announced that Absi was missing and presumed dead after a gunbattle with security forces in southern Damascus. A Palestinian, Abderrahman Aoud (“Abu Mohammed”), was appointed as the group’s new emir.⁹⁸ After Aoud’s death in a Military Intelligence ambush in Shtoura, Lebanon, in August 2010, the identity of Fath el-Islam’s leader has been something of a mystery. Several reports claim that the emirate passed into the hands of Abul-Zahra el-Zubeidi, a Palestinian salafi-jihadi ideologue based in the Ein el-Hilwe refugee camp. But Zubeidi – whose real name is Osama el-Shihabi – denies being even a member of the group,⁹⁹ and in May 2012, he released a statement calling on all jihadis in Syria to join Jabhat el-Nosra.¹⁰⁰ In July 2012, Fath el-Islam released a voice recording by its emir online, in which he used the *nom de guerre* of Abu Hussam el-Shami. It included no additional details about his identity or nationality.¹⁰¹

The checkered career of Shaker el-Absi, the group’s origins in Fath el-Intifada, and its role in provoking the Nahr el-Bared crisis at a time when Syria sought to destabilize the Lebanese government, led many critics of the Assad regime to conclude that that Fath el-Islam was a creature of Assad’s intelligence apparatus. Many pro-Syrian sources, on the other hand, claimed that the group was financed and manipulated by anti-Assad Sunni extremists in Lebanon and the Gulf. Some sought to nuance the picture, arguing that while prominent Fath el-Islam members may have been under Syrian influence, the main cadre appeared to be authentically jihadi – and Syrian *support* for the group’s challenge to Lebanese authorities did not necessarily mean that it was under Syrian *control*. “To claim that Fatah al Islam is merely a Syrian tool is not only simplistic but counterproductive”, wrote Magnus Ranstorp and Bilal

⁹⁸ “Fatah al-Islam leader believed dead”, *Aljazeera English*, December 11, 2008, www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2008/12/20081210174029633363.html.

⁹⁹ Radwan Murtada, “el-bahth an amir li-bilad el-sham [2/3] | el-imara min fath el-islam ila kataeb abdallah azzam” (“The search for an emir of the Levant [2/3] | The Emirate from Fath al-Islam to the Abdullah Azzam Brigades”), *el-Akhbar*, January 24, 2012, www.al-akhbar.com/node/33434; “liqa qanat el-jadid el-lubnaniya bil-sheikh osama el-shihabi” (“Meeting of the al-Jadid Channel with Sheikh Osama al-Shihabi”), YouTube video uploaded by dd1z, August 10, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybfBiyrpLPc.

¹⁰⁰ Abul-Zahra al-Zubeidi, “al-fawaid al-shar’ia fil-i’lan an jabhat al-nosra al-jihadiya” (“The Sharia Benefits in Announcing the Jihadi Jabhat al-Nosra”), Shumoukh el-Islam, May 15, <http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=161736>, also available on <http://jihadology.net/2012/05/15/al-masadat-media-foundation-presents-a-new-article-from-shaykh-abu-al-zahra-al-zubaydi-shariah-benefits-in-the-announcement-of-jabhat-al-nu%E1%B9%A3rah>.

¹⁰¹ “Hamm Kalima li-Emir Tanzim Fath el-Islam Kataeb el-Khilafa fi Bilad el-Sham” (Important: Speech of the Emir of the Fath el-Islam Organization, Caliphate Brigades in the Levant), YouTube video uploaded by kald1981304, July 31, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avlGXnjeGOE>.

Y. Saab in 2007. While they did recognize signs of a Syrian link, they pointed out that “Fatah al Islam’s connections with Al Qaeda are verifiable and unmistakable” and that “its leaders have long standing contacts with Al Qaeda operatives in Iraq and worldwide.”¹⁰² Today, Fath el-Islam clearly enjoys a measure of credibility within the global salafi-jihadi community. Its statements are posted on the major jihadi web forums, and often promoted by moderators.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, many anti-Assad dissidents remain convinced that the group is under the sway of Syrian intelligence.

Initially, there was little proof of Fath el-Islam participation in the Syrian revolution, although the group gave enthusiastic verbal support. By spring and early summer 2012, however, Fath el-Islam began to claim attacks in Syria on behalf of its armed wing, the Caliphate Brigades (*Kataeb el-Khilafa*), and some prominent members were reported killed in combat in Syria.

