



# SYRIA

## Quick Facts

Population: 18,028,549 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 199,951 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 90.3%, Kurdish, Armenian, and other 9.7%

GDP (official exchange rate): \$24.6 billion (2014 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2018)

## INTRODUCTION

*Islamism has featured prominently in the politics and policies of modern Syria on a number of different levels. Like other majority Sunni Muslim Arab countries governed by secular autocrats, Syria has a long tradition of Sunni Islamist opposition activity. The fact that the hereditary dictatorship of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has long been dominated by Alawis, an Islamic offshoot sect viewed as heretical by religious Sunnis, renders it uniquely vulnerable to Islamist challenges. It has managed to survive for nearly a half-century in spite of this Achilles' heel by brutally suppressing dissent and tightly regulating Sunni religious practices.*

*Notwithstanding its heavy-handed treatment of Islamists at home, the Assad regime eagerly armed, financed, and sheltered foreign Islamist organizations committed to fighting its enemies abroad. These groups have had varied sectarian and ideological affiliations, ranging from the Shia Hezbollah militia in Lebanon to the Sunni Palestinian Hamas movement and al-Qaeda-aligned terrorists battling US-led coalition forces in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. By supporting these groups, the Assad regime not only advanced its regional strategic objectives, but also helped defuse Islamist militancy at home by appropriating radical causes that resonated with disaffected youth.*

*The eruption of a popular uprising against Assad in March 2011 and the country's subsequent collapse into civil war changed everything. Although protests were initially peaceful, multi-sectarian, and explicitly oriented around the pursuit of democratic change, the escalating violence and prolonged breakdown of law and order in many areas of the country were exploited by both indigenous and foreign Islamists, including many who had hitherto supported the regime.*

*Once the bane of secularists, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood came to dominate the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition. However, more radical Islamist forces on the ground have since eclipsed its influence. Flush with financing from the Arab Gulf (in contrast to cash-starved, poorly-armed, and secular-leaning rebel forces), Salafi-jihadists close to al-Qaeda have gained dominion over key parts of northwestern Syria. Many rallied alongside Iraqi jihadists under the banner of the Islamic State, which*

*seized control of large swathes of Iraq's Sunni heartland in 2013 and 2014. However, over the past year, military advances by the U.S.-led global coalition have helped to substantially degrade the territorial holdings and political power of the Islamic State.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

More than six years of civil war in Syria have enabled an extraordinarily diverse array of Islamist actors to flourish. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into three categories: a small coterie of pro-regime Islamists, mostly Shia and non-Syrian; anti-regime Sunni political Islamists (ostensibly committed to advancing their agenda by democratic means); and Sunni Salafi-jihadists committed to either forcibly establishing an Islamic republic in Syria or using it as a stepping stone to pursue regional and international ambitions.

### *Pro-regime foreign Islamists*

At the beginning of the uprising in March 2011, the Syrian regime retained an impressive array of foreign and domestic Islamist proxies.

In the Palestinian Territories, Syria had supported the Sunni Islamist groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, for two decades. Alongside militant secular Palestinian groups, both were allowed to maintain offices and military bases inside Syria. During the Syrian occupation of Lebanon from 1976 to 2005, the Assad regime was a principal supporter and conduit to the Shiite Islamist Hezbollah movement, channeling Iranian arms and funds to the militia as it waged war against Israeli forces occupying southern Lebanon prior to Israel's withdrawal in 2000, then as it waged war intermittently against Israel itself. Finally, the Syrian regime covertly supported foreign jihadists entering Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Many Syrian jihadists affiliated with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) were allowed to set up safe houses and even recruit volunteers inside Syria.<sup>2</sup> When the Assad regime dialed back its support for Iraqi insurgents in 2007–2008, many of these jihadis left Iraq. Hundreds were imprisoned upon their return to Syria, while some were allowed to cross into Lebanon, where they founded the group Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp.<sup>3</sup>

When demonstrations against the Syrian regime first erupted in March 2011, most of the regime's Sunni Islamist allies remained on the sidelines.<sup>4</sup> Once it became clear that Assad was unable to stamp out the uprising by force, however, they abandoned the regime in droves. Hamas leaders departed their longtime home in Damascus for Doha, Qatar, in January 2012,<sup>5</sup> while Salafi-jihadists came out squarely in support of the uprising.

Hezbollah, on the other hand, has steadfastly stood by the Syrian regime. The movement has used its considerable political power within Lebanon's quasi-democratic system to ensure that the Lebanese Army and other state security institutions act to prevent smuggling and other pro-rebel activities in Lebanon. In 2012, Hezbollah forces began entering Syria, ostensibly to protect Shiite shrines but also to bolster pro-regime forces. In mid-2013, Hezbollah forces were instrumental in the regime's recapture of Qusayr, a predominantly Shiite Syrian town of thirty thousand, visible from the Lebanese border and essential to sealing off rebel supply routes into Lebanon.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Lebanese fighters from Hezbollah, there are also Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, and native Syrian Shiite militias that support the regime. The most numerous and effective of these fighters beyond Hezbollah are the thousands of Iraqi Shiite militiamen.

