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# The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissension

Hamza Mustapha | February 2014

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Series: Policy Analysis

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## Introduction

The roots of the Salafist movement in Syria go back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in what came to be known as “reformist Salafism,” a movement that largely mirrored the reformist Salafist movements that had emerged in Egypt with Sheikh Mohammad Abdu, in that it sought to combat the despotic and backward state inherited from the Ottomans. Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi, Sheikh Jamal al-Deen al-Qasimi, and Sheikh Muhammad Rasheed Rida were the main figures behind Syria’s reformist movement. Numerous branches subsequently spun off from this movement, and have played an important role in Syrian political life, giving rise to important associations, such as : al-Jamiya al-Gharra (the Radiant Assembly), founded in 1924, and Jamiyat al-Tamaddun al-Islami (the Association of Islamic Civilization), established in 1930 by Madhhar al-Adhma and Bahjat al-Bitar, a disciple of Sheikh Jamal a-Deen al-Qasimi.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to this movement, the traditional conservative Salafist movement emerged under the lead of historical figures, such as Ibn Taimiya, Ibn Qayim al-Jawziya, and Sheikh Mohammad Bin Abd al-Wahhab. Traditional Salafism in Syria owes its revival and re-activation to Sheikh Mohammad Nasir al-Deen al-Albani (1914-1999),<sup>2</sup> Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Arnaut, and his student Sheikh Mohammad Eid al-Abbasi, all of whom were active within the theological seminaries and focused on spreading the Salafist message without getting involved in politics.

The Jihadi Salafist movement in Syria, in turn, was an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was established in Syria in the mid-1930s, and officially announced in 1945, when Mustapha al-Sibai was elected as their leader. Subsequent to the Hama Mutiny in 1964, Marwan Hadeed led a new offshoot of the Brotherhood based on the belief that Jihad was the only way to be rid of “a calamity such as the Bath Party”. Hadeed was influenced by Sayyid Qutb’s ideology while studying in Egypt, and aspired to transplant it to Syria.<sup>3</sup> This differed from the Brotherhood’s founders, who preferred peaceful political action.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Hajj, “Salafism and Salafist in Syria,” May 26, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Roman, “Salafism in the Arab Levant,” p. 1160. Muhammad Nasir al-Deen al-Albani was born in Albania in 1914, and immigrated with his family to Damascus in 1922. He was raised in a poor, religiously-conservative family that followed the Hanafi school. His Salafist vision began to crystallize after he began reading *al-Manar*, a journal that was issued by Rachid Rida.

<sup>3</sup> Barout, “Syria: The Origins and Meanderings of the Struggle,” p.269.

Thus, Hadeed tried to persuade the Muslim Brotherhood to prepare for a confrontation with the authority and to form a military arm for the group. Failing to convince them, he began to prepare for battle by joining armed action with the Palestinian Fatah movement in the Shuyukh camps in the Jordan Valley from 1968-1970. There, he was able to prepare the first cohort of his Jihadist organization,<sup>4</sup> which he called “the Organization of the Fighting Vanguard”.

The Fighting Vanguard was the first Jihadist experiment in Syria to adopt armed struggle. Consequently, the 1970s and the 1980s saw armed confrontations between the Vanguard, later joined by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1980, and the Hafez al-Assad’s government, tragically leading to the massacre of Hama in 1982 and the fleeing of most Islamist leaders.

In many ways, the experience of the Fighting Vanguard paved the way for the birth of the Jihadist movement in Syria. Jihad Salafists today still consider Sheikh Marwan Hadeed the second most influential figure, after Sayyid Qutb, in the movement’s establishment. Moreover, the majority of them, who eventually joined global Jihad movements, were brought up within the Fighting Vanguard, such as Abu Musab al-Suri, who would later become the man behind Jihadist movements in Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, following the Hama massacres in 1982, the Syrian regime succeeded in curbing the presence of activist Islamism and Jihadists, a feat attributed primarily to the oppressive and coercive measures taken against Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. This took place alongside concerted efforts by the regime to encourage the formation of non-violent Islamic movements that stay out of politics, focusing instead on preaching, education, and social work. Proponents of such non-violent Salafism were figures such as Sheikh Jawdat Saeed, Sheikh Mohammad Saeed Ramadan al-Buti, who was a fierce defender of traditional Sufi doctrine in the face of the Salafism, and the Qubaisyat group, which became very active after Bashar al-Assad’s ascension to the presidency.

In the 1990s, however, the emergence of the Arab Afghans, Hamas, the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Chechen War contributed anew to the revival of Jihadist thought among some Syrian youth. Inspired by these

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<sup>4</sup> Al-Mawla, *Islamist Groups and Violence*, p. 578.

<sup>5</sup> Atwan, *al-Qaida and the Secret Organization*, pp. 326-329.

movements, small Salafist groups started to spontaneously form, though they had no organizational links between them.<sup>6</sup> Jihadist terror in Syria, however, was not witnessed until after the 1990s. Inspired as they were by global Jihadist thought, these groups failed to attract a popular base and social acceptance. Most of the members left Syria, joining the open fronts of Jihad in various parts of the world, such as Bosnia and Chechnya, especially after the creation of the “Global Islamic Front for Combating Jews and Crusaders” in February 1998.<sup>7</sup>

Since arriving to power, the Syrian regime has fought to keep Islamist movements under tight control and eliminate emerging Jihadist groups. With the first signs of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, Syria found itself working on all fronts to mobilize and prepare Jihadists to fight in Iraq, hosting them under all sorts of justifications, including the occupation of Muslim lands by the “infidel” West—a rhetoric that appeared most unusual for a fundamentally secular regime seen as having an aversion to the religious. On March 26, 2003, for instance, the late Syrian Mufti Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaro, called upon all Muslims for Jihad, and incited them “to use all possible means to defeat the aggression, including martyrdom operations against Zionist American and British invaders.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sheikh Mohammad Saeed Ramadan al-Buti, in his Friday sermon on June 13, 2003, urged Muslims to perform “the duty of Jihad” and stated that “[...] the reasons that make (Jihad) mandatory have never been clearer than they are today, in this age, on the Islamic land of Iraq”.<sup>9</sup> During 2003-2005, Jihadist groups were able to establish bases of support and logistics in many parts of Syria, selecting areas with a social base that were likely to support them. Under the name “the Iraq Support Committees,” these groups semi-openly recruited Syrian fighters, facilitating the passage of fighting groups coming from outside Syria to Iraq, and collecting donations through charitable associations, and sometimes in rural mosques.<sup>10</sup>

The 2003 Iraq War led Syria to become a safe passage for Jihadists into Iraq. Much evidence attributes the Syrian regime’s positive view of the flow of Jihadists to their battle against the US forces, who were mired in the conflict against Jihadists and al-Qaeda in Iraq. The US, keen to achieve security stability in Iraq, was forced to open

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Hajj, *The State and the Community*, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Zaytuna, “Syrian Islamists and the seduction of Jihad,” p. 388.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Hajj, “Salafists and Salafism”.

