



Islamists, Religion and the Revolution

in Syria

Mohammad Abu Rumman

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Mohammad Abu Rumman

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Foreword

In the current fall of 2013, not a single day passes by without the crisis in Syria making new headlines. The international community has demonstrated indecision regarding concerted strategic action in the face of Bashar al-Assad's brutal acts against the Syrian population. Meanwhile, the subsequent refugee crisis is heavily impacting Syria's neighboring countries Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and to a lesser extent Iraq. In the two latter, the political implications of what is turning more and more into a proxy war are felt the strongest and contribute to the increasing instability of both countries.

At the heart of many post-Assad scenarios lies the question of how to deal with the different Islamist actors, which are currently fighting on the ground, and with the sectarian tendencies, which they convey and exacerbate throughout Syria.

In the study at hand, Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman, a renowned expert on Political Islam in the Arab world, presents a timely and profound analysis of these actors. He discusses the historical and ideological backgrounds of the Islamist movements, their public discourse as well as the links between their religious and political agendas, and illustrates the challenges they face at this point. Abu Rumman suggests a classification of key agendas, which the different Islamist actors currently pursue, and assesses their potential impact.

We highly recommend this study to anyone wishing to understand the different Islamist movements, which are currently playing a predominant role in the Syrian conflict.

We wish you an insightful read and look forward to your continued interest in FES' activities and publications.

Anja Wehler-Schoeck
Resident Director
FES Jordan & Iraq

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Introduction

When the Syrian popular protests broke out in March 2011, Islamic symbols – and their material manifestations – were conspicuously present. Their visibility and influence increased further with the ascendance of spiritual discourse, the elevated role of mosques and their preachers, and the contribution of religious scholars. The Islamic groups and the militant Islamists have become key players in the ongoing military and security struggle. Indeed, the contributions of Islamists in the opposition – and of the different movements linked to them – have become a visible reality.

In one sense, experts and politicians are not surprised by the emergence of Islamic revolutionaries as it is normal for rebels to find refuge in Islam as a way to offset the imbalance of military power. Religion plays a spiritual role during wars and crises. And yet, it also poses dilemmas and questions rooted in the fear that the revolution may get off the track. The fear is that the struggle for democracy, pluralism, freedom – the basic legitimate demands that paved the way for the uprisings of the Arab Spring in other Arab countries – could give way to an entirely different reality. This reality is characterized by extreme religious discourse, a violent sectarian military strife, and the hijacking of the revolution towards social Islamism and a religious state.

Several issues and phenomena that have come to the fore only reinforce these fears and misgivings. The “militarization of the revolution,” the weak prospects for a domestic political solution, the impasse in the peaceful change process, and the failure of the international community to reach a consensus on how to end to the ongoing bloodshed have all led to tremendous destruction inside Syria, millions of refugees and tens of thousands of detainees and killed.

The emergence of the political phenomenon is exemplified by the marked and extensive activity of the armed revolutionary groups that adopt a religious system and employ an Islamic discourse. A quick look at media statements made by leaders of these groups reveals how they are changing the discourse of the revolution. They are retreating from the discussion of democracy, freedom, pluralism, and the stated political objective.

This shift of the internal conflict has followed two fault lines: the sectarian split between the Sunnis and the Shiites-Alawites and the ethnic division between the Arabs and the Kurds. These new fault lines are shaped by the

surrounding region and the involvement of outside countries in the internal conflict. The regional support falls either to the side of Sunni revolution or to the regime, relying on an Alawite base.

Meanwhile the Salafists deeply penetrated the armed revolution, thus defining the revolution's social role. Moreover, the Salafi Jihadists and the groups linked to the ideological discourse of al-Qaeda, which rejects in principle democracy and the civil state, have gained currency. Theirs is an ideology rooted in religion and doctrine with a flavor of sectarian struggle.

This phenomenon later emerged in the "liberated territories" in the provinces of Aleppo, al-Riqqa, al-Hasaka, and Jisr al-Shughour. Ideological dissonance among various armed factions surfaced in the form of confrontation and friction. For example, conflicts emerged among al-Qaeda loyal factions, the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds. Confrontations also took place as a result of the attempt on the part of extreme groups to implement the Islamic law (Sharia), enforce "hudud" (Islamic punishments for certain crimes such as adultery and theft), and impose their agenda on other groups as well as on the Syrian society itself.

Seen in this way, it would be inaccurate to lump the entire Islamic discourse under one unified intellectual and political rubric. There is an immense diversity in the agendas and policies of the armed groups, whether with regard to their vision of the nature and objectives of the struggle or even their position vis-à-vis issues of democracy, freedom, pluralism, and the new political regime.

To understand this complex situation, it is necessary to sketch out a map for active Islamic trends and movements in the current armed revolution in Syria. It is important to understand and distinguish the various ideological currents drawn into the revolution, their prospects for the future, and their impact on the revolution. In this study, I will address several questions and dilemmas about the nature of the Islamic movements and the armed groups. The study examines the Islamist movements' internal structure, their political goals, the scope of their presence and outreach, their intellectual framework and the ideological discourse, and finally their position regarding democracy, liberties, pluralism as well as women's and minorities' rights.

In conducting this study, I faced several difficulties. To start, the majority of these movements never had a political or institutional public presence in Syria before the onset of the revolution. They are either new movements linked to

the revolution and its military nature, which is characterized by both ambiguity and secrecy, or they were mushrooming under the closed political regime that prohibited Islamists from public political manifestation and organization.

Despite that, and for the sake of methodological research, it is possible to discern the key political and intellectual movements and their constituent groups. We can rely on this basic intellectual map to identify the general frameworks that distinguish Islamist actors in the current conflict.

The first of these movements is the Muslim Brotherhood, which had enjoyed a public political and social presence for decades before the ruling Baath regime's bloody crackdown on them in the early 1980s. The movement had been banned but since the Syrian revolution began, it has become reinvigorated and essential political player.

The second movement are the Salafis. It is worth mentioning that the well-known Salafis had no public presence prior to the onset of the revolution. Prior to the revolution, they had been officially banned. Yet, with the militarization of the revolution and the emergence of some groups that adopt the Salafi discourse, this ideology began to spread. However, the Salafi influence is far from monolithic. There are a number of dissimilar ideological groups, for example the Salafi Jihadists, which are very close to the agenda and discourse of al-Qaeda, or local Salafi groups, which see eye to eye with neither al-Qaeda as organization nor its political ideology.

The third movement is Sufism. This trend is divided in its turn into groups and figures, which had different approaches towards the Syrian regime since long before the revolution. They also differ regarding the scope of their involvement in the Syrian revolution and on whether to take a stand against it or remain neutral to avoid a clear political position. The fourth movement is that of independent Islamists who adopt a political discourse different from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists.¹

Some researchers add to the aforementioned trends Sheikhs and religious scholars² as well as the institutions and social groups that are linked to them. This study groups them with the primary movements – Sufi or Salafi, and the Muslim Brotherhood – because it is not possible to decouple the fourth trend from the objectives and discourse of the previous three main trends.

I study the main movements at two key levels. First, regarding their scope of influence and involvement in the revolution, I focused on the structure and public presence of these movements. Second, I examined their ideological discourse and their position vis-à-vis the nature of the conflict and the values of democracy, pluralism, minorities' rights and the desired political regime.

In carrying out this study I relied in large part on already published valid literature addressing these movements. I also drew upon descriptions of the developments of the revolution as conveyed in personal interviews with researchers and activists in the revolution, who have a direct connection to the proceedings on the ground. Furthermore, I utilized the recordings of statements and speeches by their leaders as published on electronic websites.

The Conceptual Framework: Introduction and Setting the Scene

It is clear that there is a lot of confusion in how observers, pundits, and politicians understand the role of Islamists in the Syrian conflict. This state of confusion is rooted in weak logic and, in some cases, preexisting conclusions based on superficial and inaccurate media reports. As a result, the general perception of the Islamic movement is that it can be lumped in one basket despite the clear-cut division within the movement at the level of ideology, goals, and involvement in the revolutionary activism, and even its behavior during the revolution; there is a clear dissonance in their conception of what their desired post-revolution political regime should look like.

This confusion extends to the lack of distinction between the spiritual and symbolic role of religion during the revolution on the one hand, and to the ideological movements that ultimately adopt an operational and political identity on the other hand. Furthermore, generalizations are used that describe the intellectual and the ideological trends for the armed factions without scrutinizing their discourses as well as their political and religious ideas.

The reasons for this confusion are several. Primarily, it stems from the following factors: the isolation of the Islamic phenomenon from the nature of the political regime, the reality of societal relations in Syria and the exceptional feature of the Syrian revolution as well as the coercive conditions it has been going through. Indeed, these conditions are the basis of a framework through which we can have a bird's eye view of the Syrian revolution. This framework allows us to see the dimensions and details of the revolution, influenced by a set of constraints, which need to be taken into account to understand the nature of the "Islamic phenomenon" in the Syrian revolution.

First, I turn to the political repression of Islamists. The beginning of the confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian regime dates back to the 1960s when the Pan-Arabists and then the Baathists dominated politics and took over the regime. The end of the 1970s witnessed violence, culminating in the regime's bloody crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama in 1982. Islamist political action and participation of Islamic movements in political discourse were not allowed as of the 1980s.

During this time, the regime adopted secular policies and imposed them in the public domain. As a consequence, political Islam was banned and anyone who belonged to this brand of political Islam was subject to detention and deportation. In 1980, the regime imposed a law whereby the Muslim Brotherhood was banned and any affiliation to this movement was seen as great treason warranting execution.³

The ban was not only confined to the Muslim Brotherhood and its political activities; it also included all political movements – Islamist or otherwise – that were not in line with the domestic or foreign policies of the Syrian regime. The Salafists, who continued to work in a limited and individual manner, are a case in point. The Salafists’ relationship with the authorities was always tense. In fact, the domination of the Sheikhs and Sufi practice in the public domain and their good relationship with the regime in turn soured the relationship between the regime and other Islamic movements. It goes without saying that Sufi and Salafists had an intellectual and historical animosity. The friendly relationship of the regime with the Sufis was manifested when the regime did not allow the spread of the Salafist activism.

Besides the secular and Baathist nature of the regime and its hostile relationship with Islamists, the Syrian regime relied first and foremost on the security apparatuses and harsh repressive tactics in administering domestic politics. This was clear in the regime’s relationship with the Islamists. Furthermore, the regime relied heavily on the military judiciary. Given this combination of official heavy-handed policies, the Islamists faced many hard choices. Their options ranged from working underground, going to prison, leaving the country, or just waiting for any opportunity for confrontation to express themselves.

The other dimension of the regime’s relationship with the Syrian society is sectarianism. Not only do President Hafiz Assad and his son President Bashar Assad belong to the Alawite minority, but so also do the majority of the top echelon leaders of the army, security apparatuses and senior officials. This reality shapes the sectarian character of the Islamists’ relationship with the regime.

The legacy of the general ban and absence of the Islamists movements from Syria’s political scene is reflected in the current Syrian revolution. This transpired through the weakness of clear operational and ideological frameworks that could absorb the Islamist “newcomers.” Compounding this difficulty, there is no clear distinction among these movements in general,

including the Muslim Brotherhood. Hence, understanding these movements is not an easy task. This is a different situation than that found in other countries, which banned the Islamic parties but permitted their operational and institutional representation as well as the freedom of expression, as was the case in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and some Gulf countries.

A related aspect is that there were no political Islamist institutions or conspicuous trends within the Syrian society on the eve of the revolution, against which we could measure the political and intellectual character or even their institutional size. The vast majority of these groups came to the fore with the beginning of the revolution. These groups either reconstruct their fragmented framework (deconstructed thanks to the police and security policies of the regime) or build frameworks anew. Of course, this is not applicable to the charities, educational and preaching institutions that are linked to the official religious institutions. Nor it is applicable to the Sufi movements whose work and activities the state permitted during the past three decades.

Not surprisingly, the majority of individuals who signed up for the Islamic armed groups after the eruption of the revolution lacked certain political, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds. Despite the fact that a number of these factions do give their members indoctrinating courses, the focus on the whole is on military and combat training. This makes the relationship between the individuals and the group more of a temporary bond that is linked to the development of the revolution. In other words, this relationship is neither strong enough nor suitable as a measurement of the expected prospects in a post-revolution era where Syria will have a new regime. This post-Assad era may entail a transition to a civil and political activism where the aforementioned limitations would give way to a new era with other factors – mass media, political parties, and political money – that may affect the ascendance of Islamic movements and their role.

Seen from a different angle, the general ban on Islamists before the revolution, the severe antipathy between the regime and the Islamists (except for some Sufi groups), the jailing or deportation of Islamists and the fact that most were forced underground, coupled with the sectarian dimension of this relationship made Islamists on the whole take a similar position vis-à-vis the regime. Thus, they all concur that the revolution must adopt a militant character as long as the gradual reformist approach is not on the table right now. Of course, these conditions would have been different without the armed revolution. In

absence of a revolution, their different ideologies and the different societal and political conceptions of these movements would have played a role.

This made the overlap between the different movements a key attribute of the current Syrian scene. Before the revolution, it was not possible to differentiate between the vision of the Salafi Jihadists and the traditional Salafists or even the Muslim Brotherhood when it came to their stance towards the regime and their strategies to confront it. Therefore an alliance could be forged among various factions that agreed on the objective of the revolution. However, these agreements are not necessarily strategic, nor do they reflect a kind of intellectual consensus on the critical issues at hand.

Second, that Islam is a symbolic “domain” and a spiritual haven is another source of the aforementioned confusion. One of the most prominent aspects of this misunderstanding among observers lies in the focus on the religiosity and the symbolic or spiritual mission of Islam and on Islam as an ideology adopted by some political and societal trends and groups. Observers of the Syrian revolution are quick to note the intensity of Islamic expressions in the mosques, the role of clergymen and preachers, the Islamic slogans that dominate the rallying cries of demonstrations, and the names of the revolutionary armed factions. Compared to known Islamic movements that adopt Islamic ideological options, these are expressions of an entirely different characterization of their identity, goals and justification. Despite the fact that these social and political phenomena share the same public space, they differ in their political agendas and even in the scope of their intellectual stability and the political endurance.

Interestingly, the employment of the religious aspect in a clear way does not necessarily reflect an ideological vision of the future as much as it reflects the “exceptional nature” of the current role that religion can play at the spiritual and symbolic level. Rebels and society employ religion to confront the hard conditions of destruction, detention, armed struggle and other human calamities.

The spiritual and symbolic role that Islam carries is likely to change in the next phase, i.e. in the post-revolution period. It could intensify or decrease. This necessarily pushes us to draw a distinction between the nature and objectives of religiosity and the current Islamization as it represents a salient phenomenon in the Syrian revolution on the one hand, and Islam as a structure of politics on the other hand.

Third, one of the most striking characteristics of the Syrian revolution is the divergence between city and periphery. The revolution erupted in the provinces and peripheries and continued to be peaceful for the first few months before it took a militant character as it reached key cities in Syria, namely Damascus and Aleppo. It erupted in the periphery because the military and security were losing their grip in these areas – compounding the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions and the inability of the periphery to cope with the economic transformation towards a market economy and the privatization. This became especially acute under President Bashar al-Assad.

It was not until later that the revolution reached Aleppo and Damascus. It was conspicuous that the intellectual, political, and economic elites did not display enthusiasm for the revolution nor did they take the risk of supporting it. In cities like Aleppo and Damascus, it is possible to distinguish between the poor and marginalized neighborhoods, which were prepared to support the revolution, and neighborhoods populated by the affluent middle class and bourgeois, who were not. Some residents of these neighborhoods are linked through a network of interests with the regime.⁴

As a result, the Syrian Islamic revolution currently has a very provincial and temporary character. Salafi ideas have mushroomed over the recent years in the periphery and provinces. The contribution of the so-called “civilized Islam” espoused by the middle class, intellectuals, academics, tradesmen and merchants, or of social spiritual traditions has been modest both among the armed and peaceful sides of the revolution. This becomes clear when one looks at the modest Sufi presence in the armed factions in particular and in the peaceful revolution in general.

Fourth, the aforementioned limitations have led to the changing and mobile nature of the armed factions. This is true whether one examines the increase or decrease of the presence, influence, role, internal structure, or alliances and differences within these factions. On the whole, this reality leaves us with a framework set in a multi-dimensional and changing map. With details changing from one stage to another, this map is hardly static, but it is generally becoming stable. In the coming years, it will grow more stable and cohesive compared to the situation in 2011.

It is worth mentioning that this phenomenon is a function of three key factors. As mentioned previously, the absence of traditional ideology rooted in Syrian society and the exceptional nature of the armed Syrian revolution has made these new factions on the whole new. They are still in the process of

developing their identities and logistical and societal bases and are moving from one state to another searching for a final ideological and operational framework. The majority of these factions and armed groups came to the fore at the beginning due to the unique military and security conditions in certain areas where local groups agreed to take up armed struggle. Some of these factions expanded and evolved their operational frameworks while recruiting more members. These factions looked for allies who would agree on the operational framework and the influence they sought in various areas. While some of these attempts came to fruition, others failed. Some of these factions are cohesive while others are fragile. Needless to say, some of them were established on ideological basis and others on practical and realistic considerations.

The nature of foreign funding and the absolute necessity for such funding to perpetuate the struggle has elevated the discussion about the relationship between internal and external factors. The factions or individuals that have access to sustainable funding managed to maintain their structure and perhaps expand. However, in most cases the funding comes with certain conditions. Some countries and external actors that back groups with Islamic ideologies condition their financial support by prohibiting groups from affiliating with certain ideologies. To be sure, these objective factors (funds, arming, and support) influenced the changing nature of the revolution in terms of the transformation of people's loyalty towards the groups. Individuals change according to the strength of the support and even the groups themselves change to conform to the political lines of their financial backers.

At the beginning of the revolution, a large number of groups and small factions were established. Later on, the processes of deconstruction, reconstruction, ascent and descent took hold. An American security official stated that there were some 1,200 military factions.⁵ It was in this later stage that the situation began to take a clear and more stable shape along the lines of established ideological schools of thought, including traditional Salafist, Salafi Jihadist, Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamist groups. And yet, the situation is far from static. The factors of influence, funding, and support still impact on the orientations, operations, and on the intellectual, and political agendas of these groups.

At this point, we can outline initial conclusions derived from this methodological introduction. First, there is a need to distinguish among the various aspects of Islam in the Syrian revolution as well as to not conflate these aspects with the spiritual and symbolic role that Islam represents in

Syrian Sunni society (which in turn is often conflated with the sectarian sentiments) and the strict ideological commitment that is represented by political Islam. The latter is notably different in terms of its nature, structure, and goals.

Second, the vast majority of the members of the armed Islamic factions have no Islamic organizational or ideological backgrounds. They belong to the brand of newcomers whose presence was linked with the nature of the revolution and whatever political and spiritual options it imposed on Syrian society. As with the previous conclusion, the phenomenon of political Islam in the Syrian revolution is heavily informed by the coercive and exceptional conditions produced by the armed revolution. The phenomenon in this case is likely to develop in later stages especially when the circumstances of coercion no longer exist.

