American Foreign Policy Council

Syria

Quick Facts

Population: 17,185,170 (July 2016 est.)

Area:185,180 sq km

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

Religions: Muslim 87% (official; includes Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian 10% (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian), Druze 3%, Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo)

Government Type: Presidential republic; highly authoritarian regime

GDP (official exchange rate): $24.6 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

Overview

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 has eagerly armed, financed, and sheltered foreign Islamist organizations committed to fighting its enemies abroad. The sectarian and ideological affiliations of these groups have been varied, ranging from the Shi'a Hezbollah militia in Lebanon to the Sunni Palestinian Hamas movement and al-Qaeda-aligned terrorists battling U.S.-led coalition

forces in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In addition to advancing the regime's regional strategic objectives, support for these groups 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 bête noire 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), more radical 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.

Islamist Activity

More than four 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: anti-regime Sunni political Islamists ostensibly committed to advancing their agenda by democratic means; 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; and a small coterie of pro-regime Islamists, mostly Shi'a and non-Syrian.

Political Islamists

The first category of Islamists ranges from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) to various traditionalist, reformist, and moderate Salafi Sunni religious currents that dominate the Syrian opposition in exile.

The Syrian chapter of the Egypt-based pan-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood movement was established in 1946. Despite its status as an offshoot, the SMB 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 SMB's base lay in the Sunni urban nobility and middle class.

In 1963, the secular Arab nationalist Ba'ath party seized power and began implementing land reforms and nationalizing industries, which severely threatened

middle-class interests.[1] With independent political parties and media outlawed, the mosque became the one semi-protected space where dissidents could voice opposition to regime policies.[2]

As power within the regime became increasingly concentrated among a narrow clique of Alawi officers headed by Gen. Hafez Assad, who assumed the presidency in 1971, Brotherhood agitation intensified. In 1973, violent demonstrations instigated by the Brotherhood led the regime to modify a clause in a proposed new constitution that would not require the president to be Muslim. Instead, Assad persuaded influential Lebanese Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr to issue a ruling certifying that Alawis are Shi'a Muslims and therefore eligible for the presidency.[3]

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 SMB's influence in Syria for the following three decades. Most ranking members of the Brotherhood went into exile,[4] where they splintered into rival factions centered on figures from Aleppo and Hama. 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.

The tenure of Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni of the Aleppo wing as head of the SMB from 1996 to 2010 spurred a gradual moderation of the Brotherhood's platform, rhetoric, and tactics.[5] The SMB renounced violence in 2001. In 2004, it adopted a new political platform calling for multiparty democracy and minority rights.[6] 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 calling for a "peaceful, gradual" democratic reform process.[7]

After the Damascus Declaration initiative failed to galvanize internal opposition to the regime, the Brotherhood focused its attention on warming up to 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.[8] In 2006, it formed an alliance with recently exiled former Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam, a Sunni ex-Ba'athist with close ties to the Saudi royal family by way of Hariri.[9]

When international and regional pressure on Syria began to wane, however, the Brotherhood tried to reach an accommodation with Assad. In 2009, following Israel's Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, Bayanouni suspended the Brotherhood's anti-government activities, apparently hoping that Assad would reciprocate by allow-

ing the movement to reestablish a presence inside Syria.[10] When this didn't happen, Bayanouni and his allies were soundly defeated in internal Brotherhood elections in Istanbul the following year. His successor, Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh, nevertheless decided to continue the suspension, expressing hope that Turkey would mediate between the Brotherhood and the regime.[11]

The outbreak of mass protests against the Syrian regime in March 2011 took the Brotherhood by surprise. As in other Middle East states experiencing the so-called "Arab Spring," Islamists initially played little discernable role in the unrest.[12] The SMB declined to endorse the uprising for nearly two months,[13] 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, however, Brotherhood leaders threw their weight fully behind the cause.

The SMB's secretive and elitist structure limited how useful it would be to a popular uprising. This structure served the SMB 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 SMB's predominantly urban social base left it ill-suited to connect with a popular uprising emanating primarily in rural areas and the outskirts of major cities.