<sup>10</sup> Baorut, *The Last Decade in Syria’s History*, pp. 202-203.

channels of communication and cooperation with the Syrian regime in order to stem the Jihadist tide.

From 2005-2008, the Syrian regime exploited the al-Qaida and Jihadists card hoping to curb the international isolation that was imposed on it. Limiting the movement of Jihadists, controlling the borders, and cooperating among intelligence agencies lessened US pressures on the Syrian regime, and led to a parting of ways between al-Qaeda and the Syrian regime.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the Syrian regime suddenly became an enemy of al-Qaeda, and one that needed tackling. On September 27, 2008, Damascus witnessed a suicide bombing that targeted a complex for security branches in the Qazzaz district;<sup>12</sup> Syrian authorities accused a Jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda of backing these bombings.<sup>13</sup>

Without doubt, Iraq's experience has had important repercussions on the Jihadist movement in Syria, contributing to the creation of a new generation of Syrian Jihadists. During that particular period, several Syrian jihadists emerged, including Khalid Suleiman Darwish, aka "Abu al-Ghadiya al-Suri".<sup>14</sup> In Iraq, Syrians were the second largest group of foreign fighters, or 13 percent of all the Jihadists in the country according to some Jihadist statistics in 2007. The majority of these fighters returned to Syria after the Jihadist activity began to wane, and have to date played an influential role in the Syrian revolution.<sup>15</sup>

## The Convergence of Paths: Emergence of the al-Nusra Front

In 2011, the success of the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, all of which were based on "peaceful" popular action, have created new challenges for Jihadist movements as they force a re-thinking of the methods adopted when seeking change.

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<sup>11</sup> For more on the subject, see: ACRPS Policy Analysis Unit, "The Recent Bombings in Syria: Do They Change Reality on the Ground?," the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Policy Analysis Paper, June 18, 2012, <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/e901287d-f551-4e70-929d-bbf2b3cc5059>.

<sup>12</sup> Suad Jarrous, "The Damascus Bombing: Explosive-laden vehicle attacked a complex for Syrian intelligence," (in Arabic) *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 28, 2008, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=10626&article=488579#.Uac5TEA3DBs>.

<sup>13</sup> "Confessions of a Terrorist Attack in al-Qazzaz: The Fath al-Islam affiliation with the funding Future Current is among the funders," (in Arabic) *SANA*, November 7, 2008, <http://sana.sy/ara/2/2008/11/06/200295.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Mohammad Abu Roman, "Al-Qaeda leader Suleiman Khalid Darwish, aka Abu al-Ghadiya, killed," (in Arabic) *Jordan's al-Ghadd*, June 25, 2005, <http://www.alghad.com/index.php/article/27244.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Shishani, "Abu Musab al-Suri and the Third Generation," p. 53.



The violent concept underlying Jihad, a concept enshrined as a revolutionary ideology aiming at the overthrow of the *Jahilite* (infidel, pre-Islamic) despotic regimes, has lost its force of argument and its justification after the success of “peaceful” popular action in enacting change.<sup>16</sup>

The Arab Spring revolutions have predictably led to heated debates and exchanges within Salafi Jihadist circles, and those of al-Qaida, regarding centralized vs. decentralized organization and the need to focus on “popular” rather than elitist action.<sup>17</sup> This was particularly the case after the emergence of the partisan phenomenon (al-Ansar), such as the Ansar al-Sharia group in Tunisia and the Ansar al-Deen group in Mali. At the same time, the tendency of some revolutions to turn toward militarization, as was the case in Libya and Syria, have brought both the Jihadist movements and al-Qaeda to the forefront, giving new momentum to the concept of violent Jihad. Initially, Jihadist movements were not interested in the Syrian revolution or its objectives, foremost of which is democracy, which directly conflicts with the doctrine of Jihadist movements.

In *The Strategy of the Regional War on Syria*,<sup>18</sup> Abdallah Bin Mohammad describes what he terms a “convergence of paths” that has taken place between Jihadist movements and the Syrian revolution. He claims: “Over the course of Syria’s bitter voyage throughout the last year, in one of the most important and sensitive revolutions that has attracted regional and global awareness, the Arab people have begun to intersect with the Jihadists’ belief, specifically al-Qaeda’s, from a decade earlier, that these corrupt regimes must be overthrown by self-sustaining military action, even if it does not serve the interests of the great powers.”<sup>19</sup>

The shift of the Syrian revolution toward militarization was a critical juncture for Jihadist movements as militarization transformed these movements from an unwanted actor to that of a welcomed participant in fighting a violent regime. Jihadist movements thus entered the phase of “nesting” or “building,” taking the time to explore and learn about

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<sup>16</sup> Abu Haniyya, “Al-Qaida and the Arab Spring Revolutions,” 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Suri, *The Call for Global Islamic Resistance*, p. 896. Sheikh Abu Musab al-Suri is viewed as one of the main proponents of the decentralization of al-Qaida.

<sup>18</sup> This booklet is widely available on Jihadist forums; it was also found with Jihadist leaders and elements of al-Nusra Front in Aleppo and Idlib according to testimonies collected by the author from Syrian fighters.