Finally, the vital role of the periphery in the current armed revolution and the modest role that was played by the urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo imposed a particular mode of religiosity, which is closer to the Bedouin and rural nature on the one hand, and amenable with the armed revolution on the other hand. By and large, this explains the emergence of the Salafi trend at a time when mainstream Islam – some of it close to the regime and some more close to Sufism – continued to be cautious.

1. The Muslim Brotherhood

Among the Syrian Islamic movements, the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest and has the most significant presence in the modern political history of Syria. It has attracted enormous Western attention, as most assessments and predictions foresee that it will be a key player in “post-Assad Syria.” Notwithstanding this reputation, its contribution to the armed revolution is modest and vague. Similarly, the nature of its relationship with other armed factions is unclear.

The complexity in defining the scope of the Muslim Brotherhood’s strength owes to its long absence from the Syrian political and social scene over the last three decades, in the aftermath of the infamous Hama events that took place in 1982. At that point, the movement found itself in armed confrontation with the Baathist regime. As a result, the regime uprooted the movement by detaining members and supporters, killing tens of thousands of them, and forcing the majority of its leaders to flee abroad. In 1980, the Syrian authority had introduced a law that banned the movement and stipulated that members of the movement receive the death penalty. The law was passed on the heels of the 1979 incident at the military college, in which a number of Syrian officers were killed by the “Fighting Vanguard,” the secret armed organization linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶

With the promulgation of the 1980 law banning the Muslim Brotherhood, the group’s Damascus wing decided to dissolve itself and focus instead on education and preaching, rather than confronting the Syrian regime. Some members of this wing joined the “Fighting Vanguard” while others joined the Aleppo wing. However, a fairly large number of them were not known to the Syrian regime and remained in Damascus and thus escaped the detention and massacres that took place in the following years.⁷

Since its establishment, the movement has suffered from acute discord on a geographical basis (between wings in Aleppo and Hama) and intellectual differences (the extreme versus the moderate trends). These differences were to continue after the departure of the Muslim Brotherhood from Syria until recently when Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni, the leader of the movement, was replaced by Mohammed Riyadh al-Shaqfeh. In 2011, the external leadership of the Brotherhood was granted representation in the executive bureau, to which additional members were added later in 2012 to respond to the Syrian revolution.⁸

During the decades before the onset of the Syrian revolution, the movement shifted between different discourses. In the 1950s the movement was politically active and participated in elected bodies and the government under the leadership of its founder Mustafa al-Saba'i. However, the emergence of Pan-Arabism and the Baathist coup in 1963 opened a new chapter of military and political confrontation with the regime. This in turn created a huge gap between the movement and the broad conservative class in the Syrian society.

In 1970, Hafiz al-Assad launched the Corrective Movement, toppled the regime and took over. This proved to be a turning point in the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime. Notably, this development added a sectarian dimension to the conflict between the movements and Assad.⁹

During later decades and up until the end of the 1990s, the movement had been consumed by the push and pull of the competing reformist revolutionary ideas among the movement's youth and leadership. At a time the Fighting Vanguard – a secret body that adopted the armed struggle against the regime and in fact initiated several operations that only accelerated the armed confrontation at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s – was established. A number of leaders within the Brotherhood remained adamant that this secret organization did not represent them and that they had nothing to do with the operations of this organization.

Following the massacre of Muslim Brotherhood members in Tadmur prison in 1980 and other armed clashes, the movement announced the "Armed Islamic Revolution Charter." Though the charter maintained the movement's commitment to a pluralistic and civil state, the principle of rotation of power, and the respect of minorities' rights, the charter adopted "armed action" as a strategy of confrontation against the Syrian regime. The movement also set up training camps in the 1980s sponsored by Iraq to accommodate fleeing members. Yet ultimately, the movement did not continue down this road.¹⁰

The leaders of the movement disagreed on whether to try to reach an agreement with other political and secular forces to find a way out of the Syrian crisis. However, the deterioration of the relationship with the regime and the latter's attempts to kill the Brotherhood's leaders abroad put an end to this thinking and kept the movement within the armed revolutionary approach.

And yet, the movement's discourse and political role witnessed a significant transformation at the end of 1990s. Under the leadership of Ali Sadreddine Al-

Bayanouni (1996-2010) the movement adopted a reformist tone and openness towards other political forces that were emerging in Syria. Bashar al-Assad's ascent to power helped bring about this transformation, especially with the new political openness known as "Damascus Spring," which permitted the opposition political movements to come to the surface and allowed them a limited range of flexibility and mobility.¹¹

This new orientation was reflected in a set of documents, which the movement either issued or participated in drafting with other forces, including the Damascus Declaration. The latter document adopts an open peaceful reformist orientation. It called for establishing a democratic process, ending the emergency law, opening the door for political pluralism, rotation of power, and putting an end to the Baath Party's monopoly over power. Additionally, the movement took part in the Salvation Front, which was established by the defected Syrian Vice President, Abduhalim Khaddam, but the Front did not survive.¹²

The most important document of the movement was issued in 2004. This document represents their vision of the future of Syria. In it, the movement moved clearly towards democracy, pluralism, rotation of power, respect of human rights and civil liberties, respect of minorities' rights, and made a commitment to religious principles. To many researchers and observers, the document's use of "religious principles" is vague as is the case with some other Islamic movements in the Mashreq (Levantine).¹³

1.1 The Growth of Outside Movements: "The Work of an Octopus"

Despite this historical background, the role of the movement in the revolution's political and military activity continued to be controversial. The movement was hesitant in announcing its presence in the revolution at the beginning. Nevertheless, when the movement saw that the situation was sliding toward confrontation between the Syrian society and the regime and that the protest activities continued albeit the security crackdown, the movement stepped up its peaceful opposition gradually through several means and institutions its involvement became official.

The movement's peaceful activities started through their youth groups in the diaspora. The most obvious contribution came through the media. Some youth established a website on the Syrian revolution at the beginning of the conflict;

later on, the page became one of the most important forums that covered the revolution and its daily activities and developments.¹⁴

One group that played a prominent role was a youth group, including Obadiah al-Nahas (the director of the Orient Center in London) and Ahmed Ramadan, who resigned from the movement in 2010 in the wake of the take-over of the Hama wing by the movement. In 2011, they established the “National Action,” which adopted a reformist and democratic discourse. It actively contributed to the establishment of the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) in October 2011. Ahmed Ramadan, one of the youngest leaders in the movement, and Mohammed Taifour were selected as members of the Executive Bureau of the council.¹⁵

Several international and Syrian players accused the movement of controlling the SNC, an accusation the movement dismissed. In the words of al-Sayid Issa, “we are not the biggest group within the SNC.” He added that the movement has only one seat in the Executive Bureau and six or seven seats in the General Assembly.

At a later stage, in 2010, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSR) was established in Doha. It was an attempt on the part of “Syria’s friends” to form a new umbrella organization that was more representative of the popular and political trends, and one in which the Muslim Brotherhood does not enjoy as big an influence as it does in the SNC.

Although the movement has been trying to play down its political influence in the external opposition groups, still its opponents are adamant that it dominates these groups. Hence, the movement continues to be haunted by accusations that it seeks to control and dominate the opposition and that it exploits its strength and relationship within the opposition and with other countries to back some secular figures that enjoy a good relationship with the movement, such as Burhan Ghalioun, George Sabra, and Mouath Al-Khatib.

In July 2012, Ahmed al-Jarba, who is widely seen to be close to Saudi Arabia, was elected as President of the NCSR. If anything, his selection reflects the changing balance of power and competition among the regional and Arab agendas within the NCSR. This step, however, is also a victory for the Saudis, who are not keen on coordination with the Muslim Brotherhood. This comes at the expense of the Qataris and the Turks who have been the biggest regional forces supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and the sponsors of the movement – politically, financially, and through the media.¹⁶

In addition to the aforementioned external groups and institutions that are widely viewed within the Syrian scene as figureheads for the Muslim Brotherhood or very close to them, there is the Syrian Scholars Association headed by one of the most renowned scholars in the Arab world, Mohammed Ali al-Sabouni. This association represents the moderate Islamic orientation and issues religious verdicts (fatwas). It convened a conference in support of the revolution. Another important group is the Sham Literary Men's Association headed by Abdullah al-Tantawi. It operates a website that runs op-ed pieces and literary works relevant to the Syrian revolution.¹⁷

Nevertheless, one of the most important institutions that has always been subject to controversy because of its relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is "Watan." Watan is a non-profit civil society organization registered in the United Kingdom. It announced that it plans to set up branches in other European countries, Turkey, and the United States.¹⁸ Watan denies that it is an official political movement and insists that its work is apolitical. It is made up of a number of institutions and commissions that play diverse roles such as al-Rayan (which provides training on humanitarian and charitable works in Syria), Jabal al-Hurriya (which provides training on human rights issues and public liberties), the Syrian Center for Liberties "Hurriyat" (which deals with human rights issues), the Syrian Center for Studies, the Syrian Center for Business, the Syrian National Center for Media, and Khair, a Syrian charity. Watan is the most important organization specialized in charitable support and voluntary work to help Syrians.¹⁹

The current leader of Watan is Mouath al-Sibai; Anas al-Subai presides over Khair. Ahmed al-Muhandis is the head of the General Assembly of Watan. The institution is made up of a huge number of Syrian expatriates and activists abroad. It serves as a network to link the expatriates with the charitable and humanitarian work across Syria. Yet, observers view it as a center for recruiting expatriates to join the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁰

1.2 The Vagueness of the Military Role

The overblown political and external role that the Muslim Brotherhood plays is incompatible with its modest and vague role in internal politics and in the armed revolution. Observers see this lopsided reality as a normal matter given the long absence of the movement from the internal scene, especially after the events of the 1980s. Moreover, the Sheikhs have dominated the leadership and

have failed to recognize the major transformations in Syrian society over the last few decades. A third reason is the emergence of the role of the periphery and rural areas at the expense of the cities in the Syrian revolution. Historically speaking, cities are deemed as the popular and traditional social strongholds of the movement.

These conclusions are reinforced by the confirmation of Mohammed al-Sayid, the former member of the Executive Bureau and one of its most active leaders, when he says, "the armed revolution succeeded to a great extent in the countryside and peripheral areas at the expense of cities as it spread from Dara'a to Homs to Jisr al-Shughour and Edlib. This constitutes an obstacle to a concrete and visible role for the movement in the armed struggle."²¹

From the beginning, the movement was careful to emphasize that it did not have armed factions involved in the revolution, that it was only providing financial and logistical support for the factions, that it seeks to reconstruct and renovate the organization in various sectors and undertake charitable and humanitarian work.

That said, there is confusion about this military role and the movement's relations with other armed factions. This transpired when one of its most prominent leaders, Mohammed Taifour, disclosed the movement's relations with the Revolution Shields Commission, the loose military organization that was established by the end of 2012. Yet, the movement's leader, Mohammed Riyadh al-Shaqfeh, responded by saying that the movement was not the official sponsor of the Revolutionary Shields Commission and that it did not dominate the armed factions.²²

To cover its weak presence in the armed revolution and the lack of powerful factions that could directly represent it, the movement tried to lure some prominent factions such as Kataib al-Farouq or other Islamic forces to work under the banner of the "Front for the Liberation of Syria," which represents the military faction that is closest to the moderate discourse of the movement. The front operates in a way that is closer to the Salafi orientation such as the Islamic Front or Nusra Front and the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham".

Even at the level of the movement's indirect logistical and financial support to armed groups, the movement was accused by other armed factions of the attempt to "buy their loyalties through directing the logistical and financial (arms) support towards factions closer to the movement or forcing the factions to commit to the movement's political line and be loyal to it."²³

Given the absence of traditional ideologies in the armed conflict and the existence of political and intellectual uncertainties regarding the loyalty of members of various Islamic armed factions, it is hard at this stage to identify the influence of the movement or its actual size in the military arena. The latter are in a constantly shifting between intellectual and organizational options. According to observers, among the factions closest to the movement, the Revolutionary Shields Commission represents the most prominent faction. The Revolutionary Shields Commission convened a large conference in Istanbul, which was attended by leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood, chief among them the former leader for the movement Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni.²⁴ The Revolutionary Shields Commission is constituted by set of groups that carry the name Duru' (shields). They are spread across a number of Syrian governorates. Their emblem is made up of two swords, a pigeon, and boughs. This symbol resembles the Muslim Brotherhood's emblem, which has two swords separated by the Holy Quran. The Revolutionary Shields Commission announced that its goal is to coordinate among the armed groups and to form a nucleus for a professional Syrian army. It also states that it seeks a democratic civil state based on the principle of citizenship. This indeed sets it apart from other armed factions, which state that their goal is to establish an Islamic state.²⁵

Abdurrahman al-Haj, a Syrian researcher and a member to the SNC, says that the Muslim Brotherhood established the "Assembly of Peace Battalion" in Aleppo in October 2012 that includes the Abdulfatah Abu-Ghidah Army in old Aleppo. They supported other forces such as the "Shield of al-Shahaba" in Edlib, Aleppo, and al-Riqqa. They partially back the assembly of "So stand thou upright, as thou hast been commanded."²⁶ Eyad al-Jaghbeer, a reporter for Sky News, confirmed that he had visited the office of the "Faith" battalion in the countryside of Hama and met its leaders. They told him that they belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood and he saw that their emblem was the movement's well known one.²⁷

Some observers point out that elements of the Muslim Brotherhood established the squads of al-Mu'taz Billah in Dara'a by the beginning of 2013; some of their members were abroad before.²⁸ The website of the Commission for Civilian Protection (which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood) lists a number of Islamic armed factions and their operations.²⁹

1.3 Shrinking Popularity and Organizational Renewal

In a later stage of the Syrian revolution, towards the end of 2012, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood began thinking seriously about reviving the organization inside Syria and of working to spread the call for charitable and voluntary work in a new way.

As the leaders of the group point out, the movement's members inside Syria were divided on several levels. First, there are the members who left prison in 1992 who committed themselves under the previous regime not to participate in political action. The movement seeks to re-energize them by renewing the organization's mission and activities. Second, there are the old members who were never discovered but maintained a secret relationship with the movement. A third group are members of the group who lived abroad. Yet, not all of them have the same commitment to the movement and the readiness to work with it. In fact, many of them were more involved in their personal lives and in their family affairs.³⁰

On the eve of the revolution, the organization suffered from internal divisions, the spread of its members across the world, the lack of either open or secret activity inside Syria, the aging leadership, and the lack of appeal for the movement among the new generation in Syria and abroad. This only has emasculated the significance of the movement inside Syria and led to the erosion of its organizational structure.³¹

The statements and meetings of the leaders of the movement reflect their recognition of the movement's unstable organizational situation. They understand the alienation of the movement inside the Syrian society as the majority of today's youth – those born in the 1980s – know little about the movement.³²

With the outbreak of the revolution, the ensuing gradual political and military changes and with the fall of large swaths of Syrian territory to the rebels, the Muslim Brotherhood adopted a new strategy to return to Syria in an attempt to reinvigorate the movement and adapt to the new conditions. At the leadership level, the movement reconciled the two wings of Hama and Aleppo and a new Executive Bureau was formed. The new expanded Bureau had 22 members (including two women). The majority of them are between 40 and 60 years old.³³

In early 2013, the Brotherhood decided to rebuild the organization internally, relying on old members, who had been inmates, and on secret operations. They were asked to renew their membership, start over with their activities and spread the call. The decision was to start with the families of those who were either killed or disappeared in detention (and were widely thought to have been killed). At the external level, the decision was to reinvigorate the organization by activating the members of the movements, including their families and siblings.

Mohammed al-Sayid argues that many have been attracted to the movement as a great number of members have already returned. And yet, the movement scrutinizes new members given its organizational nature and the need to check the suitability of the new members to the movement's ideas, visions, and its internal framework.³⁴ In August 2013, the first official branch of the Muslim Brotherhood was opened in Aleppo with the attendance of a number of the movement's leaders.³⁵

The movement is currently working to establish a new political party. (The name "Wa'ad" has been suggested, an acronym that stands for country, justice, and democracy). The first founding meeting was held in Istanbul in August 2013. Some predict the new party will be more liberal than the Egyptian Justice and Freedom Party. Its leadership includes former leftists and Christians. One of its most noticeable founding members is Dr. Mohammed Hikmat Walid, who is one of the most prominent leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁶

1.4 Challenges and Future Prospects

Perhaps one of the most common observations about the role of the Muslim Brotherhood is the imbalance between its historical reputation, its activities on the ground, its media and political presence abroad, the Turkish-Qatari political support, the weakness of the movement inside the Syrian society, the limits of its participation in the armed revolution, and the ambiguity of its relationship with some active factions. Hence, the most important challenge is to "restore the balance" between the external and the internal. This is exactly what the movement has been trying to do through reviving the organization and spreading the call inside Syria through various means.

The movement faces the chronic challenge of division and polarization within the movement itself. This problem has manifested over the last years in the

relationship between the wings of Hama and Aleppo. While the current leadership did what it takes to restore the Aleppo wing and to expand the representation in the Executive Bureau by integrating this wing, women, and youth, this challenge will remain one of the most important ones the movement faces.

Coupled with these challenges is the aging of the movement's leadership and its inability to adapt to the new generation who has the biggest contributor to the revolution – whether at the media, military, or political levels. Some of the active youth left the movement to work independently. Indeed, this makes reviving the movement by incorporating the youth one of the most salient challenges in the foreseeable future.

Despite these challenges and organizational as well as internal crises, some aspects of the movement are still strong. Its media and political strength abroad in addition to its experience in recruiting are among these strong suits. This was proven in the case of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. They managed to move quickly to work in public and managed to rebuild their popularity and grassroots support. They also managed to restructure themselves internally. There are a number of figures who have been playing a prominent role, some of whom actually work independently, though observers still see them as part of the movement. Chief among these are the current leaders of the movement Mohammed Riyadh al-Shaqfeh, Zuhair Salim, Mohammed Taifour, Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni, Issam al-Attar, Obadiah al-Nahas, and Ahmed Ramadan.

2. Salafists: The Ascending Force

Undoubtedly, Salafists constitute the rising force in the Syrian revolution. A few years ago, there were some unorganized Salafi activities. The secular nature of the Syrian regime impeded the spread of the Salafi ideas and Salafi preachers were subject to prosecution and detention. Moreover, the marriage of interests between the regime and the Sufi Sheikhs, who are on the opposite end of the spectrum from the Salafists, further reinforced the animosity of the regime and Salafist religious institutions.

Prior to the revolution, various Salafi trends began to come to the fore but in an unorganized manner. While the Salafi Jihadists captured the Western media attention (see the next chapter), the spread of Salafi ideas was limited to the periphery.

With the beginning of the revolution, the Salafi presence in Syria grew, taking a more visible shape when new armed factions were formed during the last months of 2011. This Salafi movement is a mix of those who were involved in the Salafi Call in previous years, a high percentage of whom were inmates of the infamous Saidnaya prison, and individuals who were newly influenced by the Salafi ideas owing to the specific conditions of the revolution.