In April 2012, the Lebanese jihadi Abdelghani Ali Jawhar (a.k.a. Abu Hajer) was reported dead in Quseir, near the Lebanese border. As head of a Fath el-Islam network in northern Lebanon, he had been one of the group’s most important leaders following the Nahr el-Bared debacle, and the media referred to him as Lebanon’s most wanted terrorist. However, some opposition activists cast doubt on the story, saying the body had been planted by Syrian intelligence, while other sources found Abu Hajer’s death hard to confirm.¹⁰⁴

On July 26, several jihadi groups and media organizations reported the death of Nidal Khaled Ashour el-Asha, a young Gaza-born jihadist who had served as commander (*masoul askari*) of the Caliphate Brigades, using the cover-name “Abu Omar el-Shami”. According to a Fath el-Islam statement, he had been killed while “performing his jihad duties” in Aleppo.¹⁰⁵ In Gaza, Nidal el-Asha had gone by the alias “Abu Hureira el-Maqdisi”, and was wanted by Hamas authorities for attacks against the local Christian community.

¹⁰² Magnus Ranstorp & Bilal Y. Saab, “Securing Lebanon from the Threat of Salafist Jihadism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2007, 30:10, pp. 842 f.

¹⁰³ The group recently declared that it will from now on only release statements through the Shumoukh el-Islam forum (www.shamikh1.info), where it has an official account.

¹⁰⁴ Radwan Mortada, “Abdelghani Jawhar qatilan fi Souriya” (“Abdelghani Jawhar dead in Syria”), *el-Akhbar*, April 23, 2012, al-akhbar.com/node/62764; Radwan Mortada, “Lebanon-Syria Border: A Weapons Market Boom”, *el-Akhbar*, May 5, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/node/7007; Aryn Baker, “In Syria, Lebanon’s Most Wanted Sunni Terrorist Blows Himself Up”, *Time Magazine*, April 23, 2012, world.time.com/2012/04/23/in-syria-lebanons-most-wanted-sunni-terrorist-blows-himself-up/; personal contacts with Syrian opposition supporters.

¹⁰⁵ Sinam el-Islam forum thread, www.snam-s.net/vb/showthread.php?t=14712. The forum moderators later revealed, in their own eulogy, that Nidal el-Asha had been a member of the Sinam el-Islam editorial committee.

Suqour el-Sham Division

The Suqour el-Sham Division (*Liwa Suqour el-Sham*, "Falcons of the Levant Division") is among the largest insurgent groups in northern Syria. Founded in September 2011 in the Jabal el-Zawiya village of Sarja, Suqour el-Sham has since expanded across the Idlib region, as well as into the northwestern Hama Governorate. This is a strategic piece of land, close to the Turkish border, and traversed by both the northern coastal-interior road and the Damascus-Aleppo highway.

Suqour el-Sham was formed by Ahmed Eissa el-Sheikh, or "Abu Eissa", who still runs the group from Sarja. The family has a history of anti-government activity. Abu Eissa's father was "disappeared" by Hafez el-Assad's regime, having participated in the 1980s uprising. In the current revolution, Abu Eissa has lost several family members, including his son Eissa. Among the emerging Suqour el-Sham network's first "martyrs" were his brothers Dawoud and Abbas, who fell in combat in June and August 2011, respectively.¹⁰⁶

According to Suqour el-Sham itself, it has some 6000 fighters, organized into several brigades. The group's official website lists these brigades as follows, with the names of commanders in parenthesis:

- Dawoud Brigade (Hassane Abboud)
- Mohammed el-Khalf Brigade (Mohammed el-Khalf)
- Dhi-Qar Brigade (Abdelaziz Abu Wissam)
- Mohammed el-Abdallah Brigade (Nidal el-Hajj Ali)
- Khansa Brigade (Ali Abu Shima)
- el-Mohajerin wal-Ansar Brigade (Asaad Abu Moussaab)
- Abul-Fadl el-Abbas Brigade (Zakaria Abu Yehia)
- Ansar el-Haqq Brigade (Rashed Abu Abdo)¹⁰⁷

Suqour el-Sham claims to be "a part of the FSA working inside Syria", but Abu Eissa denies the legitimacy of the Turkey-based FSA leadership of Col. Riad el-Asaad. He cautiously

¹⁰⁶ Information about Ahmed Eissa el-Sheikh's family history received from an opposition source with access to personal friends of the Sheikh family; see also "Shuhada Suqour el-Sham" ("The Martyrs of Suqour el-Sham"), Suqour el-Sham website, <http://www.shamfalcons.net/ar/page/our-martyrs.php>