The first major international Shia formation was the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, which emerged in 2012–2013.<sup>7</sup> Through 2013, a number of more specific formations emerged from the network of the Brigade, mostly composed of and led by Iraqi Shia. Some of these militias reflect Iranian-backed splinters from the Sadrist trend that feel let down by Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's refusal to endorse fighting in Syria. During the same time period, older Iraqi militias such as the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq,

and Kata'ib Hezbollah became involved in Syria under their own names, and new Iraqi militias in Syria like Saraya al-Khorasani, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba', and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada' emerged.<sup>8</sup>

Following major advances by the Islamic State through northern and western Iraq in the summer of 2014, many Iraqi fighters returned to Iraq, with Hezbollah supposedly recruiting Lebanese Shiites to fill their places.<sup>9</sup> However, with the reversal of a number of Islamic State gains in Iraq and a relative stabilization of the situation, Iraqi fighters redeployed to Syria in considerable numbers through 2015, with a spike likely coinciding with the Russian intervention that began in October 2015.

The main units of Afghan and Pakistani Shiite fighters are Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainabiyoun respectively. Both of these groups are affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and have mostly recruited Afghan and Pakistani Shia who are resident in Iran. The members of these groups generally lack the experience of Lebanese and Iraqi fighters and are used as frontline cannon fodder.

Among Syrian Shia, a number of formations have evolved on the basis of the idea of developing a native Syrian Muqawama Islamiya (Islamic Resistance), also known as Syrian Hezbollah. Some of these formations are directly affiliated with Hezbollah, most notably Quwat al-Ridha, which largely recruits from the Homs area; Junud al-Mahdi and the Imam al-Hujja Regiment, which recruit from the villages of Nubl and Zahara' to the north of Aleppo; and Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi. Not all Syrian Hezbollah militias recruit only among Shia or require members to convert to Shiite Islam. For instance, some of these groups have recruited from members of the Druze population in Syria.

#### *Anti-regime Sunni Islamists*

The most prominent political Islamist group in Syria is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, though other groups are also active. The Syrian chapter of the Egypt-based pan-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood movement was established in 1946. Despite its status as an offshoot, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood differs significantly from the original Muslim Brotherhood in its base of socio-economic support. Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt traditionally drew mass support from rural areas, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's base lay in the Sunni urban nobility and middle class. In 1963, the secular Arab nationalist Ba'ath party seized power in Syria and began implementing land reforms and nationalizing industries, which severely threatened middle-class interests.<sup>10</sup> With independent political parties and media outlawed, the mosque became the one semi-protected space where dissidents could voice opposition to regime policies.<sup>11</sup> Assad persuaded influential Lebanese Shiite cleric Musa al-Sadr to issue a ruling certifying that Alawis are Shia Muslims and therefore eligible for the presidency.<sup>12</sup>

During the late 1970s, Islamist militants affiliated with the Brotherhood launched an armed insurrection against the Assad regime with the goal of replacing it with an Islamic state. Though the militants had some material support from rival Arab states, they were unable to rally support in rural areas where armed resistance was more tactically feasible. Thus, the rebellion never seriously threatened the regime. Thousands of Islamists were imprisoned, and membership in the Brotherhood was made punishable by death. When militants seized control of large parts of Hama in 1982, regime forces destroyed much of the city, killing tens of thousands.

This episode virtually eradicated the Brotherhood's influence in Syria for the following three decades. Most ranking members of the Brotherhood went into exile,<sup>13</sup> where they splintered into rival factions. Meanwhile, the Assad regime's soaring regional influence in the 1980s dissuaded rival governments from sponsoring armed opposition in Syria. The devastation resulting from the Brotherhood's failed insurrection made dissidents inside Syria wary of any association with Islamism in challenging the regime.

From 1996 to 2000, there was a gradual moderation of the Brotherhood's platform, rhetoric, and tactics under the leadership of Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni from his exile in Jordan, who was head of the Brotherhood from 1996 to 2010.<sup>14</sup> In 2001, the Brotherhood renounced violence. In 2004, it adopted a new political platform calling for multiparty democracy and minority rights.<sup>15</sup> Bayanouni also worked

to improve the Brotherhood's ties with secular opposition forces. In 2005, the Brotherhood joined secular dissidents inside Syria in signing the Damascus Declaration, which was a unified statement from all Syrian opposition groups calling for a "peaceful, gradual" democratic reform process.<sup>16</sup>

After the Damascus Declaration initiative failed to galvanize internal opposition to the regime, the Brotherhood focused its attention on building ties with Western and Arab governments bent on bringing Assad to heel in the wake of his alleged involvement in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.<sup>17</sup> In 2006, it formed an alliance with recently exiled vice-president Abdul Halim Khaddam, a Sunni ex-Ba'athist with close ties to the Saudi royal family.<sup>18</sup>

The outbreak of mass protests against the Syrian regime in March 2011 took the Brotherhood by surprise. As in other Middle Eastern states experiencing the so-called Arab Spring, Islamists initially played little discernable role in the unrest.<sup>19</sup> The Brotherhood declined to endorse the uprising for nearly two months,<sup>20</sup> calculating whether its interests would best be served by extracting concessions from a weakened Assad or helping achieve his overthrow. Once it became clear the regime was not going to be able to extinguish the uprising, Brotherhood leaders threw their weight fully behind the cause.