Researchers as well as observers ascribe the current flourishing of the homegrown Salafi thought to the nature of the armed revolution itself. As it took off in the countryside and then moved to key cities, it became easier to accept Salafism. Obviously, underdevelopment and the teetering economy in these areas coupled with the rise of sectarian sentiments against the regime (Arab Sunnis view the regime as an Alawite regime) and disappointment in the international community helped the spread of the Salafist ideas. Interestingly, the Salafi thought offers answers to these grievances at both the social and the cultural level.³⁷ Abdurrahman al-Haj argues that the current Salafi boost has no deep roots in Syrian society and that it is soft and has a mobilizing and political mission linked only to the domestic conditions of war.³⁸

2.1 “Ascendance” Abroad Prior to the Revolution

Apart from the Salafi Jihadists (who will be discussed in next chapter), the roots of the Salafi Call date back to the early years of the 20th century and the so-called reformist school. It is easy to trace the modern Salafi thought to a number of the prominent figures from al-Sham, including Jamal al-Qasimi

(1860-1914) and Mohammed Rashid Rida (1865-1935), who moved from Lebanon to Egypt and later to Syria, and who was the head of the Syrian National Council during the reign of King Faisal I. Rida was the pioneer of the rational philosophical reformist school of thought.³⁹

Later, Salafi societies and associations that adopted the same reformist line emerged. The most important society was al-Jam'yat al-Gharra (The Radiant Assembly), founded by Sheikh Abdul Ghani al-Daker in 1924. The Society was active in political and public life and it helped one of its leaders. Abdul Hamid al-Tabba', got elected to the Syrian Parliament in 1943. The other prominent Salafi society was The Jam'yat al-Tamadun al-Islami (Society of the Islamic Civilization), which was founded in 1930 by Ahmed Mazhar al-Azmeh, who later became a minister. One of its famous figures was Bahjat al-Beitar. In 1946, the society launched a magazine that some consider to be the most important record of the Levantine Salafi reformist movement and its activities. The group was shut down after the 1982 Hama massacre.⁴⁰

In the 1960s, Salafism emerged in benign traditional form, focusing less on operational and political activities and more on preaching and scholarly pursuits. It was led by the renowned Salafist figure Mohammed Nasser- ad-Din al-Albani. At the beginning, al-Albani was closer to the Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi movement in Damascus, which included Issam al-Attar and Zuhair al-Shawish. He often got into debates with the Sufi followers within the Muslim Brotherhood. He started spreading his ideas but he was subject to detention after the Baath came to power in Syria, accused of spreading the Wahhabi ideas that distort Muslims.

During 1970s, his scholarly and preaching activity gained momentum. The Islamic office (founded by Zuhair al-Shawish) began to publish books written by al-Albani. Nevertheless, due to security pressures and the confrontations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Baathist regime, al-Albani left for Saudi Arabia. He left despite the fact that during these years he had begun to formulate his special theory on "Salafi Islamic Action", which was based on purification and education. He shunned political action and instead focused on preaching and Islamic jurisprudence. By the early 1980s, al-Albani had settled in Jordan and remained there until his death in 1999. Ironically, his peaceful intellectual ideas did not help the spread of his thought in Syria. One of his disciples, Mohamed Eid Abassi, was jailed for twenty years. He was released by the end of the 1990s and left for Saudi Arabia.⁴¹

On the flip side of the coin, Syrian Salafism has grown abroad. Syrian Salafism is named after its intellectual founder Mohammed Srur bin Nayef Zein al-Abideen. Indeed, Srur referred to this form of Salafism as “Political Salafism.”

Srur was an active member in the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1960s and very much influenced by the ideas of Sayid Qutb; he later moved toward Salafist thought. His ideas began to take a clear shape after he moved to Saudi Arabia in 1965. He stayed there for years until the Saudi authorities forced him to leave. Then he moved to London to establish a magazine called *al-Sunnah* along with a number of his friends and colleagues. It is the magazine that clearly expresses Political Salafism, a school of thought, which combines the religious dimension of Salafi doctrines and thought but does not accept the trend in modern Salafism to not get involved in political action. Influenced by Sayid Qutb, he devoted much of his attention to political action against Arab governments. While he previously rejected the democratic process, he later accepted it as a means for peaceful rotation of power.

Paradoxically, despite his fame in the Gulf countries and in the Levant as one of the founders of this school of thought and despite his impact on many generations of Islamists, Srur’s influence in Syria prior to the revolution had not been noticeable due to the security and political situation in Syria.⁴² Over the last three decades (1980s through the first decade of the new millennium), Salafism diminished in Syria, especially in the absence of prominent figures, while at the same time ascending abroad. A great number of well-known Syrian Sheikhs emerged, such as al-Albani, Mohammed Srur bin Nayef Zein al-Abideen, Mohammed al-Munjid, Mohammed al-Abdat, Adnan Ar’our, Mohammed Eid al-Abassi, Mohammed Lutfi al-Sabbag, Ahmed Sallam, in addition to other figures close to the Salafi Jihadist movement such as Abu-Busair (Abdulmoneim Halima).⁴³

2.2 During the Revolution: The Return of Salafism and Salafists

As the Syrian revolution gained strength, given the absence of an Islamist ideological framework and political organization as well as the media and political support for the protesters coming from external sources, the Salafists began to assume a more conspicuous role. A number of Sheikhs, chief among them Adnan Ar’our, appeared in the Salafist Safa satellite TV station and began to actively fill the vacuum.⁴⁴

A new movement, al-Mu'minun Yusharkoun ("Faithful Participation"), came to the surface in the Houran (Dara'a and its periphery). It was led by Lo'ai al-Zu'bu who characterizes his movement as "political Salafism." He took part in the fight in Afghanistan during the 1980s, in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s, and was detained in Syria for a number of years.⁴⁵

The "Faithful Participation" took part in the peaceful protests at the beginning of the Syrian revolution and in preaching activities. However, the movement announced in November 2011 that it would take up arms to confront the regime's repression of the peaceful protests. However, the movement ultimately undertook no military activities during this later stage.⁴⁶

Irrespective of the differences in Arab Salafists' positions towards the Arab popular protest movements and revolutions against incumbent regimes, they are united in their enmity towards the Syrian regime. They supported the revolution with all means available, including media, intellectual, and political support. The Salafists see eye to eye on the lack of legitimacy of the Syrian regime. The Salafi discourse depicts the regime as unreligious and sectarian. In later stages, Syrian Salafists abroad contributed by offering media, humanitarian, and financial support for the Syrian revolution. A majority of the Salafist group took part in that effort, which has helped spread the Salafi ideas inside Syria. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the armed factions and the charities in Syria were influenced by this discourse.

And yet, amid the pressure of the domestic armed struggle, distinguishing between the Salafist groups remains a difficult task. Most of these groups and movements share a common Islamic orientation with a Salafist flavor in ideas and discourse. Adding to this is the fluidity of the ideas among the members and supporters of these groups. Hence, categorizing these groups in an ideological map is a complicated matter because these ideas are controversial, erratic, and changeable, shifting according to domestic changes and to the development of the factions themselves.

That said, Abdurrahman al-Haj sketches out a more accurate classification for these armed Salafist factions and their distinguishing features. The first group are the Jihadists who are directly linked to al-Qaeda, such as Nusra Front, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", and al-Muhajerin Battalion. The second group are the Salafists of the "Deferred Caliphate." This includes the Salafi Jihadists and the political Salafists with local orientation, according to Ahmed Aba Zaid. Close to them are the Islamic Front and especially the Islamic Sham Liberals, and al-Fajr. Third, there are the traditional Salafi Jihadists such as

Liwa el-Islam. I also add a fourth category: the mixed Islamic factions, which are close to other groups with Salafi orientation, such as the battalion of al-Tawhid wal Farouq and the Islamic Farouq.⁴⁷

As I will discuss Salafi Jihadists in the next chapter, I will address the other brands of Salafism here. First, at the top of the Salafi faction – in terms of presence, role, and visibility – there is the “Deferred Caliphate Salafism” to use Abdurrahman Al-Haj’s term. This group is represented by the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF), which is dominated by Salafists. It is the most important and most widespread, with activities in most Syrian governorates. The SIF was established in July 2012, comprised of eleven major factions. Chief among them are Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyah, Liwa al-Haq, Katibat Hamzah bin Abdul Mutalib, Jamaat al-Taliah al-Islamiyah, and Katibat Mus’ab bin Umay.⁴⁸

In its charter, the SIF states that it seeks to bring down the current Syrian regime, to establish a civilized Muslim society, and to follow the Sunni “Islam of the Pious Predecessor”.⁴⁹ The SIF represents the local version of Salafism with Jihadist nature. SIF differs from the factions that belong to al-Qaeda, of which most members are Syrian. One of the most noticeable leaders of SIF is Hassan Aboud (Abu Abdullah) who belongs to Harakat Ahrar al-Sham. SIF enjoyed the backing of Abu Busair al-Tartousi, one of the most prominent former Sheikhs of universal Salafi Jihadist, who represents Liwa al-Fajr.⁵⁰

One of the leading factions of SIF is Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, which operates in Aleppo, Edlib, and the Northern areas in particular. Additionally, there are Liwa al-Haq in Homs (led by Abu Ratib),⁵¹ Harakat al-Fajr al-Islamiyah in Edlib and the rural areas of Hama,⁵² Jamaat al-Taliah al-Islamiyah, Katibat Hamzah bin Abdul Mutalib, and Saraya al-Maham al-Khasa in Damascus.

The SIF cooperates with the rest of armed factions and it does not operate under the banner of the Free Army. It took part along with Nusra Front and Liwa al-Tawhid in setting up Islamic commissions for conflict resolution that focus on human rights in multiple areas. It has a noticeable presence in al-Riqqa, Edlib, and Aleppo and their rural surroundings.

The second group is the Islamic Front for Liberating Syria. It has a general Islamic identity influenced by the Salafists, the Muslim Brotherhood and Liberation schools of thought despite the fact that its speeches and positions display a Salafist flavor. They stem from Salafist discourse and lean close to national and traditional discourse. Most of its factions work under the banner

of the Free Army. It is led by Ahmed Issa who belongs to Suqor al-Islam, while Mohammed Aloush is its executive director.⁵³

Among the most prominent factions are Liwa al-Tawhid in Aleppo under the leadership of Abdulgadir Salih,⁵⁴ who is one of the leaders of the military council; Kataib al-Farouq led by Osmah al-Jundi (a lawyer), which has a presence mainly in Homs;⁵⁵ al-Farouq al-Islamiyah, led by Amjed al-Beitar, which operates in the provinces of Hama; Suqor al-Islam, led by Ahmed Issa, who is very active in Edlib, and to a great extent in provinces of Hama;⁵⁶ and Liwa al-Islam (part of the frequently divided Ansar al-Islam), which is active in provinces of Damascus in particular. The most notable leader is Zahran Aloush who graduated from the Islamic university in Medina in Saudi Arabia. He has Salafi leanings and was detained in Syria for his preaching and Salafi activism.⁵⁷ Among the factions that constitute the Front we can mention Kataib Amro bin al-Ass in Aleppo and its countryside. The spokesperson is Dalia Shams. There is also Suqor al-Kurd in Qamishli, and the Majlis Thuwar Deir al-Zor.⁵⁸

At the civilian level, "Hay'at al-Sham al-Islamiyah" includes a number of Salafi Islamist personalities. The Sruri group (political Salafi)⁵⁹ is dominant in this commission. It has extensive activities across Syria in the fields of humanitarian assistance, preaching and relief. It offers educational and medical services and helps the local community face hardships such as securing basic needs during the ongoing conflict. It also issues the "Noor al-Sham" magazine.⁶⁰

In its founding charter, the commission states that it seeks to "empower God's religion on earth," and to maintain the Islamic identity of Syria. It also discusses its vision of citizenship, the relationship among different religions and sects, and its role in social development. Recently, it began thinking of establishing a political party that represents its political and intellectual vision.⁶¹

Similarly, the Justice and Development Movement emerged in London in 2005. It was established by members involved in Political Salafism and defectors from the Muslim Brotherhood. Scholars consider it an advanced version of Salafism. One of its leading figures is Anas al-Abdah (son of Sheikh Mohammed al-Abdah) who is close to political Salafism and a friend of Mohammed Srur Zein al-Abideen. Despite the movement's visible activities abroad, it has no significant presence in Syria.⁶² That said, Mohammed Srur Zein al-Abideen

does not acknowledge that this movement is an extension of his own and he says he does not conform with it.⁶³

In November 2011, al-Assalah Watanmiya Front was born out of the traditional Salafi ideological trend. It was established in the Eastern area in Deir al-Zor, an area with tribal nature. It has branches all over Syria, including the Eastern, Western, Central, and Southern regions. The structure of the front shows that it has some 139 battalions yet the groups with the most significant presence and momentum are in the Northern areas.

The group has two key wings: a military and a civilian wing. The civilian wing is by and large represented in the “Ahl al-Athr” society whereas its military wing is represented in the army of “al-Assalah Watanmiya.” It proclaims that its objective is the overthrow of the regime and the unity of various factions under its banner. It also emphasizes its commitment to fair standards of justice. It argues that victory in Syria is slow in coming due to the fragmentation and lack of unity among the armed factions and because of the influence of certain circles in the political opposition.

In a post-Assad Syria, the front envisions a civil state based on justice, tolerance, and coexistence among the different classes. While the front is not articulating a definite stand towards democracy, it says that it intends to reorganize as a democratic organization in order to participate in the establishment of the new regime.⁶⁴ Abdulgadir D’eifis is the Secretary General and Khalid Hammad is his deputy.

The rise of the front has been subject to debate. Some observers argue that the front has been receiving a generous financial support from outside Syria. Therefore, it has been able to recruit military leaders and to subsume active factions thanks to the resources, weapons, and logistical capabilities.

One of Front’s leaders is Abdelaziz Manaf Tlas, the renowned defected officer, who was previously leading Kataib al-Farouq. Indeed, Tlas was involved in a case that led the political committee of the Kataib al-Farouq to consider him unfit for the position of leadership and therefore ousted him.⁶⁵ Some observers go even further, arguing that the front is a duplication of the Iraqi Sahawat (revival) experiment that came into being in Anbar (a tribal area of Iraq) in 2007. The objective was to eliminate the increasing influence of al-Qaeda. The front has a similar double mission: facing al-Qaeda and, at the same time, fighting the Syrian regime and the Shiite Iranian influence. The front

enjoys the support of the Sheikhs of the Salafi Call in Jordan and Saudi Arabia and enjoys the blessing of the authorities in these two states.⁶⁶

Ali al-Halabi, one of the leading figures of the traditional Salafis in Jordan, agrees that the front is the closest to the orientation of the Salafists in the Arab World (in addition to Liwa al-Islam led by Zahran Aloush). He also confirms that the front enjoys moral support from the Salafists and does not accept aid from foreign governments. It also does not accept non-Syrian fighters in its ranks lest this cause disturbances and problems, as is the case in other fighting factions.⁶⁷

It is hard though to assess the strength of the front compared to the al-Qaeda and the Salafi Jihadists or whether it could achieve similar success as Sahawat in Iraq. However, the front possesses factors of strength that have catapulted it into prominence in the past. One of the factors of strength is its growth in the tribal structures of the Eastern areas of the country and its access to significant funds that enabled the front to recruit and gain the loyalty of other factions. It also enjoyed the logistical support of both Jordan and Saudi Arabia in terms of arming, intelligence and military aid. Undoubtedly, its attempt to subsume other factions under its banner may create some challenges and problems with factions that enjoy similar strength, presence, and capabilities, such as the Free Army and Ahrar al-Sham wal Tawhid.

2.3 *Between “Sham Salafism” and other Salafisms*

There is a multi-dimensional difference between the “Sham Salafism” that emerged in big cities with the beginning of the 20th century – before it retreated in later stages with the emergence of other brands of Salafism – and the form of Salafism associated with the rise of the latest revolutionary protest movement.

Sham Salafism was established by Mohammed Rashid Rida, Jamal al-Qasimi, Bahjat al-Beitar, Ahmed Mazhar al-Azmeh and others. It emerged in the Syrian scene through two vital societies. The first one is al-Tamadun al-Ghara’ society. It opened up to Western culture and political and public life. It also opened up to the diverse strata of the society. In a nutshell, it was influenced by the reformist school of thought that is best embodied in one of its best-known figures, Rashid Rida.

Yet the new Salafisms – whether the traditional ones (that are apolitical) or the Jihadists (seeking to set up a Taliban-like Islamic state) – are anti-West and less open to the societal culture and the political scene. They are less keen on democracy albeit not antagonistic. Its main figures are Sheikh Mohammed Nasser Eddin al-Albani, Abu Basir al-Tartousi, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani and others who adopted the Salafi approach.⁶⁸

Perhaps, the movement closer to reformist Sham Salafism is the political Salafism that believes in the general political activism and democratic institutions but is conservative when it comes to Western liberal values. Sheikh Mohammed Srur bin Nayef Zein al-Abideen is seen as the leading figure of this Salafi movement at the international level. He admits that he actually seeks to devolve the Salafi cause in Syria to the known reformist Salafism. He particularly talks about Kamil al-Qassab, the founder of the Syrian Union Party and the Scholar Society of 1937.⁶⁹

One of the figures close to the reformist Salafi line is the head of NCSR, Ahmed Mouath Al-Khatib, who energized Jema'ah al-Tamadun al-Islami (Society of the Islamic Civilization). That group was established by Ahmed Mazhar al-Azmeh in 1923 and espouses a perspective close to the Muslim Brotherhood in Damascus and used to publish the al-Tamadun Magazine. He worked to spread the reformist thought through the society, its online website Darbuna (www.darbuna.net) and the preacher of the Umayyad Mosque before he was prevented from giving religious lessons. Observers see that he is close to the Muslim Brotherhood of Damascus, especially those known for a moderate Salafi line (such as Issam al-Attar).⁷⁰

The challenge facing the different Salafi trends during the next era is linked to their ability to sustain their growth and establish a foundation in the cultural and social reality of Syria. This in its turn relies on people's acceptance of Salafi thought or at least of some of this thought's derivatives. While the current situation indicates the spread of Salafism in the countryside, it is possible to revive Sham Salafism, which had started in the larger cities, such as Damascus and Aleppo.

It goes without saying that it is hard to foresee the Salafists continuing on their current course. The scope of the Salafi movements' spread and rise will be impacted by conditions on the ground and changes in the future. If the internal war continues for a long time, then the Salafi Jihadists will profit from this situation of anarchy. However, if there is a new regime based on democracy

and pluralism, then traditional Salafism will most likely fare better in the countryside, whereas Sham Salafism could be revived in the large cities.

3. The “Paradox” of al-Qaeda in the Armed Revolution

Since the start of the revolution in Syria, al-Qaeda has been a conspicuous and controversial actor. Early on, President Assad and his propaganda machine linked the increasing popular protests with the armed activism and foreign elements belonging to al-Qaeda. Assad has sought to send a message that the revolution in Syria is not like those seen in the rest of the Arab countries but rather an external “conspiracy.” He argued that some Arab countries had been fueling the revolution to settle scores with Syria for its alliance with Iran and its support for Hams and Hezbollah.⁷¹

Nevertheless, the Syrian regime’s early allegations were proven incorrect as the protests took a clear peaceful manner. The protests were primarily driven by calls for freedom, justice, and democracy. And yet, with the excessive use of repression on the part of the Syrian regime, the protests later developed a violent and armed posture. This violent transformation coincided with the emergence of Salafi Jihadists and other small factions linked to al-Qaeda in some areas (albeit these groups did not initially associate themselves with al-Qaeda publicly).

