

# **TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION**

Middle East Report N°131 – 12 October 2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. COMING TO TERMS WITH FLUID DOGMATISM.....</b>	<b>4</b>
A. SYRIA AND SALAFISM .....	4
B. VARIETIES OF SALAFISM.....	5
<b>III. FERTILE SOIL, UNCERTAIN CROP .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>IV. FROM EXTREME TO MAINSTREAM.....</b>	<b>10</b>
A. THE LANDSCAPE.....	10
1. Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (The Support Front for the People of Syria).....	10
2. Other Salafi groups .....	14
3. The influence of foreign fighters .....	19
4. Salafism within the Free Syrian Army.....	20
B. STREAMLINING THE OPPOSITION?.....	22
1. Military councils .....	22
2. Independent alliances.....	25
C. OPINION LEADERS .....	29
1. The Adnan al-Arour phenomenon .....	29
2. Other Salafi figures .....	30
3. The absence of moderate leadership figures .....	30
<b>V. CONSTRAINTS AFFECTING SALAFIS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
A. DEALING WITH A POPULAR MOVEMENT .....	32
B. A REGIME MUDDYING THE WATER .....	32
C. LESSONS FROM NEXT DOOR? .....	33
<b>VI. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A. MAP OF SYRIA.....	37
B. ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP .....	38
C. CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA.....	39
D. CRISIS GROUP BOARD OF TRUSTEES.....	41

## TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prematurely and exaggeratedly highlighted by the regime, belatedly and reluctantly acknowledged by the opposition, the presence of a powerful Salafi strand among Syria's rebels has become irrefutable. That is worrisome, but forms only part of a complex picture. To begin, not all Salafis are alike; the concept covers a gamut ranging from mainstream to extreme. Secondly, present-day Syria offers Salafis hospitable terrain – violence and sectarianism; disenchantment with the West, secular leaders and pragmatic Islamic figures; as well as access to Gulf Arab funding and jihadi military knowhow – but also adverse conditions, including a moderate Islamic tradition, pluralistic confessional make-up, and widespread fear of the kind of sectarian civil war that engulfed two neighbours. Thirdly, failure of the armed push this past summer caused a backlash against Salafi groups that grabbed headlines during the fighting.

This is not to dismiss the Salafis' weight. The opposition has a responsibility: to curb their influence, stem the slide toward ever-more radical and confessional discourse and halt brutal tactics. So too do members of the international community, quick to fault the opposition for fragmentation and radical drift that their own divisions, dysfunctionality and powerlessness have done much to foster. For as long as different countries sponsor distinct armed groups, a bidding war will ensue, and any hope of coordinating the rebels, disciplining them and restraining their most extremist members will be in vain. The issue, in other words, is not so much whether to arm them – and, if so, with what – but rather to rationalise and coordinate the support provided to the opposition in order to make more likely the emergence of a more coherent, structured, representative and thus effective interlocutor in what, sooner or later, must be a negotiated outcome. Even those who side with the regime would stand to benefit from that development, if they wish to see today's devastating military stalemate evolve toward a political solution.

From day one, the question of Salafism within opposition ranks has been more of a political football than a subject of serious conversation. Assad backers played it up, convinced they could frighten both the country's own non-Islamists and minorities as well as the West, still traumatised by its misadventure in Iraq. Regime detractors played

it down, intent on preserving the image of a pristine uprising; people sympathetic to their cause, whether in the media or elsewhere, likewise were reluctant to delve too deeply into the issue, anxious about playing into regime hands. The net result has been more fog than light.

That is unfortunate, and not because Salafism necessarily is a central, dominant or even lasting feature of the Syrian landscape. But because it undoubtedly is present, almost certainly has been growing, clearly is divisive and strongly affects dynamics on the ground: it has an impact on who is willing to fund opposition groups, on popular attitudes, on the narrative the regime is able to expound and on relations among armed factions. This report, based both on field work in Syria and systematic analysis of the armed groups' own communications, seeks to clarify the origins, growth and impact of the opposition's fundamentalist threads.

Far from being rigid or monolithic, Syrian Salafism is eclectic and fluid. While all Salafists in theory apply literalist interpretations of scripture based on the example set by the Prophet and his companions, some have only a superficial understanding, lacking any genuine ideological vision; others seek to replace the secular regime with an Islamist form of governance; while a third tendency embraces the concept of global jihad advocated by al-Qaeda. The degree of intolerance toward members of other faiths likewise varies widely. The Iraqi precedent underscores how much these distinctions matter and how, for example, local objectives of mainstream insurgent groups, including those with Salafi tendencies, can be threatened by global ambitions of Salafi-jihadis.

Nor is it always straightforward to distinguish Salafis from non-Salafis: in some cases, adoption of Salafi nomenclature, rhetoric and symbols reflects a sincere commitment to religious ideals; in others, it expresses an essentially pragmatic attempt to curry favour with wealthy, conservative Gulf-based donors. Most armed groups have yet to develop a firm ideology or leadership structure; membership fluctuates, with fighters shifting from one faction to another based on availability of funds, access to weapons, personal relationships – in other words, based on factors having little if anything to do with belief.

Of course, there is no denying the striking inroads made by Salafism – at first, a marginal tendency at best – since the onset of the protest movement. There also is little dispute about reasons behind this growth. Conditions were favourable: the uprising was rooted in a social category readymade for Salafi preachers, the poor rural underclass that, over years, migrated to rough, impersonal urban settings far removed from its traditional support networks. And conditions ripened: as violence escalated, hopes for a quick resolution receded, and alternative tendencies (proponents of dialogue; peaceful demonstrators; the exiled leadership; more moderate Islamists) proved their limitations, many naturally flocked to Salafist alternatives. The West's initial reluctance to act – and enduring reluctance to act decisively – coupled with early willingness of private, wealthy, and for the most part religiously conservative Gulf Arabs to provide funds, bolstered both the Salafis' coffers and their narrative, in which Europe and the U.S. figure as passive accomplices in the regime's crimes.

More broadly, Salafism offered answers that others could not. These include a straightforward, accessible form of legitimacy and sense of purpose at a time of substantial suffering and confusion; a simple, expedient way to define the enemy as a non-Muslim, apostate regime; as well as access to funding and weapons. Too, Salafists benefited from the experience its militants had accumulated on other battlegrounds; they volunteered to fight, thereby sharing their knowledge with inexperienced domestic armed groups. At a time when such groups struggled to survive against a powerful, ruthless foe and believe themselves both isolated and abandoned, such assets made an immediate, tangible difference. Little wonder that, by January 2012, Salafism slowly was becoming more conspicuous on the opposition scene.

The regime cannot escape its share of blame. For years, Salafis were among those who claimed that mainstream Sunnis faced a serious threat from Iran and its Shiite allies, a category in which they included Alawites. Through increasing reliance on the most loyal, Alawite-dominated elements of its security forces to suppress a predominantly Sunni uprising, and because it received support mainly from its two Shiite partners (Iran and Hizbollah), the regime ultimately corroborated this sectarian storyline: many opponents equated the struggle against Assad with a jihad against the occupier.

Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that, for Salafis, the coast is clear. Syria boasts a history of moderate Islamic practice and has long prided itself on peaceful, cross-confessional coexistence. Its citizens have seen, first-hand, the calamitous repercussions of sectarian strife as civil war destroyed two of its neighbours, first Lebanon, later Iraq. Key figures of the uprising as well as its popular base often espouse antithetical ideology and goals. Large-scale attacks against regime forces in July and August 2012,

during which Salafi groups assumed a highly visible role, ended in failure, deflating some of the pre-existing faith. And the opposition is well aware of pitfalls: the rise of Salafism essentially validates the regime's thesis and thus helps justify its repression; worries actual and potential foreign backers; and, while rallying some Syrians, jihadi volunteers and outside Islamist sponsors to the cause, simultaneously undercuts the opposition's broader appeal and enhances the regime's ability to mobilise its own social base and allies.

All this places Salafis in the uncomfortable position of bolstering, by their behaviour and rhetoric, a central argument of the regime they seek to oust. And it explains why the mainstream opposition has launched several campaigns – unsuccessful to date – to unify rebel ranks, strengthen their overall effectiveness and contain or at least channel more radical outlooks.

Many myths surround Syria's Salafis. They are not an expression of society's authentic, truer identity; they are not merely a by-product of regime machinations; and they are not simply the result of growing Gulf Arab influence. Rather, they should be understood as one of the conflict's numerous outgrowths and, not least, part of the profound identity crisis it has produced. In many ways, it is the mirror image of the simultaneous cult of violence and ruling-family worship that, to a striking degree, has emerged among Alawites. In both cases, the rise of more extremist, militant, quasi-millenarist worldviews is not deniable, but nor is it necessarily irreversible. Salafism, both cause and symptom of the opposition's current shortcomings, is – like so much else in Syria – the expression of a bloody political and military stalemate that, for now, appears to have no way back, and no way out.

**Damascus, Brussels, 12 October 2012**

## TENTATIVE JIHAD: SYRIA'S FUNDAMENTALIST OPPOSITION

### I. INTRODUCTION

In recent weeks, fundamentalist elements have become increasingly visible within rebel ranks, triggering debate and prompting concern among Syrians and standing in sharp contrast to the opposition's original narrative. Indeed, throughout the uprising's initial months, leading activists made sure to employ language – both on the ground and online – designed to appeal to the broadest possible social spectrum. Peaceful protesters chanted for freedom and urged cross-sectarian unity, while regime attempts to paint its opposition as violent Salafi extremists convinced few observers.<sup>1</sup>

Even after the opposition took up arms, the effort to reject sectarian slogans remained unabated. In June 2011, a pioneer of the armed opposition, Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush, announced that he and his companions were defecting from the army to “protect the unarmed protesters who demand freedom and democracy”, adding: “‘No’ to sectarianism, the Syrian people are one”.<sup>2</sup> That justification – that the opposition needed to resort to arms to defend the people against regime brutality and promote their aspirations – quickly was embraced by defectors, activists

and dissident politicians alike.<sup>3</sup> However much the regime early on sought to portray its domestic opponents as violent Islamic extremists, pioneers of the armed resistance repeatedly invoked the same nationalist and democratic values embraced by its non-violent counterpart.

As the regime's brutal campaign to suppress the uprising continued through the summer of 2011, protesters' hopes that demonstrations alone would topple it further faded. In August, much anticipated daily demonstrations during the holy month of Ramadan failed to undermine government control of Damascus and Aleppo, as security forces and the civilian proxies they recruited (popularly known as *shabbiha*)<sup>4</sup> intensified their crackdown. With the regime maintaining its grip on the country's political and economic capitals, there would be no Syrian Tahrir Square.

In response, support among activists rose for emulating the Libyan model of regime change: the armed resistance, backed by Western military intervention, that led to the fall of Tripoli during Ramadan's final days.<sup>5</sup> Seeking armed

<sup>1</sup> The term “Salafi” refers to Sunni Muslims who embrace a literalist interpretation of Islamic scripture based on the example set by al-Salaf al-Saleh (the venerable ancestors), as exemplified in the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad and his first four “rightly guided” successors, al-Rashidun. For a discussion of Salafism in the contemporary social and political context, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005. For a comprehensive overview of the early stages of the Syrian uprisings, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Reports N°108, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011; and N°109, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, 13 July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Hussein Harmoush's defection video was released on 9 June 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XeIFv1B7no](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XeIFv1B7no). Among the first officers to defect, he founded the Free Officers' Movement, an early effort to organise defectors that later fell under the FSA banner. For more, see Joseph Holliday, “Syria's Armed Opposition,” Institute for the Study of War, March 2012.

<sup>3</sup> In announcing creation of the FSA in July 2011, Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad described its mission as protecting the revolution and the Syrian people, “in all its components and sects”. His rhetoric was more aggressive than Harmoush's, warning soldiers who continued to fight for the regime that they were legitimate targets, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItzI\\_AIFUWg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItzI_AIFUWg).

<sup>4</sup> *Shabbiha* refers to an essentially unrelated phenomenon: criminal gangs with ties to the ruling family that terrorised people on the Syrian coast and drove around in a kind of Mercedes dubbed *shabah* (ghost). The regime brought them to heel in the 1980s, but the expression stuck. Today, it is used as a generic term to depict not only the regime's armed civilian proxies, but also its regular troops and most zealous sympathisers. It increasingly is adopted, as a matter of pride, by those it purports to deride.

<sup>5</sup> By June 2011, the first organised armed groups had emerged within the opposition (mainly in Idlib, Hama and Homs), and in June and July defecting officers began releasing YouTube videos announcing their intention to protect peaceful protestors against regime attacks (see Section IV below). However, throughout the summer opposition activists continued to embrace *salamiya* (non-violence), as one of the revolution's defining characteristics and values. The failure of the Ramadan campaign appeared to prove the limits of a strategy entirely relying on non-violent activism. By September, activists were declaring that “the days of rocks are over”. Appeals for international intervention became a hallmark of activist messaging, and some opposition backers expressed hope local clerics would declare jihad

protection, mainstream activists began to publicly embrace the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), an entity that started off as a spattering of ad hoc opposition armed groups rooted in oppressed communities, where local volunteers and military deserters fought back against the regime's excessive use of force.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Syrians took to the streets in nationwide Friday demonstrations held in the name of "international protection" and calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone.<sup>7</sup>

In the ensuing months, opposition hopes for Western military action dwindled, even as forces loyal to the regime grew more aggressive in their efforts to crush the proliferating pockets of armed resistance. Frustration with international inaction rose in tandem with the civilian (and non-civilian) death toll. By the first weeks of 2012, opposition ranks were debating whether to declare jihad against the regime – a view long propounded on more militant, hardline forums but until then considered taboo among the mainstream opposition.<sup>8</sup> This shift coincided with the

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(holy war). Crisis Group interviews, Homs and Harasta, September and November 2011.

<sup>6</sup> While the defections of army officers throughout the summer generated considerable enthusiasm, leading activists appeared reluctant to draw attention to the opposition's armed elements for fear of vindicating regime claims that it faced a violent insurgency waged by armed gangs, rather than a peaceful popular uprising. The most popular pro-uprising Facebook page, instrumental in developing the movement's brand, "Syrian Revolution 2011" ([facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution](http://facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution)), only began promoting the Free Syrian Army (or any armed activity) in October 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The slogans of Friday protests are determined by an online vote the "Syrian Revolution 2011" Facebook page hosts. Its administrators say nominations are submitted by prominent activist groups within Syria as well as supporters online and put to a vote. The winner is widely circulated by on-the-ground activist groups and pro-uprising social media pages and features prominently in Arab media coverage. Friday protests on 9 September 2011 were held in the name of "international protection" – a vaguely-defined call for foreign intervention – and, on 28 October, in the name of establishing a no-fly zone similar to that imposed in Libya. Noah Bonsey and Jeb Koogler, "The people want foreign intervention?" *Huffington Post*, 23 May 2012.

<sup>8</sup> By most accounts, the first calls to jihad were in April 2011, after regime forces attacked a demonstration in Homs's Clock Square. Pro-opposition Syrians Crisis Group interviewed at the time claimed the regime was behind them, arguing they originated from mosques it controlled. By late 2011, chants of "the people want a declaration of jihad!" were common in more conservative pro-uprising strongholds, such as the Damascus suburb Douma. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Homs, Douma, Sanamein, December 2011. An online campaign developed in January to pressure the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page to offer "Declaration of Jihad" as a potential slogan for Friday, 20 January protests. Vigorous debate erupted among online activists, leading the page to announce it would not offer "jihad" as a nominee due to its divisiveness and potential to alienate non-Muslims, within and beyond opposition ranks. That did

not end debate; activists favouring a declaration accused page organisers of undemocratic behaviour, arguing it would strengthen the FSA by encouraging civilian volunteers to join. See Wasim Umawi, "الجمعة القادمة جمعة الشعب اعلن الجهاد", *Sooryoon.net*, 25 January 2012.

emergence of the uprising's first two prominent Salafi armed groups: Jabhat al-Nusra [the Support Front] and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham [the Freeman of Syria Battalions], both of which unambiguously embraced the language of jihad and called for replacing the regime with an Islamic state based on Salafi principles.<sup>9</sup>

These developments marked the onset of a phase of radicalisation within the insurgency. By January 2012, a Salafi strand was becoming gradually more conspicuous in militant-produced online material, including videos, communiqués, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds. Given the central role internet communication has played in allowing Syrian protesters to mobilise, coordinate and market their efforts, this material represents a valuable window into the current state of the uprising.

Much of it has been available for months but, until recently, rarely reached mainstream Western and Arab media. There are several explanations. First, Salafi influence, though growing, took time before it seriously challenged the uprising's foundational narrative of a nationalistic, revolutionary movement focused on toppling the regime and bridging sectarian divides.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the opposition, in particular the networks of activists providing information and illustrative material to the media, had every reason to project its most appealing image, well aware of the suspicions that would be aroused by overly Islamist rhetoric. Thirdly, journalists, sympathetic or at least shocked by the regime's repression, for a while appeared to agree that focus on the Salafi phenomenon would undermine the uprising's broader objectives. Lastly, because the regime had highlighted the Salafi threat long before it emerged credibly on the ground, many felt that addressing the issue would play into Assad's hands. In short, it was feared

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not end debate; activists favouring a declaration accused page organisers of undemocratic behaviour, arguing it would strengthen the FSA by encouraging civilian volunteers to join. See Wasim Umawi, "الجمعة القادمة جمعة الشعب اعلن الجهاد", *Sooryoon.net*, 25 January 2012.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the ideology and tactics of Jabhat al-Nusra and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, see Section IV.

<sup>10</sup> Throughout the uprising, leading activists have consistently sought to portray their cause as a national struggle to liberate all Syrians from an oppressive regime. Implicit in this is the message that the revolution is neither exclusively Sunni in nature, nor a revolt against distinctly Alawite rule. This narrative is neatly summarised in the Arabic mission statement of the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page: "[We are] Syrian youth from all the provinces; we work to coordinate among the various active parties within the revolution in order to attain the goals of the revolution: overthrowing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and establishing a free, civil, democratic state that encompasses all Syrians of all ethnic, religious, confessional and national backgrounds", [www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/info](http://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/info).

that analytical, unbiased discussion of Salafism's role within the opposition would be exploited.

Moreover, to the extent international and especially Western media and analysts have addressed the Salafi role within the armed opposition, they have tended to focus disproportionately on fears that al-Qaeda will take advantage of the violence to advance its cause. In February 2012, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri generated headlines with a video message calling on Muslims to support jihad in Syria. U.S. intelligence officials publicly blamed a string of high-profile suicide bombings in Damascus and Aleppo – two of which were claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra – on members of al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate operating on al-Zawahiri's orders.<sup>11</sup> Since then, much has been written in the Western press concerning alleged al-Qaeda activity and the presence of foreign fighters waging jihad on Syrian soil.<sup>12</sup> But Salafism is a phenomenon that goes well beyond al-Qaeda, and thus more complicated, and ultimately more relevant, questions concerning its role have gone largely unexplored.

With opposition militants gaining strength, violence escalating and international efforts to equip rebel forces intensifying, a more nuanced understanding of the armed opposition's strands is critical. Salafism may be only one of its many dimensions, but the fragile nature of Syrian society, intensified sectarian violence and the ambiguous role of various international actors lend it particular significance. Indeed, precisely because it is highly politicised and polarising – blown out of proportion and exploited by some, concealed or dismissed by others – it deserves careful scrutiny. This report explores the place of Salafism within the

militant spectrum and addresses key factors distinguishing the most extreme Salafi-jihadi elements from their mainstream counterparts. It draws extensively from interviews conducted by Crisis Group in Syria with opposition activists and militants, as well as on online and television material produced by a broad range of activists, militant groups and religious figures both inside and outside the country.

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<sup>11</sup> Unnamed U.S. officials told a journalist that al-Qaeda in Iraq had carried out bombings in Damascus on 23 December 2011 and 6 January 2012 and suggested it likely was responsible for the 10 February bombing in Aleppo. The 6 January and 10 February bombings were both later claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra (Section IV below). See Jonathan Landay, "US officials: al-Qaeda behind Syria bombings", McClatchy Newspapers, 10 February 2012. On 16 February, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the Senate Armed Services committee that the three bombings had "all the earmarks of an al-Qaeda-like attack", adding that al-Qaeda in Iraq was infiltrating Syrian opposition groups, likely without those groups' knowledge. Greg Miller, "Al-Qaeda infiltrating Syrian opposition, US officials say", *The Washington Post*, 16 February 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See, eg, Ulrike Putz, "Foreign jihadists declare war on Syria's Assad", *Spiegel Online*, 30 March 2012; John Irish, "Jihadists Join Aleppo Fight, Eye Islamic State, Surgeon Says", Reuters, 8 September 2012; "Foreign fighters, extremists increasingly appearing on front lines in Syria's civil war", *The Washington Post*, 19 September 2012; Mary Fitzgerald, "Syria's Irish fighters: 'I saw what was happening and had to do something'", *The Irish Times*, 22 September 2012; Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Syria: The foreign fighters joining the war against Bashar Al-Assad", *The Guardian*, 23 September 2012.

## II. COMING TO TERMS WITH FLUID DOGMATISM

### A. SYRIA AND SALAFISM

Although it has roots in a nineteenth century movement of Islamic modernist reform – one of several contemporary ideological trends, such as pan-Arab nationalism, that were striving for a form of Arab revivalism – the term “Salafi” has since been adopted by conservative Sunni Muslims who seek to apply literalist interpretations of scripture based on the example set by the Prophet and his companions.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the outbreak of the 2011 Arab uprisings, analysts generally differentiated between traditional Salafis, who typically prioritised social missionary (*daawa*) activity above political activism, and Salafi-jihadis, a small subset of Salafis who, in the words of a French expert, embrace a “hybrid Islamist ideology whose first doctrinal principle [is] to rationalise the existence and behaviour of militants”.<sup>14</sup>

Traditional Salafis tended to be supportive of ruling Arab autocrats (particularly the Saudi royal family and its allies), dismiss democracy as a human infringement on God’s authority and reject any attempt to remove the ruling establishment – whether violently or otherwise – as a violation of Islamic law.<sup>15</sup> While Salafi-jihadis share the traditional Salafis’ respect for the literal interpretation of Islamic scripture and rejection of democracy, they combine this conservatism with an unambiguous commitment to violent jihad against Islam’s alleged enemies, whether foreign states (Israel, the U.S. or Russia, for instance), local power structures (most Arab regimes, due to their opposition to Islamic rule or support for the West’s presumed “war on Islam”) or representatives of other religions, atheists and “apostates” (meaning Muslims of divergent schools of thought).<sup>16</sup>

In the context brought about by the Arab uprisings, however, some features that came to define traditional Salafis have blurred. After years on the political sidelines, a number of adherents in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt set aside their opposition to democratic politics, founding parties to compete in newly opened political arenas; in Egypt, Salafis won approximately 25 per cent of parliamentary seats. Such a rapid retreat from what once stood as a core, principled position reflects a paradox at the heart of contemporary Salafism: although it claims to be “rigorist”, and comes across as dogmatic and rigid, in fact it provides considerable and surprising flexibility, which can prove particularly valuable in times of political turmoil and conflict.

Within Syria, powerful political, social and cultural factors inhibited Salafism’s growth potential, at least at the outset. Longstanding repression, which intensified after 2001, by and large prevented its establishment within the local Islamic landscape, arguably more effectively than anywhere else in the region.<sup>17</sup> The country enjoys a deep history and vibrant practice of moderate Islamic schools of thought; these – although not addressed in this report – are heavily represented within the opposition. Syrian society also long prided itself on peaceful, cross-confessional coexistence. It witnessed first-hand the consequences of sectarian strife as civil war ravaged two neighbours, first Lebanon, then Iraq. Among opposition activists and militants, moreover, hardline Islamists and inveterate secularists constitute small minorities; most are religious Sunni Muslims without strong ideological affiliation.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, the paradoxical flexibility of this allegedly rigid creed, along with other important attributes, explains why Salafism rapidly gained ground in Syria as violence spread, even though it represented only a relatively negligible component of the country’s Sunni religious scene prior to the uprising.<sup>19</sup> Salafism confers absolute and instant legitimacy upon those who invoke it, insofar as it aims to emulate the Prophet’s ways. Its followers are identified by important yet highly accessible markers: beards of a specified length, shaved moustaches and garments that reach just above the heel. Although leading Salafi preachers typically are erudite, Salafism in its more popular incarnations does not require any particular cultural background or scholarly training; self-made Salafis essentially rely on sheer repetition of founding texts, thereby enabling social out-

<sup>13</sup> For additional discussion of contemporary manifestations of Salafism in the Arab political and militant spheres, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°104, *Radical Islam in Gaza*, 29 March 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 219-220; also Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Traditional Salafis often have adopted the principle of forbidding “*al-kharouj ‘an wali al-amr*” (directly challenging the authority of a legitimate ruler of Muslim lands). According to the former mufti of Saudi Arabia and a frequent source in traditional Salafi discourse, any direct challenge to a Muslim ruler will generate chaos and corruption and should only be undertaken in the event a ruler’s behaviour established beyond doubt that he was a non-believer, Abdulaziz bin Abdullah bin Baz, “المعلوم من واجب العلاقة بين الحاكم والمحكوم”, at [www.assakina.com/book/5975.html](http://www.assakina.com/book/5975.html).