Nevertheless, the movement 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).[14] The SMB 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).[15]

Since then, a number of moderate Islamist currents have vied for influence with the Brotherhood within the SNC. A reformist current, more receptive to liberal democratic norms than the Brotherhood, included the National Action Group, cofounded by Obeida Nahas, who served as political advisor to Bayanouni and was reportedly the architect behind the Brotherhood's short-lived alliance with Khaddam.[16] Much like Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), Nahas and his allies describe themselves as religious conservatives, not Islamists.[17]

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.[18] 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.[19] Former SNC Secretary-General Badr Jamous is affiliated with the SNM.[20]

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 as a result of the Assad's regime's relaxation of controls over religious life in the past decade. Muhammad Kurayyim Rajih's League of the Ulema of Sham (LUS), led mostly by clerics from Damascus and Homs, is the most notable traditionalist group.[21] 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 was allowed by the regime to operate in Syria in the 1990s.[22]

Finally, the Brotherhood and other political Islamist groups have been joined on most issues by a hybrid movement known as the *Sururis*. Based mainly in the Arab Gulf, *Sururism* "blends Salafism with Muslim Brotherhood ideology," notes journalist Hassan Hassan.[23] Named after Muhammad ibn Surur al-Nayef Zayn al-Abidin, a Syrian Islamic scholar initially affiliated with the Brotherhood who emigrated to Saudi Arabia in the 1960s,[24] Sururis adhere closely to the ideological precepts of Salafism (see below), but reject both the political quietism of traditional *Salafis* and (outside of the Syrian context) the *Salafi-jihadist* embrace of violence.

Due in part to lavish financing from donors in the Arab Gulf, Syrian *Sururis* played an influential role in the rebellion. By September 2012, according to scholar Aron Lund, a financing network run by compatriots of the aging Surur and funded primarily by Arab Gulf donors appeared to be "active in supporting both humanitarian and paramilitary Islamist groups."[25]

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 the Qatar-Turkey axis and opposed to al-Qaeda-linked extremists.[26] Most Islamists in the SNC have avoided raising divisive social issues, such as veiling women and banning alcohol.

Nevertheless, 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 warning that its pretensions to democracy are "a liberal peel covering a totalitarian, nondemocratic core."[27]

Although the Brotherhood declined to establish a fighting force in Syria bearing its name, it has provided funding to a range of different militias. The Commission for the Protection of Civilians (CPC), established in December 2011, was a primary vehicle for this. The intent of the financing has been less to directly control military units or promote their ideological agenda than to increase the Brotherhood's leverage sufficiently to make gains in an internationally-brokered settlement.[28]

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* preach-

ers 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*.[29]

A second umbrella of Brotherhood-backed militias in and around Idlib and Hama was the Shields of the Revolution Commission, nominally loyal to the FSA Supreme Military Command.[30] 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."[31]

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 19 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 has also played a role in fighting in Aleppo, both against the regime and its allies as part of a reconstituted *Jaysh al-Fath* in 2016 and against the Islamic State in the north Aleppo countryside alongside CIA-backed FSA groups with Turkish support.

Regime-backed 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.

In Lebanon, the Assad regime was a principal supporter and conduit to the Shi'a Islamist Hezbollah movement, channeling Iranian arms and funds to the militia as it waged war against Israeli forces occupying southern Lebanon prior their withdrawal in 2000, then intermittently against Israel itself. Syria also co-opted a number of Lebanese Sunni Islamist factions based in and around Tripoli.[32]

Finally, the Syrian regime covertly supported foreign *jihadists* entering Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.[33] 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.[34] 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.[35]

When demonstrations against the Syrian regime first erupted in March 2011, most of the regime's Sunni Islamist allies remained on the sidelines.[36] Once it became clear that Assad was unable to stamp out the uprising by force, however, they aban-

doned the regime in droves. Hamas leaders departed their longtime home in Damascus for Doha, Qatar, in January 2012,[37] 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 have acted to prevent smuggling and other pro-rebel activities in Lebanon.

In 2012, Hezbollah forces began entering Syria, ostensibly to protect Shi'a shrines but in reality also to bolster pro-regime forces. In mid-2013, Hezbollah forces were instrumental in the regime's recapture of Qusayr, a predominantly Shi'ite Syrian town of 30,000, visible from the Lebanese border and essential to sealing off rebel supply routes into Lebanon.[38]

Besides Hezbollah's overt involvement under its own name with Lebanese fighters, Syria has also seen the deployment of Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani Shi'a formations in support of the regime, in addition to the development of native Syrian Shi'a militias. The most numerous and effective of these fighters beyond Hezbollah are the thousands of Iraqi Shi'a militiamen.