¹⁰⁷ Suqour el-Sham website, <http://www.shamfalcons.net/ar/page/staff.php>. This list is not likely to be up-to-date. Other information indicates a much larger set of local subgroups, although these may of course be folded into larger brigades.

accepts the SNC as a representative of the revolution abroad, but his organization is not under FSA or SNC command.¹⁰⁸ Abu Eissa has been mildly critical of the Muslim Brotherhood,¹⁰⁹ but is also alleged to have received support from Brotherhood members.¹¹⁰ The Suqour el-Sham website features a link to the Levant Islamic Commission, an Islamic aid organization set up by supporters of the Deraa-born salafi scholar Mohammed Surour Zeinelabidin, which is presumably another source of funding for the group.¹¹¹

Ideologically, the group is clearly Islamist. It has used suicide bombers and frames its propaganda in religious rhetoric.¹¹² Abu Eissa frankly declares that he is working to establish an Islamic state.¹¹³ Still, the Suqour el-Sham Division does not fit well into the transnational salafi-jihadi movement. In its public propaganda, the Division emphasizes worldly goals such as protecting demonstrators and toppling the regime, and it makes extensive use of nationalist imagery in a way alien to ideological salafi-jihadi groups. While making no pretense of secularism, Abu Eissa has also struck a conciliatory tone towards minorities, and stated that he "welcomes an alliance with any movement or sect, including the Alawite sect, in order to achieve our goal which is to overthrow this regime".¹¹⁴ The Suqour el-Sham Division is probably best described as a homegrown Islamist militant group, not as a part of the global salafi-jihadi movement. As one Syrian source puts it, "Suqour el-Sham are probably not salafis, but they dress up in their clothes."¹¹⁵

Ansar Brigade

The Ansar Brigade (*Katibat el-Ansar*) is an independent salafi-jihadi organization fighting in Homs city. Ideologically, it mixes sophisticated jihadi rhetoric with some nationalist imagery.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Abu Eissa on the Suqour el-Sham Division website: www.shamfalcons.net/ar/page/interview-abuissa.php, with a somewhat unreliable English translation on www.shamfalcons.net/en/page/interview-abuissa.php.

¹⁰⁹ "YouTube bayan qaid squour el-sham fi ta'ariat shabbihat el-ikhwan" ("YouTube Statement from the leader of Suqour el-Sham exposing the Brotherhood shabbihah"), YouTube video uploaded by suriyedirensi, August 19, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnlcpHh8Lrl.

¹¹⁰ Interview with a Syrian opposition figure, well-connected in the Idleb Governorate, who prefers to remain anonymous.

¹¹¹ Levant Islamic Commission website: www.islamicsham.org. I would like to thank the very well-informed Syrian opposition journalist Malik al-Abdeh for information about the Levant Islamic Commission, and many other valuable comments on Islamist movements in Syria.

¹¹² As an example: "Liwa Suqour el-Sham Katibat Dawoud 'Amaliya Istishhadiya Naw'eiya fi Idleb" ("Suqour el-Sham Division Dawoud Brigade Qualitative Martyrdom Operation in Idleb"), Youtube video uploaded by strangeeng, May 17, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCin7eRon48.

¹¹³ "Syria's rebels. Who will come out on top?", *The Economist*, August 11, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21560296>

¹¹⁴ Interview with Abu Eissa on the Suqour el-Sham Division website: www.shamfalcons.net/ar/page/interview-abuissa.php, with a somewhat unreliable English translation on www.shamfalcons.net/en/page/interview-abuissa.php.

¹¹⁵ Interview with a Syrian opposition figure, well-connected in the Idleb Governorate, who prefers to remain anonymous.

The Ansar Brigade's standing may have been bolstered by the fact that even though Homs is a major conflict flashpoint, both of the leading jihadi groups in Syria (Ahrar el-Sham and Jabhat el-Nosra) seem to be weakly represented there.

In mid-May 2012, the Ansar Brigade released a video reporting that its "battlefield leader" Abu Ali el-Ansari – allegedly a former member of Fath el-Islam in Lebanon¹¹⁶ – had been killed.¹¹⁷

Umma Division

The Umma Division (*Liwa el-Umma*, where "Umma" signifies the pan-Islamic nation) has made a name for itself partly due to its high reliance on foreign fighters. It is primarily active in Idleb Governorate, near the Turkish border, but it has subunits in Homs and other areas, and has also fought in Aleppo. The group now claims to organize some 6,000 fighters, but this number seems improbably high.