The Brotherhood's secretive and elitist structure limited how useful it could be to a popular uprising. This structure served the Brotherhood well when organizing cell-based resistance in the late 1970s and avoiding regime infiltration while in exile, but did not lend itself to mass mobilization. Furthermore, the Brotherhood's predominantly urban social base left it ill-suited to connect with a popular uprising emanating primarily from rural areas and the outskirts of major cities.

Nevertheless, the Brotherhood had an advantage over secular exile groups, due to its established organizational hierarchy, large network of members, and affiliated Brotherhood chapters around the globe, as well as burgeoning relations with Qatar and Turkey (which turned against the Assad regime several months into the uprising).<sup>21</sup> The Brotherhood played a prominent role in the August 2011 establishment of the Syrian National Council, which brought the exiled Syrian opposition groups under a single umbrella, and its successor organization, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC).<sup>22</sup>

Since then, a number of moderate Islamist currents have vied for influence with the Brotherhood within the SNC. A reformist current, which was more receptive to liberal democratic norms than the Brotherhood, included the National Action Group, an organization co-founded by Obeida Nahas, who served as political advisor to Bayanouni and was reportedly the architect behind the Brotherhood's short-lived alliance with former vice-president Khaddam. Much like members of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Nahas and his allies describe themselves as religious conservatives, not Islamists.

The Movement for Justice and Development (MJD), founded in London in 2006 in response to Bayanouni's alliance with Khaddam, actually named itself after the AKP. Its political platform calls for the Syrian constitution to declare Syria a nation of "Islamic civilization and culture," but without making sharia a principal source of legislation.<sup>23</sup> The Syrian National Movement (SNM), led by Emad ad-Din al-Rashid, advocates acceptance of the "Islamic reference" (al-Marja'iyya al-Islamiyya) as a source of legislation and the basis for the national identity.<sup>24</sup> Former SNC secretary-general Badr Jamous is affiliated with the SNM.<sup>25</sup>

Another current of devout (though not strictly speaking Islamist) Sunni opposition leaders is composed of ulema (traditional Sufi religious scholars) who fled Syria during the revolt, many of whom had acquired substantial followings inside Syria because Assad's regime relaxed controls over religious life in the past decade. The most notable traditionalist group is Muhammad Kurayyim Rajih's League of the Ulema of Sham (LUS), led mostly by clerics from Damascus and Homs.<sup>26</sup> Moaz al-Khatib of LUS, former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, served as the first president of the SNC. Current LUS president Sheikh Osama al-Rifai is the spiritual leader of a moderate Sufi movement called Jamaat Zayd (Zayd's Group), which the regime allowed to operate in Syria in the 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

In April 2014, pro-Brotherhood ulema joined together with traditionalists, reformists, and Sururis to

form the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC), purporting to be an official religious authority for rebel forces. Headed by Osama al-Rifai, it is aligned with Qatar and Turkey and opposed to al-Qaeda-linked extremists.<sup>28</sup> Most Islamists in the SNC have avoided raising divisive social issues, such as veiling women and banning alcohol.

The perceived dominance of Islamists in the SNC alienated many secular opposition figures. Kamal Lebwany, a dissident physician released from detention in November 2011 after nearly a decade in a Syrian jail, lamented that “the Muslim Brotherhood monopolizes everything” and warned that its pretensions to democracy are “a liberal peel covering a totalitarian, nondemocratic core.”<sup>29</sup>

Although the Brotherhood declined to establish a fighting force in Syria bearing its name, it has provided funding to a range of different militias. Its primary vehicle for providing funding was the Commission for the Protection of Civilians (CPC), established in December 2011. The Brotherhood intends less to directly control military units or promote its ideological agenda than to increase its leverage sufficiently to make gains in an internationally-brokered settlement.<sup>30</sup>

Although the CPC was initially the main source of external financing for the revolt, it was soon supplanted by the fundraising networks of radical Salafi preachers based in the Arab Gulf. Many of the CPC’s early recipients drifted away as more sources of funding became available, most notably via the Tawhid Brigade, Ahrar al-Sham, and Suqour al-Sham.<sup>31</sup>

A second umbrella of Brotherhood-backed militias in and around Idlib and Hama was the Shields of the Revolution Commission, nominally loyal to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) Supreme Military Command.<sup>32</sup> Over the course of the war, militias affiliated with the Brotherhood have been eclipsed in strength by more radical groups. “Without a negotiated cease-fire,” scholar Aron Lund wrote prophetically in mid-2013, “the real outcome of the Syrian conflict is likely to be determined on the battlefield, where the Brotherhood’s failure to establish a strong presence could significantly weaken its hand.”<sup>33</sup>

The organization that can arguably best be seen as a successor to the Shields of the Revolution Commission is Faylaq al-Sham, announced as a merger of nineteen brigades in March 2014. The group went on to become a key component of the Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest) coalition set up in 2015 in Idlib province, which will be discussed further below. It also played a role in fighting in Aleppo, both against the regime and its allies as part of the reconstituted Jaysh al-Fath in 2016 and against the Islamic State in the north Aleppo countryside alongside CIA-backed FSA groups with Turkish support.