With the political impasse, the transformation of the Syrian scene into an open civil war, the involvement of regional and international players in the ongoing conflict, and the opening of the borders with Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq, al-Qaeda Syria was born. It came to the fore through the influx of foreign fighters and local elements with previous experience in fighting and collecting arms amid complex security and military conditions. Al-Qaeda had a particularly strong presence in the Northeast of Syria.

The official ascendance of al-Qaeda in Syria generated contending outcomes. The Syrian regime quickly exploited its rise by presenting al-Qaeda as a bogeyman, hoping to convince the world of the threat of global Jihadists and Islamic fundamentalists who would destabilize the region if the regime fell.⁷² On the other hand, Western countries cited al-Qaeda to justify inaction and their failure to support the opposition. Other Islamist factions have been grappling with how to tackle this issue. While they are aware of the effective role al-Qaeda plays in fighting the regime, they recognize the perils of their fighting role regarding the identity of the revolution, its objectives, and the external support.⁷³

To complicate the situation further, al-Qaeda Iraq entered Syria at a later stage. It clashed with Nusra Front, the local group of al-Qaeda, when the latter’s

leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani firmly rejected the demand of the leader of al-Qaeda Iraq to merge the two groups into a so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (ISIS). Interestingly enough, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of the global network of al-Qaeda, supported al-Jolani in his rejection of the proposed merger. This in turn generated acute differences within al-Qaeda itself, a matter that led to the retreat of Nusra Front and the emergence of an enlarged role for the ISIS. Subsequently, al-Qaeda got into violent confrontation with other armed factions in what appeared as if it was a replay of al-Qaeda’s experience in Iraq.

This new dimension of the war in Syria poses essential questions about the future role of al-Qaeda as well as about its current role, size, and influence. It also questions the root of al-Qaeda’s presence and its consequences. This chapter will address these critical questions.

3.1 Assad and al-Qaeda: The Magic and the Magician

The Syrian researcher Abdurrahman al-Hajj describes how the conducive and fertile environment that bred the Salafi Jihadists in Syria extends back to the 1990s. The privatization policies adopted by the regime and the resulting social dislocation, impoverishment, and the marginalization in the rural areas coupled with the Syrian regime’s policy of supporting the Islamic resistance in both Palestine and Lebanon helped reinforce a conservative religious culture in these disgruntled areas. In fact, it made these areas susceptible to radical ideas, thus depriving moderate Islam of the space for political and institutional activism.⁷⁴

This milieu was conducive to the growth of Salafi Jihadist ideas in general and the regime’s later policies played a similar role in accelerating their proliferation. These ideas serve as the spiritual father of al-Qaeda. In 2003 during the war on Iraq, the Syrian regime opened its border with Iraq, allowing Syrians and Arab volunteers to fight against American forces in Iraq. Hundreds of Syrians returned to Syria after that under the banner of al-Qaeda, which was the only available framework for Arab fighters in Iraq.⁷⁵

Meanwhile a preacher in a mosque in Aleppo named Mohamed Qoula Agasi – also known by his nom de guerre Abu Qa’aq’a’ – received Arab volunteers and facilitated their transfer to Iraq. He was killed in September 2007 when Jihadists believed him to be a Syrian intelligence officer. The Syrian security forces accused extremists of killing him.⁷⁶

In 2004 and 2005, the Syrian government claimed that some operations had been done by terrorist cells.⁷⁷ Early assessments and reports named youth who were influenced by the Salafi Jihadist ideas. Yet, in 2006, a new organization linked to al-Qaeda emerged in Lebanon. The Palestinian Shakir al-Absi, a defector from Fatah al-Intifada, engaged in an armed confrontation with the Lebanese army in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp. Some of its leaders fled Lebanon and hid in Syria and many others were killed.

The prior presence of al-Absi in Syria and his arrest by the Syrian authorities before he went to Lebanon made many observers think that the Syrian regime was behind this group. Among the reasons underlying this was the regime's use of radical Islamists as a scarecrow after the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005. It was also meant to distract the international tribunal formed to investigate the Hariri assassination.⁷⁸

Despite the enigmatic character of "Fateh al-Islam," it was to backfire as the revolution against the Syrian regime began. These groups managed to get back together along with Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria to take part in the fight against the Syrian regime. A majority of them joined Nusra Front in later stages.⁷⁹

Kataib Abdullah Azzam, was established by the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and worked within the network of al-Qaeda, though with a bigger presence in Lebanon. Azzam founded it in 2005 to work outside Iraq and in other Arab countries such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen.⁸⁰

The leader of the previous group was the Saudi Saleh al-Qar'awi (who married the daughter of Mohammed Khalil al-Hakaymeh, the leader of al-Qaeda in Egypt) who is wanted by both the Saudi and the US authorities. In 2012, Majid al-Majid took over the group. Al-Majid is also a Saudi national who is wanted by Saudi authorities. Reports suggest that al-Qar'awi suffered a serious injury, losing his legs in Afghanistan, while the current leader has been in hiding Lebanon in a Palestinian refugee camp up until the eruption of the revolution in Syria.⁸¹

The Abdullah Azzam battalions announced some successful operations against Israeli and Western interests in Sinai, Aqaba, and Lebanon during the years that preceded the onset of the Syrian revolution. Their activity during the Syrian revolution, however, remained limited. This group has conducted no serious operations despite its many supportive statements to the revolution.⁸²

This group is still small in size. And it is rarely mentioned with bigger factions such as al-Qaeda and the global Salafi Jihadists in Syria. Yet, it is one of the factions with presence that preceded the emergence of other factions. The majority of its members are Saudis, Jordanians, and Palestinians.

3.2 The Growth of al-Qaeda: Energized and Expanding

Except for the tiny fringe groups with insignificant operations, al-Qaeda had no active presence in Syria prior to the outbreak of the revolution. However, as the protests gained momentum and became violent and with the attempt by the regime to frame al-Qaeda as a scarecrow to the West, a small “nucleus” of al-Qaeda began to take shape. In the beginning of 2012, hundreds of Islamists who belonged to Salafi or Salafi Jihadist groups were released from the infamous Saidnaya prison. The released inmates soon began to spread and to participate in armed cells.

It is worth mentioning that, according to researchers, the majority of the prisoners who were released from Saidnaya jail were leaders of Islamist groups and Salafi Jihadists. In February 2012, the Syrian authority announced the release of Abu Mus’ab al-Sori (Mustafa bin Abdulgadir Sit Meriam), one of the most prominent theorists of Salafi Jihadism in the world. However, his name faded after that and no single operation can be traced to him. Some observers argue that he was not released in the first place. According to this narrative, the regime was just trying to scare the West.⁸³

The situation took another twist in mid-2011. As the Syrian revolution began to militarize, Turkey opened its borders, allowing volunteers to sneak in and fight side by side with the Syrians. Hundreds also flocked into different regions from Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, European countries, Chechnya, and Central Asia. By the beginning of 2012, the incoming individuals and groups were beginning to get organized.

Among these groups, was one sent by the head of al-Qaeda Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This group was led by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, one of al-Zarqawi’s previous comrades. He established Nusra Front, which commenced operations by the end of 2011. They set up the website “al-Manarah al-Bayda” to announce and cover the activity of this group.

In spite of the affiliation of al-Jolani to al-Qaeda and despite his previous work in it, he avoided swearing an oath of allegiance (bay’ah) to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Nor did he announce the official presence of al-Qaeda in Syria. He continued

coordinating with other armed faction in an attempt to avoid committing the mistakes he had seen in Iraq when al-Qaeda clashed with the local population. Nusra Front was active in Homs and Damascus. It later started establishing a network in Deir al-Zor and Northwest. It also exploited the channel that linked the Eastern areas in Iraq to facilitate the transition of previous members of al-Qaeda to Syria in a kind of reverse immigration. Of course the biggest presence within these groups were Syrians.⁸⁴

Nusra Front excelled at their operations, fighting, and discipline despite its excessively strict procedures in recruiting followers. That said, al-Qaeda strongly contributed to the armed operation, not allowing its ideology and global political agenda to get between themselves and the local population. On the contrary, it profited from the spread of battalions belonging to the Syrian Free Army and their lack of discipline, as al-Qaeda offered a more disciplined model that gained popular support and helped build new networks for recruitment.⁸⁵

The decisive turn came when the United States announced in December 2012 that it had placed Nusra Front on their list of terrorist groups. This decision embarrassed the Syrian Free Army and other factions, and they criticized the American decision.

The second twist came in April 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of al-Qaeda Iraq, announced the merger with al-Qaeda Syria (Nusra Front). This announcement came out of the blue. Al-Baghdadi stated that the Front and al-Jolani belonged to his organization. He said that he had sent al-Jolani with money and weapons to establish al-Qaeda al-Sham (al-Qaeda Syria). He announced the merged group under the name of the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.”

A response of al-Jolani to al-Baghdadi came shortly after. He acknowledged the role of al-Baghdadi in supporting Nusra Front but he expressed his surprise to hear al-Baghdadi’s announcement. Adding insult to injury, al-Jolani refused to join the “Islamic State” but he confirmed that his oath of allegiance (bay’ah) was to the central leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri and not to al-Baghdadi. Shortly after that, al-Zawahiri threw his support behind the front in Syria and rejected the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham”. Even though, al-Baghdadi refused to accept al-Zawahiri’s speech, he confirmed the merger of the two al-Qaeda groups into one organization.⁸⁶

Not surprisingly, the differences and divisions among the leaders of al-Qaeda at the local, regional, international levels, along with divisions among theorists

of Salafism and Salafi Jihadism, led to the division of al-Qaeda into two key factions. On one side is the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; on the other is Nusra Front led by al-Jolani. The “Islamic State” became very active and influential in its activities. Contrary to that, Nusra Front has experienced a setback and its significance is in decline. Observers believe that the majority of al-Qaeda members favored the “Islamic State”, which has more capacity and extensive experience. Most of the foreign fighters joined the “Islamic State” and this gave boost to the group’s Iraqi members.⁸⁷

The attempt by the “Islamic State” to impose its ideology and agenda on the Northern, Eastern, and Northwestern areas, which fell out of Assad’s control paved the way for military clashes between Nusra Front and some armed factions. As a result, the “Islamic State” killed some leaders of the Free Army. Demonstrations against the “Islamic State” broke out in al-Riqqa and the “Islamic State” got into armed confrontation with Kurdish factions as well. At the same time, the group entered into political and military struggles with other forces.⁸⁸ Similar to the situation in Iraq, a council of Mujahidin was established as a cover for al-Qaeda, including factions which support the Salafi Jihadists in some governorates.⁸⁹

In addition to the “Islamic State” and Nusra Front, other Jihadist groups made up of foreign and local elements that are close to the Salafi Jihadist discourse have emerged. In mid-2012, Liwa al-Umah in Ma’arat al-Numan was established. It is led by the Libyan Mahdi al-Hirati, who is an Irish citizen. He is also associated with the rebels of Tripoli. Liwa includes a number of Arab fighters in addition to Syrian fighters. It aims to help the Syrian rebels build their fighting capacity, gather weapons, and to undertake operations.⁹⁰

In the countryside of Latakia and in Turkmen Mountain, a second force of Mujahidin was established. It is made of Chechens, Arabs from the Maghreb, and Asians. Abu Omar al-Shishani (who fought in Chechnya) leads the battalion. He announced that his aim was to establish an Islamic state. The spokesperson of the battalion was Abu Hamzah al-Muhajir, who was killed later at the hands of the Free Army.⁹¹ At the time of writing this study, neither Liwa al-Umah nor the battalion of Mujahidin had expressed a position concerning the ongoing difference between the “Islamic State” and Nusra Front.

Another organization, Jund al-Sham, was established in the countryside of Homs toward the end of 2012. It is primarily comprised of Lebanese fighters and operates under the leadership of the Lebanese Khalid al-Mahmoud

(known as Abu Suleiman al-Muhajir). It controls Homs Castle. This organization represents an extension of the Salafi Jihadists in Lebanon and some Palestinian camps.⁹²

3.3 The Role of Nusra Front and the Other Armed Factions

Notwithstanding the political and media bustle about al-Qaeda in Syria, most assessments estimate the number of al-Qaeda fighters to be about several thousand compared with the tens of thousands of fighters in other armed factions. Among the members of al-Qaeda are hundreds of Arabs and foreigners from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Palestine, Morocco, Jordan, Chechnya, and other countries.

That said, the capacity of al-Qaeda seems to lie in the objective conditions rather than in its inherent strength. The political standstill, the absence of the international community – which only leaves Syrians more disappointed –, the rise of sectarianism, the involvement of Hezbollah and Iran, and the Iraqi Shiites' support of the Syrian regime have all worked in al-Qaeda's favor. These conditions created an environment conducive to al-Qaeda to continue recruiting fighters.

The other source of al-Qaeda's strength is the dissonance among other armed factions in multiple provinces. The lack of a unified leadership and a strategy made the "Islamic State" stronger in dealing with the range of fragmented players. Interestingly, the "Islamic State" is committing mistakes similar to those made in Iraq, such as the appointment of non-Syrians to senior positions in the organization, a matter leading to frictions with the local community and other factions.

One of the most obvious mistakes committed by al-Qaeda in Iraq was in fact the establishment of the "Islamic State" in some governorates. Additionally, it tried to impose its agenda on the local community. Tensions were running high in 2007 and therefore al-Qaeda got into armed struggle with other factions, including some Islamic ones, chief among them the Islamic Army and Thawarat al-Ishreen (the Revolution of the Twenty). Shortly after that, al-Sahawat (Revival) was formed to deal a deadly blow against al-Qaeda in Iraq. It led to a big rift in the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Sunni community itself.

Although the specific conditions (the American military occupation of Iraq), which led to the formation of Sahawat in Iraq, are absent in the Syrian equation, conflict between al-Qaeda and other Syrian armed factions – many of whom tried to avoid confrontation with the “Islamic State” – rose to the surface. However, the insistence of the “Islamic State” to impose its vision and agenda will sooner or later cause such confrontations.

It is true that there is a common enemy for the armed factions, the “Islamic State”, and Nusra Front, but the ideology of the “Islamic State” is different. It is based on the imposition of its religious and political agendas in the more liberal areas, which negatively impacts on the relationship between Nusra Front and the “Islamic State”. This is augmented by the international agenda and the countries supporting the Syrian revolution, which do not support al-Qaeda and even fear its rise. They will pressure the Free Army and other armed factions to emasculate al-Qaeda and bring it down to size.

4. Sufism: Militarily “Dormant”

Unlike the Salafi trend, Sufism is a well-established school that has been rooted in Syrian society for centuries. Sufism represents the traditional style of religiosity in the Syrian society and established a wide presence in the country. It has been successful in spreading religious and social rituals and *Tariqa*. Its renowned Sheikhs, mosque preachers, scholars, and Islamic lyrics have been ubiquitous.

At the same time, Sufism is not an ideological, sectarian or political party. It is rather an intellectual, religious, and doctrinal movement. Far from being monolithic, Sufism includes groups with different intellectual and political positions, as is the case with the philosophical and political diversity within Salafism. In essence, Sufism is neither a political nor a social force except for some cases when groups emerged from Sufis to assume political roles.

Interestingly, the Muslim Brotherhood included to its rank and file some Sufists and also some Salafists. Though they have theological differences, they agreed on the political stance of the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology in the general sense of the word. On the other hand, there are a number of personalities that emerged in the past decades with an independent Sufi orientation. They are active in the public domain and the political transformations in Syria. Among them we can include the group of Zaid and Harakat al-Qbeisat, which are not political forces or parties. We can also include some Sheikhs such as the former grand mufti of Syria Ahmed Kuftaro, Mohammed Said al-Bouti and others of the new Sunni scholars, such as former deputy Mohammed Habash, who aspire to play a political role.

These groups and personalities differ in their positions on the Syrian revolution. Some are fully in line with the Syrian authorities' positions; some, like Harakat al-Qbeisat, say nothing; and some are politically aligned with the revolution, such as the Zaid group. The general observation is the absence of the clear and direct presence of these forces and schools in the armed revolution. Some observers confirm the involvement of a number of young religious Sufis – among them students of well-known Sheikhs in Damascus and some other cities – in the different armed groups.

The common feature of the majority of these Sufi groups is the strength of their foundation in Syrian civil society. Most Sufi followers dwell in major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo. They enjoy wide social acceptance in these governorates, which means that they could be reactivated in the future.

Their current latent presence is due to the fact that the majority of the armed factions and the protest movement emerged in the countryside, while key cities until recently remained under a tough military security grip of the Syrian regime.

4.1 *Jama'at Zaid: From Appeasement to Confrontation*

Zaid group is considered one of the most visible Sufi groups in Syria with a long history that extends to the moment of its establishment by its first Sheikh Abdulkarim al-Rifai (1901-1973). The group became known through the activities of al-Rifai himself in mosques and conservative social events. It spread through a network of mosques and through the relations between the Sheikh, his disciples, and his followers.