<sup>16</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> See Arnaud Lenfant, “Les transformations du salafisme syrien au xxe siècle”, in Bernard Rougier (ed.), *Qu’est-ce que le salafisme?* (Paris, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, suburbs of Damascus, southern and central Syria, 2011-2012.

<sup>19</sup> For an extensive study of this religious scene, see Thomas Pierret, *Baas et Islam en Syrie. La dynastie Assad face aux oulémas* (Paris, 2011).

siders and so-called religious entrepreneurs to reach a certain standing regardless of wealth, education or ancestry.

Salafism also allows a comparatively greater degree of freedom in defining religious norms than commonly is afforded by the long-established institutions, traditions and interpretations that structure and constrain other Islamic schools of thought. Finally, it builds upon a narrative that is particularly well-suited to the needs born of violent conflict, whether it be defining and classifying one's enemy; rallying support for Jihad; or justifying martyrdom. For the largely conservative underclass whose Islamic identity is detached from local clerical elites and which represents the socio-economic backbone of the opposition, Salafism's appeal was clear.

Crucially, Salafism offered this constituency answers that others could not: a straightforward, accessible form of legitimacy and belief system, both of which were vital at a time of conflict and extreme violence; a simple, expedient way to define the enemy as a non-Muslim, apostate regime; and funding, thanks to networks that extended deep into the Gulf and had developed close economic ties with several areas of Syria most affected by the crisis. Salafism also benefited from the experience its militants had accumulated on other battlegrounds; they volunteered to fight, so shared their knowledge with inexperienced domestic armed groups.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the mainstream religious leadership had little to propose, and its outreach efforts were feeble; in like manner, both the exiled opposition and the international community became sources of deep frustration.

Over time, as the conflict evolved into a protracted civil war, even leading opposition figures began to echo long-held Western fears that the role of more extremist militants would grow. In late July 2012, referring to al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups, Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sheikh, head of the FSA's Supreme Military Council,<sup>21</sup> warned: "They are getting bigger and bigger. And day-by-day they

have more powerful positions inside the country. The situation is very dangerous".<sup>22</sup>

## B. VARIETIES OF SALAFISM

In analysing the influence of Salafi groups, several factors should be borne in mind. First, one ought to be mindful of differences not only between militant groups embracing Salafi rhetoric and other opposition factions but also among various Salafi groups themselves. Among important questions is whether one embraces the Salafi-jihadi concept of global jihad (as advocated by al-Qaeda) or instead aims to replace the Assad regime with an Islamist form of governance. As the Iraqi case amply illustrates, such distinctions matter and can be at the root of violent intra-opposition divisions. Global ambitions of Salafi-jihadis can threaten the more local objectives of mainstream insurgent groups with Salafi tendencies; specifically, whereas the former might seek to destroy the existing state, the latter might aim to rule it.

Secondly, and even among groups whose goals are limited to Syria, motivations differ. For some, adoption of Salafi names, rhetoric and symbols reflects a sincere commitment to Salafi ideals; for others, it expresses an essentially pragmatic attempt to curry favour among wealthy, conservative Gulf-based donors.<sup>23</sup> Abdul Razzaq Tlass, a photogenic, highly popular mid-level leader of Katibat al-Farouq in Homs generated public controversy in opposition ranks when he grew facial hair in a style associated with Salafis.<sup>24</sup> Yet, according to a prominent Homs activist, the decision signified an effort to please his (Gulf) fi-

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<sup>20</sup> Thus, improvised explosive devices became an art form among jihadis, who developed them in response to the U.S. occupation of Iraq. Increasingly effective armour plating used by occupation forces led their foes to adapt their weapons; they designed makeshift bombs whose detonation would melt, shape and propel a metal projectile capable of destroying tanks and other armoured vehicles.

<sup>21</sup> Mustafa al-Sheikh is a long-serving career officer who defected in January 2012 and joined the Turkey-based command of the FSA. The latter's nominal leader, Riyad al-Asaad, was inferior in rank but claimed greater legitimacy, having defected the previous July. The Supreme Military Council was created in order to reflect al-Sheikh's seniority without undermining al-Asaad's position.

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<sup>22</sup> See Mike Giglio, "Syrian rebel leader Mustafa al-Sheikh says victory against Assad not in sight", *The Daily Beast*, 26 July 2012.

<sup>23</sup> The reverse also can be true. A member of the Homs revolutionary council said, "the real head of Katibat al-Farouq, who is a Salafi, went to Turkey and met [U.S. Secretary of State Hillary] Clinton and shook her hand, even though Salafis don't shake hands with women. This is something that amuses some Homs revolutionaries", Crisis Group communication, August 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Lieutenant Abdul Razzaq Tlass, the first officer to publicly defect from the army during the uprising, announced his decision on 7 June 2011 in a video that immediately was shown on Arab satellite channels and went viral among uprising supporters online. In the following months, he became the public face of Katibat al-Farouq, a prominent rebel faction centred in Homs and surrounding suburbs that has since expanded to include affiliates throughout the country, and one of the uprising's most recognisable figures. He was as attractive to the opposition as he was threatening to the regime, but his reputation suffered with the 15 August 2012 release of footage purporting to show him engaged in a racy online video chat with an unnamed woman. On 19 August, Al-Farouq released a video in which he claimed the footage was manufactured. He has continued as a group spokesman, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMjOulykWFU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMjOulykWFU); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jZ1Xh2iAIk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jZ1Xh2iAIk).

nancers rather an ideological shift.<sup>25</sup> More generally, the preference of conservative Gulf funders are reflected in the attitudes of rebel units; in June a small group of militants released a YouTube video officially naming their unit after a Kuwaiti cleric who had provided support.<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, ever since the first militant groups emerged in the summer of 2011, the armed rebellion has been characterised by fluidity and loose organisation. Most armed groups have yet to develop a firm ideology or leadership structure; membership in various factions tends to fluctuate, with fighters shifting from one group to another based on the availability of funds and weapons and personal relationships, as well as the posture of regime forces.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, groups enjoy varying degrees of access to traditional and social media, further affecting the degree to which they can reach observers beyond their immediate vicinity. In some cases, Facebook accounts and communication with Arab satellite news channels are controlled by activists based outside the country, often in the Gulf. This, combined with Gulf-based funding, means that the online tone of activists and militant factions tends to be more Islamist (and in some cases more Salafi) than that of actual opposition groups on the ground.

Together, these factors complicate the task of assessing the relative size, effectiveness and cohesion of rebel factions.<sup>28</sup> As a result, this report focuses on groups that have documented their influence and staying power on the ground over an extended period of time, corroborating online claims with credible video evidence.

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<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012; Middle East Report N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012.

<sup>26</sup> The rebel faction, based outside Abu Kamal (a small city on the Iraq border), adopted the name *Katibat al-Sheikh Hajaj al-Ajami*. Hajaj al-Ajami is a Salafi Kuwaiti cleric who was prominent in raising money for the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, discussed below. In the video released on 14 June 2012, the group thanked him for support and praised the formation of the front, which had been announced ten days earlier, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KN7pYgtgkak](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KN7pYgtgkak).

<sup>27</sup> For example, most members of the Homs-based *Katibat Khalid bin al-Walid* joined *Katibat al-Farouq*; in turn, many of its fighters left the group following its defeat by regime forces at the battle of Baba Amr in early March 2012. Both groups subsequently enjoyed an influx of funding, as a result of which their memberships grew once more. Crisis Group observations during meetings with the Homs Revolutionary Council, May 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Estimating the number of fighters within any given group is particularly difficult. Most factions call themselves *katiba* (battalion), *kata'ib* (battalions) or *liwa* (brigade). While this provides some indication of size – *kata'ib* implies that the group is more than a single unit, while *liwa* suggests several "battalions" are within the command structure of a larger "brigade" – in practice these words are used very loosely, and the number of fighters within a battalion or brigade can vary widely.

Finally, a word of caution regarding the nature of the FSA: while Western and Arab journalists and analysts at times refer to it as if it is a coherent organisation, it more closely resembles a brand name than a unified military force. Many factions are loosely coordinated, share funding sources or are involved in incipient efforts to establish regional command and control structures. Due to their high-profile appearance on Arab television and in YouTube videos, key figures – particularly Colonel Riyad al-Asaad, its nominal leader; Abdul Razzaq Tlass; and Supreme Military Council head Mustafa al-Sheikh – have contributed to the emergence of rather vague and amorphous principles behind which (true or not) the FSA claims to stand: that it represents the mainstream militant opposition; is non-ideological; its leaders deal responsibly with the international community; and they embrace the notion of a democratic Syria guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of all its citizens. Still, the FSA has yet to produce a single leadership hierarchy, ethos or political affiliation capable of uniting dozens of brigades that fight under its banner.

Although factions that operate under its name vary significantly, the FSA's prominence is such that a group opting not to do so is actively asserting its independence. The most prominent groups to have abstained from adopting the FSA brand are disproportionately Salafi in outlook; several have chosen as their banner black Islamist flags in combination with or, more rarely, instead of the colours of the revolution.<sup>29</sup> This report distinguishes between groups, Salafi and otherwise, that define themselves as FSA affiliates and those that do not, while acknowledging that the line separating the two occasionally is ambiguous and murky.

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<sup>29</sup> Given the regime's abuse of national symbols in justifying repression, the opposition has sought to mobilise other national references. It replaced the official flag used during most of the regime's era (red, white and black horizontal stripes adorned with two green stars) with the one adopted used during the French mandate and the early independence years (green, white and black horizontal stripes adorned with three red stars). In a rebuff to both, some protesters and armed groups have flown green Saudi flags or black Jihadi banners on which the words "There is no god other than Allah" are written. The white "flag of the prophet" carrying that inscription also can be seen, although it does not necessarily carry the same meanings. It is flown, among others, by followers of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamic movement that seeks the establishment of a Caliphate but rejects the use of violence.

### III. FERTILE SOIL, UNCERTAIN CROP

As noted, the uprising took root in a social category that, in principle, was highly receptive to Salafi influence: the rural migrant underclass, many of whose members were concentrated in informal neighbourhoods ringing the largest cities. Unlike the regime's inner circle and urban elites, this slice of the population did not enjoy the fruits of the post-2005 economic opening. Years of drought and economic decline outside the political and commercial hubs prompted a prolonged period of migration from countryside to suburbs. People accustomed to traditional, rural lifestyles were suddenly transplanted into rough, impersonal settings far removed from their social support networks. Meanwhile, the state provided fewer and fewer services, and the Baath party, which once enjoyed strong roots among the underclass, increasingly became irrelevant.

Often poor, disenfranchised and lacking connections to a clerical establishment that catered mostly to urban elites, communities living in suburbs on the outskirts of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs offered favourable terrain for Salafi preachers.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the economically liberal and socially conservative merchant class that is based in the large cities, whose identity is ingrained in long-established traditions and whose business activities command religious pragmatism, rural migrants appear pre-disposed to embrace their narrative.

The conflict's intensifying confessional dimension arguably was the most critical factor behind the spread of a Salafi worldview. For years, even some mainstream Sunni opinion leaders sought to portray Iran and its Shiite allies (a category in which they counted Alawites, whose religion they consider a heretical offshoot of Shiism) as serious threats.<sup>31</sup> For many prominent Salafis in particular, confronting the geopolitical and cultural perils embodied in this perceived Shiite axis takes precedence over addressing

those posed by Israel and the West.<sup>32</sup> Prior to the Syrian uprising, this outlook made some inroads, but struggled to expand its reach.<sup>33</sup> Current circumstances have presented it with unique, unprecedented opportunities to gain ground among Sunnis in Syria and beyond.

For 40 years, Syria's Sunni majority has lived under a regime largely dominated by Assad's Alawite family; its military, security and intelligence apparatus was built so as to ensure meaningful power remained in the hands of community members. That is not to say that the regime rep-

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<sup>32</sup> Concern with Iran and Shiism rose in prominence in the discourse of both traditional Salafis and Salafi-jihadis as of 2006, when Iraq experienced its sectarian civil war, and Hizbollah gained political strength as a result of its war with Israel. Many traditional Salafis in Gulf countries, together with Salafis elsewhere who receive Gulf funding, share their governments' apprehension regarding Iran's alleged efforts to expand its influence in the Arab world. As the power of Iran's Iraqi and Lebanese Shiite allies grew at the expense of their Sunni counterparts, Salafi rhetoric increasingly focused on this purported threat. As some leading Salafis see it, Iran's mounting influence endangers regional security, but also the territorial and religious integrity of the Arab world's Sunni community. Salafis play upon fears of so-called Shiitisation – an (Iranian-sponsored) effort to convert Sunnis. Some prominent Sunni Islamist intellectuals have dismissed such worries as baseless; see Yasir al-Za'atara, "هذا الجدل المذهبي المخيف", *Al-Dastour* [Jordan], 9 December 2009; and Fahmy Huweidi, "أخطأت يا مولانا", *Al-Doustour* [Egypt], 21 September 2008). Others, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent, Qatar-based cleric who heads the influential International Union of Muslim Scholars and is a regular guest on Al Jazeera, back them, providing a mainstream stamp of approval to a traditionally Salafi concern. See al-Qaradawi's 7 February 2010 interview on BBC Arabic's *الصميم في الصميم* program, summary at: [www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2010/02/100206\\_qaradawi\\_fissameem\\_tc2.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2010/02/100206_qaradawi_fissameem_tc2.shtml). Although the phenomenon almost surely has been exaggerated, it sparked particular concern in Syria, given the regime's close political and economic ties to Tehran. The government's 2009 arrest of a Sunni scholar based at the Abu Nour Islamic Centre in Damascus led Syrian opposition activists in Beirut to release a statement accusing it of targeting "all who reject and oppose Persian Shiitisation in Syria". See "اتهامات لسوريا باستهداف علماء السنة لمواجهة المد الإيراني الشيعي", *Mufakerat al-Islam*, 9 July 2009, [www.islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2009/07/09/84756.html](http://www.islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2009/07/09/84756.html).

<sup>33</sup> Region-wide, even as the sectarian conflict between Shiites and Sunnis raged in Iraq, opinion polls suggested that Iran, Hizbollah and President Bashar Assad retained considerable credibility among Sunni Arab communities outside Iraq. In a 2008 Zogby poll conducted in six Arab countries, a mere 29 per cent of respondents believed Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would negatively impact the region, as compared to 44 per cent who felt the consequences would be positive. The same poll found Hassan Nasrallah (Hizbollah's leader), Assad and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to be the three most admired world leaders. See "2008 Arab Public Opinion Poll", Survey of the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, with Zogby International.

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<sup>30</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Alawites share little with Shiites in religious practices, though their (secretive) creed is said to give particular importance to Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the first of a line of Imams central to Shiite theology, and also to have been established by Abu Sh'aib Ibn Nusayr, a student of the eleventh Imam in this genealogy. However, Alawites are not known to respect essential Islamic practices, such as the pilgrimage or annual fasting and generally espouse a secular way of life and form of government. Rejected as heretics by several leading pre-modern Islamic scholars, they achieved greater recognition as Muslims during the twentieth century, particularly in the 1970s, when then-President Hafez Assad secured *fatwas* to that effect from prominent Shiite clerics. See Yvette Talhamy, "The *Fatwas* and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 46, 2010.

resented Alawite interests – to this day, the community counts among the country's poorest – nor that it ignored other constituencies; it reached out not only to minorities, but also to Sunni representatives. Indeed, by cultivating support from the Sunni business and religious establishments (notably in Damascus and, in recent years, Aleppo), displaying Sunni forms of piety, marrying Sunni women and appointing Sunnis to prominent and at times sensitive positions, the ruling family – particularly under Bashar – ensured that the power structure reflected a broad cross-section of society.

However, the regime's response to the protests both exacerbated and highlighted the depth of its sectarian identity. As demonstrations spread, it increasingly relied on the most loyal, Alawite-dominated elements of its security forces to crush a predominantly Sunni uprising. More important perhaps was the crucial role played by the *shabbiha*: brutal thugs who joined in cracking down on protesters and have been blamed for some of the most gruesome massacres. Although *shabbiha* are not uniformly Alawite by any means, in several regions – and notably in central Syria – they largely consist of pro-regime community members, often hailing from villages adjacent to the Sunni areas they attack.<sup>34</sup>

Other factors have bolstered early and consistent Salafi attempts to depict the struggle as essentially sectarian in nature. As a general matter, a large proportion of Alawites have either remained silent or lent support to the regime,<sup>35</sup> modest opposition efforts to reach out to and reassure them have fallen on deaf ears, failing to convince community members that they would be safe in a future Syria and thus that they should publicly break with Assad.<sup>36</sup> As a result,

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<sup>34</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°33, *Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, 10 April 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Though a handful of Alawite figures have played prominent roles within the opposition both before and during the uprising, the community by and large has refused to join the protest movement, let alone the armed struggle against the regime.

<sup>36</sup> Early opposition efforts to rally Alawite support included naming 17 June 2011 nationwide protests after Sheikh Saleh al-Ali, an Alawite leader of the 1919 rebellion against the French mandate. In November 2011, Fadwa Suleiman – a well-known Alawite actress – emerged as one of the uprising's most recognisable figures as a result of her public activism in predominately Sunni opposition strongholds in Homs. She led rallies with Abdel Basset al-Sarout (a former goalkeeper for the national youth football team and a prominent activist known for his songs) and appeared in live interviews on Al Jazeera, stressing the unity of the Syrian people and occasionally addressing her message to reluctant minority communities. See her 8 November 2011 rally with al-Sarout, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=c72B4pnGm38](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c72B4pnGm38); her 7 November appearance on Al Jazeera, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHB4k7GaZ6g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHB4k7GaZ6g); and her 2 January 2012 address to a funeral in Wadi al-Arab, Homs, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNkd1KLlYmM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNkd1KLlYmM). Islamic opinion leaders also made

and for lack of any visible Alawite participation in the uprising, in the eyes of many Sunnis the *shabbiha* came to represent the sect.<sup>37</sup>

The sectarian narrative was further boosted by the identity of those who back the regime in the most public and sustained manner: Iraqi Shiite political figures, Iran and Hizbollah, the latter of whose leader and satellite channel echo regime propaganda. Unconfirmed reports – widely disseminated by Syrian activists, pro-Saudi media and Salafi figures – that they provide the regime with direct military assistance likewise have gained broad credibility within opposition circles.<sup>38</sup> That they simultaneously support Bahrain's (predominantly Shiite) uprising only brought the confessional picture into sharper focus.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, regime reliance on domestic Alawite fighters and foreign Shiites gave rise to a narrative – particularly in vogue in Sunni opposition strongholds – equating the struggle with resistance against an alien occupation and attacks against government forces with a jihad against the occupier.<sup>40</sup> Coming in the wake of three decades of self-

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some efforts to reassure Alawites. See, eg, <http://blogs.media-part.fr/blog/thomas-pierret/041011/des-islamistes-syriens-tendent-la-main-la-communaut-laalawite>.

<sup>37</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°31, *Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, 24 November 2011.

<sup>38</sup> The opposition Syrian National Council, the FSA and other activists routinely condemn Iran's and Hizbollah's support for the regime, including alleged supply of weapons and manpower. Opposition websites likewise regularly post and link to reports of Iranian and Hizbollah interference. Although these at times originate in Saudi-funded media outlets (such as al-Arabiya, a satellite channel, and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a daily newspaper), YouTube videos claiming to depict Iranian and Hizbollah activity in Syria also are commonly featured on prominent opposition social media sites. See, eg, the 20 May 2011 video purportedly showing a victim killed by Iranian security forces in Idlib province, posted on the leading opposition Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/420796315726/posts/209360575770278](http://www.facebook.com/420796315726/posts/209360575770278). Militants claim to have captured Hizbollah fighters, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operatives and even Iraqi Mahdi Army combatants, further fuelling perceptions of Shiite military support for the regime.

<sup>39</sup> Opposition activists have mocked the purported hypocrisy in this regard of Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's secretary general, most memorably in a 12 August 2011 episode of *Anzeh wa lo Taret*, a satirical YouTube series hosted by a young Syrian woman wearing a carnival mask. Midway through the show, she asks what about Bashar Assad has led Nasrallah to support his promises of reform even after condemning similarly empty pledges by other Arab leaders facing popular uprisings. "Ah yes", she answers, "it's because he [Assad] is Shiite! So then, who is it that's sectarian?" The video has been viewed more than 400,000 times. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRh4hd9zl-w&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRh4hd9zl-w&feature=relmfu).

<sup>40</sup> As of late 2011, several opposition activists and websites had taken to labelling Syrian troops "Assadi occupation" forces, eg, the 5 November statement from the Syrian Revolution General

proclaimed Islamist resistance against Russian, Israeli and U.S. occupations, the theme resonated widely throughout the region.

Salafis have benefited from other trends and dynamics. First has been growing disenchantment with competing opposition strands. Even as peaceful protests remained a central feature of the uprising and key to its image, they proved unable to shake the regime's grip on power; as hope for a relatively expeditious and non-violent resolution faded, moderate leaders failed to present a viable alternative. Opposition voices that support dialogue have been discredited, as the regime has opted ever more clearly for a security and military solution, and its reforms have appeared transparently superficial.<sup>41</sup> Secular leaders within the exiled opposition have been divided over whether to arm the FSA and call for international intervention; those who reject both courses have alienated rank-and-file supporters of the uprising within Syria, whereas those who favour them so far have been ineffective at rallying meaningful international support. As discussed below, more moderate Islamic voices have been mostly silent.

Secondly, some Salafis have benefited from the international community's failure to decisively support the opposition. Although activist appeals for Western backing undoubtedly have complicated Salafi messaging given their traditional anti-Western stance, U.S. and European reluctance to match verbal support with concrete action ultimately boosted a narrative in which the West figures as passive partner in the regime's crimes.<sup>42</sup> In like manner, the West's hesitation to arm the FSA – whether justified or not – coupled with Gulf Arab states' initial failure to live up to their commitment to supply the opposition with weapons almost certainly played into the hands of independent Salafi armed groups.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the FSA – whose

actions were somewhat constrained by a narrative emphasising self-defence as well as by its fear of alienating potential Western backers – these groups felt freer, aggressively marketing their violent raids against regime forces and *shabbiha* throughout the spring of 2012.<sup>44</sup> The upshot has been a growing, if somewhat exaggerated, popular perception of Salafi groups as the only game in town.

A Homs activist said:

The Syrian mood gradually is being changed from moderate to radical. While the Americans are thinking and planning, the radical Islamists are fighting every day in order to get the support of the people. By the time the U.S. is ready to make a decision, all of Syria will be Islamists.<sup>45</sup>

By the same token, Western reluctance to provide support to armed opposition groups and Gulf Arab state tardiness in doing so gave wealthy private Gulf donors a head start; insofar as they tend to be Salafis themselves, they have been more likely to donate to Salafi groups, giving those yet another comparative advantage. Members of a leading Homs activist group told Crisis Group that donations from Syrian expatriates and other Arabs in Gulf countries helped fuel a growing Islamist trend among militants as of early

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Commission, a leading activist group, entitled "The Assadi occupation plans to commit massacres in Homs".

<sup>41</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Appealing for help from the international community is uncomfortable for some Salafi-jihadi groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, that traditionally have portrayed the U.S. and its allies (including Arab and Turkish leaders) as enemies of Islam. Thus, even as protesters repeatedly called on foreign governments to act (between September and December 2011, they held three nationwide Friday protests urging some form of international intervention), Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, denounced such appeals as naive and sinful. See his first video release, "الاعلان عن جبهة النصره لاهل الشام", 24 February 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal raised expectations among supporters of the uprising when he called for arming the opposition at the February 2012 "Friends of Syria" gathering; however, shipments reportedly did not reach rebel hands until May. See Maria Abi-Habib, "Saudis seek to funnel arms to Syr-

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ia rebels", *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 2012; also Martin Chulov, "At Syria's border, after months of waiting, the weapons arrive", *The Guardian*, 29 June 2012. Even as reports emerged in June of additional shipments from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, many opposition backers remained sceptical. On 20 June, opposition supporters voted online to hold the upcoming weekly Friday protests under the banner "If the governments are feeble, where are the peoples?" More recently, U.S. and European officials claim that larger quantities of weapons have reached the FSA, mainly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, transiting Turkey. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington DC, August-September 2012; EU official, September 2012.