The Umma Division states that its membership is 90 percent Syrian. These groups are apparently mostly local brigades, which have switched their allegiance from the FSA to access Umma Division patronage. However, non-Syrian volunteers form the core of the organization. Most, like its leader Mehdi el-Harati, are Libyans who fought in the 2011 war against Gaddafi, with a small number from other Arab states. Most of the Libyans formerly belonged to an Islamist militia that received Qatari sponsorship and training in the struggle against Gaddafi.¹¹⁸ Harati, an Irish citizen, also appears to have received money from US intelligence services.¹¹⁹

The Umma Division is an Islamist group. It claims that its first principle is "faith and commitment to the rules of Islam", that it is fighting a "jihad on God's path", and that it will "cooperate with everyone in establishing a righteous Islamic rule elected by the nation

¹¹⁶ Radwan Mortada, "Bilad al-Sham: Jihad's Newest Hot Spot", *el-Akhbar*, August 6, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/node/10806

¹¹⁷ "Shabakat Ansar el-Sham 0 Katibat el-Ansar Homs el-Shahid Abu Ali el-Ansari" ("The Ansar el-Sham Network: The Ansar Brigade, Homs, the Martyr Abu Ali el-Ansari"), YouTube clip uploaded on May 14, 2012, by kald1981304, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dfj-o7phSAQ>.

¹¹⁸ Mary Fitzgerald, "The Syrian Rebels' Libyan Weapon", *Foreign Policy*, August 9, 2012, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/09/the_syrian_rebels_libyan_weapon.

¹¹⁹ "Tinker raiders, soldier, spy", *Sunday World*, November 7, 2011, www.sundayworld.com/columnists/index.php?aid=9335

[*umma*]]”.¹²⁰ On its Facebook site, the group has posted parts of a speech by the jihadi ideologue Abdullah Azzam (see below).¹²¹ At the same time, el-Mahdi el-Harati and other Umma Division commanders have persistently tried to distance the group from jihadism, portraying themselves as a moderate religious movement primarily interested in defending Syrian civilians and fighting for a just cause.

While the Umma Division refuses to acknowledge any state support, media reports suggest that it is very well-funded. Considering the track record of its Libyan leadership, it seems likely that the group is backed by Qatar, or possibly a broader coalition of regional and international powers. While it has ties to militant Islamism, and the high reliance on foreign fighters is noteworthy, the Umma Division should therefore not be carelessly lumped in with the transnational jihadi movement.

Syria Revolutionaries’ Front (SRF)

In early June 2012, the Syria Revolutionaries’ Front (SRF, *Jabhat Thuwwar Souriya*)¹²² was established after negotiations between several dissident factions.¹²³ Like so many other Syrian coalitions, the SRF stated that it would unify the opposition and fill the political void in Syria. It claimed to act as the political umbrella for more than 100 armed groups, referring to the subfactions of its member organizations. According to a previous statement, the founders included the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades, the Military Council in Deir el-Zor, and the Mustafa and Farouq Divisions in the rural Damascus region;¹²⁴ but this information does not appear to be reliable, and the Military Council seemingly opted not to join the SRF. Other insurgent factions are also associated with it, such as the Ahfad el-Ummawiyyin Brigades of rural Damascus.

¹²⁰ Liwa el-Umma Facebook page, www.facebook.com/Lewa.Alamah.

¹²¹ Liwa el-Umma Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=248889078547384&set=pb.234578226645136.0.1345485975>.

¹²² Syria Revolutionaries’ Front, <http://www.srfront.org>.

¹²³ Paula Astatih, "Tlan 'an tashkil 'el-italaf el-askari li-jabhat thuwwar souria' fi istanbul li-tawhid el-fasail el-musallaha" ("Announcement of the establishment of 'the military coalition of the Revolutionaries' Front of Syria' in Istanbul, to unite the armed factions"), *el-Sharq el-Awsat*, June 5, 2012, www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=680454&issueno=12243