The name of this group refers to the Prophet's Companion Zaid bin Thabit and is also the name of the mosque from where al-Rifai launched his project. Indeed, the group eschewed direct political activity. Instead al-Rifai focused on the education aspect through seminaries in mosques. He emphasized ethical and spiritual education. The idea of transforming the mosques into universities and of setting up the alternative Islamic society through the call for education originated from this group.⁹³

In 1973, the founding Sheikh died and his son Osama succeeded him. The groups continued to follow the same general orientation. Rifai never expressed any political ambition or a desire to take part in the political process or even get involved in the regime's institution. Nevertheless, the political struggle between the Baathist regime and the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s had an impact on the group and some of its members joined the armed operations. By the early 1980s, the regime dealt the group a severe blow. A great numbers of its followers – those who had joined the "Fighting Vanguard" – were killed or detained. Osama al-Rifai himself had to take refuge outside Syria.⁹⁴

Due to the security crackdown and the migration of its leaders, the groups became inactive in the 1980s and 1990s. Later Hafiz al-Assad announced his plan to transfer power to his son Bashar and his desire to improve relations with the Sunni community and appease the middle classes and merchants who consider Rifai as their Sheikh. Assad therefore allowed Osama to return to Syria in the middle of 1990s.⁹⁵ Rifai returned after the group had lost the majority of its institutions and network of mosques, but its spiritual legacy

helped the group rebuild and restore its preaching, educational, and charitable role in the span of just a few years. It has succeeded in reproducing its presence significantly. It also managed to establish a network of institutions and charities, and to organize events at a national level but without getting involved directly in political activism.⁹⁶

In 2002, Assad paid an unusual visit to the Sheikh of the group in Damascus. This move was seen by scholars as an attempt to gain legitimacy through the Sunni religious groups. The visit granted the followers of the group confidence and assurance and reinforced its preaching and scientific activities. They started to discuss politics, albeit without getting directly in politics. Instead, the Sheikh limited his discussion to the group's declared views against what he saw to be in contradiction with the Islamic values.⁹⁷

Up until the eve of the revolution, the groups followed a middle-of-the-road strategy with regard to the regime's policy, according to Abdurrahman al-Haj. The group never adopted the discourse of glorification and support of the regime as other groups and figures did. At the same time, the group sent positive signals to the regime and this enabled the groups to secure high levels of social acceptance and expand to some neighborhoods of Damascus and its countryside.⁹⁸

During the Syrian revolution, the group's strategy underwent change. The Sheikhs of the groups neither criticize the protests nor call on people to go home. Contrary to that, in their rallies and speeches, they direct sharp criticism towards the Syrian regime. They also support the calls for reform and call for a change in official policies. Moreover, they criticized the means of torture and repression used against protesters. In August 2011, police swarmed a mosque, attacked Sheikh Osama and others who were there to pray. On the heels of this incident, Sheikh Osama received a wave of sympathy and support from the mosques of Damascus, along with demonstrations in support of him. His mosque was shut down and he had to leave Syria once again.⁹⁹

At a later stage, Osama and his brother Sariah, like other groups' Sheikhs, became active in supporting and defending revolution. The group's website, "Sada Zaid," devoted most of its publication to support for the Syrian revolution. Inside Syria, a great deal of the group's followers in and out of Damascus joined armed activities and Jihadist groups. Several were killed and others detained. Now the group is in open confrontation with the regime. Also, the group's Sheikhs such as Osama, Sariah, and Mohammed Na'im Argous are

now ranking among the religious leaders who are most proactive in supporting and defending the revolution abroad. Sheikh Osama al-Rifai participated in a conference titled "Muslim Scholars," held in Cairo in June 2013 in support of the revolution.¹⁰⁰

4.2 *Harakat al-Qbeisat: Syrian Islamic Feminism*

The roots of al-Qbeisat movement date back to 1960s when Munira al-Qbeisi (born in 1933) began her activism to spread the call. She was a biology teacher in Syrian schools but later she began teaching religion at the Faculty of Religion on regular basis.

Al-Qbeisat represents a Syrian religious feminist group, which was active within the middle class and which, in more recent years, penetrated the wealthy class in Damascus and other cities. It is strictly limited to women through a home-based network and educational institutions that concentrate on religious, spiritual, and moral education. It distances itself from political activism. It is perhaps the only Syrian Islamic movement that is received well outside Syria. The movement has spread into Jordan, Lebanon, and other countries where schools and institutions based on its Sufi education and religiosity style were established.¹⁰¹

Despite the fact that the movement is confined to women, it does not adopt a feminist discourse based on rights but a pure Islamic-religious discourse. It is characterized by its marked ability to recruit and by its acceptance among the wealthy class. This is done through a style of religiosity and Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) that enable this class to match between the spiritual needs and the nature of social life.

During the past decades, Munira al-Qbeisi remained enigmatic and avoided the media appearances. She is single, fully dedicated to the affairs of religion and preaching, and the majority of well-known women in the group do not see her. Although the movement does not participate in political or parliamentary events and activities, and she made sure that its relationship with the Syrian authorities remains friendly. The movement enjoyed the support of Sheikhs close to the regime in recent decades such as the former grand mufti of Syria Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro and Sheikh Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti.¹⁰²

During the revolution, the movement did not come up with any political stance for or against the revolution. Yet, observers assured that many women, who

belong to this movement, support the Syrian revolution politically and socially. However, this presence is limited to social and peaceful activities and has no observed presence in the media or in military and political aspects.¹⁰³

4.3 “Al-Kuftaroyoun” and the Official Religious Institutions

During the period of confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian regime and the resultant liquidation of the movement, a number of Sheiks and scholars came to the fore to fill the vacuum left by the departure of the Muslim Brotherhood’s scholars and Sheikhs. The new emerging elite allied organically with the regime and got involved in its religious institutions. As a quid pro quo, the new elite legitimized the regime’s criticism of the Islamic movements in the opposition. Among the leading scholars and religious figures are the former Grand Mufti of Syria Ahmed Kuftaro (along with his intellectual and institutional school) and Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti. In addition to them, there is the current mufti Ahmed Hasson and a number of clergymen such as Mahmoud Ukam, the mufti of Aleppo.

Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro (1915-2004) is of Kurdish origin and one of the leading religious and official figures in Syria during the last decades. He received a strict Sufi education and he belonged to the Naqshabandi Tariqa. He started his activity as a teacher in the religious fatwa school in al-Quneitra. In 1946 he established the Secondary al-Ansar Institute and then in 1951 he became Damascus’ mufti for Shafi’ya (one of the four main Islamic schools of thought in Islamic Jurisprudence in the Sunni world) and he launched a network of educational centers and charities.

In 1971, Kuftaro established the Abu-Enoor complex. Capitalizing on his relationship with Assad, he expanded the complex to include a number of educational institutes and specialized schools for both females and males in religious teaching (Shari’a). He was appointed as a grand mufti of Syria in 1974 and thus consolidated his relationship with the late President Assad. As a corollary, his group spread quickly in Syria due to the symbolic vacuum left by the departure of the Muslim Brotherhood. Other religious leaders close to his school, which adopt strict Sufism and a pragmatic approach to the regime, emerged in the 1990s.¹⁰⁴

And yet, the last years of his life saw growing differences within his group, particularly among the top leaders. The Sheik refused to endorse his son-in-law Mohammed Habash’s run for parliamentary elections. He even went a step

further when he issued a statement against the candidacy of his son-in-law. Ironically, Habash did win a seat in the parliament. Habash distinguished himself in parliament by defending the Syrian regime and by adopting an open, moderate, and enlightened Sufi line. However, differences among the top leadership of the group created serious problems. Kufaro's sons, Mahmoud and Salah were arrested by the regime and accused of spying for foreign countries. The Ministry of Endowment assumed control of the educational institution that belonged to the Abu-Enoor complex.¹⁰⁵

Although Rajab Deeb, the head of the Abu-Enoor complex and the successor of Kufaro, supported the Syrian regime against the revolution, the position of the groups towards the revolution is far from monolithic. The former parliamentarian deputy and the director of the Center for Islamic Studies Mohammed Habash defected and moved abroad. He tried at the beginning to follow a middle-of-the-road position, which he called the "third way." Then he started directing his criticisms at the Syrian regime while supporting the Syrian revolution.¹⁰⁶ Among his students, several movements supporting the revolution emerged. They called themselves "Ahrar Mujama' Enoor."¹⁰⁷

The other personality who played a prominent role in the official religious institution and in reinforcing the Sufi-regime relationship was Mohammed Said Ramada al-Bouti. He is one of the most renowned Sufi scholars and he served as a professor in the Faculty of Religion in Damascus University. He also served as the head of the Doctrines Department in the university. Since the 1980s, he supported the regime in the latter's confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood. During the 1990s, he became one of the closest people to the late Assad and a noted religious figure.¹⁰⁸

He stood up to the protest movements and gave a speech in the Umayyad Mosque slamming the protesters. His lessons and speeches angered the mosque congregants. In March 2013, he was killed while he was giving a lesson in al-Iman Mosque.¹⁰⁹ Al-Bouti was one of the best-known personalities defending the regime and one who took a strong position against Salafi trends. He was prolific and published a number of books.

The Mufti of Aleppo, Mahmoud Ukam, is also part of the official religious institution. He obtained a degree in philosophy from Sorbonne University in France. He adopted some innovative positions with regard to Islamic Fiqh. He, too, stood with the regime against popular protests.

Among other religious personalities who were close to the Syrian regime is Mohammed al-Shami, who was assassinated at the hands of militants in the early 1980s. His son, Mohammed Suhaib al-Shami, became the head of the Aleppo Endowments and he followed in his father footsteps.

In addition to these figures, Ahmed Badreddin Hassanoh became the Grand Mufti of Syria after the death of Ahmed Kuffaro. Hassanoh was born in Aleppo in 1949 and he obtained his doctorate in Islamic Fiqh.¹¹⁰ In March 2012, the Syrian Council for Ifta' headed by Ahmed Hasson issued a fatwa allowing Jihad with the Syrian regime as a part of the "defense of Syria." His son Saryiah was killed in a shootout in October 2011. Both the opposition and the regime traded accusations as to who was behind the incident. The head of his media office, Abdeljalil al-Said announced his defection from the official religious institutions as early as 2012.¹¹¹

4.4 Armed Action: "Disciples of the Sheikh"

Very few revolutionary activities are carried out in the name of the Sufi movement. And yet, a great number of the students of the Sheiks, those who belong to Zaid group in particular and those in Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo joined armed factions that adopt a general Islamic line. Chief among these factions are Katibat al-Sahabah (under the leadership of Abu Taiseer and Abu Islam), Alwaiyat Ahfad al-Rasoul (led by Abu Mouath al-Aga and Khalid Hbous), Dir's Damishq, Kataib al-Furgan, and Maghaweir al-Sham.¹¹²

Most of the members of these are from Damascus and its environs. They all (save for Maghaweir al-Sham) took part in Liwa al-Islam and Hamzah bin Abdulmutalib to form "Tajamu' Ansar al-Islam" in August 2012. Abu Mouath al-Aga became a spokesperson to this group. The Tajamu' aimed to unite all fighting Islamic factions under the banner of the Free Army. However, differences came to the fore in December 2012, leading to the expulsion of Liwa al-Islam and Hamzah bin Abdulmutalib from the Tajamu'. The differences emerged when Liwa al-Islam joined the front to liberate Syria.¹¹³

In April 2013, Liwa Maghaweir Sham al-Rasoul was formed under the leadership of Maghaweir al-Sham. It contains four main battalions; the most important among them are Bayariq al-Sham, al-Nasser Saladin, Saraya al-Hassan, Katibat Sheik al-Islam Ibn Tamiya, Katibat Dimisq, Katibat Answar al-Quran, Katibat al-Imam al-Shattbit, Katibat al-Sultan Mohammed al-Fateh Ili Madfa'ya, and Katibat Isud al-Islam.¹¹⁴

4.5 The Political, Social, and Intellectual Role

Certainly, the different Sufi movements and groups have approached the armed and peaceful revolution against the Syrian regime in different manners. Some supported the regime, such as most of the official religious institutions (Mujama' Abu-Enoor, the Institution of Endowment and Ifta'). Some indeed opposed the regime and accordingly joined the peaceful and armed protests (Students of Sheikh of al-Sham and Zaid group). Some were neutral then defected (al-Qbeisat).

Despite of the vague military targets of the Sufis, their presence and role in the era of peace and their work in the field of relief and social services has been tremendous. On the whole, the movement has a huge presence in Syrian society. It is still the number one priority for civic Islam, thanks to its historically deep network of relationships between the Sheiks of Sufism, their educational institutions, charities, and various mosques on the one hand and merchants, tradesmen, and the middle class on the other hand.

Given the historical experience of this movement, it did not retreat in the previous era of the Baathist rule. Part of the movement managed even to adapt with the emergency law and with the Baath rule. It kept its head above water through apolitical, social and religious activities. Some of the groups (like Zaid group) managed to reestablish their networks in a short time despite their absence from society for a long period.

This movement will most likely compete with the Salafi movement in the future in defining the religious options of Syrian society. There are serious differences between the two movements in terms of preaching, call, religiosity, and political Fiqh despite their agreement on Islamic symbolic slogans.

5. The Political-Ideological Blend

The task of categorizing the active civilian and military Islamist movements in Syria according to the traditional Islamic schools of thought (Salafism, Muslim Brotherhood, and Sufism) is far from easy.

To start, there is not yet stable internal cohesion within these factions. Members move freely from one faction to another. Additionally, some factions rise, others retreat and in other cases they merge or dissolve entirely. Second, there are broad Islamist frameworks – in the judicial, relief, peaching and humanitarian domains – that include more than one movement. Many of these movements are active in the liberated territories.

Within this framework of general Islamist action, a number of judicial and civilian factions and Islamist groups that do not belong to a particular movement have surfaced. Examples of this kind of activism are the Shari'a (Islamic law) Commission, which is active in and around Aleppo, al-Riqqa, Edlib, and in other liberated areas. Also there are armed factions in the South of Syria and the Houran region. These factions do not clearly belong to any of the traditional Islamic trends.

5.1 *Shari'a Commissions: Imposing Sharia and "Islamization"*

The Shari'a commissions were established in the liberated areas toward the end of 2012. They mainly appeared in Aleppo and Edlib to adjudicate civil matters and lawsuits and prosecute various transgressions. These commissions were formed based on consensual agreements among the main armed factions such as Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Liwa al-Fajr, etc.¹¹⁵

These factions reject existing "civil laws" in Syria and have announced their commitment to implement the Islamic Shari'a. Furthermore, the purview of these commissions has expanded from judging in conflicts on rights to implementing the Shari'a law in other sectors of life. This in particular triggered an extensive discussion, especially when it comes to Islamic punishment (hudud) such as stoning to death.¹¹⁶

What undermines the work of these commissions are the unqualified judges entrusted to carry out their mission. A majority of them has no judicial or legal background. Their Shari'a education is modest, to say the least. There are no

leading scholars serving on any of these commissions. Worse, the armed factions do not accept civilian judges who worked in the regime's institutions due to that fact that they practiced judiciary work based on civilian laws.¹¹⁷

In addition to these courts, a "Unified Judiciary Council" was established in Aleppo. It was tantamount to an attempt to rebuild the judiciary in a hierarchical manner in the liberated areas. This institution is to be based on the Islamic Shari'a in line with the decision of the Arab ministers of justice in 1996, a decision that was never put in place. The ministers agreed to rule out physical punishment or "hudud" due to the lack of the required conditions to implement them. But the council was not accepted by the public and failed to gain full control in these areas.¹¹⁸

The Commission and the Council differ not only regarding the nature of judicial sentences, according to Thomas Pierret. He alludes to another difference: the "separation of powers." While the Council seeks to consolidate its status as an independent authority, the armed groups that seek to retain the arm of the judiciary oversee the Commission. The main interest of the armed groups is not to impose ethics on people but to hold on to a symbolic asset that could be employed in the conflict against rogue rebels.¹¹⁹

Within the context of the process of "Islamization," Syrian rebels established a "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice." They established a commission in Bab al-Hawa in Aleppo, which together with other commissions, tries to implement Islamic teachings in these areas and to maintain peace. And yet, the commissions became controversial because of what was considered to be their imposition of religion on society by force in a manner similar to the religious police in Saudi Arabia.¹²⁰

5.2 Factions of the South: The Saudi and the Jordanian Influence

In the field – particularly in Dara'a, al-Quneitra, the South, and the countryside of Damascus – there are several active armed factions that do not operate according to traditional Islamic schools or any ideologically binding discourse. They are satisfied with more loose and general Islamic slogans. In fact, some of these factions are active under the banner of the Free Army but follow a general, mixed Islamic orientation. They do not belong to the Salafi trend nor to the Muslim Brotherhood. Needless to say, they do not ally with Nusra Front or al-Qaeda.

Among the most prominent factions is al-Muthana Qahir al-Furs, which is closer to the Salafi Jihadists, yet not officially under the banner of al-Qaeda. In March 2013, its Amir (leader) Amer Masalmeh was killed.¹²¹ Also there are Liwa Shuhada' al-Yarmouk,¹²² which was established in August 2012, led by Bashar al-Zu'bi, and Liwa al-Fallujah (under Yasser al-Aboud). The latter two belong to the Free Army.¹²³

Unlike other areas, most of the logistical support, armament, and financial support for Liwa Houran and the Southern areas comes from the Emirates and Saudi Arabia via Jordan. These countries do not support the groups and battalions that adopt an ideological Islamic discourse. Other areas benefit from Qatari support via Turkey. These two counties see no problem in supporting Islamist groups with Muslim Brotherhood or Salafist backgrounds.¹²⁴

Despite the fact that Katibat al-Muthana bin Haritha is closer to Salafi Jihadist thinking, it did not announce the oath of allegiance (bay'ah) to al-Qaeda nor did it meet with Nusra Front. One observer argues that any faction that exhibits any closeness to al-Qaeda would lose the Jordanian-Saudi support, a move that would emasculate such a faction militarily, structurally, and logistically. He points to the tremendous influence of the Jordanian security apparatuses on the factions acting in these areas through armament and funding, and even controlling the course and nature of military operations. The influence of the Jordanian apparatuses reached a point that one can even identify the personalities mediating between these factions. Ahmed al-Ni'mah-in Dara'a is seen as the point man of Jordan and Saudi Arabia in these areas.¹²⁵

Other armed factions and battalions operate more independently of the Jordanian and Saudi influence. Katibat al-Umari is one of the Liwa Ahfad al-Rasoul. These groups of Liwa are strong and active in the countryside of Damascus and Edlib with a specific Islamic line. Also there is Liwa al-Mu'taz Billah that is close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

6. Islamic Agendas, the Revolution, and the State

The previous assessment of the presence and roles of Islamist movements and schools of thought during the peaceful and armed revolution in Syria demonstrates the diversity in their visions with regard to the revolution, state, and society. They vary in their diagnosis and framing of the objectives of the revolution, a reality that influenced their attitudes toward the revolution and the relationship with other players. Clearly, they differ in their positions on the desired structure of a future political regime, democracy, political and religious pluralism, minorities' rights, and the safeguarding of basic liberties and indeed their conception of the Islamic state itself.

Seen from a different angle, these schools of thought vary in their presence and influence on society both during the revolution and in the post-Assad era, should Bashar fall. There are movements with fundamental differences in their vision of the religion-state relationship and in the scope of their intellectual and political openness or closeness that thrive in cities and the countryside. It is possible to identify five key agendas: the Muslim Brotherhood's, the Salafis', the Salafi Jihadists' / al-Qaeda's, the Sufis', and the one of the middle-of-the-road Islamic movement (wasatiya).

6.1 The Agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood: A Civil Agenda with an Islamic Leaning

The Muslim Brotherhood's agenda is quite extensive. First, the movement seeks to bring down the regime while rebuilding its institutions and reinforcing its political and operational presence. It seeks to return to Syrian society after having lost a significant part of its presence during the past decades. Additionally, it supports the armed operations with a plan to establish factions and groups linked to it. Moreover, it seeks to beef up its political influence whether within or outside of Syria.

Currently, the movement enjoys a solid relationship with both Turkey and Qatar. It benefits from the media and logistical support of these two countries. Added to this is the unwavering support it received from other Muslim Brotherhood supporters abroad.