<sup>44</sup> FSA leaders openly requested weapons from foreign governments, some of which were similarly blunt in expressing their reluctance. On 27 February 2012, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told CBS News: "We know al-Qaeda [leader Ayman al-Zawahiri] is supporting the opposition in Syria. Are we supporting al-Qaeda in Syria? Hamas is now supporting the opposition. Are we supporting Hamas in Syria?" She added: "So if you're a military planner or if you're a secretary of state and you're trying to figure out do you have the elements of an opposition that is actually viable, that we don't see". These sentiments partly explain why FSA units have sought to avoid publicising tactics that powerful potential supporters might associate with Islamist insurgents. Salafi militant groups, do not pursue Western backing, so are freer to adopt and market forms of action they see fit.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Homs Revolutionary Council leader, Homs, May 2012.

2012.<sup>46</sup> By May, according to an activist, most of the money received by armed groups in Homs was sent “from Islamists to Islamists”.<sup>47</sup>

A similar dynamic developed in Idlib province, where Salafi brigades (Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham) emerged among the most prominent militants in the north. In July 2012, a Western journalist reported from Idlib that Salafis' direct access to Gulf-based funding was the envy of local FSA leaders, who bitterly complained that their own Turkey-based leaders were not providing them with sufficient funding and arms.<sup>48</sup>

The money flow from conservative donors did more than strengthen Salafi factions relative to their mainstream counterparts. As said, it also pushed non-Salafi combatants toward joining Salafi units capable of providing them with the requisite weapons and ammunition. Groups with no ideological affiliation whatsoever began to adopt the symbols, rhetoric and facial hair associated with Salafism for that purpose. While such forms of behaviour typically might start as a largely opportunistic phenomenon and thus lead to exaggerated assessments of a rising Islamist tide, over time they could well turn into more genuine feelings, as the experience of a religiously-inspired struggle permeates a generation of fighters. As discussed below, however, it also is liable to provoke a backlash, should these superficial Salafis engage in conduct that tarnishes the broader brand.

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<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Homs Revolutionary Council leader, Homs, February 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Homs, May 2012. He added that although most Islamist militants in Homs were not extremist, the trend was growing as the war persisted.

<sup>48</sup> Referring to Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, the leader of an FSA brigade in the town of Saraqeb said, “the Salafis have their own support, and it's strong. I don't blame them, but we started before them; we spilled our blood, I think it's a grave injustice to us that they have stronger support”. A local Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham leader confirmed his group was receiving considerable funding and suggested FSA brigades in the area suffered because much support earmarked for them never made it out of Turkey. See Rania Abouzeid, “Going rogue: Bandits and criminal gangs threaten Syria's rebellion”, *Time*, 30 July 2012.

## IV. FROM EXTREME TO MAINSTREAM

As the regime's military response intensified in the latter half of 2011, the armed opposition's original emphasis on national unity and self-defence progressively was challenged by a more aggressive, explicitly Islamist outlook. The most prominent groups associated with this trend, Jabhat al-Nusra and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, announced their creation in late January 2012. Although most mainstream activists, opposition politicians and FSA leaders generally eschewed use of the term jihad, they – along with several independent Salafi groups that emerged from January onwards – openly embraced it.<sup>49</sup> To varying degrees, each developed a distinctive Salafi perspective, depicting their fight as an inherently religious struggle against a sectarian Alawite regime. While these factions are neither as prominent nor as numerous as those that adopted the FSA's banner, their aggressive tactics and savvy online marketing techniques proved instrumental in reshaping the terms of debate within Syria.

### A. THE LANDSCAPE

#### 1. Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (The Support Front for the People of Syria)

Jabhat al-Nusra emerged on the insurgent scene in late January 2012 with a slickly produced video that promised to wage jihad against the regime. While the poor-quality footage, English subtitles and aggressive, implicitly sectarian rhetoric led mainstream opposition groups to dismiss it as a regime-sponsored manoeuvre to discredit their fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra won immediate online praise from al-Qaeda supporters.<sup>50</sup>

Appearing at a time when opposition militant discourse was dominated by activists' and the FSA leadership's

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<sup>49</sup> The jihad concept plays a much smaller role in rhetoric of leading FSA factions than of Salafi groups, but the term is more prevalent in material released by factions operating under the FSA banner since the May 2012 al-Houla massacre.

<sup>50</sup> While al-Qaeda's transformation into a loosely-connected network of independent affiliates and sympathetic self-starters has been well documented, its brand name retains loyal support from a small but spirited online community. So-called keyboard mujahidin congregate on internet discussion forums such as Shamukh al-Islam and Ansar al-Mujahideen, where they can access material from Salafi-jihadi groups certified and posted by forum administrators or by al-Fajr Media Centre, which distributes publications of al-Qaeda affiliates. The threshold for publication on these sites is quite high – at the height of the Iraqi insurgency, some of its most prominent insurgent groups were banned from leading jihadi forums even though they adopted thoroughly Salafi rhetoric. Al-Qaeda supporters look to these forums to assess whether a new jihadi group is worthy of their attention.

attempts to attract Western support, portray anti-regime violence as self-defence and embrace the ideal of a future non-sectarian democracy, Jabhat al-Nusra distinguished itself with its unabashed Salafi-jihadi imagery and rhetoric, its warning against seeking Western help and its attacks against the Turkish government for being both insufficiently Islamist and a U.S. pawn.<sup>51</sup> For the group, overthrowing Assad represented only half the battle; success would come only once the entire regime was replaced with an Islamic state following Salafi principles.<sup>52</sup>

Even as others have adopted similar rhetoric and symbolism, Jabhat al-Nusra stands out among Salafi militant organisations for several reasons. It regularly takes responsibility for suicide attacks in civilian neighbourhoods; is viewed by al-Qaeda as the favoured Salafi-jihadi group; and employs an online media dissemination strategy akin to that of al-Qaeda affiliates and offshoots. Although it has taken credit for dozens of attacks against security forces throughout the country, it arguably became best known for claiming responsibility for high-profile suicide bombings in Damascus and Aleppo in early 2012.<sup>53</sup> While its propaganda sought to portray these as carefully targeted at government security buildings and personnel, pro-regime, pro-opposition and Western media all reported significant civilian casualties.<sup>54</sup> Be it in terms of target selection (government buildings in crowded urban neighbourhoods) or tactics (it remains the only prominent opposition faction to openly embrace suicide bombings), it has more in common with al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) than with Syrian opposition factions.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Jabhat al-Nusra's first video release, *الاعلان عن جبهة النصرة، "لاهل الشام"*, 25 January 2012.

<sup>52</sup> See Abu Muhammad al-Jolani's address in *ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra claimed responsibility for the 6 January 2012 bombing in Damascus' al-Midan neighbourhood, marking the first time an insurgent group had publicly acknowledged using a suicide bomber. It also claimed responsibility for the 10 February suicide bombing of a building housing security forces in Aleppo (see its 26 February video release, *غزة الثائر لحرائر الشام*); two suicide bombings in Damascus on 17 March, one targeting an intelligence office in the Christian neighbourhood of al-Qassaa (see its Communiqué #1); and the 27 April suicide bombing targeting security forces in al-Midan (Communiqué #2). In contrast, it did not claim responsibility for the 10 May bombings in the al-Qazaz neighbourhood of Damascus. This attack is further discussed in Section V.

<sup>54</sup> *The New York Times*, 6 January; 17 March 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra's attacks in the al-Midan and al-Qassaa neighbourhoods of Damascus ostensibly struck regime security targets (security personnel in the former; an intelligence office in the latter), but appear to have resulted in significant civilian casualties. Such attacks are commonly undertaken by al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has staged major bombings against government offices in Baghdad's busy neighbourhoods. Like al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra displays little sympathy for innocent bystanders.

The same can be said of Jabhat al-Nusra's open embrace of sectarian rhetoric: although most rebel factions seek to ease fears of minority communities and depict their struggle as a war of liberation on behalf of all Syrians, Jabhat al-Nusra portrays itself as the Sunni community's aggressive defender against the "Alawite enemy" and its "Shiite agents". It routinely uses the derogatory term *rawafidh* (literally: rejectionists, plural of *rafidhi*) in reference to Shiites, a practice common among Iraqi Salafi-jihadi insurgents. Its use of the word "Nusayri" instead of Alawite is equally disparaging, intended to highlight the creed's divorce from orthodox Islam: Nusayri refers to the faith's founder, a student of the eleventh Shiite Imam, whereas Alawi refers to Ali Ibn Abi Talib, considered by Sunnis to be the fourth "rightly guided" Caliph.<sup>56</sup>

Such apparent similarities with AQI practices have raised alarm in Western capitals and severely damaged the group's reputation with mainstream leaders and supporters of the uprising. U.S. officials publicly suggested that at least two attacks claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra were carried out by AQI, which they accuse of seeking to infiltrate the armed opposition.<sup>57</sup> Although Jabhat al-Nusra has not acknowledged direct links to AQI, members have admitted the presence of Iraqi, Yemeni, Saudi, Jordanian, Kuwaiti, Libyan and Kazakhstani fighters in their ranks.<sup>58</sup>

Within the opposition, as mentioned, allegations have been rife that the regime itself directly or indirectly orchestrated the early 2012 Damascus and Aleppo bombings in order to frighten Syrian minorities and Western powers. As some opposition figures saw it, initially at least, Jabhat al-Nusra's violence was tailor-made to substantiate regime claims it was facing Salafi terrorists.<sup>59</sup> From this, they concluded that the security services had carried out the bombings,<sup>60</sup>

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In its statement claiming responsibility for the al-Qassaa attack, it unapologetically informed Christians that they were not the intended target and warned Syrians "to avoid living near security branches and regime lairs" (Communiqué #2).

<sup>56</sup> See Jabhat al-Nusra communiqués #48, 79, 80, 81 and 82.

<sup>57</sup> See Jonathan Landay, "US officials", *op. cit.*; also Greg Miller, "Al-Qaeda infiltrating Syrian opposition, US officials say", *The Washington Post*, 16 February 2012.

<sup>58</sup> In separate interviews with Western journalists, a Jabhat al-Nusra leader in Deir al-Zour and a rank-and-file fighter from Idlib described local branches as primarily comprising Syrians, with support from foreign volunteers. See Ghaiith Abdul-Ahad, "Al-Qaida turns tide for rebels in battle for Eastern Syria", *The Guardian*, 30 July 2012; also Rania Abouzeid, "Meet the Islamist militants fighting alongside Syria's rebels", *Time*, 26 July 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, opposition leaders, suburban Damascus and Homs, March 2012.

<sup>60</sup> The Syrian National Council accused "Assad's gangs" of perpetrating the 17 March Damascus bombings and earlier bombings in the capital and Aleppo, describing the "terrorist" campaign as "a desperate attempt to mislead public opinion and ter-

others, including Syria's defected ambassador to Iraq, suggested they grew out of longstanding collaboration between Syrian intelligence and AQI.<sup>61</sup> A prominent Syrian Salafi-jihadi figure, Abu Basir al-Tartusi, likewise publicly accused the group of serving regime interests.<sup>62</sup> Whatever the veracity of such claims, they complicated Jabhat al-Nusra's efforts to gain more widespread acceptance from opposition backers.

That said, some indications suggest that, since July, Jabhat al-Nusra may have recovered from its initial missteps and built both credibility and cooperation with more mainstream rebel groups. This is most notable in the battleground city of Aleppo, where militants loyal to it appear to be operating alongside Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa al-Towhid fighters, the leading rebel forces involved in the hostilities (see below).<sup>63</sup> Online videos show members

of the groups fighting and celebrating together,<sup>64</sup> and a Jabhat al-Nusra leader in Aleppo told a journalist that the 300 fighters under his command were coordinating with Liwa al-Towhid.<sup>65</sup>

Such open collaboration with its larger counterpart has earned Jabhat al-Nusra public praise from prominent rebel leaders and local activists. In August a high-profile Liwa al-Towhid commander commended the group's contribution, and a spokesman for the Revolutionary Council of Aleppo and Countryside – a prominent activist organisation linked to Liwa al-Towhid – explained that Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters were welcomed as “heroes” in the city.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Jabhat al-Nusra flags recently appeared amid crowds of cheering demonstrators during Friday rallies in Binnish, an opposition stronghold in the vicinity of Idlib province.<sup>67</sup>

To this day, Jabhat al-Nusra remains the sole active militant group to receive the direct endorsement of pro-al-Qaeda online forum administrators and leading Salafi-jihadi figures. Its propaganda material is accredited by al-Qaeda's

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rify the people of Damascus and Aleppo, especially following the escalation of the protest movement in those two cities”. See “المجلس الوطني السوري يتهم النظام بالوقوف وراء تفجيرات دمشق وحلب”, Agence France-Presse, 18 March 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Riyadh al-Asaad, the official FSA leader, blamed the regime for the massive 10 May 2012 bombing of an intelligence headquarters in Damascus. He suggested it was using extremist groups to carry out bombings that served its purposes, noting that it previously had been the liaison in Iraq between al-Qaeda and other Iraqi insurgent groups. He added that “members of al-Qaeda are connected to Syrian Air Force intelligence” – one of the regime's most powerful intelligence services – and that the regime was directly responsible for the entry of any al-Qaeda member into Syria. See “الرياض الأسعد: عناصر «القاعدة» إذا”, *Al-Ra'i* (Kuwait), 13 May 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Tartusi released two statements questioning Jabhat al-Nusra's legitimacy and suggesting its actions benefit the regime. The first, posted on his Facebook page shortly after Jabhat al-Nusra released its first video, criticised the group's leadership and members for refusing to reveal their identities, unlike FSA defectors, who generally identify themselves in YouTube videos, and for opposing appeals for international assistance. He raised doubts as to whether Jabhat al-Nusra was a legitimate jihadi group, not a regime fabrication. See the 27 January post on al-Tartusi's “Islamic Opposition to the Syrian Regime” Facebook account, [www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/311812605527435](http://www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/311812605527435). In another statement posted on Facebook on 27 February, the day after Jabhat al-Nusra's second video, al-Tartusi questioned why the group had claimed responsibility for the 6 January al-Midan bombing, which opposition activists unanimously blamed on the regime, added that its open talk of killing Alawites and Shiites would prove costly to the uprising and challenged its leader to prove his credentials by revealing his identity and demonstrating support from known Syrian Salafis. See [www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/332542243454471](http://www.facebook.com/moaradaislamiya/posts/332542243454471).

<sup>63</sup> In a 23 August 2012 Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham video, the narrator credits Jabhat al-Nusra for playing a part in downing a helicopter outside Aleppo. Although Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham's Salafi ideology is similar in some respects to Jabhat al-Nusra's (see

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below), this was the first time either group publicly acknowledged cooperating with the other. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1Rb117XWN8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1Rb117XWN8).

<sup>64</sup> In a 27 July YouTube video, six fighters claimed responsibility for disabling an army tank on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra and Liwa al-Towhid, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKlkJM95nhA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKlkJM95nhA). A separate clip released on 13 August depicted a militant waving a Jabhat al-Nusra flag celebrating among Liwa al-Towhid fighters and local civilians. Amid thirteen minutes of singing and dancing not generally associated with jihadis, those celebrating cheered and chanted for the FSA, Liwa al-Towhid and Jabhat al-Nusra, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdn33XS6TY0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdn33XS6TY0). Likewise, footage of a high profile 7 September attack on a military facility in the Aleppo neighbourhood of Hanano released by Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham identified Jabhat al-Nusra and Liwa al-Towhid as having joined in the operation, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=klh-AqZP468](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klh-AqZP468). Jabhat al-Nusra confirmed its role in the Hanano attack in an official statement released on 24 September; however, the statement mentioned neither Ahrar al-Sham nor Liwa al-Towhid, nor any other co-participant. See Communiqué #83.

<sup>65</sup> See Justin Vela and Liz Sly, “In Syria, group suspected of al-Qaeda links gaining prominence in war to topple Assad”, *The Washington Post*, 19 August 2012; also the 27 July destruction of a tank in Aleppo claimed by fighters on the scene on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra and Liwa al-Towhid, op. cit.

<sup>66</sup> See Liwa al-Towhid head of operations Abd al-Qader al-Saleh's interview with Ahmad Zeidan, Al Jazeera Aleppo correspondent. لقاء اليوم, 11 August 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7yiezX66x4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7yiezX66x4); also Vela and Sly, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> YouTube videos taken during Friday rallies in Binnish on 6 and 27 July 2012 showed several Jabhat al-Nusra flags alongside a handful of white Islamist flags and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham banners, though these were outnumbered by the more widely accepted revolutionary flags, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um5tbSa7dKl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Um5tbSa7dKl); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY\\_WbsJwK1w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY_WbsJwK1w).

media distribution network and advertised on Shamukh al-Islam, the leading pro-al-Qaeda forum.<sup>68</sup> Prominent Salafi-jihadi clerics aligned with al-Qaeda have specifically referred to Jabhat al-Nusra as the most trusted, authentically Islamic faction in Syria and urged potential mujahidin to join its ranks.<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, the packaging of Jabhat al-Nusra's online material and the manner in which it is distributed reflect a media strategy familiar to jihadi audiences yet unique among Syrian insurgent groups. Whereas other factions regularly update official Facebook and YouTube accounts with immediate documentation of attacks, Jabhat al-Nusra employs a slower media dissemination model akin to AQI's. Instead of daily announcements, it reports most of its operations days after the event, issuing official statements that cover several of its attacks in a particular region.<sup>70</sup> Only in the case of high-profile attacks will its statements focus on a single occurrence, and even in those instances

the claims generally are released at least 24 hours after the fact and sometimes much later.<sup>71</sup> Release of video documentation is even more delayed, as the group typically packages material in a flashier, more technically proficient manner than others.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, everything is released via jihadi web forums, thereby providing proof of authenticity to online supporters who quickly repost it on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and elsewhere.

Paradoxically, this unique media dissemination strategy has contributed to the group's relatively low profile in a crowded militant scene. By quickly releasing statements and YouTube footage, FSA brigades and independent Salafi factions have built their reputations among a mainstream pro-opposition audience accustomed to following events at a pace approaching real-time. Video material swiftly is reposted on popular Facebook pages and appears on friendly Arab satellite channels; for those sympathetic to the insurgency, this provides a rough, if not necessarily accurate, sense of which armed factions are most active and where. In contrast, Jabhat al-Nusra's more deliberate, delayed pace is out of tune with this audience's appetite for immediate gratification, limits the group's ability to shape debates and diminishes its overall visibility.<sup>73</sup> For

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<sup>68</sup> As described above, the Shamukh al-Islam network (shamikh1.info) is recognised by online al-Qaeda supporters as the authoritative jihadi web site; forum administrators' decision to showcase a group's material gives it a stamp of approval. Most propaganda on the forum is produced by al-Qaeda affiliates and bears the label of the al-Fajr Media Centre, the online outfit responsible for distributing al-Qaeda material. Though this is not the case for Jabhat al-Nusra's propaganda, Omar al-Bakri, a prominent Lebanon-based Salafi-jihadi figure, has asserted that its material was published by al-Fajr, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 23 March 2011.  
<sup>69</sup> Salafi-jihadi figures have publicly endorsed Jabhat al-Nusra, including Abu al-Munthir al-Shanqiti (a leading member of the Jurisprudence Committee at Minbar al-Towhid wa al-Jihad, a website whose publications carry significant weight within the jihadi community); Hani al-Saba'i (a well-known Egyptian Salafi-jihadi); Abu Saad al-Amili (a prominent jihadi writer of unknown origins published on Shamukh); and Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi (an influential Jordanian Salafi-jihadi). Al-Shanqiti's and al-Amili's statements are particularly significant because they discuss what to do about the FSA. The former urges all Syrian Salafis to join Jabhat al-Nusra but not to clash with the FSA; indeed, he encourages them to cooperate with non-Salafi factions whenever advantageous to the struggle. Al-Amili's tone is less welcoming of the FSA; he criticises its leaders for adopting "infidel democracy" as their religion and accepting the legitimacy of international institutions and "apostate" Arab regimes. But he acknowledges the FSA contribution to the fight and makes clear he is not calling upon Salafis to clash with it. See al-Shanqiti's response to Question #6372, [www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/pr?qid=6372&PHPSESSID=41a18da6e199fb9a7b5cc894cc9e935c](http://www.tawhed.ws/FAQ/pr?qid=6372&PHPSESSID=41a18da6e199fb9a7b5cc894cc9e935c); also Saad al-Amili's essay, "واجب التأيد و النصر لجهة النصر", [www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=152922](http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=152922).

<sup>70</sup> On 14 July, Jabhat al-Nusra released a statement, "Some military operations in Damascus and its countryside", reporting six attacks between 20 June and 12 July. The titles of other Jabhat al-Nusra statements announcing attacks in other provinces use the same format, which is similar to that adopted by the "Islamic State of Iraq", the Iraqi jihadi umbrella group dominated by AQI. See Jabhat al-Nusra's Communiqué #33.

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<sup>71</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra took responsibility for the 24 April bombing of a regime security vehicle outside the Iranian cultural centre in central Damascus six days later. Several such belated announcements at times are made in statements released in a single batch; thus, on 20 August, Jabhat al-Nusra issued communiqués claiming responsibility for bombings conducted between 26 June and 17 August (Communiqués #3, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, and 56).

<sup>72</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra released footage of its 6 January Midan, Damascus bombing in a 45-minute video on 26 February; it released a video of its February Aleppo bombing on 25 April. Footage from several other attacks was included in a 54-minute video on 22 May. See Jabhat al-Nusra videos: *غزوة الثأر لحرار الشام*, *غزوة الثأر لأهل حمص*, *صدق الوعد*. Jabhat al-Nusra's fourth video documenting operations, released on 19 August, primarily contains footage of attacks prior to mid-June. See *صدق الوعد*.

<sup>73</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra waited until 2 July to release a statement claiming responsibility for the high-profile 27 June attack on the pro-regime al-Ikhbariya news channel; although the statement was dated 30 June, it was published two days later. By then discussions of the operation had subsided, and the most prominent version circulating on pro-opposition media outlets and social media postings was provided by FSA spokesman Malek al-Kurdi. He claimed the attack was carried out by defecting Republican Guard soldiers. This delay prevented Jabhat al-Nusra from capitalising on the high level of interest in the initial hours following the attack. See Jabhat al-Nusra's Communiqué #32, "ريف دمشق - اقتحام مبنى قناة الإخبارية السورية"; also *هجوم على مقر «الإخبارية السورية» يوقع 3 قتلى.. ووزير الإعلام يحمل "الجامعة العربية المسؤولية"*, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 28 June 2012. Similarly, Jabhat al-Nusra did not claim the 26 September attack on the military's general staff headquarters in Damascus until the following day; by then, Arab and international media outlets already had widely attributed the attack to Tajammu' Ansar al-

those wishing to do so, it also has made it easier to ignore its growing role.<sup>74</sup>

## 2. Other Salafi groups

While Jabhat al-Nusra has emerged as al-Qaeda supporters' favourite, lesser-known, independent Salafi groups have proven more successful in gaining a foothold within the militant opposition mainstream. In effect, they occupy a middle ground between Jabhat al-Nusra and the FSA.

Unlike Jabhat al-Nusra, they have not claimed responsibility for attacks in civilian neighbourhoods; do not formally embrace suicide bombings; and have eschewed the rhetoric of global jihad generally associated with al-Qaeda. In contrast with leading FSA factions, on the other hand, they justify resort to violence exclusively within an Islamist frame of reference; declare their ultimate goal to be Islamic rule; and do not provide assurances of a democratic post-Assad regime. In the same spirit, they tend to embrace Salafi imagery and rhetoric, adding black Islamist banners to the tricolour opposition flag and spicing their videos with *anashid* (Islamic chants) extolling jihad, a hallmark of Islamist militant propaganda. These groups also are more likely to refer to their enemy in overtly sectarian terms.

Online discussions suggest that independent Salafi groups so far have been more effective than Jabhat al-Nusra at building credibility among mainstream supporters of the

insurgency. Although they receive less coverage than their FSA counterparts on leading Arab satellite networks and embrace an ideology that remains controversial within opposition ranks, they do not carry the public relations baggage associated with al-Qaeda and thus are seen by many within the opposition as legitimate actors.<sup>75</sup> Independent Salafi factions claim to coordinate their operations with FSA units, and online opposition backers often do not distinguish between the two, notwithstanding their distinct brandings and ideologies.<sup>76</sup>

The credibility such independent Salafi groups have earned within more mainstream circles does not appear to have come at the expense of jihadi support. Although not endorsed by leading jihadi figures or Al-Qaeda-linked web forums, their operations regularly are praised by jihadi sympathisers who also post their propaganda online, in some cases going as far as calling on the groups to form a united front with Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>77</sup>

### *Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (The Freemen of Syria Battalions)*

The most prominent independent Salafi group, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, is best known for its widespread resort to roadside bomb attacks and sophisticated online propaganda. Though it occasionally claims attacks in cooperation with FSA brigades, it bills itself as an independent Salafi

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Islam (an alliance of FSA and Salafi factions discussed below), which took responsibility in Facebook posts and media appearances immediately following the operation. See Jabhat al-Nusra's Communiqué #84; also [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=304186833021554&set=a.290553997718171.65456.287251144715123&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=304186833021554&set=a.290553997718171.65456.287251144715123&type=1) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tZcWnD-7Ls](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tZcWnD-7Ls).