The first major "international" Shi'a formation was the *Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas* Brigade, which emerged in 2012-2013 and was named after a widely revered military commander in the Battle of Karbala between the progenitors of today's Sunni and Shi'a.[39] Through 2013, a number of more specific formations emerged from the network of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, mostly composed of and led by Iraqi Shi'a, such as Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib, Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar and the Rapid Intervention Regiment. Some of these militias reflect Iranian-backed splinters from the Sadrist trend, feeling let down by Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's refusal to endorse fighting in Syria. Aws al-Khafaji, one such splinter cleric who backed the Syria militia mobilization, is the leader of the *Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas* Forces, a militia set up with close links to the Syria-focused groups that emerged out of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. More recently, Sa'ad Sawar, a Sadrist militia commander who fought in Syria with Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib, set up *Jaysh al-Mu'ammal*, recruiting out of Sadr City in Baghdad.

Also through 2013, 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, alongside the emergence of new Iraqi militias in Syria like *Saraya al-Khorasani*, *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba'* and *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada'*.[40]

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 Shi'ites to fill their places.[41] 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 occurring to coincide with the Russian intervention that began in October 2015. This time around, Iraqi militias that emerged on the home front

in 2014, such as Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya' and Harakat al-Abdal, and clearly espousing a pro-Iranian outlook, became involved in Syria alongside the groups that were involved in 2013-2014.

The main units of Afghan and Pakistani Shi'a 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 Shi'a 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 Shi'a, a number of formations have evolved on the basis of the idea of developing a native Syrian Muqawama Islamiya ('Islamic Resistance'). 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 city; and Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi. A militia that emerged from pro-Assad tribal networks in Aleppo – Liwa al-Baqir – consists primarily of Shi'ified Bekara tribesmen and claims links/affiliation with Hezbollah. Other Syrian 'Islamic Resistance' militias of note are Jaysh al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Imam Mahdi Army, also known as the National Ideological Resistance, which mostly recruits Shi'a and Alawites from Tartous and western Hama, and the Ja'afari Force (Liwa al-Sayyida Ruqayya), which originated from Syrian Shi'a in the Damascus National Defence Forces. The Ja'afari Force was for a time affiliated with Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada', but now claims to be independent.

Salafi jihadists

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 a millennium 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 the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, *Salafis* traditionally eschewed participation in politics, focusing instead on daawa (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 *mujahidin*, 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 U.S.-led invasion, where they eventually coalesced into

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

Jabhat al-Nusra and the Rise of the Islamic State

In late 2011, ISI chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi began sending undercover operatives into Syria, many of them Syrian nationals. After releasing a January 2012 video statement calling itself *Jabhat al-Nusra* (The Support Front),[42] the new organization claimed responsibility for a multitude of spectacular suicide and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) bombings during the first half of 2012, most notably a February 10 twin bombing in Aleppo that struck a two military facilities, killing 28, and March 17 bombings against the Air Force Intelligence headquarters and Criminal Security department in Damascus, which killed at least 27.[43] *Jabhat al-Nusra* also displayed undeniable prowess on the battlefield, spearheading the capture of numerous regime bases and fortified installations.[44]

Led by a mysterious commander known as Abu Mohammad al-Golani (assumed to be a Syrian with origins from the Golan Heights, though his name may also refer to the Golan neighborhood in Fallujah), *Jabhat al-Nusra* quickly received endorsements from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri[45] and influential *jihadi* ideologues.[46]

In sharp contrast to ISI's strategy during the Iraq war, which 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 U.S. government in December 2012, the Brotherhood and many FSA commanders publicly defended it.