At the heart of its ideological and political discourse is involvement in politics. Since its establishment in 1946, the movement engaged in parliamentary activities and joined coalitions with other secular political movements. It

continued its activism until it was caught in a deadly confrontation with the ruling Baath party beginning in 1963. Soon it followed an armed confrontation, ending in the Hama episode of 1982 with the subsequent termination of the movement inside Syria.¹²⁶

Over the last few years, the movement has systematically worked to reinforce the democratic discourse in its statements and literature. It has also been sending reassuring messages to minorities, committing to protect their rights and freedom. It speaks clearly about a democratic regime with an Islamic orientation, focusing on the peaceful rotation of power, and political, religious, cultural, and partisan pluralism. That said, there still is some skepticism among minorities about the scope of the commitment of the movement in case it gains power.¹²⁷ The majority of factions, many of whom supported or established by the Muslim Brotherhood, participate in battalions of the Free Army and cooperate with other armed factions in security and military operations.¹²⁸

6.2 The Salafi Agenda: Setting up an Islamic State

On the whole, if we look at the Salafi agendas from the perspective of influence, strength, and role it is clear that the Islamic front – which includes Ahrar al-Sham, al-Fajr, al-Tali’a al-Muqatilah, Liwa al-Haq and others – has a clear local agenda. Other factions within the Islamic Liberating Front – such as Kataib al-Farouq, al-Farouq al-Islamiyah, Suqor al-Sham, and Liwa al-Islam – concur with this agenda.

On the civilian level, al-Sham charity, political Salafism and other societies involved in relief, proselytization, and education are the most present. On the battlefield, the agenda of the factions is to topple the incumbent regime and this is the top priority. It takes part along with other armed Islamic factions in administering the liberated areas.

It is worth mentioning that some factions – such as Ahrar al-Sham, al-Tawhid and Suqor al-Sham – take part in work related to administrative, public service and other civil issues. It also tries to go beyond the forms of armed action in its relations with the local community by working through a network of different institutions. This is true in spite of the fact that the armed nature of the Syrian protest has emerged as the priority for these movements.¹²⁹

These factions vary in terms of their position vis-à-vis the political commissions working abroad and the joint military council, despite the fact that a majority of these factions – even those who work with the Free Army – cast doubts on the role of the institutions working abroad. They are cautious about the attempt of outside organizations to impose their opinions. If anything, this reveals the gap in the reality of the military context and the current political work of the Syrian opposition.¹³⁰

All of these factions agree on the principle of implementing Islamic law during and after the revolution. Some of them took part in establishing and supporting the Shari'a commission that practices law in line with Islamic laws. They also support the "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice." And this indeed poses an important question about whether these factions believe in individual freedom and laws guaranteeing human rights and civil liberties.

At the political and ideological level, most of these factions support a concept of the Islamic State as the desired political regime – that is, a political regime that would be based on the Islamic Shari'a as the only source of legislation. This position is exemplified by the statements of the leaders of some factions such as al-Tawhid, Ahrar al-Sham, al-Farouq, and Suqor al-Sham.¹³¹

Some factions (such as the Islamic Front, al-Tawhid, al-Farouq, and Suqor al-Sham) avoid announcing support for the democratic system even though they do not criticize elections, forming a parliament, and other democratic mechanisms. This perspective appears close to what some Egyptian Salafi parties, such as al-Noor Party present. These parties accept the democratic process but reject democratic values, insisting on the hegemonic role of religion and Islamic principles in legislation.¹³²

These groups' interpretation of the implementation of the Islamic Shari'a stirred fears among other parties of a pending "religious tyranny", especially since during the revolution some talked about the necessity for women to wear Islamic dress and to ban some practices, such as smoking, which the group sees as in violation of the Islamic Shari'a.

6.3 Al-Qaeda's Agenda: Establishing a Caliphate and the Global Conflict Perspective

The vision of factions that adopt the Salafi Jihadist line or belong to al-Qaeda is very different from the agenda of other Islamic factions. It is true that there is a common goal for the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" and Nusra Front, yet they also have "tactical" differences in their approach to the revolution, state, and society.

In terms of priorities, both Nusra Front and the "Islamic State" view the conflict firstly from the sectarian and ideological angle. It is a confrontational posture against a sectarian Nusayr regime and against the Shi'a of Iran as well as Hezbollah. Interestingly, while these factions claim to speak for the Sunni, their vision does not reflect their aspirations for democracy and freedom.

These factions view the regional, local and international conflicts as one. To them, the battle in Syria is part and parcel of the war in Iraq against Iran and the battle against the United States and the West. It is a battle between Islam and the infidels, according to the discourse of these groups.

This is the perspective both Nusra Front and the "Islamic State" share, albeit they differ in terms of priorities and tactics. Nusra Front initially avoided to acknowledge the presence of al-Qaeda in Syria and only did so when it had to. It focused first on the local conflict and on the direct battle with Assad's forces and cooperated with other factions in military operations.¹³³

Eyad al-Qneibi captures the essence of difference between the two groups. He categorizes Nusra Front as an innovative trend within al-Qaeda. He clarifies that al-Jolani – the leader of Nusra Front – was careful to demonstrate cooperation with other Islamic factions and to emphasize that he thinks that an Islamic state can be established whether with or without al-Qaeda's participation.¹³⁴ Taking al-Qneibi's observations to mind when looking at the differences between Nusra Front and the "Islamic State", it is possible to say that the conflict between the "Islamic State" and other armed factions as well as the local people has started to increase, a matter Nusra Front tried to avoid at the beginning of the armed protests.

Undoubtedly, both the "Islamic State" and Nusra Front are committed to al-Qaeda's political agenda, which sets the conflict within a regional and international perspective. They set their priorities in line with this agenda. Therefore, it is not only about bringing down Assad's regime, although it is a

key objective. To them, Syria is a stage for the international struggle that allows al-Qaeda to grow and to build capacities and experience. Similar situations can be seen in Yemen, Algeria, Iraq and in other conflicts around the world.

At the end of the day, the short-term objective is not to establish an Islamic State, according to the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham”. The goal is to lay the groundwork for setting up a universal Caliphate system. This is the formula that al-Qaeda acknowledges as the political system, which represents Islam and which is its primary political aspiration.

During this era of conflict and until the establishment of the desired Caliphate regime, al-Qaeda seeks to impose its religious and political agenda on the soft places that fall under its control. It seeks to implement the Islamic Shari’a according to its singular perspective. One of its theorists, Abu Bakr Naji, dubs it the “Emirate of Brutality”, which is what in fact took place and paved the way for strong differences with other factions.

6.4 Sufism and the Sheiks’ Agendas

Notwithstanding the weaknesses and vagueness within the armed struggle of Sufi factions and their division on the revolution in general, Sufi groups have an extensive presence in Damascus and Aleppo. Its Sheikhs have an extensive presence in the mosques and enjoy a close relationship with the local community. They espouse a style of Islam closer to Sufism but to varying degrees. In Aleppo, it appears as clearer in its societal and religious line than in Damascus.

There are no political or military forces that can present a clear definition of the groups’ agenda or their ideological vision of the desired political regime. The reality of the Sufi groups indicates that they pay more attention to the social aspect over the political one. They focus on educational and charitable activities in addition to preaching and proselytization. Of course they have differences among themselves regarding the structure of the desired Islamic system. Al-Qbeisat for instance does not say anything whereas the Zaid group speaks of an Islamic identity while the official religious institution is in alliance with the Syrian regime and defends its legitimacy.

6.5 Islamists and Democracy

Some Islamic movements align with the Muslim Brotherhood in their acceptance of democracy, political pluralism, rotation of power, and the principle of citizenship. An example is the Syrian National Current and to some extent the Movement for Justice and Development, albeit this is less obvious in its literature than with the National Current.

The political agenda of the National Current (of which Imad al-Din Rashid is the leading theorist) is based on the full commitment to a pluralistic democratic system, rotation of power, and openness to all communities while maintaining the Islamic and Arab identity of Syria. The National Current encourages the participation of all, the respect for human rights and minorities' rights, and a focus on national unity. It departs from the other Islamic discourses as it considers Islam as one of the constituents of the Syrian identity. In that, there is a respect to the cultural and religious diversity of the country. In its founding statement, the National Current states that its principles are based on "the Islamic authentic objectives that confirm the spiritual and ethical content of all divine religion." This underscores the flexibility in jurisprudence that the National Current has in its view of the relationship between religion and society.¹³⁵

The vision of the Movement for Justice and Development emphasizes the establishment of a regime that respects the dignity and freedom of the individual through "a national formula open to all regardless of their religion or sect, relying on Islam as a top reference and giving priority to freedom, justice, values, ethics, and human rights and respecting the will of people through the ballot box."¹³⁶

Although the democratic Islamic movements display no clear vision to distinguish themselves from the armed factions, some of these factions such as Ahfad al-Rasoul, al-Sahabah, Maghaweir al-Sham, and Sham al-Rasoul adopt a general Islamic discourse and do not specify the conditions and characteristics of the Islamic state, which they want to see in the future. Until now, they have not attempted to implement Islamic Shari'a, as al-Qaeda and some of the Salafi factions have done.

7. The Future Prospects: The Question of Religion and Society

A number of interrelated factors impact the framing of the relationship between religion and society in the current and forthcoming eras – be it a prolongation of the conflict for a long time, the fall of Assad’s regime or a local-international deal along with the lines of the Yemeni model.

This begs several questions. What is the extent of the impact of previous agendas on society, religiosity, openness, and closure? Another question has to do with the sustainability of the rise of these movements. Will some movements outlive the war and the revolution or are they only linked to the conditions of armed struggle and mayhem?

7.1 *The Current Social Circumstances*

The Salafi movements have increasingly prospered in Syria and their presence has expanded. And yet, Abdurrahman al-Haj argues that these movements are primarily a means of war. Put differently, they are intimately connected with the conditions of the current armed struggle and the exceptional circumstances of the Syrian revolution. Their rise is also linked to the nature of the beginning of the revolution, which kicked off from the countryside then moved into cities. Furthermore, it is linked to the foreign funding, which at the very beginning took the Islamic shape through some representatives of the Salafi movements in the Gulf and through the support of both Turkey and Qatar who enjoy a good relationship with Islamists. Qatar and Turkey adopted a line of supporting Islamists whether Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists.

The two most populous cities in Syria, Damascus and Aleppo, did not join the armed revolution until a later stage. They may have been pulled into the revolution due to activity in the surrounding countryside. As mentioned earlier, the revolution was first sparked in the politically and economically marginalized cities and the peripheral areas. The religiously oriented Sufi movement had a greater presence in the two cities. Yet, the rise of Salafism took place in the countryside. This in turn explains to a great extent the shrinking role of the traditional Sufi movement compared to the boost in Salafism in the discourse and slogans of the armed groups.

Having said that, however, the Salafi trend in general is not temporary nor does it have no societal base. It was noted that before the revolution, Salafism began to establish itself in cities as well as in the countryside in Syria thanks to

the media revolution, the workers in the Gulf, the war in Iraq, and the economic transformation driven by capitalism and privatization. Yet, the current boost is connected with the conditions of the conflict and is not tested at a time of stability and security and normal social conditions.

On the other hand, the Sufi movement has demonstrated throughout the past decades a considerable ability to adapt to Syrian civil society. It also proved its ability to rebuild and adapt its institutions quickly, similar to what happened with the Zaid group during the 1900s when its leader Osama al-Rifai returned to Syria.

It was obvious that the moderate, open style of religiosity that has characterized the Syrian cities historically is reflected in Sufism and the Muslim Brotherhood and impacted on the role of Sheiks and scholars who always insisted embracing the Islamic identity in its broader sense. It is worth mentioning that even the reformist Shami Salafis that emerged with the beginning of 20th century, continued to open up to other movements until the beginning of the conflict with the Pan-Arabists and the Baathists in the 1960s. The religious leadership of associations such as al-Tamadun wal Ghara enjoyed social and political presence. They participated actively in public life at that time.

As far as the Salafi Jihadists are concerned, they prosper during conflicts and wars and amid sectarian and religious conflict, when no political track is on the horizon as is the case in Iraq and Syria. This movement suffers when it talks about its cultural, political, and social agendas as was demonstrated in Iraq in 2007 when the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” was established. The “Islamic State” entered into confrontation with other Sunni armed forces. The formation of Sahawat further weakened the presence and influence of the “Islamic State” for a number of years before it revived its role in 2012 in the wake of the standoff in the political process in Iraq and of the extension of Sunni-Shiite tensions in Syria into the region.

7.2 Religion, Society, and Political Development

The spread, influence, and presence of these different modes of societal religiosity and the political ideologies of these Islamic movements will, by and large, depend on how the current armed struggle with the Syrian regime plays out. Provided the armed struggle continues for a long time and the protests persist in their current form, the Salafists will continue to be active. Yet, with

time the Muslim Brotherhood will reenergize its institutions and its civilian and military presence in various regions. Also Sufi groups will restore a part of their activities and will adapt to the new temporary conditions, especially in the large cities.

It is likely that the confrontation and conflict among the Islamic movements increase following the intellectual and ideological differences, and in particular when it comes to the administration of the liberated areas. The indications of this struggle and its features have come to the fore between the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" and other forces. But, should al-Qaeda develop its fighting capabilities and start to threaten the bordering regions then this will reinforce international support for other Sunni factions.

But if the regime falls or if there is an international deal to negotiate Assad's departure and begin a transitional period under international supervision – as is the case in Yemen – and if a new regime begins to take shape as new actors enter the political process to draft a constitution and to reshape public institutions, then the current movements will transform into political forces and parties. In this case, the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi and democratic Islamic movements will be present. We will also see a diverse map of these contending agendas, which will change as we noted previously in their political agenda, partisan platforms, their vision (for democracy, the state, society, and the relationship with the West), and their position on individual freedom, minorities, and women. They will engage in an intra-Islamist debate as well as in debates with secular forces like they are taking place in the Arab Spring countries. This transitional stage will rely on how the various political forces manage their struggles and internal differences.

In the context of Syria's internal anarchy, observers have expressed concern about the growth of the phenomenon of "war lords" similar to what has been seen in Afghanistan. The current struggle has contributed to the rise of a new elite from the marginalized and poor classes who lead the armed factions, receive funds, and exert authority in their areas. This authority is growing and taking root in the light of internal conflict, which lacks transparency and institutionalism and thus grants these people special status. This will make it hard for them to give up on their authority unless there is a strong and active regime with political as well as military and security capabilities that qualify the regime to regain power.

The ability of one side of the conflict to dominate militarily and to inflict a defeat on the other, thus resulting in a clear victory for one side, could lead to

two different scenarios – though they are unlikely given the current indicators of the internal and external balance of power. The first scenario is a victory for the armed factions. This may lead to internal fractions in the relationship among sects, ethnicities, and various religions. It will make minorities worry about their status and their future. It will push the rebels towards Islamism because the Islamic factions are the most active and have the greatest influence on the ground. In this case, the revolution will take a more Islamic character. And in case they manage to control the land to a great extent this would give boost to those who call for an Islamic state parallel to the Islamic Revolution in Iran of 1979.

In the second scenario – a military and political victory of the regime coupled with the retreat of the armed factions – the Islamist forces would go back to their dormant situation. That said, they will continue to have a presence at the societal and cultural level as happened in the wake of the Hama episode of 1982, though in a more influential manner. The two experiences are different in terms of the scope of the spread of the revolution and the scope of the involvement of the different strata of society.

Conclusion

In the Syrian revolution, the armed struggle's religious dimension has played a significant role. This is clear at the spiritual, symbolic, and even the societal levels. The value of religious social solidarity and the role of mosques in internal solidarity have been prominent. The presence of religion has also been important at the emotional and mobilizing level. It has intertwined with the sectarian nature of the struggle and served to counter the imbalance of power between the Syrian regime on the one hand and the other armed factions on the other hand. Religion has also been significant in terms of the ascendance of Islamic movements in the fields of politics and humanitarian relief.

This study's goal was to sketch a map of the active Islamic groups and movements in the Syrian revolution. These groups are categorized as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists, Salafi Jihadists / al-Qaeda, Sufi movements, independents, and other factions that can fall within these dominant armed factions, charities or political institutions.

There are several internal and external factors that have played an influential and decisive role in defining the nature, formation, and presence as well as the rise and decline of these groups. The interplay among these influencing factors generates changes in the map of active forces on the ground.

At the level of international agendas, the Western countries strongly support the Free Army and the National Coalition. This agenda differentiates between Islamist and non-Islamist factions. In fact, it favors the latter. Also, the Western agenda equates its animosity to the Syrian regime with that of al-Qaeda and its groups. For this reason, their funding goes mainly to non-Islamist groups. Furthermore, the Western agenda attempts to restructure the parities of conflict to include the confrontation between the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" – which expanded in 2013 – and these factions.

Not far from the international agenda is the official Arab agenda – particularly that of the Arab states belonging to the moderate axis – which gives priority to the secular dimension over the Islamic one and refuses to direct the support to the Salafi movement or the Muslim Brotherhood. These countries – Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates – play an active role in supporting some factions and in directing the conflict particularly in the Eastern and Southern areas as discussed previously.

In particular, Turkey and Qatar have a distinct agenda. They do not mind integrating themselves with political Islam – whether the Salafi trend or the Muslim Brotherhood – in the coming stage of the conflict. They support Islamist factions strategically, logistically, and politically. This agenda is active in the Western, Northern, and Central areas to a great extent.

At the domestic level, some agendas align with external agendas. The first agenda is represented by al-Qaeda (the “Islamic State”, Nusra Front, and other factions). It merges the local conflict with its global struggle. It sees the Syrian army as an enemy. It is worth noting that the “Islamic State” has entered in confrontation with other armed faction especially non-Islamist ones. It seeks to extend its influence in liberated areas even if this will be at the expense of other factions.

The second agenda is the political Salafi agenda. Close to it come Ahrar al-Sham, al-Tawhid, Suqor al-Sham and other factions. They seek to wipe out the regime and to establish an Islamic state. They tolerate elections and they insinuate the possibility of transforming into political parties in the future.

Salafi Jihadists constitute the third agenda. Here, we talk about al-Assalah Watanmiya, which is close to the official Arab agenda. Some observers fear that it may transform into a case similar to Sahawat in Iraq. It may adopt a simultaneous dual fight: one against the Syrian regime and another one against al-Qaeda. It is possible that this agenda transforms, in case of the downfall of the regime, into a movement close to the Saudi official line.

And of course there is the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is closer to the independent Islamic agendas and some of the Sufi-leaning movements. It seeks to topple the regime, establish a democratic system of a conservative and Islamic nature. This agenda enjoys an indirect support from Qatar and Turkey.

It is notable that the Islamist map in Syria is still erratic and linked with the nature of the armed struggle and the expected development in the Syrian arena. However, these movements will on the whole face several challenges and controversies in the next stage that will pose vital questions with which the discourse and the practice of these movements will contend.

The key question is the role of Islamism, religion and secularism in society. This very question is strongly present in the Arab Spring and led to polarization in Egypt and Tunisia between the secular and Islamic elite. It also presents the question of public versus individual liberties and questions the role of minorities, women, art, and literature.

The second dilemma is the relationship between the periphery on the one hand and the populous cities such as Damascus and Aleppo on the other hand. This is aggravated by the socio-economic gap that emerged in recent years and is reflected in the active contribution of the periphery and countryside in the revolution at the expense of these cities. It should be repeated here that the Sufis and the Muslim Brotherhood have a bigger presence in cities while the Salafi boost during the revolution emerged in the countryside.

The third dilemma is connected to the deep ethnical, religious, and sectarian cleavages in Syria. This is an acute source of tension in a society where ethnical, religious, and sectarian pluralism is very much engrained. This looming controversy strongly weighs upon the vision and positions of these movements and their stance vis-à-vis the Kurds, Alawites, and the concept of “transitional justice.”