<sup>19</sup> Abdallah Bin Muhammad, “The Strategy of the Regional War on the Land of Syria,” (in Arabic) publisher unknown, 2012, <http://jalnosra.com/vb/showthread.php?t=480>. Website restricted in some areas.

environments receptive to Jihadist thought, with the purpose of implanting themselves within these communities, sending small cells to these areas and then activating other “sleeper” cells.<sup>20</sup> In many ways, the Jihadists’ assimilation in the revolution is also thanks to the Syrian regime. Many Jihadists that were detained in Syrian prisons were freed through a number of pardon decrees that have been periodically issued by the regime since the beginning of the revolution.<sup>21</sup>

With the beginning of 2012, the Syrian revolution turned to armed struggle, a transformation that would prepare the ground for the presence of Jihadist groups and the legitimization of their existence among the revolutionaries.<sup>22</sup> The announcement of the al-Nusra Front’s creation, on January 24, 2012, occurred because many protestors lost faith in the effectiveness of peaceful struggle, coinciding with Salafists and Jihadists consistent questioning of the use of peaceful struggle. With the escalation of the aggressiveness and brutality of the regime, their presence suddenly appeared legitimate and more socially acceptable.<sup>23</sup> Jihadists have ultimately justified their existence through an Islamic theological rule: “rebuffing the harm of the enemy and its aides”. Additionally, the absence of foreign military intervention was a key factor leading up to their formation, particularly since frustration toward the international community’s refusal to intervene, in tandem with the rise in the numbers of civilian casualties, have made the alliance with Jihadist groups easier. Jihadists now represent the principal players in the battle against the regime.<sup>24</sup>

The sectarian massacres committed by the regime led to the rise of sectarian rhetoric among the proponents of the revolution; as such, the reservations they had toward

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<sup>20</sup> “Al-Nusra Founding statement in Arabic,” YouTube video, 16:49, posted by “JihadTv4,” May 25, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3ERodHVGqo>.

<sup>21</sup> Researcher and lawyer Ala al-Qadi, interview by author. Al-Qadi, who conducted multiple interviews with members and leaders of the al-Nusra Front in Aleppo, says that “Jihadists publicly appeared in Aleppo in June 2011. They established a headquarter for their organization near the children’s hospital in the area between the al-Hawuuz, al-Nayrab, and al-Shaaar neighborhoods [...] the majority of the members of this organization were Syrians who had been released by the regime following the pardon issued on June 21, 2011. They numbered in the hundreds before the flow of Saudis, Afghans, and Yemenis began in 2012.”

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see: Azmi Bishara, *Syria: The Way of Suffering to Freedom: An Attempt in Current History* (in Arabic), (Doha/Beirut: the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), pp. 253-256.

<sup>23</sup> ICG, “Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition,” International Crisis Group, *Middle East Report*, no131, October 12, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.aspx>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Jihadist groups discourse suddenly abated. Finally, in the beginning of 2012, Syria witnessed several calls for the “proclamation of Jihad” that are regularly echoed in protests and on social networks. Jihadist movements seized this opportunity to legitimate their existence. The leader of the al-Nusra Front Abu Mohammad al-Julani makes this clear in the founding statement of the Front, when he said: “the appeals for the people of Jihad have risen, and we could only respond to the call and to return to our people and land from the first months of the outbreak of the revolution”.<sup>25</sup>

## Al-Nusra: A Traditional Jihadist Fit?

The al-Nusra Front is rooted in different intellectual frameworks and Jihadist literatures; however, Abu Musab al-Suri’s writings and ideas are central to the organization. Of these, the most important works include *The Global Call for Islamic Resistance*, which theorizes what it terms “the third generation of Jihadists”; *Remarks on the Jihadist Experience in Syria*, which evaluates the previous Jihadist experiences in Syria, especially that of the Fighting Vanguard and the Muslim Brotherhood;<sup>26</sup> and *Ahl al-Sunna in Syria in the Face of Nusayris, Crusaders, and Jews*, in which he presents his vision on the “infidel” nature of the Syrian regime, and identifies what he considers to be the enemies of the Jihadist project in Syria: the Zionist Crusaders, the Alawites, the Shia, and the Druze.<sup>27</sup> The name of al-Nusra Front was in fact inspired by this book, in which the writer concludes: “from the blessed Syria in the early 1960s was the beginning of the movement of Jihad; in Syria [Jihad] has prospered during the 1980s, and to Syria [the Jihadist movement] returns today God willing, al-Nusra! Al-Nusra! Oh, brothers of Jihad!”<sup>28</sup>

Abu Musab al-Suri believes that traditional Jihadist organizations are no longer relevant today, and that Jihadist thought must re-invent itself and pursue new organizational methods. He proposes that “cells of global Islamic resistance” are based on individual Jihad and small offshoots, rather than a centralized organizational structure.<sup>29</sup> Al-Suri

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<sup>25</sup> “Al-Nusra founding statement,” YouTube video, May 25, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Shishani, “Abu Musab al-Suri,” pp. 143-154. For Abu Musab al-Suri’s [in Arabic], see “Abu Musab al-Suri” on the Forum of Tawheed and Jihad, <http://www.tawhed.ws/a?a=hqkfgsb2>.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Shishani, Abu Musab al-Suri,” p. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Abdullah Bin Muhammad, “The Strategy of the Regional War”. It should be noted that the Jihadist online forums treat the writings of Abdullah Bin Muhammad as the writings of Abu Muhammad al-Julani himself.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Suri, *The Call of Islamic Resistance*, pp. 1453-1454.

contrasts the characteristics of the traditional organizations with those of the “brigade” and their modus operandi according to the following table:<sup>30</sup>

<b>Mode of Action</b>	<b>Traditional Organizations</b>	<b>Resistance Brigades</b>
<b>Objective</b>	Overthrowing the government and establishing an Islamic one	Retaliate harm from enemies and their aides
<b>Doctrine</b>	Jihadist Doctrine	Call for Global Islamic Resistance
<b>Command</b>	Central Commander and Leadership	General Guidance of Global Brigades and Local Commander of brigade
<b>Roadmap</b>	Organization’s General Mandate	Resisting Occupation
<b>Funding</b>	Funding Sources of an Organization and its spending budget	Funding of the brigade which comes from donations and spoils
<b>Allegiance</b>	A centralized pledge of loyalty to the commander	A pledge to God for Jihad and resistance, and a pledge to obey the commander of the brigade

Examining these ideas sheds light on how the al-Nusra Front works. Small Jihadist groups that were active in the revolution in late 2011, and which later joined al-Nusra Front, were not linked to known Jihadist organizations, nor did they announce any pledges of loyalty of allegiance; instead, under the banner of Jihad, they sought to resist regime forces and “rebuff invaders”. As such, al-Nusra did not represent a traditional Jihadist organization, but a receptacle that grouped all these brigades and developed their organizational structure, feeding them with new recruits and helping them create a “broad front” for Jihadists in Syria.