¹²⁴ "tasis 'jabhat thuwwar souriya' bi-sifati-ha el-wajiha el-siyasiya lil-thawra" ("Establishment of the 'Syria Revolutionaries' Front" as the political face of the revolution"), *Arab Peninsula News Agency*, May 27, 2012, www.aljazeeraalarabianews.com/Portals/Content/?Name=%CA%D3%ED%D3%20%CC%C8%E5%C9%20%CB%E6%C7%D1%20%D3%E6%D1%ED%C7%20%C8%D5%DD%CA%E5%C7%20%C7%E1%E6%C7%CC%E5%C9%20%C7%E1%D3%ED%C7%D3%ED%C9%20%E1%E1%CB%E6%D1%C9%20&info=YVdROU16a3dNQ1p6YjNWeVkyVTIVM1ZpVUdGb1pTWjBIWEJsUFRFbWVHMxNhV1E5TIRJMK55W0rdQ=-.plx.

The SRF is not part of the FSA, nor of the SNC. It was endorsed at its creation by the prominent SNC leader Ahmed Ramadan (connected to a faction of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which plays a very prominent role inside the SNC), but the SNC Executive Bureau spokesperson Georges Sabra (of the Syrian Democratic People's Party, a rival of the Brotherhood) officially refuted Ramadan's comments on behalf of the SNC.¹²⁵

The SRF appears to have been created as an opportunistic alliance between the so-called "Aleppo faction" of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and various salafi, jihadi and tribal groups.¹²⁶ It seeks to "gather all factions of the armed jihad in the homeland"¹²⁷ in order to "establish a righteous Islamic rule".¹²⁸ It has set up its own Sharia Commission to interpret religious issues,¹²⁹ and membership is reserved exclusively for Muslims "known for their commitment to Islam".¹³⁰ Sharia law will be the "source for legislation in the state", but the group also declares that it will "respect religious and national pluralism".¹³¹ While obviously Islamist, SRF propaganda is generously sprinkled with nationalist imagery, and there is no sign of a solid ideological grounding in salafism.

The main relevance of the SRF to this report is the role of the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades as its most significant member faction – but this has been a troubled on-and-off relationship. Ahrar el-Sham first announced that it would join the SRF on June 4,¹³² but then dropped out, only to

¹²⁵ "Ilan 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"), *el-Quds el-Arabi*, June 4, 2012, www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\04z496.htm&arc=data\2012\06\06-04\04z496.htm; "tasrih sahafi hawla alaqa el-jabha bil-majlis el-watani el-souri" ("Press statement about the relationship between the Front and the Syrian National Council"), Syria Revolutionaries' Front, June 5, 2012, www.srfront.org/?p=124.

¹²⁶ The so-called "Aleppo faction" is connected to former MB leader Ali Sadreddine el-Bayanouni and the SNC Executive Board member Ahmed Ramadan, among others. This faction dominated the Syrian Brotherhood until 2010, when it was displaced by the "Hama faction" headed by current leaders Riad el-Shaqfa and Farouq Teifour. For more on these issues, see Aron Lund, "Divided they stand. An overview of Syria's political opposition factions", Foundation for European Progressive Studies & Olof Palme International Center, May 2012, http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/news/122_divided-they-stand-an-overview-of-syrias-political. I am thankful to Syrian opposition journalist Malik al-Abdeh for much of this information.

¹²⁷ "man nahnu" ("Who are we?"), Syria Revolutionaries' Front, www.srfront.org/?page_id=56.

¹²⁸ Charter of the Syria Revolutionaries' Front, http://www.srfront.org/?page_id=58.

¹²⁹ "Declaration of Syria Revolutionaries' Front", YouTube video uploaded by MrGuerrillaXL, June 4 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuST6w2MEGA>.

¹³⁰ Syria Revolutionaries' Front charter, internal regulations and terms of membership, as published on the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades site on Facebook, July 19, 2012,

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=203286686465244&set=a.197942143666365.39841.197411547052758&type=1>

¹³¹ "Ilan insha haykaliya jadida lil-mu'arada el-sourya .. wal-majlis al-watani yatanassal" ("Announcement of the creation of a new military structure for the Syrian opposition ... and the National Council disavows it"), *el-Quds el-Arabi*, June 4, 2012, www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\04z496.htm&arc=data\2012\06\06-04\04z496.htm.

¹³² "Jabhat Thuwwar Suriya || Indimam Kataeb Ahrar el-Sham" ("Syria Revolutionaries' Front || Inclusion of the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades"), Syria Revolutionaries' Front, June 4, 2012, www.srfront.org/?p=130.

re-enter by July 18.¹³³ For a short while, the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades kept adding the SRF name to their statements, but this soon stopped, and the jihadis no longer appear to take the alliance seriously.