<sup>74</sup> On rare occasions when it went public at an early stage, the tactic largely backfired. Thus, Jabhat al-Nusra claimed the 3 October bombings in Aleppo's Saad Allah al-Jabbari square roughly twelve hours after the attack. According to its statement, it employed two suicide bombers, two car bombs and a small unit of fighters in the operation, which destroyed an officers' club, a café and a hotel reportedly used by regime soldiers as well as security elements, and seriously damaged a second hotel. According to official media, 34 were killed in the attack, including soldiers and civilians. Although some pro-opposition satellite channels and social media pages ignored Jabhat al-Nusra's claim – neither Al Jazeera nor the leading pro-uprising Facebook page ([facebook.com/Syrian.revolution](http://facebook.com/Syrian.revolution)) mentioned it in their extensive, sympathetic coverage of the bombings – the announcement focused the international media's attention on the group, mainly in negative terms. See Jabhat al-Nusra's Communiqué #96; also "Ministry of Interior: 34 Martyred, 122 Injured in Aleppo Terrorist Bombings", Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), 3 October 2012; Tim Arango and Anne Barnard, "Turkey strikes back after Syrian shelling kills 5 civilians", *The New York Times*, 3 October 2012.

<sup>75</sup> While less recognisable than the FSA, independent Salafi groups appear to enjoy support from local opposition groups active online. The leading activist Facebook page dedicated to the Damascus suburb of Douma, a key opposition stronghold, regularly posts material released by Liwa al-Islam and actively encourages users to follow the group's online material. See [www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/posts/330681980346057](http://www.facebook.com/Douma.Revolution/posts/330681980346057). Similarly, material released by Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham regularly is posted by Idlib and Tartous-based activist groups; Liwa Saqour as-Sham's propaganda (discussed below) appears on the pages of Idlib- and Aleppo-based groups; and Katibat al-Ansar's material (discussed below) is posted on a range of Homs activist pages.

<sup>76</sup> A posting on the leading pro-revolution Facebook page contains a Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham video alongside a caption reading "God protect our dear Free Army", [www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/304042383018391](http://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/304042383018391).

<sup>77</sup> Online al-Qaeda supporters typically post videos and statements by independent Salafi groups, seeking to highlight that these groups are separate from the FSA and aim to establish Islamic rule rather than democracy. Thus, a call by an al-Qaeda sympathiser for Jabhat al-Nusra, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, Saqour al-Sham, Katibat al-Ansar and Liwa al-Islam to coordinate messaging and unite under a common Salafi banner was reposted on jihadi and mainstream discussion forums, <http://img713.image Shack.us/img713/1954/000000mi.jpg>; <http://hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=291240>; [www.shababsyria.org/vb/showthread.php/66150](http://www.shababsyria.org/vb/showthread.php/66150).

alternative to the better-known umbrella group.<sup>78</sup> It asserts that it has over twenty affiliated “battalions” across the country, though a review of its videotaped operations suggests activity is concentrated in the north west,<sup>79</sup> notably Idlib province, where opposition groups enjoy varying degrees of control over some towns and rural areas. It also increasingly is active in Lataqia, Hama and Aleppo provinces;<sup>80</sup> in August, a journalist reporting from Aleppo estimated it had 500 fighters in the city.<sup>81</sup>

The group was among the first opposition factions to document improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against regime forces, regularly updating its Facebook page with videos of roadside bombings targeting military convoys.<sup>82</sup> In like manner, it claims to have employed remotely-driven, explosives-laden vehicles, a tactic pioneered in Iraq and also used by Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>83</sup> However, even as they acknowledge acquiring bomb-making expertise from jihadis who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, its members deny that foreign fighters are in their ranks.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> As mentioned, as of 15 September 2012, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham also had claimed responsibility for two operations carried out in cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra.

<sup>79</sup> Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham maintained a list of its brigades in the “About” section of its Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/A.AIsham.B/info](http://www.facebook.com/A.AIsham.B/info). The link was active as of 6 October 2012 but as is the case with many rebel groups, the page frequently is removed from Facebook.

<sup>80</sup> See Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham's postings depicting its operations at [www.facebook.com/A.AIsham.B](http://www.facebook.com/A.AIsham.B) and <http://twitter.com/Ahraralsham>; see also David Enders, “In Northern Syria, rebels now control many towns and villages”, McClatchy Newspapers, 7 June 2012.

<sup>81</sup> See Richard Spencer, “British convert to Islam vows to fight to the death on Syrian rebel front line”, *The Telegraph*, 16 August 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham released its first IED attack video on 15 February 2012. The bomb struck a military convoy near Jisr al-Shaghour. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYQXCsjK3I4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYQXCsjK3I4). Its Facebook page posts statements announcing operations on behalf of its affiliated brigades, some of which also maintain their own Facebook pages. The group regularly follows up on these announcements with videos of selected operations; its Facebook page likewise includes audio recordings and promotional videos released by affiliated brigades and links directly to its *daawa* page, discussed below. The page regularly is removed, apparently by site administrators. It also operates a website ([www.ahraralsham.com](http://www.ahraralsham.com)), Twitter feed (<http://twitter.com/Ahraralsham>), and a page cataloguing its video releases ([www.dailymotion.com/K-AhrarAlsham#video=xs7csm](http://www.dailymotion.com/K-AhrarAlsham#video=xs7csm)).

<sup>83</sup> See Salafi-Jihadi essayist Akram Hijazi's survey of the Syrian militant scene, “خريطة القوى المسلحة”, 12 June 2012, at [www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=1003838](http://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=1003838).

<sup>84</sup> See Rania Abouzeid, “Meet the Islamist militants”, *op. cit.*; also Ruth Sherlock, “Al-Qaeda tries to carve out a war for itself in Syria”, *The Telegraph*, 12 July 2012.

The issue of suicide bombings is more delicate. During the first four months following its official emergence in January 2012, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham did not take responsibility for any such attack; of late, however, the situation has become more confused. On 7 June, it conducted a truck bombing on a regime checkpoint near the town of Khan Sheikhoun, in Idlib province; the group announced the attack on Facebook and YouTube the following day, asserting that the vehicle had been remotely piloted.<sup>85</sup> That version was contradicted by the leader of a Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham battalion in Khan Sheikhoun, who contended that his group had carried out an attack on a checkpoint that same day using a nineteen-year-old suicide bomber. He added that, although it was his battalion's first suicide attack, other Ahrar al-Sham battalions separately had resorted to this tactic.<sup>86</sup>

Through online communications, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham presents its principal goals and ideological belief: waging jihad against Iranian-led efforts to project Shiite power across the Levant and establishing an Islamic state.<sup>87</sup> It devotes a separate Facebook page entirely to *daawa*, a missionary call to Islam, and regularly updates the page with practical Salafi guidance.<sup>88</sup> In addition, it promotes its humanitarian activities, releasing YouTube videos of its

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<sup>85</sup> Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham's original Facebook post referred to the checkpoint attack but did not describe how it was carried out; instead, it cursed “the dogs and minions of Iran”. The original YouTube video it posted has since been removed by YouTube administrators (a common occurrence since YouTube rules ban depiction of graphic or gratuitous violence); a reposting, with original text, is at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFCV9P90ak4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFCV9P90ak4). *عملية -نسف حاجز السلام /كتائب أحرار الشام* at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFCV9P90ak4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFCV9P90ak4), 8 June, *www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFCV9P90ak4*.

<sup>86</sup> See David Enders, “Syrian rebels now using EFPs in bombs, bane of U.S. in Iraq”, McClatchy Newspapers, 13 June 2012.

<sup>87</sup> In its first audio address, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham clearly stated its goal to replace the Assad regime with an Islamic state. However, it also acknowledged that must take into account the population's current state of mind, misled by the regime's manipulation of the clerical establishment. It also described the uprising as a jihad against a Safawi (Iranian Shiite) plot to spread Shiism and establish a Shiite state from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and Palestine. The statement claimed that were the plot to succeed, it would be a triumph for Zionism, “because it's well known that al-Rafidha [a pejorative terms used to describe Shiites] don't fight the enemy; they only turn their swords against Sunnis”. See *الكلمة الصوتية أحرار الشام* [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKm5xzKvYFY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKm5xzKvYFY). *بشائر 1- الأسبوعية*

<sup>88</sup> Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham updates its *daawa* page ([www.facebook.com/AlaBasseerah](http://www.facebook.com/AlaBasseerah)) several times daily with short posts offering Salafi guidance. It includes general advice on religious practice (eg, a warning against the dangers of delaying prayer) and the proper behaviour of mujahidin (eg, a warning against looting).

fighters packing relief kits and distributing them to local residents.<sup>89</sup>

As the pace and geographic reach of its operations has risen, so too has its public profile. By early June 2012, it was touted as the largest military member of the newly-announced Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, an Islamist-dominated political-military alliance. Ironically, although Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham acknowledged its leading part in creating the coalition, it officially suspended participation a day after its launch, visibly uncomfortable with its moderate tone.<sup>90</sup> Six weeks later, the group once more reversed course, lifting the suspension following the coalition's adoption of a new political charter – one that, by more explicitly calling for an Islamic state, affirming commitment to “international treaties and conventions, so long as they do not contradict the principles of Sharia” and proclaiming its desire to “activate Syria's positive role in all fields”, sought to walk a fine line between a more explicitly Islamist stance and a pragmatic effort to maintain ties to the international community.<sup>91</sup>

#### *Liwa Saqour al-Sham (Falcons of Syria Brigade)*

Liwa Saqour al-Sham was established in November 2011 and, since March 2012, has emerged as one of the most powerful groups in Idlib province, where it reportedly has roughly 4,000 fighters.<sup>92</sup> Its online messaging illustrates the blurry lines separating independent Salafi groups both

from the FSA and from one another;<sup>93</sup> Liwa Saqour al-Sham claims to have conducted joint operations with Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib province and both organisations coordinate attacks alongside FSA units.<sup>94</sup>

In fact, in the first video address publicising the group's attacks, its leader, Ahmad Eissa Ahmad al-Sheikh (often referred to as Abu Eissa), asserted that it was part of the FSA.<sup>95</sup> Only in the following weeks did Liwa Saqour al-Sham drop the FSA reference and increasingly adopt Salafi rhetoric, releasing videos and statements under its own name. Al-Sheikh has since appeared in a video in which he instructs fighters that their ultimate goal must be to establish an Islamic state, and, on 27 July, delivered a sermon urging his audience to focus on the promotion of proper Islamic behaviour among those around them.<sup>96</sup> The group's official Facebook page now regularly posts material calling for Islamic rule; in one, Syrians are told to reject any national and pan-Arab identity, as claims of

<sup>89</sup> Each kit contains food supplies and pamphlets designed to promote religious commitment in daily life. A pamphlet shown in the video is entitled “Your *hijab* [headscarf] is your appearance and your honour”.

<sup>90</sup> Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham explained its decision by pointing to the ambiguous position adopted by coalition spokesmen toward the Syrian National Council. It asserted that, as a committed Islamist group, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham could not maintain ties with the SNC. See 5 June statement released by its media office, on the group's Facebook page.

<sup>91</sup> See the 18 July 2012 post on the Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham Facebook page. In statements released at its 4 June official launch, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front announced its commitment to “Islam and its legislative frameworks for the state”, together with its commitment to religious pluralism. By contrast, the new charter, published on 18 July, defined its political vision as: “Overthrowing the governing regime in Syria, establishing rightly-guided Islamic governance, and presenting a vision for the renaissance of the *ummah* [global Muslim community]”. Among the coalition's guiding principles, the document also listed “implementing God's law”. See “الإعلان باسطنبول عن جبهة” “موحدة للفصائل العسكرية” الإسلامية “في سورية”, *Al-Ghad* [Jordan], 5 June 2012; also the 19 July post on the Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham Facebook page.

<sup>92</sup> See Sarah Birke and Katie Paul, “Inside Syria's fracturing rebellion”, *The New Republic*, 30 August 2012.

<sup>93</sup> The group announced formation of its first “battalion” on 25 November 2011 but did not officially take credit for armed operations until March. See “قسم صقور الشام” Allegiance of Sham Falcons”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYoO4SeZw9Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYoO4SeZw9Q). In June 2012, an Associated Press reporter who spent time in Idlib noted that Liwa Saqour al-Sham leader Ahmad Eissa al-Sheikh “is one of northern Syria's most powerful and best armed commanders”, claiming to command over 1,000 fighters. See Ben Hubbard, “Syria rebels divided, at times violent”, Associated Press, 23 June 2012.

<sup>94</sup> On 9 April, Liwa Saqour al-Sham released a video claiming responsibility for an IED attack on a military convoy conducted in cooperation with Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham. The video soundtrack is a *nashid* (Islamic chant) typically employed by Islamist militant groups. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1JgmluoI4E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1JgmluoI4E). Its official Facebook page also “likes” Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham and its *daawa* page and posts videos of that group's operations, [www.facebook.com/sqooralsham](http://www.facebook.com/sqooralsham). On 17 April, its Facebook page included a post urging readers to pray for group members fighting alongside “other heroes from the FSA” in Ariha, a small city in Idlib province, [www.facebook.com/sqooralsham/posts/218529161589593](http://www.facebook.com/sqooralsham/posts/218529161589593).

<sup>95</sup> Liwa Saqour al-Sham video, “مليات بالجملة ضد جيش بشار الأسد”, بيان قائد لواء صقور الشام يتحدث عن عمليات الجيش السوري الحر, 12 March 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Sheikh made clear that the struggle should aim at establishing an Islamic state, although he added that this does not entail driving out non-Muslims. He emphasised that, in the current stage, they must cooperate with all, including non-Muslims, noting the Prophet allied with Christians and Jews. However, he said, the time will come when fighters will move ahead and refuse to accept Syria as anything other than Islamic. See “حلقة علم للواء صقور الشام يقدمها قائد اللواء”, 21 April, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUg\\_2A82QBw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUg_2A82QBw). The sermon was delivered in a mosque in the Idlib province town of Jabal al-Zawiya and emphasised the importance of “promoting virtue and preventing vice”, “طبة الأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijLlBjiXKQg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijLlBjiXKQg).

national unity between Sunnis, Alawites and Christians are “absolutely forbidden” under Islamic law.<sup>97</sup>

In an apparent attempt to appeal to different audiences – from conservative Gulf Arabs to Western states<sup>98</sup> – Liwa Saqour al-Sham tempered its online embrace of Salafi rhetoric with more moderate views. In meetings with Western journalists, for example, al-Sheikh and other officials admit that their ultimate objective is an Islamic state but also speak of guaranteeing minorities' democratic rights – a stance closer to that adopted by branches of the Muslim Brotherhood than to typical Salafi discourse.<sup>99</sup>

The group's stance on suicide bombings is equally ambiguous. On several occasions, it has claimed responsibility for attacks in which someone drives an explosives-laden vehicle into a regime checkpoint. In the first such instance, it asserted that the bombing was not a “martyrdom operation” (jihadi terminology for suicide bombings); instead, it alleged, it had hidden explosives in the car of a person suspected of being an undercover regime agent, then detonated the vehicle when he arrived at the checkpoint.<sup>100</sup> On the second occasion, its Facebook page likewise refers to a regime agent, although a videotape of the explosion posted on the page clearly labels the attack a “martyrdom” operation.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>97</sup> The post invoked *al-Wala' wa al-Bara'* (loyalty and disownment), a Salafi concept that urges believers to distance themselves from non-Muslims. See the 17 May post on the group's official page, [www.facebook.com/sqooralsham/posts/418817458152113](http://www.facebook.com/sqooralsham/posts/418817458152113).

<sup>98</sup> Liwa Saqour al-Sham members acknowledge receiving money from Syrian expatriates and other Arabs. See Ben Hubbard, “Syria rebels divided, at times violent”, op. cit. In August 2012, in a possible indication of its funding sources, the group hosted two visiting delegations: one led by Imad al-Din al-Rashid, a prominent, moderate exiled Islamist Syrian politician (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMhWyyHTcM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMhWyyHTcM)), who reportedly funds militants in Homs and elsewhere, Crisis Group interviews, activists, Homs, November 2011 and May 2012; the other a group that included Salafi members of the Bahraini parliament whom al-Sheikh thanked for their support, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOXKTpsRILM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOXKTpsRILM).

<sup>99</sup> See Tracey Shelton, “Syria: a revolution divided”, *Global Post*, 9 July 2012. A member of an Idlib activist organisation insisted that, unlike Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa Saqour al-Sham was not actually Salafi. Crisis Group interview, Western-educated doctor and member of Idlib's Revolutionary Council, July 2012.

<sup>100</sup> See *عملية نوعية تفجير حاجز كامل عن بعد لواء صقور الشام*, 18 April 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqykh57BjTk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqykh57BjTk). Ben Hubbard, an Associated Press journalist, also reported that Liwa Saqour al-Sham conducts bombings using unwitting suspected collaborators and has executed captured regime soldiers. See “Syria rebels divided, at times violent”, op. cit.

<sup>101</sup> See the 10 May 2012 Facebook post, which describes the use of live regime agents in car bombings as a group “policy”,

Whatever the case may be, Liwa Saqour al-Sham was the first militant group other than Jabhat al-Nusra to advertise use of vehicular-borne IEDs piloted by live drivers, a tactic commonly associated with the Iraqi insurgency's most extreme elements. It since has been adopted by Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, which in turn claims to have shared its remote-controlled car bombing capabilities with Liwa Saqour al-Sham. Cooperation between these two groups was evident between mid-June and mid-July 2012, when they took responsibility for at least three joint bombings targeting regime checkpoints and carried out by moving vehicles.<sup>102</sup>

### *Liwa al-Islam (Islam's Brigade)*

Active in Douma and nearby Damascus suburbs since March 2012, Liwa al-Islam provides yet more evidence of the fluidity of lines separating independent Salafi groups from FSA units.<sup>103</sup> It and the local FSA affiliate, Katibat Shuhadaa Douma (Douma Martyrs Battalion), announce joint operations, praise each other's independent activity and, more anecdotally, “like” each other's Facebook pages.<sup>104</sup>

[www.facebook.com/sqooralsham/posts/412473888774381](http://www.facebook.com/sqooralsham/posts/412473888774381). (The link to the video mentioned in the post no longer is active.)

<sup>102</sup> Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham's 10 July Facebook post announced an attack in the Lataqia countryside carried out with an explosives-laden vehicle driven by a *shabbiha* member. See [www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/posts/260338394074718](http://www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/posts/260338394074718); also its 13 July statement claiming responsibility for a car bombing carried out jointly with Liwa Saqour al-Sham via remote control, at <http://hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=288298>. The groups allegedly jointly carried out car bombings on 16 June and 8 July. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOGW9bENeUA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOGW9bENeUA), and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEL-\\_JYipb4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEL-_JYipb4).

<sup>103</sup> In mid-2012, Liwa al-Islam earned a reputation as one of the most active factions in Douma, a rebel stronghold on the capital's outskirts. Its current prominence is chiefly from having been first to take responsibility for the 18 July bombing that killed four senior regime security officials in the elite Damascus neighbourhood of Rowda. The spectacular attack inspired rebel fighters to escalate their activity in the capital during the following week. Liwa al-Islam claimed the bombing both on its Facebook page and in a live Al Jazeera interview. A competing claim emerged hours later, and it never produced evidence. [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=287406054700421&set=a.267988626642164.59029.254125888028438&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=287406054700421&set=a.267988626642164.59029.254125888028438&type=1). This post is no longer accessible due to the removal of Liwa al-Islam's page from Facebook. Several Facebook links below are thus also inaccessible. As of 9 October, the group's official page could be found at [www.facebook.com/LwaAlaslamTjmAlansar](http://www.facebook.com/LwaAlaslamTjmAlansar).

<sup>104</sup> See Liwa al-Islam and Katibat Shuhadaa Douma Facebook pages at [www.facebook.com/islam.fsa](http://www.facebook.com/islam.fsa), [www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade](http://www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade) and [www.facebook.com/Duma.martyrs.battalion](http://www.facebook.com/Duma.martyrs.battalion). For an example of Liwa al-Islam praising Shuhadaa Douma, see the 12 May post on its page; it includes a picture of Shuhadaa Douma fighters beneath a caption that reads, “Our mujahidin brothers from Katibat Shuhadaa Douma. God protect you,

The main distinction between the groups appears to be less about strategy and tactics than ideology and tone, though such differences have had no apparent impact on Liwa al-Islam's willingness to cooperate with the FSA.<sup>105</sup> Unlike its FSA counterparts, Liwa al-Islam has opted for the black Islamist flag; identifies itself as an independent "jihadi militant" group; carries out attacks in the name of "jihad for the sake of God Almighty"; and espouses a Salafi conception of Sharia.<sup>106</sup> The tone and content of its propaganda is more overtly religious, with a Salafi connotation that contrasts with the FSA groups' broader, more general Islamic rhetoric. Prominent Salafi clerics promoted by the group include Adnan al-Arouf (an influential Syrian cleric further discussed below) and Nabil al-Audi, a charismatic Kuwaiti preacher whose anti-Shiite diatribes feature prominently in its online postings.<sup>107</sup> It also maintains a separate Facebook page that aims to clarify its ideological positions and encourage proper Salafi etiquette among its fighters.

Its Facebook postings often are highly sectarian in nature even though the group has sought to clarify that it does not favour all-out war against Alawites.<sup>108</sup> In one *fatwa* (religious edict), its "Sharia Committee" explains that rebels must fight regime combatants regardless of sect and

that calls for ethnic cleansing against Alawite civilians are both religiously illegitimate and inconsistent with the revolution's broader interests.<sup>109</sup> Although the group hardly is non-sectarian, such assertions distinguish it (and other independent Salafi organisations) from stances adopted by both AQI and Jabhat al-Nusra – the former having targeted Shiites for years and the latter having threatened to treat Alawites similarly.<sup>110</sup>

#### *Katibat al-Ansar (Supporters' Battalion)*

Active since March 2012 in the city and suburbs of Homs, Katibat al-Ansar describes its mission as jihad, promotes proper Salafi behaviour and speaks openly of the conflict's sectarian nature.<sup>111</sup> The group adopted the white Islamist flag, displaying it alongside the tricolour banner.<sup>112</sup> It also addresses the question of relations with non-Salafi opposition factions; noting the corrupt environment in which many fighters operated prior to the uprising (in both the army and local neighbourhood gangs), various online posts describe non-observant militants as "sick" brothers who should be treated for their spiritual ailments rather than punished or confronted.<sup>113</sup>

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heroes, and may he support us and support you", [www.facebook.com/islam.fsa/posts/309360499141607](http://www.facebook.com/islam.fsa/posts/309360499141607); see also the 10 May post in which Liwa al-Islam thanks Shuhadaa Douma and another local brigade for their efforts in jointly defending the city, [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=230460870393059&set=a.204310096341470.35872.204198289685984&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=230460870393059&set=a.204310096341470.35872.204198289685984&type=1).

<sup>105</sup> In August 2012, Liwa al-Islam joined prominent FSA factions active throughout the capital to form Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam (Gathering of Supporters of Islam), discussed below.

<sup>106</sup> See [www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade/info](http://www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade/info).

<sup>107</sup> The group's *daawa* page at [www.facebook.com/is.br.gr](http://www.facebook.com/is.br.gr). Sharia, which is no longer was accessible, having been replaced by a new one at [www.facebook.com/liwaaislamlejnaelmia](http://www.facebook.com/liwaaislamlejnaelmia). A Liwa al-Islam affiliated brigade displays Nabil al-Audi's picture atop its Facebook page, accompanied by a quote warning of the dangers that would accompany a "Safavid" (Iranian) victory in Syria. On 18 May, the same page posted a video clip of an al-Audi sermon outlining the alleged Shiite regional conspiracy and describing Alawites as the most dangerous threat to the Muslim *umma*, [www.facebook.com/forsanalsona](http://www.facebook.com/forsanalsona) and [www.facebook.com/forsanalsona/posts/364119506985843](http://www.facebook.com/forsanalsona/posts/364119506985843); this page is no longer accessible, having been replaced by one located at [www.facebook.com/LwaAlaslamktybtforsanAlstFyAlqlmwn](http://www.facebook.com/LwaAlaslamktybtforsanAlstFyAlqlmwn). Liwa al-Islam Facebook postings also regularly quote Akram Hajazi, a Salafi-jihadi writer popular among jihadis online. See [www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade/posts/288197561287937](http://www.facebook.com/IslamicBrigade/posts/288197561287937).

<sup>108</sup> Posts on the page generally refer to government forces as the "Nusayri [Alawite] army" and *fatwas* repeatedly depict Alawites as apostates. One *fatwa* urges immediate execution of captured Alawite fighters because of their "apostasy and war against Muslims"; in contrast, Sunni prisoners should be tried and executed only if found to have killed.