This is clear in the al-Nusra Front’s founding statement. Al-Julani did not announce the establishment of an Islamic state, as with the Jihadist organizations in Iraq and in Northern Mali; instead, he declared the “creation of the Support Front for the people of Syria—Syria’s Mujahideens in the arenas of Jihad”. Al-Julani also avoided declaring allegiance to and affiliation with al-Qaeda or any other “regional” Jihadist organization, such as the Islamic State in Iraq, which supported the creation of al-Nusra and supplied it with men and funds. Al-Nusra maintained this demarche until April 10, 2013, when

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced its disbanding and merger into a single organization that he named the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a decision that was rejected by al-Julani. It is likely that al-Julani's pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was merely a last resort following al-Baghdadi's decision, and a tactic al-Julani used to avoid the establishment of a Syrian clone of "The Islamic State in Iraq".<sup>31</sup> Sheikh Mohammad Abdallah Najeeb Srour<sup>32</sup> confirms this assumption when he quotes al-Nusra leaders, saying:

Al-Julani has an understanding of the specificity of Syria and the differences between it and other places Jihadists are active; al-Nusra has a level of flexibility in the application of Islamic legal rules and requirements. It does not require allegiance to it as a group, nor does it impose its control over other battalions. Al-Julani has sought to create a Mujahedeen Shura Council in order to prevent the monopolization of the Front's command by one individual, the commander al-Ameer, as has happened with traditional Jihadist organizations.<sup>33</sup>

#### Al-Nusra's Organizational Structure

The organization's groups are composed of 15-25 individuals, and are led by a military commander who coordinates their armed action. Each group is given a specific identification number, and the members of the group pledge their allegiance to the commander. The pledge (*al-Baya*) signifies blind loyalty and the execution of orders without question.<sup>34</sup>

The brigades have different names, and range in size from 100 to 200 individuals; they are led by a field commander who oversees the groups within his geographic area.<sup>35</sup> The groups' commander, who enjoys a margin of freedom in making decisions in accordance with the developments on the ground, with the exception of large operations coordinated by regional commanders, is made accountable for their actions

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<sup>31</sup> "Al-Zawahiri abolishes the merger of the 'Jihadists' of Syria and Iraq," (in Arabic) *al-Jazeera Net*, June 9, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/a5a7d33e-3c9f-4706-b070-e358b5e67236>.

<sup>32</sup> Srour is a Syrian sheikh from Aleppo, and founder of the Assembly of the Youth and Clerics of the Nahda, which is active throughout Syria. He is also close to Aleppo's legal committee.

<sup>33</sup> Sheikh Muhammad Abdallah Najeeb Srour, Skype interview by author.

<sup>34</sup> Hani Ahmad, a member of Liwa al-Islam in the al-Bab region in Aleppo, interviewed by author.

<sup>35</sup> Testimonies and information collected by the author from a number of fighters who participated in battles along al-Nusra Front, including Abd al-Rahman al-Mustapha in the Eastern Ghouta, Samir Ahmad in al-Yarmuk Camp, Abd al-Rahman al-Bakkar in Aleppo, al-Hajj Bakri in the Hama countryside, and "Abu al-Bara" in Maarrat al-Numan.

so as to prevent arbitrariness and abuses, and makes the pledge of allegiance to the field commander.<sup>36</sup>

Regional commanders, some of whom are non-Syrian Arabs, are responsible for military, aid, and religious work in Syrian governorates. They tend to enjoy a broad authority at the military level, with the exception of vital decisions, in which case they need to return to the Mujahedeen Shure Council for approval. The council itself is composed of 12 members, most notably al-Julani, al-Zawahiri (observer member), al-Baghdadi, Abu Ali al-Iraqi, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, Abu Maria al-Iraqi, and others.<sup>37</sup>

### Membership

The al-Nusra Front recruits members through candidature and recommendation by a trusted source or via the completion of military courses. If someone recommends the candidate, he must commit to religious lessons and Jihadist orientation for no less than two months, and must garner the approval of the religious preachers in his region. The candidate must then receive a recommendation from two current members who bear witness to his commitment and discipline, and undergo military tests to decide whether he should be sent to the frontlines or enrolled in training temporarily. The second method is through selection after military courses finish. Due to its military reputation and large presence, joining the al-Nusra Front has become desirable for many fighters. For instance, near the neighborhood of Dar Izzat in Aleppo, a Syrian army base called "al-Sheikh Suleiman Camp," formerly a center for military research, is currently used to conduct religious and military courses, with dozens of fighters graduating weekly. Upon graduation, al-Nusra selects the best fighters to join its ranks.<sup>38</sup> There are also Arab and foreign *Muhajireen* (migrant) members who believe in Jihadist ideology and are experienced in Jihad battle.

### Funding Sources

The Front is primarily funded by Jihadist organizations. The military tasks, aid, and services they provide constitute just a small portion of its budget,<sup>39</sup> thus the Front

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<sup>36</sup> Sheikh Abdullah Najeeb Srour, personal interview.

<sup>37</sup> Anonymous interview by author with an intermediary in Aleppo.

<sup>38</sup> Corresponding information collected by the author from various testimonies by Ala al-Qadi, Hani Ahmad, Sheikh Abdullah Najeeb, Syrian fighters in the Syrian Islamic Front (The Brigade of the Mujahedeen of Syria), Abu al-Bara al-Hamawi, and Abu Yazan al-Hamawi (martyred on October 2, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Information collected during a personal interview with Sheikh Abu Abdullah al-Shari, a leadership figure close to the religious legal committee in Aleppo.

mainly relies on spoils. Before participating in any battle with other opposition factions, the Front often fights on the condition that it receives the lion's share of the spoils. This was the case with the attacks against all the military bases in Syria's north, such as the Sheikh Suleiman Base, the 46<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Khan Touman, and others. As a result, al-Nusra became the only faction in Syria with sufficient ammunitions;<sup>40</sup> additionally, the Front gained control over Aleppo's grain silos, thereby becoming in charge of protecting the city's factories, whose merchants gave monetary payments out of fear that their factories would be looted. The Front also controls several oil wells in the Eastern Region that it has used to finance its activities. Service projects, such as the public transportation buses project in and around Aleppo, have brought the group significant financial returns.