### *Sunni Salafi-Jihadis*

The Syrian civil war has witnessed a proliferation of militant groups adhering to Salafism, an ultra-orthodox Sunni Islamist current that believes Muslims must return to the ways of al-salaf al-saleh (the righteous ancestors) from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and rid themselves of *bidaa* (innovations) that have taken root in the centuries since. The latter include not only such secular conventions as democracy and the nation-state, but also centuries of Islamic jurisprudence and traditions that have come to define how most Muslims practice their faith. Non-Sunni Muslims and Sufis are viewed as heretics. In sharp contrast to members of the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, Salafis traditionally eschewed participation in politics, focusing instead on *dawa* (missionary work) to convert Muslim societies to their way of thinking.

During the late 1970s, a younger generation of Salafis in the Arab Gulf (many of them expatriates) began to reject the movement’s traditional political quietism and either agitate for Islamic rule at home or fight perceived enemies of Islam abroad. Thousands went to South Asia to combat the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of Kabul to the mujahideen, many of these so-called Arab Afghans returned home to continue fighting for their beliefs or joined Osama bin Laden’s expanding al-Qaeda network. Many Arab Afghans later went to Iraq in the wake of the 2003 US-led invasion, where they eventually coalesced into AQI, rebranded first as the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen

(Mujahideen Shura Council) in early 2006 and then the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006, some months after AQI leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's death.

Today, two of the most prominent Salafi-jihadi groups are Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. In late 2011, ISI chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi began sending undercover operatives into Syria, many of them Syrian nationals. Those operatives released a video statement in January 2012 calling themselves Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front).<sup>34</sup> The new organization claimed responsibility for a multitude of spectacular suicide and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) bombings during the first half of 2012.<sup>35</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra also displayed undeniable prowess on the battlefield, spearheading the capture of numerous regime bases and fortified installations.<sup>36</sup> Led by Abu Mohammad al-Golani, Jabhat al-Nusra quickly received endorsements from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri<sup>37</sup> and other influential jihadi ideologues.<sup>38</sup> In sharp contrast to ISI, whose strategy during the Iraq war alienated local Sunnis, Jabhat al-Nusra developed cooperative relations with non-jihadist rebels and limited its mistreatment of civilians. When Jabhat al-Nusra was officially designated a terrorist group by the US government in December 2012, the Brotherhood and many FSA commanders publicly defended it.

In late 2012, Baghdadi became fearful that Jabhat al-Nusra was growing too independent. In April 2013, he unilaterally declared that ISI and Jabhat al-Nusra were to merge to form the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, Golani disputed the merger and appealed to Zawahiri to mediate, declaring a renewal of the bay'a (pledge of allegiance) to the al-Qaeda leader. When Zawahiri ruled in favor of Golani, ISIS broke away from al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra, taking most foreign fighters operating in Jabhat al-Nusra's ranks with it.

ISIS aggressively consolidated areas of northern Syria under its control, clashing frequently with other rebels, including Jabhat al-Nusra, and even executing several of their military commanders.<sup>39</sup> It soon became clear that ISIS, unlike other rebel groups, was not predominately fighting to overthrow Assad—indeed, the regime's endurance had created ideal conditions for ISIS's growth. After ISIS consolidated its contiguous holdings of territory in Syria in the wake of infighting with rebels in early 2014, it went on to overrun much of northern Iraq in the spring and summer of that year. As a result, ISIS officially declared its caliphate on June 29, 2014, and changed its name to the Islamic State.<sup>40</sup>

In contrast to many other insurgent groups operating in Syria, the Islamic State has derived most of its income from indigenous revenue sources, not outside donations.<sup>41</sup> In addition to deriving revenue from taxation and confiscations, the Islamic State gained control of most of the oil-rich province of Deir az-Zor as well as other oil resources in Hasakah, Raqqa, and Homs provinces, allowing the organization to make considerable income selling off Syrian crude oil (topping up to \$1.5 million a day in late 2014, going by the Abu Sayyaf records).<sup>42</sup> It has also allowed its oil to be resold to outside clients, including the Assad regime<sup>43</sup> and rebel-held areas of Syria. When ISIS took over Mosul just before the creation of the caliphate, it was reported to have looted \$425 million in cash from the central bank, making it by some accounts the world's richest terrorist organization.<sup>44</sup> However, Islamic State finances have since been degraded by coalition airstrikes targeting "cash points" and the oil industry. Further, the Islamic State's taxation base has been reduced because local forces acting with coalition support have recaptured territory. This drop in revenue has resulted in reductions of salaries and benefits for fighters, which take up a considerable portion of Islamic State expenses.

Jabhat al-Nusra, which increasingly emphasized its al-Qaeda affiliation after Zawahiri's ruling in its favor (by doing things such as inscribing the al-Qaeda name on banners), suffered considerably as a result of the rise of the Islamic State, losing all its holdings in the east by July 2014.<sup>45</sup> Leaked recordings in that month suggested an impending announcement of an Islamic emirate by Jabhat al-Nusra to counter the Islamic State's project, though the emirate announcement was denied in an official Jabhat al-Nusra statement. However, the group did not collapse but rather began to show a harsher side. By November 2014, it had expelled the FSA coalition known as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, with whom Jabhat

al-Nusra had previously cooperated in expelling ISIS from Idlib.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Jabhat al-Nusra began setting up its own Dar al-Qada (judiciary) branches in various localities in northwest Syria and forced the Druze community of Jabal al-Summaq in northern Idlib province to renounce their faith, destroying Druze shrines in the process.<sup>47</sup>

In 2015, a number of Islamist, Salafi, and jihadi groups in the north came to set up the Jaysh al-Fatah coalition, primarily based in Idlib province and led by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham. Faylaq al-Sham also joined this coalition. With backing from Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, the coalition expelled the Assad regime from Idlib city and other key towns in the province, leaving two isolated Shiite villages, Fou'a and Kafariya, under siege. The coalition failed to establish a unified governance system in the province, and Jabhat al-Nusra experienced its own internal ruptures centered around two dissident figures, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani and Saleh al-Hamawi, who were both involved in the creation of Jabhat al-Nusra but came to believe the group was not being pragmatic enough and insisted on focusing more on unification efforts.