The controversy of the domestic-external relationship is also looming. Obviously, a majority of the factions are careful about the influence exerted by the opposition groups abroad. They confirm their independence from their decision. During the coming months, internal factions will seek to exhibit their political face and this will once again bring up the issues of political representation, unity and legitimacy. In light of these controversies, the Islamic movements in the Syrian revolution will shift and change in character. This will define the nature of their roles in the conflict and their relationship with each other and with the regime.

Endnotes

¹ This study excludes the Kurdish Islamist groups and movements owing to their exceptionalism in general within the dynamics of the Kurdish society itself and its ethnic nature. Kurdish society is a distinct political issue in Syria. This study concentrates on the Sunni Islamist movements, which today represent the main forces in the Syrian revolution. Therefore, the role of Shiite or so-called pro-Shia groups in Syrian society is a separate topic and lies beyond the scope of this study.

² See, Abdurrahman al-Hajj, *Al-Dawlah, wal Jama'ah, al-Tatalu'at al-Siyassiah liljama'at adiniya fi Soria* (London: Markiz al-Tawasul wal Abhath al-Istratejiya), pp. 43-6.

³ See Salah Nayouf, "al-Islam al-Siyassi fi Soria: Kharitah Ma'rifiy," in al-Ikhwān al-Muslumoun fi Soria: Moman'at al-Taifa wa Unf al-Haraka "Political Islam in Syria: a Knowledge Map" in "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: The Resistance of the Sect an the Violence of the Movement" (Dubai: Al Mesbar Studies & Research Center, Second edition, February 2001), pp. 26-47.

⁴ On the domination of rural communities in the armed struggle and the socio-economic conditions that set the city and periphery apart, see Mohammed Jamal Barot, *al-Iqd al-Akhir fi Tarikh Soria: Jadaliyat al-Jumud wal Islah* "The Last Decade in Syria's History: The Controversy of Standstill and Reform" (Beirut: The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012), p. 89 to the end of the book. This section of the book addresses this phenomenon: the dilemma of city-periphery in the Syrian revolution, its developments, and the socio-economic policies that contributed to the current reality of the revolution. Also see, Salameh Kaileh who links the revolution and the protests with the political condition and with the class struggle and the economic policies followed by the Egyptian regime. Salameh Kaileh, *al-Thawarah al-Musalaha: waqi'uha, Sairoratuha wa Afaquha* "The Armed Revolution: Its Reality, Process, and Prospects" (Beirut: Atlas Publishing House, 2013), pp. 13-24.

⁵ See statements made by David Shedd, deputy director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, <http://www.akhbaralalam.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=63644>.

⁶ See Najib Ghabdian, "al-Haraka al- Islamiyah wa Afaq al-Tahawul al-Dimoqrati," "The Syrian Islamic Movement and the Prospects for Democratic Transformation," in the book "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: the Resistance of the Sect and the Violence of the Movement" (Dubai: Al Mesbar Studies & Research Center, Second edition, February 2001), pp. 68-86.

⁷ Interview with Hassan al-Safadi, an activist in the civilian and political domain and a supporter of the Syrian revolution and an observer of the Islamic trend, Khaldā, Amman, 10 August 2013.

⁸ See Fadi Shamiyah, al-Ikhwan al-Musulmon, wal Tali'ah al-Muqatilah wal Ilaqah Ma' al-Sultah" "The Muslim Brotherhood, the Fighting Vanguard and the Relationship with the Regime," in "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: the Resistance of the Sect and the Violence of the Movement" (Dubai: Al Mesbar Studies & Research Center, Second edition, February 2001), pp. 201-3. Special interview with Mohammed al-Sayid, former member of the Political Bureau of the Syrian Muslim brotherhood, Amman, 9 June 2013.

⁹ See Salah Nayouf, *Op. cit.*, pp. 28-46.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 38-41.

¹¹ See Najib Ghabbian, *Op. cit.*, pp. 71-86.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 82-86.

¹³ See the text of the project of the future of Syria at the official website of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, <http://tinyurl.com/o4a8zxo>

¹⁴ See Aron Lund, Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Brief_Lund-Syrian_MB.pdf

¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁶ On al-Jarba's election, see a report on Al-Jazeera net, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/40811f5b-affa-4a3c-9d0d-5cea8460a5a1>

¹⁷ See www.odabasham.net

¹⁸ See Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria."

¹⁹ The official website for Watan: <http://www.watansyria.org/about>

²⁰ *Ibid*, <http://www.watansyria.org/institutions>

²¹ Interview with Mohammed al-Sayid.

²² Aron Lund, *Op. cit.*

²³ Interview with Mohammed al-Sayid. Interview with Ahmed Aba Zaid, an observer of the Syrian revolution from Amman, Amman, 29 May 2013. See also Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt"

²⁴ Interview with Ahmed Aba Zaid, see also Aron Lund, "Struggling to Adapt."

²⁵ See recording of the establishment of Revolution Shields Commission, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecldcfDTPOE>

²⁶ Interview via e-mail on 10 August 2013.

²⁷ Interview with Eyad al-Jaghbeer, Khalda, Amman 20 July 2013.

²⁸ Abdurrahman al-Haj, *Op. cit.*, pp. 9-12.

²⁹ See <http://syrgccp.net/>

³⁰ Special interview with Mohammed al-Sayid, *Ibid.*

³¹ Interview Osama Gawji, an observer of Syrian politics, Amman, 20 June, 2013. Also special interview with Ahmed Aba Zaid, *Op. cit.*

³² Special interview with Mohammed al-Sayid, *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ See "Syrian Freedom", <http://tinyurl.com/q96wz2r>

³⁶ See the report of Bahiyah Mardini, "Ikhwan Soria Yushaklun Hizan Siyasyan Shabihan bi Hizb al-Hurria wal Adalah al-Masri," "The Muslim Brotherhood of Syria Form a Political Party Similar to the Egyptian Party of Freedom and Justice. Elaf, <http://elaph.com/Web/news/2013/6/820450.html>

³⁷ See Mohammed Jamal Barot, al-Iqd al-Akhir fi Tarikh Soria: Jadaliyat al-Jumud wal Islah "The Last Decade in Syria's History: *op. cit.*, p. 293. Aee also Salameh *Kaileh*, *al-Thawarah al-Musalaha: waqi'uha, Sairoratuha wa Afaquha "The Armed Revolution: Its Reality, Process, and Prospects"* pp. 13-19

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⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 1167-69.

⁴⁵ See an interview with Lo'ai al-Zu'bu conducted by Giselle Khoury of al-Arabiya, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_b2xeQ5pGY

⁴⁶ See, net/index.php?d=34&id=37350

⁴⁷ Abdurrahman Al-Haj, *Op. cit.*, pp.9-12

⁴⁸ Ibid, and also see Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Syrian Islamic Front: A New Extremist Force: Policy Watch 2031," 4 February 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-syrian-islamic-front-a-new-extremist-force>

⁴⁹ See the original text of the founding charter of the front, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fACS9tltlmZDmomb1ZtjJLZaAckWOT0yhtRwoskgIE/edit?pli=1>

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⁵⁴ See the website of Liwa al-Tawhid, <http://lewaaltawheed.com/>

⁵⁵ See the website of Kataib al-Farouq, <http://www.al-farok.com/>

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⁵⁸ See the website of the Front for Liberating Syria, <http://syrialiberationfront.net>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Interviews with Hassan al-Safadi, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Interview with Sheikh Mohammed Srur Zein al-Abadeen, Amman, 23 August 2013

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⁶³ Interview with Sheikh Mohammed Srur Zein al-Abadeen, *op. cit.*

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- ⁶⁶ Interview Hassan Abu Haniyeh, Amman, 17 August 2013.
- ⁶⁷ A phone interview with Ali al-Halabi, Amman 24 August 2013.
- ⁶⁸ Mohammed Abu-Rumman, *Op. cit.*, pp. 47-55.
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⁸⁴ Elizabeth O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, *Op. cit.*, pp. 31-38.

⁸⁵ See "The Retreat of Nusra Front's Influence in front of the Islamic State of Iraq," Reuters," *Op. cit.*

⁸⁶ Abdurrahman al-Haj, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

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⁹⁰ Elizabeth O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, *Op. cit.*, 24-26.

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¹⁰³ Interview with Ahmed Aba Zaid

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Appendix 1: Leading Islamist Personalities

Following is a list of prominent Islamist figures and personalities that have been active in the Syrian revolution, including both supporters of the armed and civilian protests and those who are aligned with the official religious institutions. The main sources of this biographical information are websites by these individuals and their institutions. These profiles also draw from credible sources linked to the Syrian revolution or personal sources with intimate knowledge of the military scene and knowledgeable the leading people in this armed factions.

1. Leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood

Mohammed Riyadh Khalid al-Shaqfeh. He was born in 1944 and became the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. On 3 August 2010 he was elected to lead the group's Consultative Council succeeding Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni. He was born in Hama to a very well-known family of scholars. He finished his high school in Hama and then moved to Damascus to study at the university where he earned his first degree in civil engineering in 1968. In 1961, during his university studies, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood and became one of the leading members of the Brotherhood center in Hama in 1978. Later on, he became the head of the center before he was targeted by the Syrian authorities in 1980 during the armed conflict with the regime. Yet he managed to flee the country and continue his activities from abroad. In 1983, he became a member in the group's leadership. In 1990, he joined the executive committee in the National Coalition to Save Syria and in 1999 he became a member of the political bureau of the national coalition. On 30 June 2009 he was the target of an assassination attempt in Baghdad while he was serving as a senior official of the Syrian branch of the group. His car was hit by some 28 bullets but miraculously he survived.

Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni. A former leader of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and an opposition leader who currently resides in London. He was born in Aleppo in 1938 and obtained his degree in law from University of Damascus in 1963. He served as an Arabic teacher in a private school in Aleppo beginning in 1957, an employee in the electricity authority in Aleppo beginning in 1962, and in 1978 he began his work as a lawyer in Aleppo. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1952 and in 1977 became deputy leader of the movement. He continued this position for a number of years and in 1996 he was elected as a leader of the movement. He was reelected in 2002 for a second four-year term. He was arrested in 1975 and detained for a couple of years in Syria because of

his affiliation with the movement. In 1979 he left Syria for London, where he still lives.

Obeida al-Nahas. He was born in Aleppo in 1972 and served as Director of the Center for Orient Studies in London, a research center that is close to the Muslim Brotherhood. He established the National Bloc and Watan institution with a number of youth from the Muslim Brotherhood. He is a member of the Syrian National Coalition and the spokesperson of the Syrian Youth Coalition. He was also a member of the general assembly of the National Salvation Front. Sources within the movement say that he was fired from the Muslim Brotherhood and that he was closer to the moderate wing of Aleppo. He was also close to the former leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni.

Ahmed Ramadan. Born in Aleppo in November 1963, he is a member of the executive bureau of the Syrian National Council and currently a director of the London Center for Media Strategies. He established al-Quds Press News in 1992 in London and continued running it until 2010. Recently, he was fired from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Zuhair Salim. He was born in Aleppo in 1947 and graduated from Aleppo University from the Faculty of Languages in 1971 with a specialization in Arabic. He knows some French and Persian as well. He became a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1963. He left Aleppo in 1979 and still lives abroad, focusing on research and monitoring. He runs the center for al-Sharq al-Arabi for Strategic and Civilizational Studies. He adopts some progressive positions with regard to the issue of the state. He says, "I do not believe in the concept of Political Islam and I believe that the modern state is the most expressive of the essence of the Islamic position." In July 2013, he resigned from his position as a spokesperson of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Mohammed Farouq Taifour. He was born in Hama and has assumed a number of leading positions in the Muslim Brotherhood. He quit his job as an engineer in Saudi Arabia and dedicated his time to fieldwork. Currently he is the deputy leader of the movement and is viewed as one of the strong and influential personalities within the movement.

Muneir al-Ghadban. He was born in Mnein, in the countryside of Damascus, in 1942. He graduated from the Faculty of Religion at Damascus University in 1968. He later served as a teacher in Saudi Arabia. He has published several books, in particular the al-Seirah al-Nabawiyah (prophetic biography), and he is seen as one of the leading theorists of the movement in Syria. He became deputy leader of the movement. He is a known academic with several

publications. His books include, Mu'awiya bin abi Sufyan: the Warrior Companion; The Political Alliance in Islam; and the Political Approach of the Prophetic Biography.

Adel Faris. He was born in Aleppo in 1944 and graduated from the Engineering Faculty in 1967. He was arrested twice, in 1973 and again in 1979, and left the country after he was released. Also, he assumed a number of leading positions in the movement. He is very close to the Aleppo wing of al-Bayanouni.

2. Salafi Personalities

Osmah al-Munjid. He was born in 1980 and is now the head of the information bureau of the Justice and Development Movement. He has lived in Britain since 2004. He holds a degree in economics from Damascus University.

Rami Mohammed al-Dalati (Abu-Huthaifah). He was born in Homs and obtained a diploma in Prosthodontics from Damascus University in 1996. He also studied in the Faculty of Religion and obtained his BA in religion in the complex of Ahmed Kuftaro. After that he became a graduate student in the interpretation department. However, the security harassment, detention, and the eruption of the revolution prevented him from finalizing his thesis on the interpretation of liberation and enlightenment for al-Tahir bin Ashour. Personally, he is interested in the general Islamist activities and its political aspects. He is also focusing on the Salafi Jihadist and influenced by the ideas of Sayid Qutb and the ideas of the contemporary Ahmed al-Rahid and Abdulkarim Bakar. He describes himself as believing in Salafism as an approach and as a method. He does not see himself as a Salafi in terms of jurisprudence but as Shafi'i. He considers himself as open to the majority of Islamic trends even if he disagrees with them in some secondary matters. Unlike others, he considers these secondary matters as fundamentals.

Ahmed Mouath al-Khatib al-Hosni. He was born in Damascus in 1960. Later on 11 November 2012, he was elected President of the NCSR. But on 24 March 2013, he resigned so that he could work freely. The Syrian security forces detained him several times in the years of 2011 and 2012 due to his support of the popular protests that call for bringing down the regime. But he managed to run away from Syria in July 2012. He benefited from his father the preacher of al-Sham, the scholar Mohammed Abu el-Faraj al-Khatib and other scholars such as Sheikh Hamdi al-Jweijani, Sheikh Abdulghani al-Digr, and Sheikh Abdulgadir al-Aran'out. He studied practical Geophysics and he worked as a

Geophysics engineer for nearly six years at al-Furat oil company. Later, he obtained a diploma in political science and international relations and a diploma in the arts of negotiation. Prior to the eruption of the revolution, he served as Imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. He also became the president of Jam'yat al-Tamadun al-Islamiyah and is still its honorary president. He taught Shari'a at the institute of Sheikh Badr Eddin al-Husni.

Anas al-Abdah. He was born in 1967 and studied at Yarmouk University in Jordan. He received his Master's degree in Geophysics. Later he moved to Britain and worked in technical administration. He established the Movement for Justice and Development in London as a Syrian opposition and anti-regime movement. He became the president of the Damascus Declaration on behalf of the diaspora. He devoted a lot of time to unifying the efforts of the Syrian opposition. He was one of the founders of the Syrian National Council. He became a member of the general assembly of the National Council. He also took part in establishing the NCSR and was elected as a member of its political committee.

Adnan Mohammed al-Ar'our. He was born in 1948 in Hama in Syria and now lives in Riyadh. He earned his university degree in education. Currently, he works as the scientific director of a research institute in Riyadh. He graduated from University of Damascus and worked as a teacher in Syria and in Saudi Arabia. He studied under a number of late Sheikhs such as Sheikh Mohammed al-Hamid – one of the senior Sheikhs in Syria – then al-Albani and then Ibn Baz. He was known for supporting the revolution from the beginning and he appeared on a number of satellite stations making the case against the Syrian regime.

Mohammed bin Nayef Zein al-Abadeen. He was born in Horan in 1938 and currently he lives in Jordan and Qatar. He grew up as a Muslim Brother then defected in 1969. He was aligned with the wing of Issam al-Attar. He moved to Saudi Arabia in Buraidah to teach mathematics. During this time, his vision of political activism matured. His vision combines the Salafi doctrines and the political views that are the legacy of Sayid Qutb. For this reason he was forced to leave Saudi Arabia. He moved to Kuwait and then to Britain. He established a research center on the Prophetic Biography and launched al-Sunna magazine, which was banned in most Arab countries. The Sruri Salafi trend is named after him. He supported the revolution through the Islamic Sham Commission. He is seen as one of the most prominent and influential Salafi scholars.

Abdulmoneim Mustafa Halima Abu Busair al-Tartousi. He was part of the secret Fighting Vanguard and left Syria by the end of the 1970s after spending

time in jail. He moved from Jordan to Yemen and then to Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Thailand. He finally settled in London as a political refugee. He was considered one of the leading ideologues of the Salafi Jihadist trend in the Arab world. But during the last few years, he modified his position and started criticizing al-Qaeda and entered into debate with some of its members. His change became evident during the Syrian revolution, which he has actively supported. He moved to Syria to help the armed factions. He was very critical of al-Qaeda over the declaration of its existence in Syria. He also criticized the statements of both al-Baghdadi and al-Jolani, who swore an oath of allegiance (bay'ah) to Zawahiri. He is considered close to the ideology of the Islamic front and in particular to Liwa al-Fajr.

3. Sufi Personalities

Mohammed Habash. He was born in Damascus in 1962. He received his education in religious schools then studied Islamic sciences in the religious institute for call and preaching. He received his BA in religion from Damascus University. Later he received three BAs in Islam and Arabic from Damascus University, Tripoli University, and Beirut University. He also received his Master's degree and a Ph.D. from the Holy Quran University in Khartoum. He made a name for himself as an Imam and a preacher. He later ran in the parliamentary elections and won twice. Also he won the election of the Parliament council five times. He adopted the discourse of religious reform and that of Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro and Sheikh Jawdat Said who particularly influenced him. He pursued his projects through the Center for Islamic Studies in Damascus, which he founded and ran. He held a number of Islamic conferences to promote the enlightened Islamic discourse. He also established the association of enlightenment writers and was elected twice as the head of Shari'a scholars in Syria. He published 42 books on issues of Islamic enlightenment. He was also known for writing bold articles in Arabic newspapers and for his many programs on Arab radio and satellite TV stations. He left Syria during the revolution and moved from defending the Syrian regime to supporting the revolution. Currently, he lives in United Arab Emirates.

Mohammed Ukam. He was born in Aleppo in 1952 and became the mufti of Aleppo. He studied in the Shari'a secondary school (al-Khasrawayah) in 1966 and in 1971 earned his high school certificate as one of the top students in the country that year. Soon after that, he joined the Faculty of Religion and graduated in 1975, again at the top of the class. He obtained a diploma in

educational rehabilitation from the Faculty of Education at Damascus University in 1976, and then he earned a diploma in methodology and the fundamentals of teaching in 1977. He left for France in 1979 to continue his education at the Sorbonne in Paris and obtained his Master's degree in 1981. He presented two theses, one "A Study of Letters of Omar Bin Abdelaziz to his leaders," and the second "The Theory of Imamate of the Contemporary Shia." His supervisor was the renowned French historian Dominique Sordoullet. He obtained his Ph.D. in Islamic political thought in 1983 under the supervision of the well-known philosopher Mohammed Arkoun. His dissertation was entitled "Hakimiyah and authority in the Islamic political thought during the fifth century hijri: a comparative study between Sunni and Shia." He returned to Syria in 1984 to pursue his work. He became a general inspector of Aleppo city and took a position for the regime and against the revolution.