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<sup>109</sup> See *fatwa* in response to Question #12, 12 June, [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=445388468812938&set=a.439647206053731.105914.438818622803256&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=445388468812938&set=a.439647206053731.105914.438818622803256&type=1).

<sup>110</sup> In claiming responsibility for the 17 March Damascus bombings, Jabhat al-Nusra warned the regime: "Stop your massacres against Sunnis, for if you do not you will bear the sins of the Nusayris [Alawites], and what's coming is worse and more bitter, with God's permission", Communiqué #2.

<sup>111</sup> Activists from the Homs Revolutionary Council (HRC) describe Katibat al-Ansar's fighters as "very good people" and question whether they truly are Salafis; one suggested that – although the leadership likely was Salafi – many rank-and-file members lacked any specific ideology. Crisis Group interviews, Homs, July 2012. In reaction to the 25 May massacre in nearby al-Houla, a Katibat al-Ansar video criticised fellow Muslims who failed to support the "Sunni community in Syria" with time, money and weapons, "بيان بخصوص مجزرة الحولة -كتيبة الأنصار", 25 May 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIzQanRjXUQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIzQanRjXUQ).

<sup>112</sup> [www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/306224986135184](http://www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/306224986135184); this post is no longer accessible, due to the removal of Katibat al-Ansar's official page from Facebook; its official page is currently at [www.facebook.com/k.alansar](http://www.facebook.com/k.alansar). Katibat al-Ansar adopts a white flag bearing the Islamic *shahada* (declaration of belief). While black flags featuring the *shahada* are more common among Islamist groups, the Taliban in Afghanistan uses a white flag similar to al-Ansar's.

<sup>113</sup> Addressing al-Ansar fighters as physicians charged with healing fellow militants through exemplary behaviour and goodwill, a post asked: "Have you ever seen a doctor who hated his patient for the severity of his sickness, or abandoned him and threw him on the side of the road? These 'patients' require patience in order to treat the corruption of their upbringing, just as a sick person requires patience in treating the corruption of his

Such religious pronouncements aside, and as in the case of Liwa al-Islam, Katibat al-Ansar maintains cooperative relations with prominent FSA counterparts, notably Katibat al-Farouq (discussed below).<sup>114</sup> In early April 2012, it cited its relationship with the FSA faction as a key reason for accepting the ceasefire demanded by UN and Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan – although it never carried it out, invoking regime violations to justify its own continued armed operations.<sup>115</sup>

### 3. The influence of foreign fighters

From early in the uprising, the question of foreign fighters in opposition ranks has been politically charged. The regime sought to amplify – and, at times, fabricate – evidence of foreign jihadi activity in order to bolster its case that non-Syrian “terrorists” formed part of a global conspiracy to destabilise the country. Official media routinely contend that the bodies of combatants and civilians littering

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health”. See 16 and 17 June 2012 posts on the Katibat al-Ansar Facebook page.

<sup>114</sup> Katibat al-Ansar regularly refers to Katibat al-Farouq in its Facebook postings, offering prayers for its fighters and honouring the “martyrdom” of a prominent commander. See 25 June post on the Katibat al-Ansar official Facebook page.

<sup>115</sup> The ceasefire officially went into effect on 12 April 2012. It formed part of Annan’s six-point plan to resolve the crisis that also called on the regime to withdraw troops from population centres, accelerate release of political prisoners, permit journalists to move freely and allow peaceful protests. While both the government and leading FSA factions (including Katibat al-Farouq) agree, the ceasefire’s impact was minimal, as the regime failed to carry out its central requirements, and both sides continued fighting. In announcing conditional acceptance of the ceasefire, Katibat al-Ansar expressed reservations, noting that the lull would benefit the regime more. It nevertheless purportedly agreed to halt fire, citing the importance of cooperation in both war and peace with their “brothers” in Katibat al-Farouq, who had proved their mettle even as others had not; the group also mentioned the need to demonstrate desire for a reasonable solution and give the regime a final chance to peacefully leave power. However, it made clear that its compliance depended on the regime stopping all military operations, halting fire on protesters and allowing displaced Homs families to return home. None of these conditions having been met, it continued operations. See its Communiqué #1, “بيان من كتيبة الأنصار بخصوص الهدنة”, 12/4/2012, 12 April; also its video of attacks in response to regime violations, “راجمات الأنصار ردا على خرق الهدنة”, 22 April, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C7s96c2\\_sU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C7s96c2_sU). Two months later, with Katibat al-Farouq, the Homs Revolutionaries’ Union (discussed below) and other local factions, it signed a press release announcing desire for a temporary ceasefire in order to evacuate civilians; it also criticised UN observers for purportedly remaining silent amid regime massacres, “بيان صحفي من الفصائل الثورية في مدينة حمص”, 21 June 2012, [www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/311984048892611](http://www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/311984048892611). Signatories collectively identified themselves as the “Revolutionary Factions in the City of Homs”.

the streets in the aftermath of military operations are those of foreigners. By contrast, the mainstream opposition until recently rejected outright any such insinuation; faced with incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, it has chosen to minimise the phenomenon.

Although there is little to suggest that foreign fighters wield significant practical, political or ideological influence, their presence has been substantiated by journalists working both in-country and across the region as well as by jihadi militant groups’ own social media postings. Perhaps the most tangible effect has been on tactical operational matters. As noted, IEDs and vehicular-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs, commonly referred to as car bombings) were introduced to the insurgency in early 2012 by Jabhat al-Nusra and Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham, whose members traced their bomb-making skills to fighters with experience in the Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies.<sup>116</sup> Local leaders from mainstream FSA-affiliated factions in turn have acknowledged acquiring the know-how to deal with explosives from these two groups; since June 2012, FSA militants regularly mount IED and, less frequently, VBIED attacks.<sup>117</sup>

Foreign militants have had more direct involvement, fighting alongside Syrian insurgents. Most factions deny this, although several journalists present in the north report witnessing foreigners embedded in Syrian-led groups and, from time to time, some rebels confirm that foreigners operate within their brigades.<sup>118</sup> By all accounts, non-Syrians comprise only a small fraction of fighters, and available evidence suggests they are mostly in Salafi factions and in a prominent independent rebel group led by Mahdi al-Harati, a Libyan who was a key commander in the anti-Qadhafi uprising.<sup>119</sup> However, secrecy surround-

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<sup>116</sup> See Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, *op. cit.*; also Rania Abouzeid, “Meet the Islamist militants”, *op. cit.* Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham has not publicly acknowledged a non-Syrian presence, but members of other rebel brigades in Aleppo said most foreign fighters in Aleppo and Idlib belonged to it. Erika Solomon, “Syria rebels see future fight with foreign radicals”, Reuters, 8 August 2012.

<sup>117</sup> A BBC team embedded with an FSA affiliate in Idlib province witnessed fighters preparing an IED attack. “IED bombs new Syrian rebel strategy”, BBC, 25 June 2012. As fighting erupted near central Damascus on 17 July, FSA affiliate Kata’ib al-Sahaba [Companions Battalions] claimed responsibility for a VBIED attack against regime armoured vehicles and personnel. [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=440813499297423&set=a.412784962100277.92570.412633368782103&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=440813499297423&set=a.412784962100277.92570.412633368782103&type=1).

<sup>118</sup> A CNN crew reported meeting a Turkish citizen fighting with a Liwa Saqour al-Sham brigade in Idlib province; local residents said the group included several North Africans. Its leader denied the presence of any foreigners among the 600 men he claimed to command. Ivan Watson and Reja Rezak, “Faces of the Free Syrian Army”, CNN, 27 July 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Erika Solomon, “Syria rebels”, *op. cit.* Mahdi al-Harati, an Irish citizen originally from Libya, commanded the Tripoli Bri-

ing the activities of foreign militants makes it extremely difficult to assess with any accuracy their extent, location and potential ramifications.

Several incidents nonetheless have helped shed some light on this phenomenon, while underscoring the dilemmas it presents to the armed opposition in weighing tactical benefits of foreign jihadi support against strategic costs in terms of relations with the West and the insurgency's overall image. On 19 July 2012, for example, a previously unknown group of foreign jihadis calling themselves Majlis al-Shura (Shura Council) surfaced, fighting alongside FSA-affiliated militants in the high-profile capture of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey. Although the appearance of jihadis on YouTube videos and in Western media put Turkey-based FSA spokesmen on the defensive,<sup>120</sup> Syrian militants involved in the battle clearly appreciated the support, praising their "mujahidin brothers" in videos filmed during the ensuing celebration.<sup>121</sup>

However, that same day foreign jihadis captured two Western journalists elsewhere along the border, holding them

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gade during the Libyan uprising. In June 2012, he and other Libyan fighters announced formation of Liwa al-Ummah (The Nation's Brigade), an independent rebel umbrella group in Syria now comprising several affiliated battalions. He claimed his group includes more than 6,000 fighters, 90 per cent of whom purportedly are Syrian. However, a review of its videos suggests the first figure is likely at least exaggerated. See Mary Fitzgerald, "The Syrian Rebels Libyan Weapon", *Foreign Policy* (online), 9 August 2012. Although Liwa al-Ummah invokes jihad and calls for some form of Islamic governance, it eschews distinctly Salafi symbolism; the bulk of its online material and media appearances suggests a more pragmatic Islamist leaning. Still, it acknowledges receiving funding from Hajaj al-Ajami, a Kuwaiti Salafi cleric who also openly raises money for the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, discussed below, eg, [www.facebook.com/Lewa.Alamah/posts/237701949666097](http://www.facebook.com/Lewa.Alamah/posts/237701949666097).

<sup>120</sup> Colonel Malek al-Kurdi, a prominent Turkey-based FSA spokesman, denied the foreigners spotted at Bab al-Huwa were al-Qaeda members. More generally, he denied the presence of any foreign fighter in FSA ranks, claiming non-Syrian personnel in rebel units were doctors. He acknowledged that FSA groups included some "radicals", but attributed this to a strategy to absorb all elements of society, secular and Islamist. Nathir Redha, "قيادة «الجيش الحر» تنفي وجود «القاعدة» على معبر باب الهوى", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 23 July 2012.

<sup>121</sup> The border crossing was seized by fighters from Liwa Dera al-Thowra (The Revolution's Shield Brigade), which invokes the FSA banner, as well as foreign combatants whom their Syrian colleagues refer to as "our brothers from Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin" (the Mujahidin Advisory Council). See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uURCYxV37D4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uURCYxV37D4). In another video filmed shortly after the capture, a fighter can be seen waving the jihadi flag adopted by AQI as another, apparently non-Syrian, says, "we announce from here the establishment of an Islamic state, with God's permission", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LooqC8cVXRy](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LooqC8cVXRy).

for a fortnight until they were rescued by FSA fighters. Tensions between mainstream rebel factions and foreign jihadis operating in the area rose in the following week and, on 4 September, a group of fighters from Katibat Farouq al-Shimal (Northern Farouq Battalion), a local Kata'ib al-Farouq affiliate, reportedly kidnapped and executed Majlis al-Shura's leader.<sup>122</sup>

That the presence of foreign fighters has come at a real cost was reflected in the striking turnabout of one of their leaders and foremost proponents, as expressed in an interview with Crisis Group. Having left Syria after what he said was ten months of fighting, he expressed misgivings about the foreigners' role:

Arab fighters have caused much trouble on the ground. They don't have a clue about Syrian society. Most of them don't know the map, the country's main cities or neighbours, not to mention the ethnic and confessional landscape. Very often, they don't even possess much military experience. Their ignorance has caused a backlash within Syrian society. Even if foreign volunteers can help topple the regime, they would make things much more difficult the day after. Their dependence on various competing foreign sponsors has exacerbated the absence of coordination among Syrian armed groups. Plus, their presence serves the regime, which uses it as a justification for massive destruction.

The Arab fighters number only a few hundreds, mostly Tunisians, Libyans and Saudis, typically recruited through the internet. At first there was a significant regional mobilisation on Syria's behalf, but it has calmed down. My call is for them to leave the country altogether.<sup>123</sup>

#### 4. Salafism within the Free Syrian Army

Salafism is not the preserve of explicitly Salafi groups. Beyond their Islamist names and use of Islamist rhetoric, several FSA affiliates refer positively to Adnan al-Arou

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<sup>122</sup> Toby Sterling, "Western photographers Jeroen Oerlemans, John Cantlie kidnapped in Syria by Islamic militants", Associated Press, 27 July 2012. Ahmad al-Masri and Kamal Saqr, "الجيش الحر يغتال رئيس شورى الدولة الإسلامية في معبر باب الهوى", *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 4 September 2012. In subsequent interviews with a British journalist who visited the area, Farouq al-Shimal fighters attributed their decision to kill the Majlis al-Shoura leader (known as Abu Muhammad al-Shami al-Absi) to his ideological extremism and attempts to impose the group's authority against the wishes of other local rebel factions. Sarah Birke, "The killing of a jihadist leader", *The Economist* (online), 12 September 2012.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interview, September 2012.

and other Salafi clerics.<sup>124</sup> The most critical distinction, in other words, is not whether a given group is infused with a degree of Salafi thought, but rather whether this is a primary, defining component of its worldview, identity and reason to fight.

Most FSA factions neither release public political platforms nor address broader ideological issues, yet for the most part they portray the uprising as a national struggle against an oppressive dictatorship rather than a Sunni jihad against an Alawite regime. To be sure, religiously committed Sunni fighters – especially those from the countryside and working class suburbs – dominate FSA ranks, but for the most part they appear to turn to Islam for personal, spiritual inspiration rather than as a concrete model for the post-Assad state.<sup>125</sup> What is more, and while the distinctly Sunni religiosity embraced by many FSA fighters and factions is undeniable, their decision to fight under the FSA banner entails serving a force whose most recognisable leaders, Colonel Riyadh al-Assad and Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sheikh, publicly have embraced principles of non-sectarian democracy.

For example, when Abdul Razzaq Tlass, the public face of the prominent Katibat al-Farouq FSA faction in Homs, grew his beard to match the Salafi style and length, he did not deviate from his essentially non-sectarian rhetoric, calling for a “progressive, democratic” Syria,<sup>126</sup> in like

manner, al-Farouq publicly distanced itself from the opposition's most extreme elements by recognising the legitimacy of international agreements (which hardline Salafi-jihadis reject) and warning al-Qaeda not to interfere in the uprising. Whether these positions reflect its genuine views or a pragmatic attempt to win Western backing, such rhetoric is typical of FSA leaders but rare among independent Salafi factions.

At the same time, and as noted above, differences between the FSA and independent Salafi groups (including the more militant Jabhat al-Nusra) have not meaningfully hampered their cooperation. The impact of such collaboration can be seen in the use by FSA factions of more aggressive bombing tactics since July.<sup>127</sup> Western journalists in Deir al-Zour and Idlib provinces report that Jabhat al-Nusra increasingly shares bomb-making capabilities with FSA brigades.<sup>128</sup> For now at least, mainstream rebel groups eager for more effective weapons and tactics likely find that benefits of such collaboration outweigh any long-term political and ideological concerns – particularly as prospects for Western military intervention seem remote.

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<sup>124</sup> The Facebook page of Katibat Dera al-Shimal (Shield of the North Battalion), a brigade active in Idlib province and a key member of the regional military council (see below) “likes” Adnan al-Arouf, Nabil al-Audi (a prominent Kuwaiti Salafi discussed below) and Muhammad al-Arif (a prominent Saudi Salafi discussed below), [www.facebook.com/freearmyder3alshamal](http://www.facebook.com/freearmyder3alshamal). The names of FSA affiliates typically are based on central concepts or figures from Islamic history and culture; most choose names with some religious connotation. However, it is difficult to distinguish between distinctly Salafi names and those that are more generically Islamic.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group interviews, southern, central and northern Syria, July 2011 to September 2012.

<sup>126</sup> One of the most prominent factions in the armed opposition, Katibat al-Farouq (now officially Kata'ib al-Farouq) often has attracted media attention. It won praise in the daring, deadly mission to evacuate Western journalists trapped in Baba Amr in February 2012. In turn, in the wake of the rescue of French journalists Edith Bouvier and William Daniels, it commended Western reporters who worked in Bab Amr, thanked the French government for support, called on al-Qaeda members not to interfere in Syria and encouraged rebels to adhere to internationally recognised rules of war and human rights principles. See its 1 March Communiqué. Three weeks later, a report by a media outlet connected to the Vatican accused it of forcing Christians to flee their Homs neighbourhoods. The group strongly denied this, adding that most of its Christian “brothers” in the area opposed the regime, and many had supported al-Farouq both with humanitarian aid and by serving in its ranks. It said

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that a specific incident in which Christians in al-Qusayr (outside Homs) were forced to leave their homes involved an individual family that had actively facilitated *shabbiha* activity there. See its statement released on 22 March 2012; also “Abuse of the opposition forces, ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Christians in Homs, where Jesuits remains”, Agenzia Fides, 21 March. A Christian organisation supportive of the uprising rebuffed the Agenzia Fides claims in “Ethnic cleansing of Christians in Syria” – facts and propaganda”, Syrian Christians for Democracy, 22 March 2012. See Tlass interview in *al-Hayat*. Malek Daghestani, “عبدالرزاق طلاس «الحياة»: طموحي أن أكون عسكرياً في جيش سورية الديموقراطية”, *Al-Hayat*, 1 June 2012.

<sup>127</sup> A brigade fighting under the FSA banner joined Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham and smaller Salafi factions in claiming responsibility for a 10 July bombing in which an explosives-laden tank truck was detonated while passing through a regime checkpoint in Lataqia province. Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham asserted it was driven by a *shabbiha* member; the FSA faction, Katibat Jabla Ahfad al-Qassam, did not address how the vehicle was blown up. See the 10 July posts on the groups' Facebook pages, [www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/posts/260338394074718](http://www.facebook.com/K.AhrarAlsham/posts/260338394074718) and [www.facebook.com/ahfadalqasam/posts/263636693736886](http://www.facebook.com/ahfadalqasam/posts/263636693736886).

<sup>128</sup> A Jabhat al-Nusra leader in Deir al-Zour said, in reference to the local FSA leadership, “we meet almost daily. We have clear instructions from our leadership that if the FSA needs our help we should give it. We help them with IEDs and car bombs. Our main talent lies in bombing operations”. Another local FSA leader acknowledged working with Jabhat al-Nusra but expressed reservations about its extremism. See Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, *The Guardian*, 30 July 2012. A leader of a small FSA brigade in Idlib province made a similar admission, adding: “I am one of those people who is afraid of extremism. I told [Jabhat al-Nusra] it's possible that perhaps one day we will stand against each other because of your activities. If they intend to do to us what happened in Iraq, it's wrong”. Rania Abouzeid, “Meet the Islamist militants”, *op. cit.*

## B. STREAMLINING THE OPPOSITION?

The rise of fundamentalist, Salafi groups can be explained as the natural, expected by-product of heightened violence combined with receding hopes of a quick resolution. Yet, for Syria's opposition, it also is a problematic one: it validates the regime's thesis and thus helps justify its repression; worries actual and potential foreign backers; and, while rallying some Syrians, jihadi volunteers and outside Islamist sponsors to the cause, simultaneously undercuts the opposition's broader appeal and enhances the regime's ability to mobilise its own social base and allies.

As a result, the opposition launched several campaigns in the uprising's second year to try to unify rebel ranks, strengthen its overall effectiveness, contain or at least channel more radical outlooks and establish the backbone of post-Assad institutions. This section profiles several such endeavours at the national and local levels; whereas some were instigated with the specific aim to limit extremist influence, others were initiated by Islamists seeking to order a disorderly rebel scene. The outcome is mixed, as the opposition's current landscape illustrates.

Most established rebel formations possess sufficient resources to endure but are not strong enough to either fully absorb similar-sized groupings or shun alliances with them. At the same time, more radical Islamist factions are powerful enough to carry on, yet increasingly feel the need to reach out to mainstream combatants as opposed to antagonising them. And, finally, because efforts of foreign backers remain scattered and disjointed, they still sustain competing local coalitions rather than foster integration within a more coherent, unified opposition structure. A former foreign fighter in Syria emerged from his experience persuaded that the latter was vital to success: "I've become convinced that the only way to defeat the regime is through unification of the indigenous armed groups and incorporation of other components of society. Until now, however, Islamic states and networks that support the opposition for the most part work against this objective, each funding its own preferred group".<sup>129</sup>

Still, when it comes to fighting the regime, opposition groups of all stripes have been relatively successful in putting differences aside. Though some reports of clashes between FSA and jihadi militants have surfaced, for now such incidents appear isolated and do not appear to have stymied the broader trend toward collaboration across ideological lines. If anything, this trend likely will expand as long as rebel forces believe it necessary – and as long as their more radical elements avoid tactics (such as high-profile bombings producing significant civilian casualties) harmful to non-Salafi counterparts. Such cooperation bolsters

the credibility of and respect for Salafi militant groups within the opposition as a whole; local activist groups post Salafi propaganda online, and leading FSA factions are known to work with Salafi groups. In short, in a context of continued opposition fragmentation, geographic proximity and shared short-term objectives likely will remain more influential than ideological affiliation in determining relations among local militant factions.

### 1. Military councils

Even as FSA leaders in Turkey address the international media as if speaking on behalf of a coherent institution, their ability to regulate groups fighting under their banner has been limited at best. In this sense, the establishment of military councils is the most ambitious attempt to date to organise the dozens of "brigades" and "battalions" that identify themselves as part of the FSA, bringing them under the framework of recognised regional commands that coordinate strategy and public messaging.

An initial effort was undertaken in January 2012 by Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sheikh shortly after he defected. His objective was to enhance coordination among FSA factions and put in place elements of command and control.<sup>130</sup> To this end, he created and headed the Supreme Military Council of the FSA to serve as a supervisory body overseeing regional military councils, themselves tasked with coordinating strategy among local FSA factions.<sup>131</sup> He repeatedly has portrayed this structure not only as an effective means of harmonising military operations but also as a safeguard against attempts by extremists to take advantage of the chaotic militant scene.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> These efforts at times put him at odds with Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad, who defected six months earlier and is the FSA's official leader. According to a 24 March agreement, al-Asaad technically serves as the FSA's leader of operations, and al-Sheikh is in charge of external relations. See "العقيد رياض الأسعد: 2012-3-24 قائد الجيش السوري الحر", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=pljxIGwLkYs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pljxIGwLkYs). Also, [Al-Sheikh acknowledges tensions over how to organise the FSA. ] "الشيخ يعترف بوجود خلاف بينه وبين الأسعد", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 May 2012.

<sup>131</sup> In April 2012, Syria-based FSA officers announced the creation of seven such regional councils, each led by a defected colonel. Additional local councils have emerged since; a journalist investigating rebel organisation and funding in September 2012 counted at least ten. However, in September, coordination between Mustafa al-Sheikh and local council leaders appeared limited. Rania Abouzeid, "Syria's secular and Islamist Rebels: Who are the Saudis and the Qataris arming?", *Time*, 18 September 2012.

<sup>132</sup> See Mustafa al-Sheikh's 26 April 2012 interview on Adnan al-Arouf's live program, Maa Souria hatta al-Nasr (With Syria until Victory), 90 minutes into [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Amp\\_OnBRyKg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Amp_OnBRyKg). He explained that the uprising's Islamisation

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<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, September 2012.

The establishment of military councils gave rise to an unlikely partnership between al-Sheikh – an outspoken proponent of cross-sectarian unity and critic of attempts to “Islamise” the uprising – and Adnan al-Arouf, a controversial Syrian Salafi cleric based in Saudi Arabia who frequently depicts the uprising as part of a broader Sunni struggle against Shiite oppression. Beyond Saudi Arabia’s probable role in fostering this relationship, combining a pragmatic military figure with a conveyor of religious orthodoxy, both appear to share the goal of organising opposition ranks under recognised, accountable leadership and avoiding infighting. Al-Arouf regularly emphasises the councils’ importance on his popular live television program and calls for donations to be funnelled through the regional bodies.<sup>133</sup> His show treats al-Sheikh and local council leaders as exclusive spokesmen for the FSA, providing a Salafi stamp of approval to a campaign initiated by an officer widely perceived as both secular and suspicious of Islamists.<sup>134</sup>

Though the military councils quickly gained prominence as recognised FSA spokesmen, their on-the-ground track record has been uneven, with only limited, localised success in uniting ranks.<sup>135</sup> Where effective, they put in place identifiable structures, with (admittedly loose) chains of command and accepted division of labour. In Hama, for instance, the local council encompasses nineteen brigades (including some of the province’s most prominent); each has signed up to a clearly defined governance structure.<sup>136</sup>

serves regime interests by projecting the image of a sectarian as opposed to a popular, cross-confessional struggle, warned any drift toward extremism within opposition ranks would be dangerous and called the military councils a means of preventing it.