## Infiltration and Spread

The quick spread of the al-Nusra Front in Syria, especially in the Northern region, suggests a carefully studied plan, shrewdly implemented, and exploiting the circumstances and demarche of the revolution. Shortly after its founding, groups from al-Nusra began to participate along with the Free Syrian Army in the armed confrontations,<sup>41</sup> placing its fighters in fronts near Aleppo and Idlib, which enabled them to inflict large losses on the regime's forces and gain the respect of the Free Syrian Army, who welcomed Jihadists on the frontline against the regime because of their ability to remain steadfast.<sup>42</sup>

With the emergence of Arab and foreign fighters, and the increase in the number of Syrians joining the group, the al-Nusra Front expanded its military activities throughout Aleppo's countryside, and carefully chose the locations of its concentration based on two considerations. First, on November 19, 2012, the Front, alongside other battalions, seized large military bases and fortified military outposts to Aleppo's west, gaining large quantities of weapons and ammunitions.<sup>43</sup> The same occurred with the Sheikh Suleiman base, which was controlled by the al-Muhajireen Battalion affiliated with al-Nusra Front;

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<sup>40</sup> Hussain Jammo, "Al-Nusra Front: A rough strategy for a soft takeover of the revolution," (in Arabic) *al-Hayat daily*, January 8, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/470180>.

<sup>41</sup> Bishara, *Syria: The Way of Suffering*, p. 357.

<sup>42</sup> Jammo, "Al-Nusra Front," January 8, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> "Spoils gained by al-Nusra Front at the 46<sup>th</sup> Regiment in Atarib," (in Arabic) YouTube video, 0:32, posted by "atareb syriafree," November 19, 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=W0iu6iwjUbc#](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=W0iu6iwjUbc#).



the group acquired military vehicles, tanks, and large quantities of ammunitions.<sup>44</sup> By taking control of this base, and then turning it into a training camp for fighters, the Front imposed its presence in a geographically-strategic location, representing the meeting point between Aleppo and Idlib.

Secondly, the Front chose to spread its influence in parts of the Eastern countryside of Aleppo, seeking to gain the local population's approval by providing aid and helping "liberate" these regions from the regime forces. Al-Bab is considered among the most important areas for the al-Nusra in the Eastern countryside, and their presence in these areas led to their controlling important military bases, such as the missile and radar battalion in Taana village, the missile battalion in Tal Hasil near al-Sufaira, and the defense factories in al-Sufaira to Aleppo's east.

The spread of the al-Nusra Front enabled it to control the lines of supply and logistics between Turkey and Aleppo, making cooperation and coordination with the Front a prime objective for all the battalions active in Aleppo and its countryside because of their need for armament and supplies. Their spread to the east also helped the fighters expand toward the city of al-Raqqa and, starting in February 2013, to carry out a series of military operations in conjunction with the Islamic Front, especially the Ahrar al-Sham Movement. With these operations, the Front took hold of strategic regions, such as the Tsihrine Dam, the Euphrates Dam in the city of al-Tabaqa, and, finally, the city of al-Raqqa itself, thus managing to take hold of principal strategic points in the North and Northeast.

In Deir al-Zour, al-Nusra entered the city a year after the outbreak of the revolution. A member of the city's revolutionary council, Faysal Abu Suud, recounts: "al-Nusra entered the city when the atmosphere was right, with the escalation of the armed confrontation and the scarce support that was available to the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries in the city resembled a drowning man clutching to a straw after the West and the Arabs abandoned them. The group's entrance into the battles created a qualitative shift in the fight against the regime's forces. Afterward, the Front became a

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<sup>44</sup> "Uzbek man leads takeover attack on the Sheikh Suleiman base in Aleppo," (in Arabic) *al-Riyad Newspaper*, December 11, 2012, <http://www.alriyadh.com/2012/12/11/article791701.html>.



destination for many of the fighters in the city, who now constitute 80 percent of the members of al-Nusra in Deir al-Zour".<sup>45</sup>

Based on their long-term strategic interests, the Front extended their coverage to the mountains of Lattaqiya, to Hama's West, and the villages of Idlib near the coast. In March 2012, the Front began to establish its presence in Lattaqiya's Jabal al-Akrad region, with the help of members (*Ansar*) who are originally from the region as well as a number of Arab and foreign fighters (*Muhajiroon*). Abu Suleiman al-Suri, one of the group's fighters in Lattaqiya, recounts:

After having established a presence in Jabal al-Akrad, the majority of the Front's fighters moved to Jabal al-Turkman, an indispensable move due to the Front's conviction that the regime may find itself forced to establish an Alawite state on the coast; it was thus essential to besiege the Alawite Mountains in order to prevent the creation of such a state. The move enabled the Front to bombard Alawite villages and respond to their "aggressions" against the Sunnis in Lattaqiya and throughout Syria.<sup>46</sup>

Their relationship with local communities played a key role in al-Nusra's spread and influence. At the start of its formation, al-Nusra was careful not to mix with civilians, fearing it would engender frictions with citizens, and tried to avoid the residents having any influence on its fighters. However, following their entry in Aleppo and the extension to the countryside, al-Nusra found itself forced to mix with civilians. Wanting to avoid a repetition of the Iraqi experience, al-Nusra fighters were careful not to provoke local civilians and sought to gain their favor, requiring them to provide services in the regions that were no longer under the authority of the state, such as distributing gas tanks and fuel, providing the bakeries with the needed flour, organizing traffic, and others. The Front made a mark, differentiating themselves from other opposition brigades and battalions, by providing this "security stability" and responding to the needs of the population. It also stayed away from typical practices of traditional Jihadist movements, such as the application of Islamic legal rulings based on a theological interpretation, stating that "in wars, law is not implemented,"<sup>47</sup> and steering away from disregard of