Real unity between Jabhat al-Nusra and more mainstream factions was impeded by Jabhat al-Nusra's al-Qaeda ties. Proposals for a merger in January and February 2016 were ultimately rejected because of these connections. Around this time, Zawahiri recorded a speech entitled "Go Forth to al-Sham" (not released until May 2016) that portrayed the Syrian jihad as the best hope for establishing an Islamic government that could eventually give rise to the caliphate.<sup>48</sup> Unity of the mujahideen, according to Zawahiri, is paramount (an idea he had previously emphasized in a January 2014 speech on Syria in which he placed unity above temporary organizational ties).<sup>49</sup>

By July 2016, it had become more attractive for Jabhat al-Nusra to sever public ties with al-Qaeda, partly on account of proposed US-Russian coordination to target the group.<sup>50</sup> The move to break ties would put the ball in the court of the factions that objected to the al-Qaeda affiliation in discussions on mergers. In addition, Jabhat al-Nusra hoped to score a propaganda move in trying to show that Westerners objected to Islam itself, not simply to al-Qaeda links. As a result, with apparent guidance from al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra officially rebranded itself as an independent entity on July 28, 2016, changing its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (Conquest of al-Sham Front).<sup>51</sup> The move, announced by Golani on video, was preceded several hours by an audio message from Zawahiri's deputy, Abu al-Khayr al-Masri, urging for the necessary steps to be taken to protect the Syrian jihad. The fact the message came from Jabhat al-Nusra's media wing, al-Manara al-Bayda, suggested that Masri was already in Syria, fitting in with a pattern of movement of senior al-Qaeda personnel to Syria. Some elements within Jabhat al-Nusra (for example, Abu Julaybib) rejected the rebranding out of fear of ideological dilution of the jihadist project, but they do not seem to have had the influence to divide the ranks.

### *"Third-way" jihadist groups*

In addition to the Islamic State and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, there have been a number of smaller jihadi factions composed partly or mainly of foreign fighters. These groups have differed in their allegiances, and most of them have merged over time with larger formations, including the Islamic State. Some groups that were more closely affiliated with al-Qaeda have merged with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and its successor organization, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or remained independent organizations. The main independent group today is the Turkestan Islamic Party (composed mostly of Uyghur refugees who have lived in Turkey).

A more mainstream current encompasses a broad array of groups funded heavily by Salafi activists in the Arab Gulf and Arab Gulf governments themselves, who see them as a means of limiting the growth potential of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Baghdadi's Islamic State. Most of these groups joined the Syrian Islamic Front, an umbrella coalition established in December 2012, and its successor, the Islamic Front, in November 2013. However, the Islamic Front underwent a variety of splits and mergers, with the brand currently most associated with Ahrar al-Sham and groups that have merged into it. Other Islamic Front

member groups, such as affiliates of the Aleppo-based Liwa al-Tawhid that were ideologically closer to the Muslim Brotherhood, went on to form separate coalitions like the Shami Front.

Ideologically, most of the groups that constituted the Islamic Front share much in common with hardline jihadists. They have proclaimed rejection of democracy, claimed to be fighting for an Islamic state, and refused to recognize the SNC and the opposition interim government. Unlike the transnational jihadists, however, Islamic Front groups downplayed or even denied pan-Islamic ambitions (scholar Abdul Rahman Al-Haj calls them “deferred Caliphate” jihadists<sup>52</sup>), avoided anti-Western demagoguery, and adopted slightly less inflammatory rhetoric concerning Syrian minorities.<sup>53</sup> The Islamic Front groups have had few foreign volunteers fighting in their ranks (mostly concentrated in Ahrar al-Sham), and none are known to have used suicide attacks significantly.

Most Islamic Front groups relied heavily on financing from Arab Gulf donors, most of it channeled under the guise of humanitarian aid through Kuwait, which has been the primary hub of private fundraising because of its lax regulatory environment and the political strength of Salafis.<sup>54</sup> The tiny, oil-rich emirate was dubbed “the Arab world’s main clearinghouse” for donations to radical Islamist rebels by the *Wall Street Journal*<sup>55</sup> and “a virtual Western Union outlet for Syria’s rebels” by the *New York Times*.<sup>56</sup> Due to UN sanctions and Kuwaiti regulations, these financiers’ importance has been greatly diminished.