<sup>133</sup> Al-Arouf on the 26 April episode of Maa Souria hatta al-Nasr, op. cit., characterised unity provided by the council structure as a practical necessity (highest ranking officers provide strategic leadership) and religious duty; agreed with al-Sheikh that this structure will help prevent extremists from taking advantage of chaos; and suggested that aid to the FSA be distributed through the councils to avoid competition over resources.  
<sup>134</sup> Al-Sheikh was quoted on 29 March in the pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat* as stating that his next battle would be against the Islamisation of the revolution. His comments drew heavy criticism from Islamists online and sympathetic news sites. See “مصطفى الشيخ.. بيعنا سكوته.. وعلى الجيش الحر وضع حد لتدخله بالسياسة وإلا؟!!” وعلی الجیش الحر وضع حد لتدخله بالسياسة وإلا؟, Sooryoon.net, 30 March 2012.

<sup>135</sup> In the course of their first five months of official operation, the military councils grew to be treated by international media as legitimate, authoritative FSA spokesmen. When Arab media seek FSA statements, they often turn to al-Sheikh as well as regional military council leaders and representatives. Council leaders and spokesmen often appear on Al Jazeera and al-Arabiya, to both comment on breaking stories and participate in talk shows.

<sup>136</sup> A list of brigades included in the council was included on a facebook page that has been removed; the council’s current page is at [www.facebook.com/Military.Council.Media](http://www.facebook.com/Military.Council.Media). One of the

On 17 May 2012, the groups’ leaders and representatives elected committee members charged with handling the council’s financial affairs, weapons procurement, security matters and media communications. They reached agreement on other matters, such as allocating responsibility among council leaders and factions; handing the council overall responsibility for setting strategy and coordinating tactics among brigades; and applying Sharia in internal dealings, interactions with civilians and treatment of prisoners.<sup>137</sup>

The Deraa military council has been similarly successful in bringing together (formally at least) a large portion of local fighters under its wing; like its Hama counterpart, it claims to possess the necessary infrastructure to coordinate distribution of funds and weapons among its brigades.<sup>138</sup>

In other provinces efforts to unify brigades have fallen short. Homs council leader Qassem Saad al-Din emerged as a media star in May 2012 as spokesman for the FSA’s Joint Internal Leadership, a body that aspires to coordinate messaging among rebel factions.<sup>139</sup> Yet even as he

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brigades is a Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham affiliate, the first known instance in which one of that group’s brigades operates under nominal FSA leadership.

<sup>137</sup> According to the platform, execution of regime agents should only follow a ruling from the council’s jurisprudence committee. See “28 6 Hama أو غاريت تسليم قيادة المجلس العسكري في 28 6 Hama”, 28 June 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S71Fm8kJqg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S71Fm8kJqg). For further discussion of regional military councils, see Joseph Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency”, Institute for the Study of War, June 2012. In late June, the Hama Council announced it had transferred leadership from Major Ali Ayoub to Brigadier General Ahmad Berri, in deference to military hierarchy.

<sup>138</sup> The military council in Deraa Province has gone further than others in establishing a clear chain of command and dividing responsibility among leaders; it twice claims to have changed leaders after higher-ranking defectors joined. It publicly criticised Riyadh al-Asaad for not handing over the FSA leadership to higher-ranking officers (an apparent reference to Mustafa al-Sheikh). It also accused him of excessive loyalty to Turkey and called on him to step down, adding: “You no longer represent us; it’s the Military Council that represents us, because the [regional] councils have provided unity and prevented the emergence of warlords”. See its 2 June statement on Facebook; also “24 4 2012 إعادة هيكلة المجلس العسكري في محافظة درعا SMC”, 24 April 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R3EraO0utc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R3EraO0utc).

<sup>139</sup> Although Riyadh al-Asaad, Mustafa al-Sheikh and other FSA figures often speak for the FSA, their distance from the battlefield leaves them vulnerable to charges that have little influence on the ground. Thanks to Qassem Saad al-Din, the FSA military council could boast its first publicly-recognised spokesman in Syria; he has both appeared in videotaped firefights and spoken for a broad constituency beyond his immediate area of operation. His profile rose quickly as a regular guest on Arab satellite networks; his 27 and 30 May statements threatening to no longer abide by the Annan plan’s ceasefire following the Houla massacre were reported by many media outlets as offi-

claimed to speak for FSA leaders nationwide, Saad al-Din's council failed to include leading factions operating within a few miles of his office, including Katibat al-Farouq.<sup>140</sup> In Idlib, the regional military council comprises prominent FSA brigades but not local independent Salafi groups, though Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa Saqour al-Sham have established themselves as leading local actors.<sup>141</sup> Likewise, Aleppo's dominant coalition, Liwa al-Towhid, launched its campaign to capture the city in July against the local military council's wishes and refused to acknowledge council leadership through the first seven weeks of ensuing combat.<sup>142</sup> It took until 10 September for Liwa al-Towhid and council leader Abd al-Jabbar al-Aqaidi finally to announce creation of a joint leadership body, the Revolutionary Military Council in Aleppo Province.<sup>143</sup>

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cial FSA positions. "Pessimism at UN as Syria crisis worsens", Al Jazeera English, 31 May 2012; also [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgZ7bljxDo4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgZ7bljxDo4) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHexQTtwfmM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHexQTtwfmM) (Saad al-Din addressing UN observers and directing FSA fighters in the midst of a clash with regime forces). However, his actual ability to command fighters appears to be restricted to Rastan, adjacent to Homs. Crisis Group interview, Homs Revolutionary Council representative from Rastan, Homs, July 2012.<sup>140</sup> The Homs council includes Liwa' Rijal Allah and Katibat Khaled bin al-Walid, prominent factions particularly active in Rastan. See Joseph Holliday, "Syria's Maturing Insurgency", op. cit. Explaining al-Farouq's decision not to join the council, Abdul Razzaq Tlass stated: "We do not acknowledge any entity or name that is not issued by the command of the Free Syrian Army under the leadership of Colonel Riyadh al-Asaad. We wash our hands [of any such entity] and consider it an attempt to divide the ranks and discredit the FSA". See "كتائب الفاروق" 27 4 2012", 27 April 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-RHM9CMri0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-RHM9CMri0).

<sup>141</sup> In mid-June, the Associated Press counted more than twenty active brigades in Idlib province with very little coordination among them. "Rebel coordination rarely extends beyond neighboring towns and villages and never to the provincial or national level. Many rebels don't even know the commanders in towns two hours away". "Syria rebels divided", op. cit.

<sup>142</sup> In a 26 July statement apparently directed at the Aleppo military council, Abd al-Aziz al-Salameh, leader of Liwa al-Towhid, warned that "no council has the right to claim responsibility for military activity in Aleppo, for it is well known who is active on the ground", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHNRZOsMD3U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHNRZOsMD3U). Liwa al-Towhid reportedly began operating in Aleppo against the advice of the military council leadership, which only joined the attack after it captured city neighbourhoods. See Richard Spencer, "Aleppo is becoming Syria's Stalingrad", *The Telegraph*, 11 August 2012.

<sup>143</sup> See the council's formation announcement, read by al-Aqaidi and Liwa al-Towhid commander Abd al-Qader al-Saleh, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czf08R12Ye0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Czf08R12Ye0). The messy issue of who actually leads the council appears to have been addressed through the creation of a joint "presidential council" including al-Aqaidi and al-Saleh. The announcement identified twelve member factions, the most prominent of which are Liwa al-Towhid and Liwa

Attempts to unify ranks also triggered tensions within the FSA leadership. As seen, Mustafa al-Sheikh admitted to rivalry with Riyadh al-Asaad; in similar manner, al-Asaad and Qassem Saad ad-Din, the Homs council leader, publicly feuded over whose office speaks on the FSA's behalf.<sup>144</sup> Coordination both among councils and between them and Turkey-based Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sheikh also remains obscure, while relations with the opposition's exiled political leadership have been strained. As opposition members met in Cairo on 2 July purportedly to bridge longstanding divisions, Saad al-Din – the Homs council leader – dismissed the conference as a "conspiracy", because participants refused to explicitly call for foreign military intervention.<sup>145</sup> Further efforts, such as the launch in late September of a "Joint Leadership of the Revolutionary Military Councils" attended by Adnan al-Arouf (see below), calling for the establishment of a "civil state", and claiming to represent 80 per cent of opposition armed groups, have yet to produce discernible results.<sup>146</sup>

In short, although military councils helped improve coordination, they have been unable to establish a coherent structure, comprehensively represent opposition interests or ensure that outside money and weapons are precisely and reliably delivered to known recipients. For the councils, this last point is critical: unless international funding and arms are channelled through them for subsequent redistribution, they will find it hard to gain leverage over individual brigade leaders or convince local FSA units to sacrifice some of their autonomy.<sup>147</sup>

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al-Fatah, a brigade considered loyal to al-Aqaidi. For background on the tensions between Liwa al-Towhid and al-Aqaidi, see Charles Levinson, "Leadership rifts hobble Syrian rebels," *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 September 2012.

<sup>144</sup> In reality, neither can credibly claim to do so. Al-Sheikh acknowledged disagreement with al-Asaad over FSA organisation efforts in a 1 May interview with *As-Sharq al-Awsat*, op. cit. The rift between al-Asaad and Qassem Saad al-Din emerged on 31 May, when al-Asaad rejected al-Din's statement that the FSA would withdraw from the ceasefire within 48 hours if the regime did not adhere to the Annan plan. Saad ad-Din responded that al-Asaad represents only himself, and FSA leaders in Syria no longer would take orders from those abroad. See "انقسام بين" "قيادة المنشقين في الخارج والمقاتلين على الارض", *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 31 May 2012.

<sup>145</sup> فصائل «الجيش الحر» غير راضية عن توجهات المعارضة السياسية في "مؤتمر القاهرة", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 July 2012.

<sup>146</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QG\\_e\\_Qqdut4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QG_e_Qqdut4); [www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/aff8bdf5-d74d-4c41-b044-d75fcf47fb27](http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/aff8bdf5-d74d-4c41-b044-d75fcf47fb27).

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior military defector, August 2012. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which the opposition's foreign backers have been willing and able to coordinate their efforts and set up systematic, well-organised supply lines. A U.S. official described coordination between Washington, Paris, London, Ankara, Riyadh and Doha on Syria policy as "very good" but in the same breath conceded it was not as

## 2. Independent alliances

In addition to military councils, armed groups have formed alliances, again in an effort to better harmonise actions.

### *Ittihad Thuwwar Homs (The Homs Revolutionaries' Union)*

Formed in mid-May 2012, Ittihad Thuwwar Homs is one of the first attempts to bring together a coalition of local brigades outside the FSA. It officially includes nineteen factions operating in Homs and its countryside, as well as a civilian activist organisation and at least one local cleric.<sup>148</sup> Members have signed on to a clearly-defined governance structure, including a judicial unit designed to fill the security vacuum that followed the regime's loss of local control.<sup>149</sup> Its various factions also adhere to a broad political platform that describes their goal as a "nationalist, popularly elected government with an Islamic *marjaiya*" (frame of reference).<sup>150</sup>

Such mildly Islamist language – commonly used by the Muslim Brotherhood to refer to a form of democracy consistent with Islamic law – arguably serves as the common ideological denominator for the group, which encompasses both independent Salafi and FSA-affiliated brigades. Ittihad Thuwwar Homs has claimed joint operations and issued a statement with both Katibat al-Ansar and Katibat al-Farouq, suggesting that leading Homs factions operating independently of Qassem Saad al-Din's military council may be coordinating their actions by transcending ideological fault lines.<sup>151</sup>

### *Jabhat Thuwwar Souria (The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front)*

On 4 June 2012, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front announced its formation in a high-profile Istanbul press conference. It described itself as a military alliance aimed at uniting opposition factions and establishing a new government guided by principles of freedom, justice, pluralism and Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>152</sup> Within hours, it seemingly crumbled, as its largest military component, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, suspended its membership due to disagreement over the nature of the front's relationship with the Syrian National Council.<sup>153</sup> As mentioned, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham reversed course in mid-July, following adoption of a new political charter emphasising a commitment to Islamist principles.<sup>154</sup> In a subsequent interview, the head of the front's executive council explained that it was neither Salafi nor *Ikhwani* (affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood), even though it included members of both ideological currents. As he put it, Islamists dominate the militant spectrum, and the front's aim is to unite all rebel factions under the flag of Islam and in the name of jihad.<sup>155</sup>

The front generated only scant interest online and in the Arab media after the initial burst of attention and thus far has failed to attract additional prominent militant factions. Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham aside, its participating rebel groups are relatively minor and geographically isolated from one another.<sup>156</sup> The front thus far has received funding from at least one prominent Kuwaiti cleric, but its future political

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seamless on arming the rebels, with scattered initiatives, not a systematic plan. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, September 2012.

<sup>148</sup> For a list of groups in the alliance, see [www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/319355741472220](http://www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/319355741472220). Since then, an additional brigade and an organisation representing al-Qusair, a town outside Homs, have joined, [www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/417670074943680](http://www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/417670074943680).

<sup>149</sup> The key figure in the judicial office appears to be Ali bin Nayef al-Shahoud, a member of the General Association of Muslim Scholars in Syria, which encompasses clerics supportive of the uprising. His *fatwas* offer religious guidance relevant to the battlefield, including measures to limit civilian casualties. See [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=329796327094828&set=a.317855531622241.75455.309119905829137&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=329796327094828&set=a.317855531622241.75455.309119905829137&type=1).

<sup>150</sup> See [www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/310892852318509](http://www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/310892852318509).

<sup>151</sup> See Katibat al-Ansar's 1 June post, at [www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/300844100006606](http://www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/300844100006606); the Revolutionaries' Union's 21 June post, at [www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/433152156717043](http://www.facebook.com/Union.rebels.Homs/posts/433152156717043); and "بيان صحفي من الفصائل الثورية في مدينة حمص", 21 June 2012, [www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/311984048892611](http://www.facebook.com/katibat.al.ansar/posts/311984048892611).

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<sup>152</sup> See "جبهة ثوار سوريا تعلن التغيير العام لإسقاط الأسد", *Al-Arabiya*, 4 June 2012.

<sup>153</sup> See Ahrar al-Sham's 5 June statement, at [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=378499295532239&set=a.319190974796405.71118.256326](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=378499295532239&set=a.319190974796405.71118.256326).

<sup>154</sup> The new charter calls for "rightly-guided Islamic governance", lists Sharia among its general principles and restricts membership to those who have demonstrated an "Islamist commitment", [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=203286686465244&set=a.197942143666365.39841.197411547052758&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=203286686465244&set=a.197942143666365.39841.197411547052758&type=1).

<sup>155</sup> See the interview with Rami al-Dalati, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front executive council president, at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=9R-x2pjL5gg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9R-x2pjL5gg).

<sup>156</sup> In addition to Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front currently comprises Katibat Hamza fi Jabl al-Akrad (active in the Lataqia countryside along the coast), Katibat Thuwwar al-Sha'itat (active in Deraa), Kata'ib Ahfad al-Umayyeen (active in Damascus and its countryside) and Katibat Thuwwar Baba Amr (active in Homs). Exemplifying confusion on the militant scene, the latter also is a member of the Homs Revolutionaries' Union. See [www.srfront.org](http://www.srfront.org) and [www.facebook.com/srfront](http://www.facebook.com/srfront).

relevance likely depends on how useful the alliance proves to its most powerful component, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>157</sup>

#### *Liwa al-Towhid (Unity Brigade)*

The driving force behind the rebel campaign in Aleppo, Liwa al-Towhid represents the most advanced attempt thus far to unite mainstream local brigades under a single command structure.<sup>158</sup> It was formed on 18 July 2012 following a series of meetings among local rebel leaders from Rif Halab, the towns and rural areas surrounding Syria's economic capital.<sup>159</sup>

In contrast to the other aforementioned militant coalitions, Liwa al-Towhid from the outset presented itself as a single, coherent military unit under unified leadership rather than an alliance of individual brigades.<sup>160</sup> In this respect, it benefited from the infrastructure established by the Revolutionary Council of Aleppo and Countryside and its official military wing, Liwa Ahrar al-Shimal, a prominent rebel force whose fighters now form Liwa al-Towhid's backbone. The head of the Revolutionary Council, Abd al-Aziz al-Salameh, based in Tal Rifaat, roughly 25 km north of Aleppo, has overseen military and civilian affairs in much of Aleppo's northern countryside since January 2012 and currently serves as Liwa al-Towhid's official leader.<sup>161</sup>

<sup>157</sup> The Syria Revolutionaries' Front has enjoyed prominent backing from Hajaj bin Fahd al-Ajami, a Kuwaiti cleric who has used his Twitter feed to promote and raise funds for it. See <https://twitter.com/hajajalAjami>. He also has appeared in a YouTube video, since removed, presenting donations to the front on its founding day.

<sup>158</sup> The term *towhid* can refer to unification, as in the coming together of various factions, or the oneness of God, sometimes translated as monotheism. The latter is a central concept of Islam and often invoked by Salafis to distinguish between what they see as the true monotheism of Sunni Islam and the *shirk* (polytheism) that has crept into the theology and rituals of Shiism and heterodox sects. The name Liwa al-Towhid arguably can satisfy all constituents: it contains symbolism dear to Salafis, while allowing others to interpret it as a straightforward reference to the literal unification of factions that combined to form it.

<sup>159</sup> The largest faction in the coalition, Liwa Ahrar al-Shimal, released a video from the meeting preceding Liwa al-Towhid's official launch, [www.facebook.com/ahrralshamali/posts/451691341521241](http://www.facebook.com/ahrralshamali/posts/451691341521241). The coalition's other main components include Kata'ib al-Shuhadaa, Liwa Derat 'Aza and Liwa Qabtan al-Jabal, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=la6U5jBtHjw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=la6U5jBtHjw).

<sup>160</sup> Liwa al-Towhid leaders and foot soldiers alike claim to act for the group, as opposed to the individual factions to which they belonged prior to its formation.

<sup>161</sup> See Anthony Lloyd, "Bird song, rotors, then the roar of rocket fire at Syria hospital", *The Australian*, 16 June 2012. "Syria: Some in opposition fear rebels miscalculated in Aleppo", *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 2012.

On 19 July, the group's fighters began moving from the countryside toward the heart of Aleppo.<sup>162</sup> To an extent, Liwa al-Towhid's performance since that time mirrors that of the insurgency as a whole: its coordinating ability is improving but remains limited,<sup>163</sup> it recognises the need to fill the growing security vacuum, but its record in doing so is mixed;<sup>164</sup> and its forays into Aleppo helped reinforce

<sup>162</sup> Abd al-Aziz al-Salameh, Liwa al-Towhid's leader, and operations director Abd al-Qader al-Saleh reportedly made the final decision to launch the attack to seize Aleppo on 18 July, the day the group announced its formation, after learning of the bombing that killed four senior regime security figures in Damascus that day. They and other group leaders referred to their campaign to "liberate" Aleppo as imminent in a YouTube video filmed and released that day. The campaign began the next day. Richard Spencer, "Aleppo is becoming Syria's Stalingrad", op. cit.; also [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwTnJEV8aRU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwTnJEV8aRU).

<sup>163</sup> Liwa al-Towhid's formation and subsequent multi-front attack on Aleppo were a success in terms of coordination, given the unprecedented size and cohesion of the force deployed. On 21 July, its fighters entered the city from two directions, the south west and east. Supported by forces inside the city, they fought toward Aleppo's centre, establishing a semblance of control over much of its south-eastern half by the first days of August. Liwa al-Towhid's head of operations claimed to command 8,000 fighters, though a Western journalist in Aleppo estimated 2,000. See Abd al-Qader al-Saleh's interview with Al Jazeera's correspondent in Aleppo at لقاء اليوم, Al Jazeera, 11 August 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7yiezX66x4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7yiezX66x4); also Erika Solomon, "Syrian aircraft strike Aleppo, rebels claim successes", Reuters, 1 Aug 2012. However, the group failed to coordinate with other local forces, reportedly launching the attack against the advice and without the support of the FSA's military council in Aleppo and countryside. See Charles Levinson, "Leadership rifts", op. cit. The military council and other local groups, including FSA factions and Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham, began lending full support only after the attack, and coordination has remained weak, with disputes reportedly over seized weapons. Erika Solomon, "Syria rebels", op. cit.; also Richard Spencer, "Syrian rebels state William Hague's £5m aid is hopelessly inadequate", *The Telegraph*, 12 August 2012.

<sup>164</sup> In the final meeting of local rebel leaders prior to the announcement of Liwa al-Towhid's formation, Abd al-Aziz al-Salameh emphasised discipline and warned that any fighter who harmed civilian life or property would be punished in the same manner as *shabbiha* members. He added that all prisoners would be tried by a judicial committee that would also administer two prisons. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV4byuWfjIk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV4byuWfjIk). As the group's fighters gained momentum on the city's outskirts, its leadership urged Aleppo's other rebel factions and citizens to help ensure law and order, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KijtM6eD0FY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KijtM6eD0FY). Although quick to diagnose a serious problem, the group fell short when it came to prescribing a solution to the institutional void; its ambitious plans to appoint leaders charged with overseeing individual districts have been undermined by inability to achieve cooperation from other militant factions. Erika Solomon, "Syria rebels", op. cit. YouTube videos showing Liwa al-Towhid fighters collecting garbage from city streets, intended to project an image of order and responsi-

social fault lines by highlighting some of the armed opposition's darker side, while failing to achieve durable gains against the regime.

Long reluctant to join the uprising in which most surrounding towns and cities were participating, a significant proportion of Aleppo's residents evacuated the city,<sup>165</sup> as rebels from the adjacent countryside battled regime forces for control of neighbourhoods. The regime, reluctant to put overstretched troops into risky urban combat, escalated its counter-attack on 24 July by using the air force, pounding rebel-held areas from afar.<sup>166</sup>

Many Aleppans who remain in the city appear to blame the armed opposition for their considerable losses and suffering, and tensions have been reported between residents and fighters; many of the former are sceptical of the opposition's strategy and angry that the decision to invade the city forced them to abandon their homes.<sup>167</sup> Liwa al-Towhid's inability to prevent rising crime, as well as its brutal dealing with local regime loyalists, have further hurt its standing among residents.<sup>168</sup> Ultimately, Aleppans are caught between the blind shelling of a brutal regime and the disorganisation of an opposition that has failed to give them a concrete, viable alternative.

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bility, were overshadowed by more widely disseminated clips depicting them executing Zeino Berri, an infamous Aleppo *shabbiha* leader, and members of his clan in cold blood and broad daylight. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gfqe0L-mTo0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gfqe0L-mTo0) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wikFenHocII](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wikFenHocII).

<sup>165</sup> On 31 July, the UN reported that 200,000 had fled Aleppo, while an additional 15,000 were taking shelter in public buildings. "Syria: Aleppo fighting traps thousands, UNHCR says", BBC, 31 July 2012.

<sup>166</sup> See Loveday Morris, "Dozens dead as war planes bomb Syria's biggest city", *The Independent*, 25 July 2012.

<sup>167</sup> Activists in Aleppo worried that the high human cost following its sudden descent into war could turn many residents against the opposition. "The military campaign for Aleppo came too early", a local Christian activist said, "because people here didn't see the government violence that would have convinced them that the Free Syrian Army was needed". Activists reported that many of the city's displaced blame the rebels, and the director of a local school sheltering residents estimated that "70 per cent of the refugees here are pro-regime, or at least pro-stability". Liwa al-Towhid leader, Abd al-Aziz al-Salameh, appeared unsympathetic: "Other provinces finished their revolutions, and Aleppo hadn't started yet. You could wait 100 years, and Aleppo still won't be ready". "Syria: Some in opposition fear rebels miscalculated", *The Los Angeles Times*, op. cit.

<sup>168</sup> For a report on the wave of violent crime that has afflicted Aleppo since violence intensified in the city, see "Crime wave engulfs Syria as its cities reel from war", *The New York Times*, 10 August 2012.

Liwa al-Towhid's ideological leanings (or lack thereof) likewise reflect those of the militant mainstream. Although its fighters refer to themselves as FSA members, the leadership acknowledges the affiliation is more symbolic than substantive.<sup>169</sup> Like most formations fighting under the FSA banner, it eschews any particular ideology, invoking instead a broad commitment to principles of democracy and sectarian coexistence alongside frequent professions of personal Sunni piety and distinguishing itself from Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups at the radical end of the Salafi spectrum by claiming to pursue a state of secular citizenship and cross-sectarian equality.<sup>170</sup>

Above all else, Liwa al-Towhid's guiding principle appears to be pragmatism. Its field commander, Abd al-Qader al-Saleh, described both Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian National Council as "our brothers", complimenting the former for its role in battle and the latter for representing the opposition.<sup>171</sup> Coming from an outgunned rebel leader desperate for material and tactical support, such praise makes perfect sense, even if the two organisations in question share a fierce, mutual hostility.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> See the interview of Liwa al-Towhid's head of operations, Abd al-Qader al-Saleh, with Al Jazeera, لقاء اليوم, op. cit.; also [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kPf37O1MnQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kPf37O1MnQ); for a video of Liwa al-Towhid fighters referring to themselves as part of the FSA following their storming of Zeino Berri's compound, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wikFenHocII](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wikFenHocII).