Mohammed Said Ramadan al-Bouti. He was born in 1929 in the village of Ayn Dewar on Boutan Island in Turkey near the Turkish-Iraqi border. He left with his father to Damascus in 1933. He is a specialist in religion and he is one of the most important religious scholars in the Islamic world. He was particularly influenced by his father, who was also a religious scholar. He received his religious and civil education in Damascus and then he moved to study in al-Azhar in Egypt, where he earned a Ph.D. from the Faculty of Religion. He has written some forty books that address various Islamic issues. He is the best representative of the conservative trend in the four Sunni schools of thought. Many liken him to Imam al-Ghazali because of his quiet style and strong reasoning. Al-Bouti is considered one of the specialized Sunni clerics in the topics of doctrines and material philosophy after he wrote his Ph.D. on the criticism in the dialectical materialism. But from a jurisprudence point of view, he is considered a defender of the al-Asha'aryiah school of thought in facing the Salafi ideas. He was killed during the Syrian revolution in 2013 when a bomb was detonated during one of his lessons. The opposition and the government traded accusation over who killed him. He was known for supporting the regime and for his criticism of the other Islamic movements.

Mohammed Ratib al-Nabulsi. One of the most renowned scholars. He was born in Damascus to an educated family. His father was one of the scholars teaching at mosques in Damascus. He left a great collection of books including many manuscripts. Mohammed studied at elementary, primary, and secondary schools in Damascus and then he joined a college. In 1956, he graduated from a college and then joined the Faculty of Arts in Damascus University where he graduated in 1964 with a BA in Arabic language and literature. Then he joined the Faculty of Education to pursue his graduate studies. In 1966, he received a

diploma in education, then he joined the Lebanon branch of Leon University. He prepared his MA thesis and the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance in Syria agreed to print the thesis at their expense. He obtained his doctorate degree from Dublin University on the topic of educating boys in Islam. He taught in schools and then he joined Damascus University as a lecturer in the Faculty of Education. Then he taught a course on the scientific miracle of the Holy Quran and al-Sunna in the Faculty of Religion in al-Azhar University – the branch of al-Fateh al-Islami in Damascus. He also lectured on the Islamic doctrine at al-Azhar University in the Abu-Enoor complex. He also taught the Fundamentals of education in the Islamic university of Tripoli. He supported the Syrian revolution and issued a number of statements condemning the attacks on peaceful demonstrations.

Munira al-Qbeisi. She was born in 1933 and founded the al-Qbeisat movement in Syria. She started working in the 1960s as a teacher of biology. Subsequently, she studied religion at the Faculty of Religion at Damascus University. She continued to work with women. Al-Qbeisat is a Sufi feminist movement and is spread among the wealthy and middle class in Syrian cities. Her call resonated well in countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Kuwait. She did not marry because of her dedication to the call. Now she is in her eighties and is not accessible to the majority of her followers save for a small number of them. She has a good relationship with Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro and Ramadan al-Bouti. She never took an open position vis-à-vis the current Syrian revolution.

Sariah al-Rifai. He was born in Damascus in 1948. He is the son of the founder of Zaid group, Abdulkarim al-Rifai. He received his early education in the institute of al-Jami'yah al-Ghra'. In 1965 he was appointed Imam of the al-Qusour mosque. He continued his education at al-Azhar mosque in Cairo. There he finished his MA in 1974. He became Imam of Zaid mosque after the death of his father in 1973 and then resumed the expansion of the mosque in 1994. He founded al-Ni'mah al-Khayriah charity in 2000 and also he took part in organizing events, activities, and religious and competitions. In addition to his brother Osmah, he is one of leading leaders of the Zaid group. He supported the peaceful revolution and refused to support the security apparatus's repression of the protests. His relationship with the Syrian authorities soured and he left the country to go abroad.

Osama al-Rifai. He was born in Damascus in 1944. He graduated from the Faculty of Arts at Damascus University in 1971. He remained close to his father, Sheikh Abdulkarim al-Rifai, in his lessons and activities and in sponsoring the Zaid group and its network of mosques. But he left Syria after

the events of the 1980s and returned in the mid-1990s as Assad was trying to reduce internal resentment in order to pave the way for the transfer of power to his son. He returned to the mosque of Abdulkarim al-Rifai in Kufr Susah neighborhood in Damascus and continued to make speeches and to teach. He also continued relaunching the Zaid network and its activities until the popular protests in Syria started. He refused to criticize the revolution and instead criticized the official policies. In his speeches he called for abolishing the emergency law, releasing the detained, and called for justice and freedom. This led to his arrest in November 2011 by the Syrian security forces. Then he left Syria, moving from one capital to another giving lectures and issuing pro-revolution fatwas.

Ahmed Badreddin Hasson. He was born in Aleppo in 1949 and became the mufti of Syria. He earned his BA in Arabic literature and a Ph.D. in al-Shafi'i jurisprudence from al-Azhar University. He was appointed mufti of Aleppo in 2002 and is a member of the Higher Council for Ifta' in Syria, a two-term member of parliament and Imam for al-Rawdah mosque in Aleppo. During the protests of 2011, he appeared in the media a number of times saying that what was taking place in the country – and in Dara'a in particular – was a plot by external actors. His statements were in line with the regime's argument. A statement by the International Union for Muslim Scholars – headed by al-Qaradawi – criticized Hasson personally. In response to this statement, Syrian scholars issued a statement saying that they were not surprised by the al-Qaradawi-led union's statement and that it was issued based on "partisan backgrounds linked to schemes with clear objectives to undermine the stability and security of Syria."

Mahmoud Ali Khalaf. He was born in 1958 in Iblin village in the Zawya Mountain in Edlib and is the founder of the Wasat party. He received a university degree in agricultural sciences from Aleppo University. After his graduation in 1981, he left for Jordan and stayed there until 1993. He worked in the political apparatus of the Muslim Brotherhood for more than two years and then he founded the Syrian reformist political Wasat movement in 2009. Currently he lives in Britain and he issued several poetry collections.

Imad Eddin al-Rashid. He is the founder of the opposition National Current and currently lives in Turkey. He served as deputy dean of the Faculty of Religion at Damascus University and is a member of the Syrian National Council. He was born in Fiq in al-Quneitra in 1965 and earned a Ph.D. in Shari'a (Fundamentals of Jurisprudence) from Damascus University in 1999.

4. Military Leaders

Ahmed Issa Zakarya al-Sheikh. He was born in Sarjah village in 1972 and became known with the name Abu-Issa. His home is in al-Zawya Mountain in Edlib in Syria. He became active in armed struggle at the beginning of the revolution. He was also a detainee in Saidnaya prison from March 2004 on. His family was persecuted by the Syrian regime and his father disappeared in the prisons of the regime in the 1980s.

Mohammed Zahran bin Abdullah Aloush (Abu Abdullah): he was born in the countryside of Damascus. His father is Sheikh Abdullah Aloush, a Sheikh well known for his commitment and compliance with the approach of Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah (Adherents to the Sunna) and the community of Followers. Sheikh Zahran was taught the Holy Quran by his father and some of the most renowned Sheikhs. He joined the Faculty of Religion at Damascus University and went to continue his graduate studies at the Islamic University in Medina at the Faculty of Hadith al-Sharif and Islamic Studies. Then he finished his MA at Damascus University. Prior to the revolution, he was an entrepreneur and he established a construction outsourcing company. He was in prison when the revolution started. His activities and call caused him to be prosecuted by the security services, beginning in 1987 and ended with his detention in 2009, when he was put in Saidnaya military prison. The protests put pressure on the Syrian government and forced it to release a number of the detainees. He left the prison on 22 June 2011, three months after the outbreak of the revolution. As soon as he left the prison he established a military force to fight the regime. At the beginning he called it Sariyat al-Islam, then it was developed into Liwa al-Islam.

Abdulgadir al-Salih. He is the general leader of Liwa al-Tawhid. He is 33 years old and from the village of Mari' near Aleppo. He worked in the field of testing grain and food commodities.

Osama al-Jundi. He is the leader of Kataib al-Farouq. He was born in Homs and worked as a lawyer before the outbreak of the revolution. He took part in the well-known battles in Baba Amro against the Syrian army. Then he took over the leadership of the kataib after Abdulrazaq Tlas, a former leader of the kataib, was ousted.

Amjed al-Beitar. He is the founder of Kataib al-Farouq al-Islamiyah that broke off from Kataib al-Farouq. Its main presence is in the countryside of Hama. Amjed worked as an Imam before the revolution. He is in his forties and is known for his Salafi affiliation.

Hassan Aboud (Abu Abdullah). He is one of the founders of Liwa “Ahrar al-Sham” and he is from the countryside of Edlib. He was an inmate with other Islamists in Saidnaya prison before the onset of the protests. After he left prison, he immediately started to establish an armed faction. He belongs to the Salafi school of thought.

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. He is the Amir (prince) of Nusra Front that belongs to al-Qaeda. There is some disagreement on his identity. Some observers confirm that he is one of the displaced from the Golan Heights to Damascus. He is a friend of al-Zarqawi in Iraq. According to a letter of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the current leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Jolani had returned to Syria under his supervision after the outbreak of the protests and then established Nusra Front.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Abu Du’a). His full name is Ibrahim bin Awad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Husni al-Samira’ie and he is from Samira’ city. He studied in the Islamic university in Baghdad and earned his Ph.D. there. He was known for his Salafi Jihadist ideas in Samira’ in Ahmed bin Hambal mosque. He was one of the active leaders and founders of the Shari’a commission in Samaria’; then he was appointed as the Amir of the Iraqi Islamic Statute in 16 May 2010. He was called the Prince of the Faithful and in 2013 he announced the merger of al-Qaeda Syria with al-Qaeda Iraq, that was rejected by al-Zawahiri and a matter that demonstrated an unprecedented challenge to the leader of al-Qaeda.

Appendix 2: The Most Important Fighting Groups in Syria



Following is a list of the most prominent armed groups according to their distribution in various provinces. It is a preliminary and changing list that shifts according to rise and decline of these factions. It is based on the assessment by sources close to these armed factions of their activity and military presence.

1. Damascus Governorate

- Gaboun Neighborhood: Liwa Jayish al-Muslimin, Liwa al-Awal, and Liwa al-Islam in Gaboun and Jober.
- Barzah Neighborhood: Liwa Tawhid al-Asmah and Liwa al-Islam.
- Jober Neighborhood: Liwa Aaron al-Rashid, Liwa al-Bara', Tahrir al-Sham group, and Nusra Front.
- Damascus and its Countryside: Tajamu' Alwiyat al-Habibi al-Mustafa (Harista, Uraibin, and Jober)

- Al-Tadamun Neighborhood: Liwa Al-'iz bin Abdu Salam, Ababil Horan, the Second Division, the Fourth Division, Liwa Turkman al-Jolan.
- The Black Stone Neighborhood: Ahfad al-Rasoul and Liwa Shuhada' al-Hajar al-Aswad.
- Al-Yarmouk Camp: al-Hajar al-Aswad, Suqor al-Jolan, Jund Allah, Bahjat al-Beitar, al-Umah al-Wahida, Saif al-Sham, Aknaf Bait al-Maqdis, Anas bin Malik, Ammar al-Masri, 'iz al-Din, Al'iz, Al-'uhda al-'umariyah, and Katibat ibn Tamiya.
- Al-Qidan Neighborhood: Liwa Mujahdeen al-Sham, and Huthaifah bin al-Yaman,
- Al'assali: Liwa Aham al-Rasoul, Liwa Fursan Horan, Liwa al-Umah al-Wahida, Alwiyat Ababil Horan.

2. Damascus Countryside

- Al-Ghotal al-Sharqiyah: Guwat al-Maghaweir, Liwa al-Bara', Nusra Front, Liwa al-Islam, Alwiyat al-Habib al-Mustafa, Liwa Tahrir al-Sham, Liwa al-Qa'qa', Alwiyat Ababil Horan, Liwa al-Furqan, Liwa Dir' al-Asima in Harasta, and Liwa al-Islam
- Damascus Western Countryside: Liwa al-'iz, Alwiyat, Alwiyat wa Kataib al-Sahabah, Ahrar al-Sham, Nusra Front, Liwa Tawhid al'Asima, Fursan al-Sunna, Alwiyat Ahfad al-Rasoul, Zaid ibn Haritha, Bayariq al-Sham, Bayariq al-Islam, Liwa al-Tawhid wal Jihad, and Katibat Jund Allah.
- Al-Qalamon: Liwa al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Nusra Front, Liwa Rijal Allah in al-Qalamon, Katibat Maghaweir al-Qalamon, Liwa al-Ghuraba', the Third Division for Ahrar al-Qalamon, Liwa Shuhada' Ain Mnein, Liwa al-Noor in al-Qalamon, Liwa al-Nassr in al-Qalamon, Kataib al-Aqasa in al-Qalamon, Katibat Nusrat al-Mazlom in al-Qalamon, al-Qalamon Liberation Front, Katibat Saif al-'adl, Katibat Fursan al-Sunna in al-Qalamon, the Military Revolutionary Council in al-Qalamon, Kuluna Shuhada' al-Ruhaiba al-Abtal, Kataib Hifiz al-Nizam, Kataib al-Aqsa in al-Qalamon, Katibat al-Qadissiya in al Nabak, and Katiibat Maghaweir al-Qalamon.
- Towns of Southern Countryside of Damascus: al-Saiyada Zeinab, Hujaira, al-Thubabiya, al-Husseiniya camp, al-Sbeina, Alwiyat Afad al-Rasoul, Nusra Front.

3. Homs Governorate

- Homs City: Kataib al-Farouq, Liwa al-Haq, Jabhat Reif Homs, Kataib al-Farouq al-Islamiyah, the Commission for protecting civilians.
- Al-Rustun City: Kataib al-Farouq, the Independent Kataib al-Farouq, Liwa al’Iman, Liwa Mu’awiya, Liwa al-Shahid Samir al-Duhaik, Liwa Salman al-Farisi, Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa Usud al-Islam, Liwa Supor Talbeisah, Liwa al-Turkman, Kataib al-Noor, Liwa Shuhda’ Talbeisa, Liwa Talbiesa, Katibat al-Shahid Imad ‘Weijan, Nusra Front, and the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham".

4. Hama Governorate

- The "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Alwiyat Afad al-Rasoul, Liwa al-Iman, Liwa al-Farouq Hama, Liwa al-Islam- Hamah branch, Liwa Ahl al-Bayt, Liwa al-Majd, Tajamou’ and Alwiyat Abna’ Humah al-Muqatilah.

5. Dara’a Governorate

- Liwa Floja, Liwa al-Yarmouk, Liwa Tawhid al-Janoub, Harakat al-Muthana al-Islamiyah, Inkhil, Liwa Shuhada’ al-Islam, Liwa Gharba’ Horan, and Liwa Assadullah.
- Al-Jaidour (in its entirety) Inkhil, Jassim, Nimr, and al-Harah): Liwa Jeidrou Horan, and Liwa Ababil Horan.
- Da’il: Katibat Saqr Quraish
- Dara’a Western Countryside: Liwa Shuhada’s al-Yarmouk, Liwa Suqor Horan, and Liwa al-Yarmouk.
- Eastern Middle Area: Liwa Mohammed bin Abdullah, Liwa Tawhid Horan, Liwa Suqor Horan, and Liwa al-Yarmouk.
- Al-N’aiymeh: Liwa Fallujah Horan.
- Al-Hirak: Liwa Shuhada’ al-hurriyeh.
- Basr al-Harir: Liwa Amoud Horan.
- Al-Lujat: Liwa al-’Umari (belong to Ahfad al-Rasoul) and Liwa Dir’ al-Lujat.

- Dara'a City: Liwa Tawhid al-janhoub, Liwa al-Maham al-Khassah, Liwa Shahid Horan, Liwa al-Harayn (belong to Ahrar al-Sham), Liwa Ahfad al-Rasoul, and Liwa Tahrir Horan.
- The Eastern Area: Liwa al-Shahid al-'aqid Ahmed al-'Amr, Liwa Tabark al-Rahman, Firqat Maghaweir Horan.

6. Edlib Governorate

- Alwiyat Suqor al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", Liwa al-Haq, Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah, Alwiyat Ahfad al-Rasoul, Alwiyat Shuhada' Soria, Ahrar al-Zawiya, Ahrar al-Janal al-Wistani, Dorou' al-Thawara, Ahrar al-Shamal, Liwa al-Umah, and Liwa al-Iman.

7. Latakia Governorate

- The "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", Suqor al-'Iz, Kataib al-Muhajerin, al-Liwa al-Awal, Jabhat al-Assalah Watanmiya, Nusra Frotn, Nusrat al-Mazlom, Liwa al-Fath al-Mubin, Liwa al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sham, Harakat Sham, Tajamou' al- Qadissiya, Kataib al-'Iz Abdul Salam, and Liwa Ahrar Turkman.

8. Deir al-Zor Governorate

- Liwa Ja'far al-Tayar, Liwa al-Abbas, Liwa al-Muhajerin, Liwa Jund al-Aziz, Liwa Mu'tah, Liwa al-Islam, Liwa al-Qa'qa', Liwa Allahu Akbar, Liwa Ahfad al-Rasoul, Liwa Ahfad Mohammed, Jaish al-Assalah Watanmiya.

9. Al-Riqqa Governorate

- Al-Riqqa City: Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", Liwa al-Tawhid, Alwiyat Ahfad al-Rasoul, and Liwa Thuwar al-Riqqa.
- Al-Riqqa Countryside (Tell Abiad, al-Tabaqa, and Ain Issa): Liwa al-Tawhid, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyah, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", Alwiyat Ahfad al-Rasoul, Liwa Oeis al-Qurani, Liwa al-'Izatu lililah, Kataib Mu'awiya, Kataib al-Farouq, katibat Usud al-Islam, and Liwa Dir' al-Badiya.

10. Al-Quneitra Governorate

- Liwa al-Furqan, Liwa Nusur al-Jolan, Liwa Ahrar al-Quneitra, an Liwa Ahfad al-Rasoul.

11. Aleppo Governorate

- Liwa al-Tawhid, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, the "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", Liwa Ahrar Soria, Liwa al-Salam, Liwa Halab al-Shahba, Liwa Halab al-Madina al-Islami, Kataib Abu 'Imara, the Division 19, the Division 9, Liwa al-Fath, Liwa Asifat al-Shamal, Liwa Shuhada' Badr, Liwa al-Sultan Mohammed al-Fatih, Katain Noor al-Din Zinki, Liwa Amjed al-Islam, Liwa Dir' al-Shahba, Liwa Suqor al-Sham, Liwa al-Aqsa, and Liwa Usud al-Harb.

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