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<sup>45</sup> Personal interview via Skype with "Faysal Abu Suud," member of the council of the revolutionaries of Deir al-Zour, on May 30, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with "Abu Suleiman al-Suri" via Skype, May 14, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> For an expansive discussion of the subject, see: Abd al-Munim Mustapha Halima (Abu Baseer al-Tartusi), *Jihad and Legal Policy: Recommendations and Assessments for Contemporary Jihadist Movements*, (in Arabic) February 15, 2007, <http://www.altartosi.com/book/book27>. Also see: "On the

human life or the publication of videos showing civilian executions, as was the practice with other such organizations.<sup>48</sup>

## Relationships with other Battalions

Upon the announcement of the creation of al-Nusra Front in early 2012, its fighters had not yet crystallized as an organizational structure with a clear hierarchy. Armed action mostly relied on local battalions in the villages and the different regions acting under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army. At the time of its inception, al-Nusra banned its fighters from mixing, communicating, and coordinating with the Free Syrian Army battalions. The Front generally looked down at the Free Syrian Army's fragmentation of military action, snubbing those fighters who, according to the Front, were defectors, lacked religious and ethical discipline (since they smoked, cursed, spoke in a lewd manner, did not pray, etc. ), and lacked the Jihadist upbringing and education.<sup>49</sup>

With the heightened confrontation between the regime forces and the revolutionaries' battalions, al-Nusra changed tactics. The battalions, thanks to their intimate knowledge of their regions, the supply routes, and the fighting style of the regular army, were able to achieve important victories on the field, prompting the Front to coordinate with them. The cooperation between the Front and the Free Army improved the operations of the revolutionary battalions.

Before each operation, the revolutionaries would request the participation of al-Nusra Front, who would in turn send them a "suicide bomber" or an explosives-laden car to be detonated at the targeted location, in addition to fighters who would fearlessly occupy the front lines of the battle; eventually, the revolutionary battalions' role has become of support for the work started by al-Nusra.<sup>50</sup> At the beginning, the alliance with the Front was more opportunistic, enabling the Free Syrian Army quick victories that would provide them with spoils, weapons, and ammunitions without substantial effort. This contributed to the "mythification" of al-Nusra Front; victories became linked to the

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question of implementing legal rulings in the liberated regions," (in Arabic) The Theological and Doctrinal Debate Forum, June 13, 2013: <http://t3beer.ahlamontada.com/t1020-topic>.

<sup>48</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Rise of Al Qaeda in Syria," *Foreign Policy*, December 6, 2012, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/06/the\\_rise\\_of\\_al\\_qaeda\\_in\\_syria](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/12/06/the_rise_of_al_qaeda_in_syria).

<sup>49</sup> Personal interview with Al-Hajj Bakri, one of the Free Syrian Army leaders in Hama, in November 2012. Al-Hajj Bakri was quoting the commander of al-Nusra Front in the city of Halfaya in the Hama governorate.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Front's participation to the extent that entire battles were canceled or suspended because the Front refused to participate and join the attack.<sup>51</sup> As a result, in the words of Ahrar al-Sham's leader Hassan Abbud, building close links with the Front became "a strategic option for every faction on the ground because they are tough, brave, and steadfast in the battles".<sup>52</sup> Al-Nusra made use of its legendary status, and in late 2012 began to impose conditions on the other battalions before participating in military operations, such as receiving a greater share of military spoils.<sup>53</sup>

The majority of the battalions (al-Tawheen Brigade, Suqur al-Sham Brigades, and the Syrian Islamic Front) describe their relationship with al-Nusra Front as "good," despite differences on political ambitions. There has rarely been a squabble or a military clash between al-Nusra and the main military formations of the opposition, with the exception of the al-Farouq Battalions and some tribes in the Deir al-Zour region. However, the Front finds itself more amenable to coordination with the Ahrar al-Sham Movement and the other factions of the Syrian Islamic Front,<sup>54</sup> leading to an alliance between them in the majority of battles.<sup>55</sup> Though differences exist, the two movements share the same intellectual leanings, political ambitions, desire to establish an Islamic state, and organizational discipline. The Ahrar al-Sham Movement is among the most organized and disciplined military formations in Syria, with its organizational structure being largely similar to that of al-Nusra Front, granting al-Sham great efficiency in the confrontations with the regime.

On the other hand, al-Nusra's relationship with the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Syria, announced on September 12, 2012, varies according to each constituent faction in the Front. For instance, al-Nusra cooperated with Ahrar al-Sham Movement to establish a joint operations' room, and participated with Suqur al-Sham in liberating the Taftnaz military airport in early 2013. In coordination with other battalions including

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<sup>51</sup> Personal interview with Muslih al-Thalji, one of the fighters who participated in the campaign. According to his testimonies, the "single body" battle in the Hama countryside may have been the clearest example of this phenomenon, with the battle put on hold due to the non-participation of the al-Nusra Front.

<sup>52</sup> "Hassan Abbud ... the main figures of the armed opposition, Part 1" (in Arabic) *al-Jazeera Net*, June 11, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/28fb39ff-06ea-47c9-a1ae-ec7dc64fd624>.

<sup>53</sup> Personal interview with Ala al-Qadi.

<sup>54</sup> The Islamic Front is led by Hassan Abbud, "Abu Abdallah al-Hamawi", leader of Ahrar al-Sham. "Founding statement for the Syrian Islamic Front and its included battalions," (in Arabic) YouTube video, 4:21, posted by "almrds," December 22, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YySOTYEWKLw>.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Mohammad al-Ameen, a leadership figure close to the legal committee in Aleppo and a member of Ahrar al-Sham.