Perhaps more ambiguous in characterization is Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham is strongest in Idlib province and was the leading faction there alongside Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. Founded in late 2011 and led by Hassan Abboud, a former Sednaya military prison detainee, Ahrar al-Sham became a leading actor in the Syrian Islamic Front and then the Islamic Front. Though most of the first generation of the leadership was wiped out in a mysterious explosion in late 2014, the group recovered. Strongly backed by Turkey and Qatar, Ahrar al-Sham has been open to the idea of engagement on the international stage and has a foreign political relations wing dedicated to this engagement, represented foremost by Labib Nahhas (a.k.a. Abu Izz al-Deen), who was seen as embodying the more moderate wing of Ahrar al-Sham. On the other hand, remarks by Ali al-Omar, who became leader in November 2016, also situates Ahrar al-Sham within the Islamic movements that seek the revival of the caliphate. The speech framed the conflict in Syria in highly sectarian terms, stressing the need to come together to fight the “Rafidites” (a derogatory term for the Shia), and spoke highly of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a Sunni movement that could bring together Sunnis of a variety of madhahib (schools of thought).

The group maintained closer military alliances with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham than Jaysh al-Islam, but forming unified governing structures within areas taken from the regime has proven more elusive. At the local level in Idlib province, for example, Ahrar al-Sham has often acted as a local counterbalance to harsher actions by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. The two groups also supported rival judiciary structures: while Ahrar al-Sham is linked with the Islamic Commission, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham backed the Dar al-Qada (set up in 2014 as Jabhat al-Nusra’s judiciary branch). In July 2016, a number of Salafi and jihadist jurists and scholars came together to form the Assembly of al-Sham Scholars, which aimed to serve as a single, ostensibly independent judiciary body for the various factions. This development fit in with the notion of grander unification efforts among Salafi and jihadist factions—an idea that also helped give rise to the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

However, success in the subsequent unity talks between Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and other factions, particularly Ahrar al-Sham, proved elusive. A clear reason for this failure is that Jabhat Fatah al-Sham did not appear to have fundamentally changed its conduct or ideological end goals, even though those who rejected the rebranding have feared ideological compromise of the jihadist project. This failure to change gave rise to suspicion that the rebranding was more a tactical move than a genuine break from al-Qaeda. On a key issue—namely, whether it is acceptable to coordinate operations with Turkish forces to fight the Islamic State in north Aleppo countryside—Jabhat Fatah al-Sham reiterated opposition to such action in keeping with the prior rejectionist stance of Jabhat al-Nusra, while Ahrar al-Sham’s Shari’i



council officially endorsed coordination. Though the endorsement does not mean everyone in Ahrar al-Sham agreed on the idea, fighters from the group participated in Turkey's Euphrates Shield operations in the north Aleppo countryside against the Islamic State, despite criticism that the Euphrates Shield drew manpower away from fronts against the regime, allowing Aleppo to fall into Assad's hands.

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham's premise for unity talks appeared to have been based on the notion that other factions should merge under its banner and lose their identities, or at least accept the group as having the main leadership role in a merger body: that is, unity should ultimately be on Jabhat Fatah al-Sham's terms. The fall of Aleppo to the regime in December 2016—a heavy blow to the wider insurgency—intensified discussions surrounding a merger between factions in the north of the country, the success or failure of which depended heavily on the roles of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. In effect, two rival unity initiatives emerged. One of these initiatives was embodied in a statement issued on December 28, 2016, by ten factions, including Faylaq al-Sham, the Shami Front, and Jaysh al-Islam's minor northern affiliates.<sup>57</sup> These factions have emphasized their orientation through issuing the statement in the name of the "Free Syrian Army." That is, whatever the Islamist and Salafi tendencies, the project was operating within a clear national framework.

The other unification movement represented a continuation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham's efforts to push for unity, still clearly on its terms and with the intent of orienting the wider insurgency toward its ideological end goals. Ahrar al-Sham effectively found itself caught in the middle of these two unity initiatives. Some in Ahrar al-Sham's senior leadership are more sympathetic to the initiative led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, while others, in particular those associated with the group's wider political outreach efforts such as Labib Nahhas, rejected siding with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, seeing it as an act of political suicide.<sup>58</sup>

Only a round of serious infighting spurred actual mergers, beginning with an attack by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham on the Mujahideen Army, a group that had received CIA support. By the end of January 2017, several groups, including the Shami Front and Jaysh al-Islam's northern affiliates, subsequently merged under Ahrar al-Sham, seeking protection from Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, while Jabhat Fatah al-Sham merged with groups that had a close working relationship with it, in addition to sympathizers in Ahrar al-Sham under Hashim al-Sheikh, to form Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Liberation of al-Sham Commission), led by Hashim al-Sheikh with Golani as military commander.

Despite an apparent new balance of power being struck by the mergers, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had seized control of important border supply routes in Idlib and had emerged the stronger actor. This reality was borne out in a subsequent round of infighting in July 2017 that saw Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham inflict some decisive defeats on Ahrar al-Sham, including forcing the latter off the key Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey and expelling the group from the Idlib provincial capital.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's moves against its largest rival are connected to its aim of expanding its administrative capabilities as part of a wider effort to become the face of Syria's insurgency. Hay'at Tahrir is committed to rejecting the notion of a political settlement with the regime but also trying to force the outside world to deal with it. For example, the group has taken an increasingly hardline approach towards civilian local councils operating in its areas, requiring them to become affiliated with its services administration. The group has also set up a new administration to monitor financial transfers and currency exchanges.