The SRF itself remains somewhat active in the media and online. The press will occasionally quote its military spokesperson, Sgt. Muheiman el-Rameid, a military defector and member of the Arab Tai tribe from the north-eastern Hassakeh Governorate.¹³⁴ In practice, however, the SRF now seems mostly reduced to re-releasing Ahrar el-Sham communiqués with the addition of its own name, seeking to share credit for the jihadis' operations. As an alliance on the ground, it appears more or less politically irrelevant.

el-Mouminoun Yusharikoun

The salafi group el-Mouminoun Yusharikoun ("Believers Participate") gained some notoriety early on in the uprising, when its leader Louai Rushdi el-Zoubi was identified by the *al-Arabiya* TV network as the public face of Syrian salafism.¹³⁵ Zoubi is a jihadi veteran from Syria's Deraa Governorate. He fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia, and spent part of the 1990s living in Sudan, when Osama bin Laden resided in the country. While originally an apolitical missionary group, his adherents reportedly joined the armed struggle in late 2011.

In April 2012, the FSA's Rijal-Allah Division in el-Rastan (Homs Governorate) accused Louai el-Zoubi of having ordered the killing of its commander, Cpt. Amjad el-Hamid.¹³⁶ In a videotaped statement, Zoubi denied any involvement and accused Syria's Military Intelligence Directorate of having ordered the assassination, to split the opposition.¹³⁷ Apart from this, little has been heard of el-Mouminoun Yusharikoun on the battlefield.

¹³³ Statement on the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades Facebook site,

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=203116579815588&set=a.197942143666365.39841.197411547052758&type=1>

¹³⁴ "Inshiqaq el-raqib el-batal muheiman el-ramid el-tai 2011-6-29" ("Defection of the heroic Sgt. Muheiman el-Ramid el-Tai 2011-6-29"), YouTube video uploaded by freedom4566, June 29, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=alqDQyfAuIU

¹³⁵ "amin 'amm harakat el-mouminoun yusharikoun el-salafiya fi souriya el-sheikh louai el-zoubi 10 20 el-arabiya" ("The General Secretary of the Salafist Believers Participate movement in Syria Louai al-Zoubi. *al-Arabiya* 20/10"), YouTube clip uploaded by ShameeForever, October 21, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=k17X-fatZhc.

¹³⁶ "Bayan li-Liwa Rijal-Allah li-Ightiyal Amjad el-Hamid" ("Statement of the Men of God Division on the Assassination of Amjad el-Hamid"), YouTube video uploaded by aberfreedom on April 5, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5vs6pVqlZA

¹³⁷ "Bayan el-Sheikh Louai el-Zoubi bi-Khusous el-Rastan wal-Shahid Amjad el-Hamid 2012 4 9" ("Statement by Sheikh Louai el-Zoubi regarding el-Rastan and the martyr Amjad el-Hamid 2012 4 9"), YouTube video uploaded by a7laagraam22, April 10, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EiStZYHBmwQ.

Fajr el-Islam

Harakat Fajr el-Islam (“The Dawn of Islam Movement”) is a small, Islamist insurgent group active in Aleppo. It may also have a minor presence in the Idleb Governorate.¹³⁸ In Aleppo, Fajr el-Islam is mentioned in media and activist reports as one of many organizations battling government forces,¹³⁹ and the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades has saluted it for fighting alongside its Shahba Brigade.¹⁴⁰ Otherwise little is known about the group, including its exact ideological tendency. It does not appear to issue statements or seek media attention.

Abdullah Azzam Brigades

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades are named after an influential Palestinian jihadi scholar, who was instrumental in gathering the Arab-Islamist volunteer force in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s. Until his assassination in Pakistan in 1989, Azzam was a major influence on modern jihadi ideology, and, in collaboration with his later-to-be-famous associate Osama bin Laden, he helped lay the foundations for al-Qaeda.

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades are part and parcel of the global salafi-jihadi scene, and have members from many different countries. The group is not a formal al-Qaeda affiliate, but they appear to be ideologically close. However, it is hard to pin down the exact nature of the group. Since the mid-2000s, the name “Abdullah Azzam Brigades” has been used to claim responsibility for several different attacks around the world, including in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Pakistan. It is unclear which of these operations are related to each other, and whether the same name is used by more than one network.