Ahrar al-Sham and al-Tawheed Brigade, the Front fought in the “liberating the prisoners” battle against the Aleppo Central Prison, executing a series of suicide attacks in the area surrounding the prison.<sup>56</sup> In Damascus, extensive coordination was evident between al-Nusra Front and al-Islam Brigade in the fight to rebuff the regime’s attack on Jobar (which is very close to the capital), al-Utaiba, al-Abada, and al-Qassimiya.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, the relationship with al-Farouq battalions has been extremely tense, reaching in many instances the level of armed clashes and mutual liquidations.<sup>58</sup>

## Fractures within al-Nusra and the Emergence of ISIS

On April 9, 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, commander of the Islamic State of Iraq, announced the merger of al-Nusra Front for the People of Syria with the Islamic State of Iraq, thus establishing the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and calling upon all Jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria to join ISIS.<sup>59</sup> The following day, the al-Manara al-Bayda media group played a speech by Abu Muhammad al-Julani in which he denied his knowledge of al-Baghdadi’s decision to form ISIS and reminded al-Baghdadi of his founding pledge to “reinstate the authority of God on his land, and lead the nation toward the implementation of [God’s] law and the dissemination of [God’s] doctrine,” at the time of the al-Nusra Front’s creation.<sup>60</sup> Al-Julani noted that the announcement of “the State of Islam” should have been made in conjunction with all those who participated in the Jihad—factions, clerics, and migrant fighters. His choice of language, however, was non-confrontational, one in which he sought “to climb from a lower level to a higher one” by renewing his pledge of allegiance to the leader of al-Qaeda Ayman al-Zawahiri, demanding al-Zawahiri’s arbitration on this question.<sup>61</sup>

The split was unexpected and came without warning, prompting media and political circles to deem this exchange as a major event with large potential repercussions.

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<sup>56</sup> “Suicide bombers besiege the soldiers of al-Assad in the buildings of the Aleppo Central Prison,” (in Arabic) *Orient News*, al-Mashriq Television Channel, October 17, 2013, [http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news\\_show&id=5777](http://orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=5777).

<sup>57</sup> Personal interview with Muhannad Abu Hafiz, a member of al-Islam Brigade in Jobar on June 15, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> “The mutual liquidation of leaderships between al-Nusra and the al-Farouq Battalions stirs fears of infighting within the Syrian opposition,” (in Arabic) *al-Hayat Newspaper*, January 13, 2013, <http://alhayat.com/Details/471614>.

<sup>59</sup> “The announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” (in Arabic) *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 9, 2012, <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=724119&issueno=12552#.UIUXj2zJS74>.

<sup>60</sup> “Al-Julani’s speech,” (in Arabic) YouTube video, 7:15, April 10, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXZ3YpzF4Mw>.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Nobody was able to explain the roots of the conflict. For the purpose of this paper, the conflict's background has been traced through numerous interviews conducted with members of al-Nusra and with figures close to the Front. Abu Ubaida al-Masri, leader of Jaysh Mohammad (Army of Mohammad) in the city of Azaz, explains the rift as follows:<sup>62</sup>

Differences began to surface between al-Julani and al-Baghdadi with al-Baghdadi's followers being tasked with observing al-Julani and his behavior, something akin to guardians. Abu Ali al-Iraqi, in particular, was responsible for supervising al-Julani and delivering his messages to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Iraqi rapidly began imposing his views upon al-Julani, such as the proposal to bomb the National Coalition headquarters in Turkey, which al-Julani rejected. Al-Baghdadi's followers began to feel that matters were starting to get out of their hands, and that al-Julani was excluding them from decision making. Two men close to al-Baghdadi sent him a letter stating that "al-Julani will do with you as Baibars did with Qutuz". Infuriated, Al-Baghdadi went on assembling a Shura council, excluding al-Julani and four other Syrian members, to discuss how to deal with al-Julani and the Islamic State.

Mohammad al-Ameen, a leader close to the legal committee in Aleppo and a member of Ahrar al-Sham, adds other reasons for the conflict between al-Julani and al-Baghdadi, centering on al-Julani's refusal to repeat the mistakes of the Iraqi experience, something which al-Baghdadi views as indispensable to impose the authority of God and to implement the *Sharia*. Al-Julani resented al-Baghdadi for a number of reasons: the hastiness of resorting to *takfeer* (excommunication) and the killing of those who oppose the State; the disregard for the lives of civilians during operations; the use of suicide bombings as a preferred fighting method; the arrogance in dealing with others, forcing them to pledge allegiance to an unknown commander, stating that those who

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<sup>62</sup> On May 20, 2013, the author obtained a letter penned by Abu Ubaida al-Masri, the leader in al-Nusra Front and head of Jaysh Mohammad in the city of Azaz, explaining the reasons behind the conflict between al-Julani and al-Baghdadi, and which led to the announcement of the "State". The letter would not have been viewed as trustworthy had it not been in line with most of the testimonies collected by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies on the veracity of its content and the reality of the affair. Among these testimonies, Sheikh "Abu Abdullah al-Shari," the leading figure in the Front of Aleppo's Clerics, Mohammad al-Ameen, who is close to the legal committee in Aleppo, Abu Suleiman al-Suri, Ala al-Qadi, and others. Moreover, the letter mentions a number of facts that were cited in the statement of Ayman al-Zawahiri regarding the conflict between al-Baghdadi and al-Julani, which was published on Jihadist Internet forums on June 9, 2013. It should be noted that Abu Ubaida al-Masri later published this letter in early October 2013 on his Twitter account.

do not pledge allegiance to the Front are considered apostates who defy the authority of God; the imposed restriction by al-Baghdadi on cooperation with other revolutionary factions; and, finally, al-Baghdadi's demand that the Front extends its influence over all the liberated territories and devotes its resources and the spoils to promote Jihadism.

Fractures within the Front emerged shortly after the confrontation between al-Baghdadi and al-Julani. The majority of the *mujahirun* (foreign fighters) welcomed the announcement of the ISIS and pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi as their commander. A number of Syrians within the Front (al-Ansar), however, decided not to join the new organization; some of them remained loyal to al-Julani, while others were reticent vis-à-vis the pledge of allegiance to al-Zawahiri, preferring to withdraw from the Front altogether and joined Syrian Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>63</sup>

The al-Nusra leadership avoided an armed clash with al-Baghdadi's supporters, preferring to wait for al-Zawahiri's arbitration, being convinced that it would be in their favor. Al-Zawahiri, in fact, issued a statement renouncing the merger, allowing al-Julani to remain in his position as "a general overseer" of al-Nusra Front in Syria.<sup>64</sup> Al-Zawahiri's statement failed to curb the conflict between the two parties, and al-Baghdadi's proponents doubted the statement, accusing al-Nusra of forging it. Furthermore, they described al-Julani and his supporters as "not being trustworthy". Even after Jihadist Internet forums published al-Zawahiri's statement and affirmed its authenticity, al-Baghdadi rejected the content of the arbitration letter; al-Furqan media group (affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq) broadcasted a speech by al-Baghdadi on June 15, 2013.<sup>65</sup>

In his speech, al-Baghdadi talked of the potential benefits and possible harms of ISIS's announcement, especially given that many Jihadist theorists, such as Abu Baseer al-Tartusi, viewed the decision to declare the State as containing more harm than good. This was the same argument advanced by al-Julani when he rejected al-Baghdadi's decision.<sup>66</sup> Regardless, al-Baghdadi defiantly declared that the Islamic State in Iraq and

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<sup>63</sup> Author interviews with Abu Suleiman al-Suri, Hani Ahmad, and Mohammad al-Ameen.