The long-term viability of this project is doubtful. Despite professed commitments by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to maintaining the independence of aid organizations and NGOs working in Idlib, these organizations and their donors will be increasingly reluctant to work in a province dominated by what is internationally considered to be an al-Qaeda front group. In turn, the growing pariah status of the province is likely to hurt Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham financially in an area lacking the lucrative resources like oil that are found in the Islamic State's remaining holdings in eastern Syria.

The formation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its growing administrative project raise issues regarding

its relationship with al-Qaeda. The speed with which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham was formed means that it is unlikely that al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had a part in the creation of the merger. Since the creation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Jordanian jurist Sami al-Oraydi, who served as chief jurist for Jabhat al-Nusra and remained even after the formation of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, has parted ways with Golani and other former comrades, accusing the successor organizations to Jabhat al-Nusra of disobeying al-Qaeda.

Further, Zawahiri has taken on a realistic view of the Syrian civil war since the insurgency's loss of Aleppo, urging the jihadists in a message released in April 2017 to pursue a strategy of guerrilla warfare rather than control of territory. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's policies are the opposite of this approach, indicating a clear strategic divergence between Zawahiri and the group. Only a large offensive by the regime and its allies into Idlib province, which will likely force Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to adopt guerrilla tactics, is likely to bring about a rapprochement between Zawahiri and the group.

Ahrar al-Sham, meanwhile, has appointed a new leader (Hassan Soufan), and has vowed to continue its operations, trying to demonstrate the loyalty of its affiliates. However, it seems doubtful that the group will recover from the blows inflicted on it in July 2017.

### ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Syria is an extraordinarily diverse country. Sunni Arabs are by far the largest ethno-sectarian group, comprising sixty-seven percent of the population. Non-Arab (predominantly Sunni) Kurds number roughly nine percent of the population. The remainder consists of non-Sunni, predominantly Arab religious minorities—Alawis comprise about twelve percent of the population; Christians of various denominations, ten percent; Druze, three percent; and various Shia denominations, around one percent.<sup>59</sup> Communal solidarity (*asabiya*) is very strong among all of these minorities, owing in part to centuries of oppression and discrimination at the hands of Sunni rulers.

Assad made sure that the façade of civilian government in Syria appropriately reflected Sunni demographic weight. The positions of prime minister, foreign minister, and army commander were nearly always held by Sunnis, for example, as were most parliamentary seats, judicial offices, and other high visibility posts. Many second-generation Alawi power barons later forged business partnerships with Sunnis, and some (including Bashar al-Assad) married Sunni women.<sup>60</sup> For most Syrians, opposition to the regime was not rooted primarily in matters of faith. The Assad regime's statist economic development and social welfare policies gave it a sufficiently strong base of rural support cutting across sectarian lines that lasted through the turn of the century.<sup>61</sup>

Militant Islamism certainly was not a cause of the popular uprising that erupted in 2011. There are plenty of socio-economic drivers, most notably a pronounced youth bulge. Syria's population at the time of twenty-three million was the youngest in the Middle East outside of the Palestinian Territories,<sup>62</sup> with fifty-three percent below the age of twenty.<sup>63</sup>

Bashar Assad's economic reforms solidified support for the regime among the urban elites and middle class, but at the expense of rural areas. UK-based Syrian journalist Malik al-Abdeh characterized the uprising as a "revolution of the rural Sunni working classes against the Alawi-dominated military elite and the urban bourgeoisie (both Muslim and Christian) that has profited from the Assad dictatorship."<sup>64</sup> It was not religion that triggered their decision to rise up to the regime after years of quiet obedience, but the "demonstration effect" of watching Egyptians, Tunisians, and Libyans overthrow their own governments.

Early in the uprising, observers sympathetic to the opposition argued that "there are few traces of radical Islamism in Syria" and that, should the Assad regime fall, "the chances of Syria turning into an Islamic state are almost nil."<sup>65</sup> But the secular democratic orientation of the uprising steadily eroded as the violence escalated and prospects of a peaceful solution evaporated.<sup>66</sup> This erosion was partly because the regime had little trouble suppressing protests in non-Sunni and mixed towns and neighborhoods, where demonstrations were never large enough to give safety in numbers. In Sunni majority areas, in

contrast, demonstrations “were 20 to 30 times larger [and] organized under the semi-inviolable protection of mosques.”<sup>67</sup> For ordinary Syrians contemplating whether to protest in the streets, ironically, it was much safer to be a Sunni than to be an Alawi.

Moreover, while it may have been the case that a majority of Christians, Druze, and Kurds—perhaps even Alawis—supported demands for political reform and human rights, they were much less willing than devout Sunnis to take great personal risks in challenging Assad. Consequently, regime repression further tilted the demographic composition of the uprising by weeding out minorities and those of little religious faith.<sup>68</sup> As the country rapidly slipped into full-blown civil war in early 2012 and it became a question of whether to stand up and fight the regime, the revolutionaries on the ground were almost exclusively Sunni. Sunnification was followed by Islamization as most emerging rebel groups adopted explicitly Islamic names and iconography.