In Lebanon, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades are best known for having irregularly fired rockets across the Lebanese border into Israel, thereby defying Hezbollah, which seeks to monopolize “resistance” activities in southern Lebanon. It has been active in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilwe, near Sidon in southern Lebanon, in close proximity to other jihadi groups, such as Fath el-Islam and Osbat el-Ansar. In some of its Lebanon-related activities, it has

¹³⁸ Information received from a Syrian activist who has recently conducted visits to rebel-held territory in Idleb Governorate, and who prefers to remain anonymous.

¹³⁹ “Syria revolt attracts motley foreign jihadi corps”, *NowLebanon/AFP*, August 18, 2012, www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=428915.

¹⁴⁰ Ahrar el-Sham Brigades Facebook page, statement from the Shahba Brigade, July 26, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=205684372892142&set=a.197942143666365.39841.197411547052758&type=1>

used the name “Ziad el-Jarrah Battalion” (after a Lebanese 9/11 hijacker), and it is claimed that Syrian operations would similarly be attributed to the “Abu Anas el-Shami Battalion” (but no such operations have been reported yet).¹⁴¹

The Abdullah Azzam Brigades are currently led by Majed bin Mohammed el-Majed, a Saudi citizen wanted in his homeland for involvement in terrorism. He was appointed to the post in July 2012, succeeding another Saudi by the name of Saleh el-Qar’awi.¹⁴² Although the group has made statements in support of the Syrian revolution, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades have so far provided no proof of military activity on the ground. Recent communications from the group have focused on criticizing Hezbollah, Iran, and Shia Muslims in general.¹⁴³

Suleiman Fighting Company

The Suleiman Company (*Firqat Suleiman el-Muqatila*) was formed in 2011 by Abu Suleiman el-Hamawi, who as the name implies, is from Hama. The group is independent, and not part of the FSA. It mixes salafi and nationalist rhetoric.

Abu Suleiman’s background is somewhat in dispute. According to some sources, he hails from an Islamist family, and the group is allegedly named after his father, who perished in the 1982 uprising in Hama. Abu Suleiman himself mentions having been arrested by both State Security and Military Intelligence in the Bashar era, and says he was severely tortured in prison, where he swore he would fight the regime.¹⁴⁴ Other sources claim he is a former narcotics smuggler, who turned to religion only after his arrest. Some consider Abu Suleiman a mere warlord whose Islamist posturing is designed to legitimize his movement and attract

¹⁴¹ Fidaa Itani, "Abdullah Azzam: The Voice of Al-Qaeda in Syria", *el-Akhbar*, December 28, 2011, english.al-akhbar.com/content/abdullah-azzam-voice-al-qaeda-syria; Radwan Mortada, "Searching for Al-Qaeda in Lebanon (II): An Emir for Greater Syria", *el-Akhbar*, March 5, 2012, english.al-akhbar.com/node/4800.

¹⁴² Naser el-Heqbani, "'kataeb abdullah 'azzam' tatakhalala an za'im-ha el-sa'oudi el-matloub ba'd isabati-hi bi-'aaha mustadima'" ("The Abdullah Azzam Brigades drop their wanted Saudi leader after he is afflicted with a 'permanent disability'"), *el-Hayat*, July 1, 2012, alhayat.com/Details/415138.

¹⁴³ Aaron Y. Zelin, "New video message from the 'Abdullah 'Azzām Brigades' Amīr Mājid bin Muḥammad al-Mājid: 'Message to Lebanon's Shī'ah'", *Jihadology*, August 18, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/08/18/new-audio-message-from-the-abdullah-azzam-brigades-amir-majid-bin-muhammad-al-majid-message-to-lebanons-shiah/. This hostility to Hezbollah, on both political and sectarian grounds, was also on display in a recent speech by the Lebanese jihadi sheikh Sirajuddin el-Zureiqat on behalf of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades. Zureiqat attacked Hezbollah, Iran and Syria, and accused them of working to protect Israel, while Sunni resistance fighters are wrongly accused of "terrorism". He concluded that "the elimination of Alawi rule in Syria will be a first step towards the liberation of Palestine and the Aqsa mosque". (Aaron Y. Zelin, "New video message from the 'Abdullah 'Azzām Brigades' Sirāj ad-Dīn Zurayqāt", *Jihadology*, August 8, 2012, jihadology.net/2012/08/08/new-video-message-from-the-abdullah-azzam-brigades-siraj-ad-din-zurayqat).