<sup>170</sup> In his Al Jazeera interview, Abd al-Qader al-Saleh addressed the issue of minorities: "Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Christians, all of us are in one state and are one people, and we are all equals like the teeth of a comb. We are all one, ... there are minorities but they have rights, just as I have rights ... there is no difference between a Christian or [anyone else] ... they all have the right of citizenship in this land". See لقاء اليوم, op. cit.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Speaking of Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Saleh said, "Jabhat al-Nusra are our brothers .... Our goal is to overthrow the regime, so we welcome all who fight on the ground, and they are fighting on the ground like all the other brigades on the ground". Speaking of the Syrian National Council, he said, "the SNC represents Liwa [al-Towhid] externally and politically, represents the opposition inside [Syria]. But now, the situation needs skilled individuals, whether from the FSA outside [Syria] or from the SNC. We ask these skilled individuals to come here to the ground to organise and arrange matters with us. This is a battle, and after the battle there will be institutions and government offices. So we ask our brothers in the SNC to come join us on the ground, and at the same time we thank them for their efforts thus far". Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> As noted, a 27 July YouTube video showcased six fighters claiming responsibility for disabling a Syrian army tank on behalf of Jabhat al-Nusra; toward the end, a voice yells "Liwa al-Towhid" in an apparent effort to imply they had cooperated, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKIkJM95nhA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKIkJM95nhA). A separate clip released on 13 August showed Jabhat al-Nusra militants celebrating alongside Liwa al-Towhid fighters and local civilians, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdn33XS6TY0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qdn33XS6TY0).

*Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam*  
(Gathering of Supporters of Islam)

Formed on 8 August 2012, Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam encompasses seven rebel factions active in Damascus and its surrounding suburbs. These include, notably, the most prominent independent Salafi faction in the area, Liwa al-Islam, as well as leading FSA factions with ties to the military council in Damascus and countryside.<sup>173</sup> As with other rebel coalitions, membership appears somewhat fluid, and participation does not preclude cooperation with, or even membership in, separate militant alliances.<sup>174</sup> The coalition's stated mission – "Unifying efforts in Damascus and its countryside in order to overthrow the Assad gang" – reflects the lack of a clear ideology;<sup>175</sup> in that spirit, the insurgents' tricolour flag coexists with black Islamist banners in its online material, and its Facebook page has messages from all ends of the ideological spectrum.<sup>176</sup> The group claimed its first high-profile operation on 15 August 2012, a truck bomb attack on a military building adjacent to a hotel housing UN personnel.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> The coalition's seven founding factions are Liwa al-Islam, Kata'ib al-Sahaba, Liwa al-Furqan, Liwa Ahfad al-Rasul, Kata'ib Dera al-Sham, Liwa al-Habib al-Mustafa and Katibat Hamza. Kata'ib al-Sahaba is an FSA-affiliated faction that has claimed joint operations with the Damascus military council; Liwa al-Furqan also claims to be part of the FSA. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgwXrAMdf5o&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgwXrAMdf5o&feature=player_embedded).

<sup>174</sup> Liwa Ahfad ar-Rasul (Grandsons of the Prophet), a faction that adopted the FSA banner and claims a role in the high-profile 15 August and 2 September bombings of a central Damascus military facility near Umayyad Square, was listed among Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam's founding members. However, its online messaging identifies it as a member of Tathir al-Sham (Cleansing Damascus), another coalition active in the capital. Ahfad al-Rasul claimed responsibility for both attacks in cooperation with Ansar al-Islam's Liwa al-Habib al-Mustafa, suggesting that he maintains strong relations with that group regardless of its membership status. [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=410822018980348&set=a.391856570876893.92376.390654780997072&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=410822018980348&set=a.391856570876893.92376.390654780997072&type=1) and [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=346790115406184&set=a.344692345615961.83315.344674672284395&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=346790115406184&set=a.344692345615961.83315.344674672284395&type=1).

<sup>175</sup> See [www.facebook.com/Ansar.islam.muster/info](http://www.facebook.com/Ansar.islam.muster/info).

<sup>176</sup> During the group's first ten days of operation, its Facebook page posted *fatwas* released by Liwa al-Islam's Sharia Committee, video clips featuring Saudi Salafi cleric Muhammad Saleh al-Munajed and video clips and activist postings highlighting statements by defected former Prime Minister Riyadh Hijab, [www.facebook.com/Ansar.islam.muster](http://www.facebook.com/Ansar.islam.muster).

<sup>177</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=js-1KZpjYqI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js-1KZpjYqI). An Ansar al-Islam spokesman alleged the explosion occurred hundreds of metres from the hotel and that all the group's operations were far from civilian areas and UN observers, [www.facebook.com/KataibAlShaba/posts/278420235608159](http://www.facebook.com/KataibAlShaba/posts/278420235608159). As noted, Ansar al-Islam asserted it played a part in a second bomb attack against the same facility less than three weeks later.

*Liwa al-Haq (Truth Brigade)*

Founded on 11 August 2012, Liwa al-Haq comprises Katibat al-Ansar and three independent factions operating in Homs.<sup>178</sup> In its first official statement, it pledged to continue jihad until the Assad regime is replaced by just Islamic rule; it justified its creation as a step toward uniting rebel ranks.<sup>179</sup> Nevertheless, its failure to attract prominent factions with which Katibat al-Ansar previously had worked suggests it will do little to unify the fractious Homs militant scene.

*Jabhat Tahrir Souria (Syria's Liberation Front)*

Formed on 12 September 2012, Jabhat Tahrir Souria presents itself as an unprecedented independent coalition composed of factions active in several provinces, including two of the insurgency's most prominent forces: Liwa Saqour al-Sham and Kata'ib al-Farouq.<sup>180</sup> In a founding statement recorded by Saqour al-Sham leader Abu Eissa Ahmad al-Sheikh and posted on al-Farouq's Facebook page, Jabhat Tahrir Souria identified Abu Eissa as its leader and "Islamic Sharia as [its] frame of reference", while pledging to defend all Syrians regardless of sect or ethnicity.<sup>181</sup> As in the case of Ittihad Thuwwar Homs, such vaguely worded references to Islamist thought – balanced with an equally non-committal nod to pluralism – appear aimed to please a range of constituencies while avoiding the potential divisiveness of a meaningful ideological platform.

It is premature to assess the depth and extent of coordination member factions will pursue. Initial confusion surrounding the coalition's launch suggests obstacles to meaningful cooperation among groups operating in different parts of the country; three days after being identified as a member in the coalition's founding announcement, Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam (a prominent Damascene militant al-

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<sup>178</sup> See [www.facebook.com/L.al7aq](http://www.facebook.com/L.al7aq).

<sup>179</sup> Liwa al-Haq's founding statement is at [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=332840816806438&set=a.332836243473562.77547.331962640227589&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=332840816806438&set=a.332836243473562.77547.331962640227589&type=1).

<sup>180</sup> According to the text of Jabhat Thuwar Souria's founding statement published by Kata'ib al-Farouq, the coalition includes 22 factions in Homs, Idlib, Lataqia, Hama, al-Hasaka, Aleppo, Deir al-Zour and Damascus provinces. However, the most prominent Damascus component named, Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam, has denied it is a member (see below). [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=440670802643397&set=a.407216552655489.86675.406242312752913&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=440670802643397&set=a.407216552655489.86675.406242312752913&type=1). Since changing the first word in its name from Katiba (battalion) to Kata'ib (the plural), al-Farouq has expanded from its Homs and suburbs base to include affiliates in Hama, Dera, Idlib and Damascus provinces. See its Facebook page and website, [www.facebook.com/Al.Farouq.Battalions](http://www.facebook.com/Al.Farouq.Battalions) and <http://al-farok.com/>.

<sup>181</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUrW5EiwWEA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUrW5EiwWEA) and [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=440670802643397&set=a.407216552655489.86675.406242312752913&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=440670802643397&set=a.407216552655489.86675.406242312752913&type=1).

liance discussed below) released its own statement denying it had joined the front.<sup>182</sup>

## C. OPINION LEADERS

### 1. The Adnan al-Arour phenomenon

Few individuals associated with the uprising ignite as much passion, positive or negative, as Adnan al-Arour, a Syrian Salafi preacher. Though based in Saudi Arabia, he emerged as a key figure because his stated position and narrative resonate with opposition activists and militants who follow his television show, aired by several Salafi satellite channels.<sup>183</sup> Sympathisers view him as a long-time opponent of a despised regime, whose practical advice to on-the-ground activists and fighters and ferocious attacks on exiled politicians helped maintain morale through the darkest moments of Assad's crackdown. Detractors, both inside and outside the opposition, perceive him as an opportunist who used the uprising to advance a sectarian agenda.

Both versions contain elements of truth. Al-Arour undeniably fuelled the uprising's more sectarian strand and sowed division between its Salafi and non-Salafi components. Yet, his role has been more nuanced and complicated than often portrayed, as illustrated by his above-mentioned part in promoting the military councils. Indeed, as with many Saudi-based clerics, it often is difficult to determine whether al-Arour is more of a conveyor belt (leading his viewers toward sectarian jihad) or a buffer (absorbing the anger of hardline Salafis who might otherwise support al-

Qaeda or like-minded local jihadi groups).<sup>184</sup> He most likely performs both functions. His charismatic diatribes helped legitimise anti-Shiite rhetoric, but he simultaneously invested much of his hard-line, Salafi credibility toward promoting the non-Islamist FSA leadership and denouncing major bombings claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra. Thus, in late May 2012, he urged non-Syrians to refrain from fighting in his country, arguing that such activity would harm the uprising.<sup>185</sup>

Key to his success is that he offers red meat to angry Salafis, while careful not to alienate mainstream supporters of the uprising, balancing passionate calls to arms with reasoned strategic and scriptural arguments. Among examples of his balancing act: he repeatedly characterises the uprising as part of a broader Sunni struggle against Shiite oppression, but also explains that Christians and Alawites who join will receive twice the reward of Sunnis and that those who opt for silence will be treated as if they were neutral, whereas Sunni silence is criminal. Likewise, he argues that Islam prohibits collective punishment (so Alawites who do not fight should not be held accountable for crimes of Alawite *shabbiha*) and, in the same breath, blames the al-Houla massacre on "Nusayris" from neighbouring villages, ignoring any distinction between killers and the Alawite community as a whole.<sup>186</sup> In this respect as well, his stance arguably epitomises broader Sunni instincts: in principle embracing cross-confessional coexistence but in light of sectarian massacres, increasingly equating the regime with the Alawite community.

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<sup>182</sup> In its statement, Tajammu' Ansar al-Islam acknowledged involvement in talks to create a national rebel alliance but expressed surprised at being mentioned in the official announcement launching Jabhat Tahrir Souria. It added: "We disapprove of the prematurity of this announcement and its inclusion of our name prior to the completion of procedures and to reaching agreement with the other brigades and battalions active on the ground", [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=357513977667131&set=a.344692345615961.83315.344674672284395&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=357513977667131&set=a.344692345615961.83315.344674672284395&type=1).

<sup>183</sup> Al-Arour's show has been especially popular in rural and working class urban areas. Crisis Group interviews, southern, central and northern Syria, July 2011-September 2012. It features interviews with some of the uprising's most recognisable voices, including Abdel Basset al-Sarout, Hadi Abdullah (a prominent activist in Homs) and military council leaders and spokesmen. Several militant factions refer to al-Arour in their video statements and Facebook pages, including both FSA brigades and independent Salafi groups. Reporting from Syria, Nir Rosen noted his popularity among militants and the broader protest movement, "Islamism and the Syrian Uprising", *Foreign Policy* (online), 8 March 2012. His appeal remains limited among more educated and moderate activists and fighters, who fear his image will tarnish the uprising's reputation.

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<sup>184</sup> Al-Arour is most infamous for having threatened to chop and feed to the dogs the bodies of Alawites who participate in regime oppression. Though he also has stated that Alawites supporting the uprising should be rewarded and those who remain neutral ought to be left alone, the distinction often is dismissed by critics and supporters alike. When Katibat Thu al-Nourain (a Salafi faction active outside Homs) warned that if Alawites did not stop supporting the regime, the group would begin attacking their villages, it pointedly thanked Adnan al-Arour and popular Salafi satellite channels. For an edited clip of al-Arour's threat, see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA0A\\_YoEcO0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA0A_YoEcO0); also Katibat Thu al-Nourain's "11-5-2012 تاريخ رقم 2 بيان", 11 May 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQZvjUE-Zdc&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQZvjUE-Zdc&feature=youtu.be).

<sup>185</sup> In May 2012, Al-Arour said, "it is not permissible for a non-Syrian to enter Syria in order [to fight the regime]". He suggested foreign fighters would give rise to "domestic and foreign problems, and lies and fabrications, and al-Qaeda"; encouraged non-Syrians to provide other forms of support; but emphasised that "we don't want people to travel to Syria, and we won't accept them", [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hta1vZPWEs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hta1vZPWEs) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWqxmNmd7Sc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWqxmNmd7Sc).

<sup>186</sup> مع سوريا حتى النصر, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DqtoxR9tqM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DqtoxR9tqM); مع سوريا حتى النصر, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KT1PbIfwhW0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KT1PbIfwhW0).

## 2. Other Salafi figures

Al-Arour is not the only Gulf-based Salafi televangelist to enjoy support among the opposition. In recent months, references to non-Syrian Salafi figures have become increasingly common on militant and activist online sites. Their rising prominence can be attributed to three factors: extensive, enthusiastic coverage of the uprising on Salafi satellite networks;<sup>187</sup> the conflict's increasing sectarianism; and prominent Salafi fundraising campaigns for opposition militants.

Leading Salafis such as Kuwaiti cleric Nabil al-Audi and Saudi preacher Muhammad al-Arifi long have warned Sunnis of the dangers presented by Iran, its Shiite Arab allies and Shiism itself. Their presence on popular Salafi channels and highly effective use of social media – al-Audi has nearly one million Twitter followers and al-Arifi nearly two million – enabled them to portray the uprising as a distinctly Sunni struggle well before prominent opposition leaders and friendly Arab media outlets publicly acknowledged the conflict's sectarian dynamics. As al-Arifi and al-Audi see it, the uprising does not embody a fight for democracy but rather a jihad on behalf of Sunnism against a polytheistic Alawite regime waging full-scale war against Islam as part of a broader Iranian-led regional Shiite conspiracy.<sup>188</sup> To some Syrian rebels, the past year and a half have lent credibility to this Salafi narrative. Al-Arifi's and al-Audi's statements are more and more ubiquitous on Sunni Salafi Facebook pages and occasionally appear on mainstream activist sites as well.<sup>189</sup>

Salafi fundraising and assistance, although welcomed by militants, has presented complications. Adnan al-Arour himself has argued against independent, uncoordinated campaigns to arm individual brigades, urging resources be centralised for accountability to establish more coherent command-and-control structures and avoid destructive inter-factional competition.<sup>190</sup> In May 2012, the Saudi

government announced that all funding from the Kingdom should be funnelled through official channels; it forced al-Arifi to cancel a fundraiser for Syrian fighters.<sup>191</sup> That said, independent fundraising continues unimpeded in other Gulf countries.<sup>192</sup> In Kuwait, for example, the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front has benefited from fundraising efforts by Hajaj bin Fahd al-Ajami, a Salafi cleric.<sup>193</sup> Such non-coordinated efforts are likely to exacerbate disorganisation and competition among opposition groups, allow independent brigades to thrive and further strengthen Salafi influence.<sup>194</sup>

## 3. The absence of moderate leadership figures

The success of Gulf-based Salafis in bolstering their influence among rebel militants and activists partly reflects the lack of moderate, effective clerical and political leadership. Many leading clerical figures keep a low profile or remain loyal to the regime. The two most prominent Sunni clerical establishment personalities, Muhammad al-Bouti and Mufti Ahmad Hassoun, have defended the regime since the outbreak of protests; opposition supporters widely ridicule them as government pawns.<sup>195</sup> Other leading clerics

<sup>191</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, "Saudis back rebels, mindful of past", *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 August 2012.

<sup>192</sup> In a 16 March sermon delivered in Riyadh, al-Arifi told the Syrians, "our money is with you, and God willing our weapons will soon be with you". On 26 May, he joined other prominent Saudi clerics in launching the Committee of Scholars to Support Syria, a group intended to raise money for rebels in the aftermath of the al-Houla massacre. Saudi authorities forced a halt to the campaign two days later; Saudi commentators sympathetic to the government cited the need to prevent money from reaching extremists as a key reason for the decision. See al-Arifi's sermon, *رسالة للمرابطين بسوريا | خطبة الجمعة د. محمد العريفي*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=re7NHDd1Nm8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=re7NHDd1Nm8); also Frederic Wehrey, "Saudi Arabia Reins in Its Clerics on Syria", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 14 June 2012.

<sup>193</sup> Al-Ajami uses his Twitter account to inform potential sponsors when and where they can donate. He has expressed admiration for Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham as among the strongest and best organised militant groups. See <https://twitter.com/hajajalAjami> and his 1 June tweet, <https://twitter.com/hajajalAjami/status/208547950765420544>.

<sup>194</sup> A U.S. official claimed the Saudi and Qatari regimes had concluded that helping militant Salafi groups could backfire. At this point, he said, funding to such entities originates chiefly from Gulf residents; although their governments have sought to curb such financing, he characterised their record as mixed. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, September 2012.

<sup>195</sup> Many local prayer leaders have been discredited, too. An activist leader in the Damascus suburb Arbeen explained the lack of respect for local clerics: "The sheikhs here all belong to security and the Baath party. The sheikhs told us not to go out and not to watch the biased [anti-regime] channels. We went out against the sheikhs, shouting down this sheikh or that sheikh. There were no good sheikhs with the people here: either

<sup>187</sup> Noting the importance of Gulf-based satellite channels to Salafism's rise, a regime official from Deir al-Zour explained: "Salafism is a new tendency, really. A culture of jihadism took root in Syria after the invasion of Iraq, but it doesn't enjoy an ideological underpinning. We don't have Salafi sheikhs per se. The influence comes via satellite channels and ties into many historical references that are more generally present in our culture". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2012.

<sup>188</sup> See al-Arifi's January 2012 sermon, "What I saw in Syria", at *مشاهداتي في سوريا د. محمد العريفي* 1433-2-19 هـ, 13 January 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XglXxqhcHwE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XglXxqhcHwE); also al-Audi's 23 March 2012 sermon at *أكبر مؤامرة تستهدف الأمة الإسلامية*, 24 March 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_pZZrdPYGBA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pZZrdPYGBA).

<sup>189</sup> Liwa al-Islam's religiously-focused Facebook page "likes" Al-Arifi's official page and, as seen, has posted al-Audi's material on several occasions. See [www.facebook.com/is.br.gr.Sharia](http://www.facebook.com/is.br.gr.Sharia).

<sup>190</sup> See *سوريا حتى النصر*, op. cit.

have been quiet; some, in the words of an opposition blogger, have vacillated between “hinting sometimes; warning at others” – namely, hinting at support for the uprising while warning against the dangers of unsanctioned protests and armed self-defence.

In the uprising's early months, Usama al-Rifa'i, the imam of the Rifa'i mosque in the Kafar Souseh neighbourhood of Damascus, stood out as a relative exception, strongly criticising the regime's crackdown and allowing his mosque to become a launching pad for protests. In August 2011, he was hospitalised due to injuries sustained when security forces stormed the mosque on one of the holiest nights of Ramadan; he disappeared from the scene and, by mid-2012, was reported to have left the country.<sup>196</sup> Now based in Istanbul, he has established a league of prominent exiled religious figures, such as his brother, Sariya, and two of the most revered Damascene prayer leaders, Krayyim Rajih and Ratib al-Nabulsi. By now, virtually all members of the religious elite have left the country; although this enabled it to toughen its stance, the shift has come too late to repair its damaged credibility. All in all, the traditional clerical establishment has been on the sidelines, unwilling or unable to directly confront the regime.

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he was afraid, or he was with the regime”. Crisis Group interview, December 2011. Similar recriminations were heard from opposition leaders elsewhere. Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo, Damascus, August 2011, June 2012.

<sup>196</sup> See the activist blog [اشيائي](http://ashiaei.wordpress.com), 21 December 2011, <http://ashiaei.wordpress.com> and [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=333469490069622&set=a.157418147674758.40365.157413294341910&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=333469490069622&set=a.157418147674758.40365.157413294341910&type=1). His brother, Sariya al-Rafa'i, another prominent Syrian cleric, for months walked a fine line, continuing to preach in Damascus and expressing sympathy for the protest movement while stopping short of fully endorsing the uprising. The result was a thoroughly mixed message; both regime opponents and backers occasionally cited his sermons. Following the al-Houla massacre, however, he threw his weight behind the uprising, condemning the killings and calling for a three-day general strike. His statement appeared to resonate, as the opposition celebrated the success of the 31 May-2 June strike. Still, however strong his influence among the Damascene business class, he does not feature prominently in opposition militant discussions. Given his late decision to back the opposition, he is unlikely to emerge as a credible alternative to hardline Salafi voices. See his 29 May call for the strike, [كلمة الشيخ سارية الرفاعي](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjZW1hwi4lxE), [يعد مجزرة الحولة](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjZW1hwi4lxE), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjZW1hwi4lxE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjZW1hwi4lxE). Homs has been an exception to the rule; its traditional Sunni clerical leadership played a large role in inciting, encouraging, leading and controlling the uprising. By contrast, the absence of clerical leadership appears especially striking in Hama, where religious leaders never emerged due to regime suspicions dating back to the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising of the late 1970s/early 1980s. Crisis Group interviews, opposition political leadership, Hama, September 2012.

Opposition politicians, including both long-term exiles and others who left the country during the uprising, have been widely discredited due to infighting and impotence. This has had a devastating impact on the Syrian National Council (SNC), the coalition of opposition groups;<sup>197</sup> its struggles in turn have hurt the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which exercises significant influence within the council but has maintained a low profile and (despite a heavy-handed backroom role) avoided asserting itself as the opposition's public face. Although not incompatible with efforts to extend its on-the-ground influence principally through funding and patronage,<sup>198</sup> the strategy has severely limited the Brotherhood's ability to visibly guide the uprising; instead, it has hidden behind an umbrella structure that ultimately has proved weak and unconvincing. Overall, the absence of an assertive, pragmatic leadership, coupled with spiralling, at times deeply sectarian violence, inevitably played into more hardline hands.

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<sup>197</sup> Even figures who maintain credibility with the opposition have suffered as a result of the exiled opposition's overall decline in popularity. For instance, Imad al-Din al-Rashid (a prominent moderate Islamist known to finance armed groups) and Haithem al-Maleh (a former judge and popular veteran activist) have seen their public standing diminish as sympathetic Arab media outlets increasingly turn to young activists on the ground rather than exiled politicians.

<sup>198</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood appears to be compensating for its relatively weak public profile by investing heavily in the armed opposition. A resident of a small town north of Aleppo said, “on the ground, the Islamists are making inroads through their funding networks and charitable activities. The Muslim Brotherhood is particularly effective. They have an open playing field. They use an ambiguous and flexible discourse that can mobilise broadly. And they are investing heavily in the FSA. They prefer co-opting armed groups by providing them with money and weapons rather than creating their own units”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2012. Rumours abound concerning which rebel groups receive Brotherhood funding. Reuters has reported that it finances Kata'ib al-Farouq, while Liwa Saqour al-Sham leader Abu Eissa recently cut his ties with Hei'at Himayat al-Madaniyin – the “Commission for the Protection of Civilians”, which provides material support to rebels and maintains official ties to several militant factions, due to charges that it is controlled by the Brotherhood. See Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Footballer turns rebel as Syria spins into civil war”, Reuters, 1 August 2012, and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_7wvm\\_uYKZY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7wvm_uYKZY). A Muslim Brotherhood spokesman acknowledged that the organisation had begun forming militant factions within Syria three months earlier. See Paula Astih, “الإخوان المسلمون لـ «الشرق الأوسط»: أنشأنا»، [Al-Sharq al-Awsat](http://www.al-sharq-al-awsat.com), 5 August 2012, [www.al-sharq-al-awsat.com](http://www.al-sharq-al-awsat.com), “كتائب مسلحة للدفاع عن النفس وعن المظلومين”.

## V. CONSTRAINTS AFFECTING SALAFIS

### A. DEALING WITH A POPULAR MOVEMENT

Though chaos, destruction and rising sectarianism created increasingly favourable conditions for Salafis, the context nonetheless has been challenging. Key figures of the uprising, as well as its popular base, often espouse antithetical ideology and goals. Many activists advocate a non-sectarian platform intended to reassure nervous minorities, including Alawites; such efforts resonate with a population that, particularly in recent years, has come to define its society in opposition to the sectarianism that devastated Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>199</sup> Too, a cultural gulf separates hard-core Salafis from much of the opposition mainstream. Their stern demeanour, rejection of most forms of art and contemporary folklore, ambiguous stance on democracy and eagerness to usher the country toward Islamic rule stand at odds with the more creative activist culture that has flourished since the uprising began and to which – although it certainly has waned in the face of escalating violence – many still cling.