Some attribute this Islamic awakening to the fact that donations from the Arab Gulf states and private Arab donors outpaced assistance from the West. According to such “resource mobilization” explanations,<sup>69</sup> the influx of cash from Salafi donors not only strengthened jihadist forces vis-à-vis the FSA, but also led relatively secular groups within the FSA to adopt Salafi dress and customs.<sup>70</sup> Many rank and file fighters of Salafi-jihadist militias are devout Sunnis with no firm extremist convictions. “Size, money and momentum are the things to look for in Syrian insurgent politics—ideology comes fourth, if even that,” notes Lund.<sup>71</sup>

However, much as Pakistan and Afghanistan became the crucible for indoctrinating adventure-seeking youth from across the Arab world into the Salafi-jihadist path during the 1980s, Syria has perfect conditions for giving rise to a new generation of extremists. Already the effects have been felt in attacks in Europe partly caused by returning jihadists, as happened in a shooting incident at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels in May 2014, as well as the Paris attacks in November 2015. Further, the Islamic State and other jihadist groups have made a show of raising and educating children under their wings and indoctrinating them with their ideology. In addition, the large-scale Shia Islamist mobilization to aid the regime has given rise to a much more sectarian-charged atmosphere in the region than prior to 2011.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In the first three decades after the Ba’ath Party seized power in 1963, the Syrian state worked to secularize Syrian society and control Islamic religious expression, especially in the wake of the first Syrian uprising. All formal Islamic institutions were closely managed by the state,<sup>72</sup> while preaching outside of the mosques or outside of appointed prayer times was prohibited. There were no independent political parties, media, unions, or other associations allowed to come between citizen and state. Neutering the mosques was the final link in the chain.

Upon ascending to the presidency after his father’s death in 2000, Bashar al-Assad continued efforts to promote an Islamic posture. The new president released hundreds of Islamist prisoners, lifted a longstanding ban on wearing female headscarves in Syrian schools,<sup>73</sup> and allowed mosques to remain open between prayer times.<sup>74</sup> He began favorably referencing religion in public speeches,<sup>75</sup> while state universities held Qur’an reading competitions.<sup>76</sup> The Syrian military even announced that Islamic clergy would be allowed to give lectures to military cadets for the first time in forty-three years, a decision that Defense Minister Hassan Tourkmani called a response to “the thirst for God in the barracks.”<sup>77</sup>

Although falling well short of the kind of unfettered religious freedom that could pose direct political and security threats to the regime, state-modulated Islamization dramatically changed the public landscape of Syria, from styles of dress to architecture.<sup>78</sup>

Whereas the late Hafez al-Assad kept his regime’s Palestinian and Lebanese Islamist clients at arms-length and never allowed them to operate unsupervised in Syria, Bashar al-Assad went much further during the Iraq war by allowing militant jihadists to preach and recruit inside Syria. The most notable was Abu Qaqa (a.k.a. Mahmoud Qoul Aghassi), a preacher in Aleppo who was allowed to directly recruit

local youth to fight in Iraq and even offer weapons training at his mosque. Some have suggested that Abu Qaqa was, or became, a Syrian intelligence agent, as many of his recruits were tracked and arrested upon their return to Syria. His assassination in 2007 was widely seen as either payback from jihadists for betraying them or disposal by a regime that no longer needed or trusted him.<sup>79</sup>

During the first four months of the 2011 uprising, while thousands of pro-democracy protestors were being rounded up, the Assad regime released hundreds of Islamists from its jails, many of them Iraq war veterans who had run afoul of the authorities after returning to Syria in 2008–2009. Many of these parolees later played major roles in the rebellion. Parolees who later played roles include Zahran Aloush, the first leader of Jaysh al-Islam; Abdul Rahman Suweis of the Haqq Brigade; Hassan Aboud of Ahrar Al Sham; Ahmad Aisa Al Sheikh, commander of Suqour Al Sham; and possibly Jabhat al-Nusra commander Abu Mohammad al-Golani (whose true identity has never been confirmed).<sup>80</sup> Some interpreted the releases as a horribly botched effort to win the support, or at least the quiescence, of jihadists. Others believe that the releases were intended to have precisely the result they had—jumpstarting a violent Islamist insurgency that would lead the international community to think twice about aiding the Syrian opposition, while solidifying support for the regime among minorities and urban, middle-class Sunnis.

Assad had blamed foreign jihadists for the uprising from the very start, so the emergence of the Islamic State—a jihadist organization full of foreigners that makes no effort to appear civilized—was a blessing for him. There is some evidence of the regime having tried to facilitate ISIS’ growth versus other rebel factions. For example, regime airstrikes against ISIS bases in some areas of Syria all but stopped when the group began targeting other insurgents in much of 2013 and early 2014.<sup>81</sup> However, fierce battles between the regime and ISIS in the summer of 2014 over control of oil fields, as well as the ISIS conquest of the isolated regime bases in Raqqa province and massacres of personnel in summer 2014, belied claims that ISIS was secretly in league with Assad. In addition, in 2015 the Islamic State launched a military campaign against regime positions in the Homs desert, culminating in the conquest of the ancient city of Palmyra and Qaryatayn. These towns were retaken by the regime with Russian support in the spring of 2016, though the Islamic State then recaptured Palmyra in an offensive in December 2016, while the Syrian regime and Russia were focusing heavily on Aleppo. The Syrian regime recaptured Palmyra a second time in March 2017.

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