¹⁴⁴ "kalimat el-sheikh abu suleiman qaid firqat suleiman el-muqatila" ("Speech of Sheikh Abu Suleiman, leader of the Suleiman Fighting Company"), YouTube video uploaded by ccemeer, June 12, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDRRzEEqkT4

foreign funding. He seems to have had an uneasy relationship to some other insurgent groups in the Idleb region.

The Suleiman Fighting Company is mainly active in the Idleb countryside's Jebel al-Zawiya region, and in the Hama countryside, strongholds of Syria's Islamist resistance. Abu Suleiman commands the loyalty of thousands of fighters, who have set up rear bases and bring provisions across the Turkish border. The Suleiman Company appears to be well funded, and it is reported to be attracting fighters rapidly.¹⁴⁵

Ansar el-Islam Gathering

In August 2012, seven different rebel FSA groups in the Damascus region joined forces under the name Tajammou' Ansar el-Islam fi Qalb el-Sham ("Gathering of Islam's adherents in the heart of *el-Sham*", i.e. the Levant or Damascus), to form the largest insurgent coalition in the Damascus region. These groups were: the Islam Division, the Sahaba Brigades, the Furqan Division, the Ahfad el-Rasoul Division, the Der' el-Sham Brigades, the el-Habib Mustafa Division, and the Hamza bin Abdulmuttalib Brigade.¹⁴⁶ Most member groups seem to lean heavily towards Islamism.

The best known of these groups, and also the most ideologically extreme, is the Islam Division (*Liwa el-Islam*). It is active in the Ghouta, formerly a famous agricultural region surrounding Damascus, but now mostly a sprawl of low-income suburbs. It adheres to salafism, has set up a Sharia Commission,¹⁴⁷ and describes itself as an independent "military jihadi" faction.¹⁴⁸ It has been involved in hit-and-run guerrilla warfare, as well as in bomb attacks on government centres. In July 2012, the Sayyed el-Shuhada Brigade of the Islam Division claimed responsibility for the mysterious bomb attack against the National Security Office in Damascus, which killed at least four high-ranking regime officials, among them

¹⁴⁵ Nir Rosen, "Islamism and the Syrian uprising", *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2012, mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/08/islamism_and_the_syrian_uprising; Telephone interview with Syrian opposition journalist Malik al-Abdeh, July 31, 2012.

¹⁴⁶ "tajammou' ansar el-islam bayan" ("Ansar el-Islam Gathering statement"), YouTube video uploaded by Martyrs12, August 17, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPaNqfzG-8o; the Ansar el-Islam Gathering on Facebook, www.facebook.com/Ansar.islam.muster. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Elin Hagerlid for valuable information on this group and its member organizations, as well as on Syrian insurgent factions generally.

¹⁴⁷ Islam Division (Sharia Commission), www.facebook.com/is.br.gr.Sharia.

¹⁴⁸ Islam Division Facebook page, <http://www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade/info>.

Bashar el-Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat and Defense Minister Daoud Rajiha.¹⁴⁹
 (Another well-known Ansar el-Islam operation was the evacuation of Syria's prime minister
 Riad Hejab to Jordan, where he announced his defection.)¹⁵⁰

The Ansar el-Islam Gathering is generally presented as a part of the FSA.¹⁵¹ The FSA was not
 mentioned in the statement announcing the group's establishment, but most of its member
 factions pledged allegiance to the FSA at the time of their original establishment, and have
 been referred to as FSA groups throughout the uprising. Several, including the Sahaba
 Brigades, the el-Habib Mustafa Division, and the Der' el-Sham Brigades, clearly still identify
 as FSA units after forming the Ansar el-Islam Gathering. The Islam Division referred to itself
 as part of the FSA as recently as July 2012.¹⁵²

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¹⁴⁹ Statement No. 1 of the Islam Division – General Command, <http://www.lewaa-aleslam.com/statements/statement1.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ "tajammou' ansar el-islam taqrir rai' ala el-'arabia" ("Ansar el-Islam Gathering, wonderful report on Alarabiya"), YouTube
 video uploaded by Martyrs12, August 21, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYeXgo_yYz8.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Statement No. 1 of the Islam Division – General Command, <http://www.lewaa-aleslam.com/statements/statement1.pdf>.



ISLAM DIVISION



SUQOUR EL-SHAM DIVISION



AHRAR EL-SHAM BRIGADES



JABHAT EL-NOSRA

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