<sup>64</sup> "Al-Zawahiri abolishes the merger of the Jihadists of Syria and Iraq," see note 31.

<sup>65</sup> "[The state] will remain in Iraq and Syria" (al-Baghdadi's speech in Arabic), YouTube video, June 15, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFGsamaxoAk>. [This YouTube video has been terminated.]

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Al-Baghdadi also said: "We have gotten used to the notion that our sheikhs have the trenchant opinion on obscure matters. They see benefits and interests where others see corruption. They do not care [what others think] because they are rightly-guided, and that time will reveal that it we will be

Syria was there to stay, and that he will not concede on this point.<sup>67</sup> He rejected al-Zawahiri's disapproval of the merger, noting that there are legal and theological problems with al-Zawahiri's opinion, adding that he chose between God's command and an opinion contravening God's command, for which he chose the former.<sup>68</sup> Following this declaration, the gulf between the Front and the ISIS widened, with both sides working to enhance their positions in the field.

Overall, the repercussions of this split on the ground can be summed up as follows:<sup>69</sup>

- The presence of al-Nusra Front in the city of Aleppo receded, with the exception of some areas in Bustan al-Qasr and the area around Aleppo's central prison. The Front's presence almost completely vanished in the Aleppan countryside after al-Baghdadi's supporters took over all the headquarters and offices of the Front, expelling those who remained loyal to the Front. ISIS rapidly announced the affiliation of these regions and cities with the Islamic Emirate, forcing the locals and the revolutionary factions to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi as their commander.
- ISIS has completely taken over the al-Nusra Front in the city of al-Raqqa, where al-Nusra lost all presence.
- Al-Nusra Front was able to retain its presence and influence in the Idlib countryside thanks to the protection offered by Ahrar al-Sham, which prevented al-Baghdadi's men from repeating the scenario of Aleppo with the takeover of al-Nusra's headquarters and military camps and the forcing of al-Nusra's members to join the new organization.
- Al-Nusra was sharply divided in Deir al-Zour; currently residing in Deir al-Zour, Abu Maria al-Iraqi and his expressed loyalty to al-Julani has prevented the effacement of the al-Nusra Front in Deir al-Zour. In the countryside, however, especially the cities of al-Mayadin and al-Boukamal (which are close to Iraq), ISIS maintains the strongest presence.
- Al-Baghdadi's supporters in Lattaqiya represent the majority, leading to the Front's receding presence in the region.

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incapable of fathoming those who refrain from waging Jihad, those with special interests, and those with weak wills."

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> These conclusions are based on the author's research of the Syrian situation and the presence of Jihadist movements, in addition to numerous testimonies and interviews, including those cited in this paper; others testimonies could not be cited because the interviewees requested anonymity.



- Al-Nusra is still present in Damascus and its surrounding areas because its commander, Sheikh Abu Sameer, recanted on his pledge of allegiance for al-Baghdadi, pledging loyalty to the Front once again.
- In Houran, some of the Front's members have joined al-Baghdadi, withdrawing from Houran to the northern regions in order to reinforce the ISIS in its areas of influence. Al-Nusra still maintains a strong organization in Houran led by Abu Anas al-Hawrani.

## Jihadists: The Revolution's Debacle

Jihadist movements have infiltrated the Syrian revolution and have rapidly become an influential actor on the Syrian scene. The political and armed revolutionary forces have exhibited short-sightedness by turning a blind eye to their activities and, in some instances, going as far as defending them against their critics. Some revolutionary factions have dealt with Jihadists in an opportunistic and pragmatic manner, taking advantage of their role in combating the troops of the regime, paving the way for more Jihadi presence and influence on the field. ISIS has now turned from fighting the regime's forces to fighting the revolutionary battalions and expelling them from regions under their control, as shown in al-Raqqa, where ISIS attacked the headquarters of the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigade, affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, in mid-August 2013 and in the city of Azaz, where it seized control of the city after clashes with the "Tempest of the North Brigade" (also affiliated with the Free Syrian Army) in mid-September 2013.<sup>70</sup> The same scenario was repeated in other locations, such as the village of al-Dana in the Idlib countryside and al-Shadadi in the countryside of al-Hassaka.

Many Syrians fear the presence of Jihadist movements, particularly since the spread of black Islamic banners (representing al-Qaeda's flag), the widespread appearance of religious courts and the classification of the Syrian people into "believers" (Sunni Muslims), "people of protection (Christians), and infidel apostates (Alawites) have greatly undermined the Syrian revolution. Making matters worse is the violence employed by Jihadists, including suicide and car bombs that constitute their preferred fighting methods. For the adherents of Jihadist movements, violence has been justified in the ability to target the regime's security headquarters and main pillars of power; however, the outcome of this violence was the death of hundreds of innocent citizens

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<sup>70</sup> "Zaman al-Wasl reveals the full story behind the battle of Azaz between the ISIS and the Tempest," (in Arabic) Zaman al-Wasl, September 18, 2013, <http://www.zamanalwsl.net/readNews.php?id=41207>.



who happened to be near the locations of the bombings.<sup>71</sup> The Jihadists presence has also led to a shift in international opinion on the Syrian revolution, transforming it from a just cause against despotism to a civil war in which the Jihadist's role is abundant. What is more, this Jihadist presence has provided the regime with the proof and evidence needed to prove its initial hypothesis from the beginning of the revolution—the protestors in Syria are “Salafist terrorist groups”.

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<sup>71</sup> Bishara, *Syria: The Way of Suffering*, p. 351.

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