With time, the situation inevitably has evolved. Until recently, opposition activists broadly dismissed the very issue of Salafism, describing it as a fringe phenomenon if not a pure regime fabrication. In May 2012, mocking the regime's insistence that it faced Salafi terrorists rather than a popular rebellion, the Syrian Revolution Facebook page posted a video of demonstrators singing at a rally beneath the sarcastic caption: "Al-Qaeda's Islamic extremist gangs sway to the tune of music that is forbidden in *takfiri* ideology".<sup>200</sup> Salafis seemed aware of the uphill battle they faced in spreading their message. In its first audio message in early 2012, Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham complained of the regime's success in shaping popular views by resorting to a clerical establishment that banned jihad and warned against Salafi backwardness.<sup>201</sup> Today, by contrast, it has

become virtually impossible to deny the existence and influence of a movement that has become significantly more visible and assertive.

In the future, popular assessments of Salafism likely will depend less on abstract ideological pronouncements than on value-added: the capacity of its members to assist practically in the fight against the regime, coupled with their on-the-ground behaviour and tolerance for popular codes of conduct often at odds with rigid Salafi principles.

### B. A REGIME MUDDYING THE WATER

As opposition activists struggle to project an inclusive image, they repeatedly have condemned alleged regime attempts to depict the uprising as a naked sectarian struggle and rally minorities to its side.<sup>202</sup> This largely explains opposition efforts to deny, erase or dilute Salafi voices within its ranks; on Arab satellite channels, activists are at pains to avoid overtly Islamist or sectarian rhetoric, and the most popular pro-insurgency Facebook page refrains from posting al-Arour's material.<sup>203</sup> More generally, activists dismiss any regime reference to Salafis as predictable, unfounded efforts to intimidate the population by caricaturing the protest movement.<sup>204</sup>

In this context, Salafis find themselves in an awkward position, bolstering by their behaviour and rhetoric a core argument of the regime they seek to oust. The challenge has been particularly acute for Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadi militant groups that suffer both because of official propaganda highlighting and magnifying the threat from al-Qaeda<sup>205</sup> and because of widespread suspicion that the regime in the past did not hesitate to exploit jihadi networks in Lebanon and Iraq to its advantage.

The FSA leadership, opposition activists and sympathetic Arab media (notably Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya) all con-

<sup>199</sup> Activist groups celebrated and encouraged Syria's tradition of relatively harmonious cross-confessional relations. Tellingly, until recently at least, Alawites, Christians, Druze and members of other minority communities travelled to attend rallies in Sunni opposition strongholds. Crisis Group observations, Damascus and Homs, 2011-2012. A year into an uprising that has grown increasingly divisive, online backers nonetheless voted to hold mid-April Friday protests under the banner of a "Revolution for all Syrians"; yet the poll also suggested competing trends, as voters narrowly defeated an alternative motto calling on the "Armies of Islam" to intervene in Syria. Amal Hanano, "Any Given Friday", Foreignpolicy.com, 18 April 2012.

<sup>200</sup> *Takfiri* refers to the practice of declaring certain Muslims infidels; critics often accuse Salafi extremists of using it against political opponents: denying their legitimacy by proclaiming them non-Muslims, www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution/posts/310949788984090.

<sup>201</sup> See Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham's first audio address, op. cit.

<sup>202</sup> Buthaina Shaaban, an Assad adviser, apparently was the first to inject a sectarian theme into the discussion a mere days after the uprising began, by describing protests as *fitna* (religious strife). Phil Sands, "Syria on brink of sweeping reforms", *The National*, 28 May 2011. During the protests' first weeks, government media outlets published questionable reports claiming various Islamic emirates had been declared, and Islamist insurgents had taken up arms, eg, the 13 May 2011 report that an Islamic emirate had been declared in Talkalakh, a small city in Homs province, ناصر مرعي اعلان امارة في تالكلك السوربية والسلطات تعمل، "على تفكيكها", *Syria Now*, 13 May 2012.

<sup>203</sup> It also refused to nominate "Declaration of Jihad" as a potential Friday protest slogan. See Wasim Umawi, op. cit.

<sup>204</sup> See, eg, a satirical post from the popular Al-Mundasa activist blog, reporting on the Salafi Emirate of Homs's FM radio station, at "إمارة حمص", <http://the-syrian.com/archives/3045>.

<sup>205</sup> Pro-regime media call Jabhat al-Nusra an al-Qaeda affiliate or often use Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda interchangeably.

demned high-profile bombings that struck Damascus and Aleppo in the first half of 2012, arguing they undermined the cause and suggesting they had been masterminded by the regime.<sup>206</sup> They repeatedly cited the same evidence: tireless official efforts to play up the attacks, attribute them to al-Qaeda and portray the jihadi movement as the driving force behind the uprising; alleged prior use by Syria's intelligence services of Fatah al-Islam, a jihadi group based in Lebanon, and of Iraq-bound jihadis to pursue regime objectives.<sup>207</sup> The more radical a given Salafi group's rhetoric and deeds, the more that group is suspected of serving the regime, and the less its claims of leading the struggle against Assad are viewed as credible beyond the narrow circle of its immediate backers.

### C. LESSONS FROM NEXT DOOR?

Iraq's legacy looms large, in recurring regime warnings of an impending sectarian war as well as in roadside IED blasts that frequently target army convoys. Opposition fighters view Iraq as both a potential source of money, weapons and expertise<sup>208</sup> and a powerful counter-argument for the regime. It also ought to serve as a warning, insofar as Iraq's insurgency achieved virtually none of its aims, whether

defeating the U.S., resisting Iranian influence or promoting Sunni Islamist rule; if anything, its principal accomplishment was to provoke a backlash among much of its social base.<sup>209</sup> The regime considers it a valuable ally: the portrait of a future Syria should the opposition (which it equates with Sunni extremists, which in turn it equates with al-Qaeda terrorists) prevail.

Jabhat al-Nusra in particular has shown signs of replicating the behaviour that proved fatal to the Iraqi insurgency. Although it has yet to videotape beheadings or claim responsibility for attacks against Alawite or Shiite civilian targets, its overtly sectarian rhetoric, tactical embrace of suicide attacks in urban areas and general insensitivity to civilian casualties largely parallel AQI's actions. Initially at least, it displayed scant concern for negative public reaction to its operations. It continued bombings in Damascus even after its first al-Midan attack was loudly condemned by opposition supporters, and it was ambiguous regarding responsibility for the infamous 10 May morning rush-hour bombings that struck a key intelligence facility in the capital's al-Qazaz neighbourhood, killing 55 and wounding hundreds.<sup>210</sup>

Yet, Jabhat al-Nusra for now remains somewhat of an exception. Most other militant groups have been at pains to distinguish their tactics and strategic vision from their Iraqi counterparts' precisely in order to maintain backing of existing supporters while gaining acceptance from those still on the fence. The FSA and leading Salafi groups have

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<sup>206</sup> Although the opposition initially accused the regime of staging the bombings, Jabhat al-Nusra's rising prominence has led it to shift the argument, claiming that the group works for (or is manipulated by) Syrian intelligence and does bombings at its behest, eg. Riyadh al-Asaad's comments, "الأسعد: المخابرات الجوية"، *Al-Riyadh*, 14 May 2012; also FSA spokesman Khaled al-Hamoud's, reported by Paula Asatih, "النظام السوري يعلن مقتل مهندس تفجيرات «جبهة النصرة». والجيش الحر"، *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 June 2012.

<sup>207</sup> Opposition figures, activists and friendly media outlets repeatedly cite reports alleging that the regime has manipulated jihadis, including claims that it fabricated a tape in which an alleged jihadi claimed responsibility for the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, used Fatah al-Islam via the intelligence services to sow unrest in Lebanon; facilitated jihadis' flow into Iraq; and used a prominent cleric to encourage Syrian jihadis to do so, then murdered him as a political liability. It also cites August 2009 charges by Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's prime minister, that the regime was behind a massive bombing in Baghdad. For example, see "كول أغاسي" و "كول أغاسي"، *Kulna Shurikaa*, 27 May 2012, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/42756>.

<sup>208</sup> The level of support from Iraq to Syrian militants cannot be accurately gauged. Although Western journalists suggest it is relatively modest, its impact could be disproportionate. In particular, the proliferation of IED usage since February 2012 suggests that Syrian rebels have grown adept at applying tactics borrowed from Iraq's jihadis. In late March, a leader of the powerful Dulaim tribe told a reporter in Fallujah, Iraq, that he sent weapons, 30 fighters and expert bomb makers and hundreds of thousands of dollars to militants in the neighbouring Syrian province of Deir al-Zour. "Iraqis sending arms, fighters into Syria", CNN, 27 March 2012.

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<sup>209</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°74, *Iraq after the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape*, 30 April 2008.

<sup>210</sup> Two days after the attack, a statement on YouTube purported to claim responsibility for Jabhat al-Nusra, but online jihadis denounced it as a fake, pointing to numerous errors and inconsistencies. On 13 May, Jabhat al-Nusra's official media outlet (al-Minara al-Baidah) asserted it was a forgery but neither confirmed nor denied the group's involvement, instead saying it had yet to receive official word from the "military department". See Jabhat al-Nusra's Communiqué #8, "بيان نفى"، 13 May, at <http://alnusraa.blogspot.com/2012/05/8.html>. Jabhat al-Nusra has not issued any further statement on the 10 May attack. A study of the 10 May attack written by a self-proclaimed Syrian Islamist "research centre" and published on leading jihadi forums praised it for bolstering the jihadis' position in Syria by striking a blow to international efforts to pursue a negotiated end to the conflict; weakening exiled opposition leaders; and making it more difficult for them to collaborate with the international community at jihadi expense. See "جزء الظالمينتمير" "فرعي فلسطين والدورياتدراسة للعملية وأثارها", published by مركز لواء الشام للاعلام والبحوث والتوثيق (Liwa' al-Sham Centre for Media, Research and Documentation), May 2012, at <http://ia601201.us.archive.org/30/items/dirasaaa/dirasaaa.pdf>. Although one cannot determine whether the study's author is tied to Jabhat al-Nusra, publication and advertisement on official jihadi forums (including Shamukh al-Islam) suggests that it represents the thinking of recognised figures within the jihadi community.

mostly made only limited use of suicide attacks and bombings in crowded civilian areas, abstained from filming the decapitation of alleged infidels and from AQI's unabashed defence of sectarian killings and (albeit not uniformly) refrained from kidnapping foreigners. FSA figures likewise have sought to discredit Jabhat al-Nusra (at least prior to the July Aleppo campaign) and reject al-Qaeda interference, a far cry from the less-than-convincing attempts of Iraq's nationalist insurgency groups to distance themselves from AQI, whose brutality came to shape public perceptions of Sunni militants.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, mindful of the importance of Western opinion, even independent Salafi groups (including Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa Saqour al-Sham) have hosted foreign journalists.

A debate has emerged within jihadi forums over lessons from Iraq. In a notable article published two weeks prior to Jabhat al-Nusra's creation, a jihadi essayist outlined several, including that jihadi should not create independent factions whose tactics and strategies differ from those of other anti-regime forces; should refrain from activity liable to divide opposition ranks; and should avoid targeting minority populations or interfering in opposition attempts to win their support or neutrality.<sup>212</sup>

Predictably, Jabhat al-Nusra's actions have caused a rift within the Salafi-jihadi community. Some key figures have maintained support even as others voiced criticism. In addition to Abu Basir al-Tartusi's aforementioned reservations, in June 2012, the leader of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (a small jihadi group active in the Levant) urged Syrian jihadis to refrain from bombings in urban areas and activity that could divide the opposition or alienate minorities. The statement did not mention Jabhat al-Nusra, but the intended target was unmistakable.<sup>213</sup>

There also are indications, albeit early and inconclusive, that Jabhat al-Nusra may be taking account of the backlash it prompted. Although it still publicises its suicide bombings, it shifted its approach after the unpopular 10 May attacks (described above), seemingly excluding targets that could provoke massive civilian casualties.<sup>214</sup> Its July and August joint appearances with Liwa al-Towhid fighters likewise suggest that at least some within the leadership recognise the value of cooperating with mainstream insurgents and building credibility with the local population. There is a flip side, however: should this emerging trend in Aleppo signal a broader shift in Jabhat al-Nusra's national strategy, it will become that much harder for mainstream leaders and activists to discredit, delegitimise and thus contain it.

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are respected within the jihadi community, advertised on official jihadi forums and considered by Western analysts to be affiliated with al-Qaeda.

<sup>214</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra's 3 October bombings in a central Aleppo square was an ambiguous case. It was the group's most aggressive attack in a potentially crowded neighbourhood since spring 2012 and helped shed light on the current state of opposition opinion toward suicide attacks in urban areas. The bombings, discussed above, generated mixed reactions among rebel leaders and activists in the hours prior to Jabhat al-Nusra's official claim of responsibility. Pro-opposition media outlets (including Al Jazeera and al-Arabiya) provided favourable coverage, emphasising that the targets – an officers' club and two hotels – were being used as staging grounds for regime military and *shabbiha* forces. Some mainstream rebels and activists made similar statements, focusing on regime casualties and ignoring the government's claims that civilians had been among the dead; for example, an FSA spokesman and a member of Liwa al-Towhid voiced support for the attacks, as did the leading pro-uprising Facebook page. See Caroline Akoum, "تجيرات تهز حلب وعشرات"، *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 4 October 2012; Sam Dagher, "Car bombs rock Syrian city", *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 October 2012; [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152258699810727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152258699810727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1). However, other voices within the opposition mainstream condemned the operation, criticising the use of suicide bombers, targeting of buildings adjacent to civilian businesses and pedestrian traffic and destruction of a well-known café abutting the popular Saad Allah al-Jabiri square. Such sentiment appeared especially prevalent on Aleppo activist pages, suggesting that the attack may have exacerbated tension between native Aleppans and rebel forces active in the city, which are dominated by militants from the surrounding countryside. See blog posts condemning the attack on the popular activist site al-Mundasa, <http://the-syrian.com/archives/88575> and <http://the-syrian.com/archives/88615>. See also user reaction on the leading Aleppo-focused activist page ([www.facebook.com/Aleppo.Revolution11](http://www.facebook.com/Aleppo.Revolution11)), [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=431489620240499&set=a.167728499949947.41621.167323373323793&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=431489620240499&set=a.167728499949947.41621.167323373323793&type=1) and [www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=431470596909068&set=a.167728499949947.41621.167323373323793&type=1](http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=431470596909068&set=a.167728499949947.41621.167323373323793&type=1).

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<sup>211</sup> Although AQI's excessive violence in Sunni areas and insensitivity to the concerns of local tribal and insurgent leaders prompted a crisis between it and nationalist insurgent groups in 2007, this falling-out followed years of cooperation during which mainstream insurgent figures were reluctant to distance themselves from al-Qaeda. As late as October 2007, Harith al-Dhari, a prominent Sunni cleric with ties to nationalist insurgents, said that while he rejected some of al-Qaeda's attacks, "al-Qaeda remains part of us, and we are part of it". See "التوافق"، *العراقية تنتقد تصريحات الصاري بشأن القاعدة*, Al Jazeera, 10 October 2007. For analysis of the Iraqi insurgent strategy and messaging during the first three years of the war, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°50, *In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency*, 15 February 2006.

<sup>212</sup> See "أبو الفضل ماضي" (Abu al-Fadhli Madhi), 10 January 2012, <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?s=3ee071f067561d2612c74f83c8e4e284&t=53862>.

<sup>213</sup> See Abdullah Azzam leader Majed al-Majed's 19 June audio statement on Syria, "ماجد إربيع الشام كلمة أمير كتائب عبد الله عزام"، [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R09sTnPbpQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R09sTnPbpQ). Though relatively small and low profile, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

## VI. CONCLUSION

The armed opposition is experiencing a difficult, potentially destructive phase, locked in a war of attrition against the regime and experiencing fragmentation and radicalisation. These trends carry serious implications for the future of the uprising and Syrian society as a whole and raise several critical questions. First, whether these divisions will persist or, conversely, whether the incipient trend toward greater coordination will help bring about a more credible leadership structure able to negotiate on the opposition's behalf and fill the security vacuum induced by the regime's erosion; secondly, whether sectarianism will further tear apart the social fabric and bolster the appeal of radical Salafi militants.

There are reasons to fear changes for the worse. Escalating violence, opposition failings and the international community's ambivalence likely will deepen despair that, in turn, will boost the appeal of more radical groups and means of struggle, suicide bombings included.<sup>215</sup> As the number of internally displaced and refugees grows, and entire towns and neighbourhoods are damaged to the point of becoming uninhabitable, armed groups risk cutting themselves off further from their social base and coming to resemble combatants roaming in the rubble. As they eat, struggle and pray together, fighters increasingly form insular units detached from the cross-cutting popular movement from which they sprung, inhabiting their own world, so more prone to spin out of control. Their reportedly high attrition rate may empower second-generation leaders with less of a strategic vision, legitimacy or experience – lacunae for which they might seek to compensate with ever more radical beliefs and violence. A roughly similar dynamic largely defined Iraq's insurgency after 2006, leading to rapid self-destruction.

On the face of it, Salafi groups appear to be immediate beneficiaries of current trends. Their vision retains undeniable appeal: it provides a sense of purpose at a time of considerable suffering and confusion, when the limitations of all alternative approaches and worldviews – including popular resistance as in Egypt and Tunisia; a Libya-style international intervention; and the Free Syrian Army – have been exposed. In the course of an uprising that is going through various stages and learning via trial-and-error, it could well be Salafism's turn. It offers abundant and valuable resources: additional funds, weapons, ammunition and fighters; access to know-how acquired in other conflict areas; a clearer identity and more compel-

ling discourse; as well as the feeling of enjoying the backing of the Islamic nation as a whole. At a time when armed groups struggle to survive against a powerful, ruthless regime and believe themselves both isolated and abandoned, such assets can make an immediate, tangible difference. Within this context, Salafism also could serve as a convenient mantle in which delinquents and criminals cloak themselves.

As seen, however, there are strong countervailing factors of which the opposition is well aware. A more fundamentalist outlook inescapably deepens critical fault lines, prompting tensions with minorities as well as liberal activists; with the traditional Sunni establishment; and with much of the outside world. Such drawbacks are all the more costly given the armed groups' current impasse and inability to break out of the military standoff with the regime. Salafis were most visible during the brief, fleeting moment in late July when a majority of armed groups launched an all-out offensive against a regime they wrongly believed to be on its last legs; their failure to secure victory was a significant setback from which they cannot easily distance themselves.

It is, in other words, far too early to predict whether the Salafi trend is temporary or destined to persist. The conflict has experienced a number of shifting phases, so there is little reason to assume that the present landscape will remain static long. Calculations within the opposition could change, as could its character: impelled by its foreign backers, who might finally succeed in streamlining and centralising their support, the opposition might unify around mainstream actors; driven by competition, it might further fragment; faced with a concerted international push for negotiations, it could evolve in different, unpredictable ways.

There are many misconceptions regarding Syria's Salafis. It would be wrong to assume their rising influence is a function of deep social roots or popular identity finally unearthed. Similarly, it would be mistaken to attribute it solely to extraneous manoeuvres – by the regime, intent on sully the opposition's image, or by Gulf Arab states, determined to bolster Islamist influence. As Crisis Group has described, the conflict has gone through phases; it has mutated, as have the character of the regime, sectarian relations and civil society dynamics.<sup>216</sup> Among the changes wrought is the spread of Salafism – an outlook that benefits from conditions on the ground and provides straightforward answers where others do not. A similar evolution can be seen in pro-regime ranks, notably among Alawite fighters, some of whom likewise have drifted toward a nihilistic, inward-looking, cult-like celebration of Bashar and of the violence done in his name. Both developments

<sup>215</sup> The tactic appears to be gaining acceptance: fighters from the Hama countryside told Crisis Group many had volunteered, adding, however, that the decision to resort to suicide attacks had not yet been taken. Crisis Group interviews, September 2012.

<sup>216</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

are alarming; neither necessarily is permanent. But breaking out of this cycle will require breaking out of a bloody military deadlock – and a return to politics.

**Damascus, Brussels, 12 October 2012**

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF SYRIA



## APPENDIX B

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices or representation in 34 locations: Abuja, Bangkok, Beijing, Beirut, Bishkek, Bogotá, Bujumbura, Cairo, Dakar, Damascus, Dubai, Gaza, Guatemala City, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Kabul, Kathmandu, London, Moscow, Nairobi, New York, Port-au-Prince, Pristina, Rabat, Sanaa, Sarajevo, Seoul, Tbilisi, Tripoli, Tunis and Washington DC. Crisis Group currently covers some 70 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Strait, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in

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Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, institutional foundations, and private sources. The following governmental departments and agencies have provided funding in recent years: Australian Agency for International Development, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Canadian International Development Agency, Canadian International Development and Research Centre, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Commission, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Irish Aid, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Agency for International Development, Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish International Development Agency, Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, United Kingdom Department for International Development, U.S. Agency for International Development.

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**October 2012**

## APPENDIX C

### CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA SINCE 2009

#### Israel/Palestine

- Ending the War in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing N°26, 5 January 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Gaza's Unfinished Business*, Middle East Report N°85, 23 April 2009 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).
- Israel's Religious Right and the Question of Settlements*, Middle East Report N°89, 20 July 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Palestine: Salvaging Fatah*, Middle East Report N°91, 12 November 2009 (also available in Arabic).
- Tippling Point? Palestinians and the Search for a New Strategy*, Middle East Report N°95, 26 April 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, Middle East Report N°97, 2 August 2010 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).
- Squaring the Circle: Palestinian Security Reform under Occupation*, Middle East Report N°98, 7 September 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?*, Middle East Briefing N°30, 24 March 2011 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).
- Radical Islam in Gaza*, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°104, 29 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change ...*, Middle East Report N°110, 20 July 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Curb Your Enthusiasm: Israel and Palestine after the UN*, Middle East Report N°112, 12 September 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Middle East Report N°119, 14 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process*, Middle East Report N°122, 7 May 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

#### Egypt/Syria/Lebanon

- Engaging Syria? Lessons from the French Experience*, Middle East Briefing N°27, 15 January 2009 (also available in Arabic and French).
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- Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Middle East Report N°84, 19 February 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Lebanon's Elections: Avoiding a New Cycle of Confrontation*, Middle East Report N°87, 4 June 2009 (also available in French).
- Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, Middle East Report N°92, 14 December 2009 (also available in Arabic).
- Reshuffling the Cards? (II): Syria's New Hand*, Middle East Report N°93, 16 December 2009 (also available in Arabic).
- Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, Middle East Report N°96, 26 May 2010 (also available in Arabic).
- Nouvelle crise, vieux démons au Liban : les leçons oubliées de Bab Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, Middle East Briefing N°29, 14 October 2010 (also available in Arabic).
- Trial by Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°100, 2 December 2010.
- Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, 24 February 2011 (also available in Arabic).
- Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, Middle East Briefing N°31, 24 November 2011 (also available in Arabic).
- Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, Middle East Report N°108, 6 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).
- Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East

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*Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared*, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

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*Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report N°128, 1 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

#### North Africa

*Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°106, 28 April 2011 (also available in French).

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*Tunisie : lutter contre l'impunité, retrouver la sécurité*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°123, 9 May 2012.

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*Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°130, 14 September 2012.

#### Iraq/Iran/Gulf

*Iraq's Provincial Elections: The Stakes*, Middle East Report N°82, 27 January 2009 (also available in Arabic).

*Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, Middle East Report N°86, 27 May 2009 (also available in Arabic).

- U.S.-Iranian Engagement: The View from Tehran*, Middle East Briefing N°28, 2 June 2009 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).
- Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line*, Middle East Report N°88, 8 July 2009 (also available in Kurdish and Arabic).
- Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa*, Middle East Report N°89, 28 September 2009 (also available in Kurdish and Arabic).
- Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond*, Middle East Report N°94, 25 February 2010 (also available in Arabic).
- Loose Ends: Iraq's Security Forces between U.S. Drawdown and Withdrawal*, Middle East Report N°99, 26 October 2010 (also available in Arabic).
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- Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, Middle East Report N°114, 20 October 2011 (also available in Arabic).
- In Heavy Waters: Iran's Nuclear Program, the Risk of War and Lessons from Turkey*, Middle East Report N°116, 23 February 2012 (also available in Arabic and Turkish).
- Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IX): Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan*, Middle East Report N°118, 12 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- Iraq and the Kurds: The High-Stakes Hydrocarbons Gambit*, Middle East Report N°120, 19 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- The P5+1, Iran and the Perils of Nuclear Brinkmanship*, Middle East Briefing N°34, 15 June 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*, Middle East Report N°125, 3 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- Déjà Vu All Over Again: Iraq's Escalating Political Crisis*, Middle East Report N°126, 30 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).
- Iraq's Secular Opposition: The Rise and Decline of Al-Iraqiya*, Middle East Report N°127, 31 July 2012 (also available in Arabic).

## APPENDIX D

### INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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