Fearful that *Jabhat al-Nusra* was growing too independent, in late 2012 Baghdadi began pushing for it to be subsumed under ISI, and in April 2013 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, 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.[47] It soon became clear that ISIS, unlike other rebel groups, was not fighting first and foremost to overthrow Assad—indeed, the regime's endurance had created conditions ideal for its growth. After consolidating contiguous holdings of territory in Syria centered on Raqqa in the wake of infighting with rebels in early 2014, ISIS went on to overrun much of northern Iraq in the spring and summer of 2014. As a result, ISIS officially declared its caliphate on June 29, 2014 and changed its name to "the Islamic State."[48]

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.[49] Besides 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 revenue selling off Syrian crude oil (topping up to $1.5 million a day in late 2014, going by the Abu Sayyaf records).[50] As part of the running of the oil industry, the Islamic State has allowed for oil to be purchased from fields under its control and then sold to outside clients, including the Assad regime[51] 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 in Mosul after its capture of the Iraqi city in June 2014, making it by some accounts the world's richest terrorist organization.[52] Islamic State finances have since been degraded by coalition airstrikes targeting "cash points" and the oil industry, however. Further, the recapture of territory by local forces acting with coalition support has reduced the Islamic State's taxation base. This has resulted in reductions of salaries and benefits for fighters, who take up a considerable portion of Islamic State expenses.

Jabhat al-Nusra's evolution

Jabhat al-Nusra, which after Zawahiri's ruling in its favor increasingly emphasized openly its al-Qaeda affiliation on the ground (e.g., by 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.[53] 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 then denied in an official *Jabhat al-Nusra* statement. However, the group did not collapse but rather began to show a harsher side, expelling by November 2014 the FSA coalition known as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, with whom *Jabhat al-Nusra* had previously cooperated in expelling ISIS from Idlib.[54] 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, most notably destroying the shrines in the process.[55]

In 2015, a number of Islamist, Salafi and *jihadi* groups in the north came to set up the *Jaysh al-Fath* coalition, primarily based in Idlib province and led by J*abhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham*. Faylaq al-Sham also joined this coalition. Abdullah al-Muheisseni, a Saudi cleric and financier who had moved to Syria, came to serve as a key spiritual and judicial figure in Jaysh al-Fatah. With backing from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the coalition expelled the regime from Idlib city and other key towns in the province, leaving only isolated two Shi'a 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 more focus towards unification efforts.

A major impediment to real unity between *Jabhat al-Nusra* and more "mainstream" factions was the issue of *Jabhat al-Nusra's* al-Qaeda ties. Proposals for a merg-

er in January and February 2016 were ultimately rejected because of these connections. Zawahiri around this time 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.[56] 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).[57]

By July 2016, the proposal for *Jabhat al-Nusra* to sever public ties with al-Qaeda became a more attractive proposition, partly on account of proposed U.S.-Russian coordination to target the group.[58] 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, there was hope to score a propaganda move in trying to show that the issue was Western objection to Islam itself, not simply to al-Qaeda links. As a result, with guidance from al-Qaeda, *Jabhat al-Nusra* officially rebranded itself as an independent entity on 28 July 2016, changing its name to *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* ('Conquest of al-Sham' Front).[59] The move, announced by Golani on video, was notably preceded several hours before 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 suggests that Masri is as of now residing in Syria, fitting in with a pattern of movement of senior "al-Qaeda central" personnel to Syria. Though some elements within *Jabhat al-Nusra* (e.g., Abu Julaybib) appear to have rejected the rebranding, they do not seem to have influence to divide the ranks.

"Third-way" jihadist groups

In addition to the Islamic State and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*, there are a number of smaller *jihadi* factions composed partly or mainly of foreign fighters. These groups have differed in their allegiances and many 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*, or remained independent organizations. Some examples of still-independent groups are the Turkestan Islamic Party (composed mostly of Uyghur refugees who have lived in Turkey) and the *Jabhat Ansar al-Din* coalition (featuring a Syrian faction – *Harakat Fajr al-Sham al-Islamiya* – and a faction founded by Moroccan ex-Guantanamo detainees called Harakat Sham al-Islam). As of December 2016, the *Jabhat Ansar al-Din* coalition components have formally merged into a single entity under that name.

A more "mainstream" current encompasses a broad array of groups funded heavily by *Salafi* activists in the Arab Gulf and Arab Gulf governments themselves, being seen 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 foremost associated at the present time 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, openly claimed to be fighting for an Islamic state, and have generally not recognized the SNC and the opposition interim government.

Unlike the transnational *jihadists*, however, Islamic Front groups have downplayed or even denied pan-Islamic ambitions (scholar Abdul Rahman Al-Haj calls them "deferred Caliphate" *jihadists*"[60]), avoided anti-Western demagoguery, and adopted slightly less inflammatory rhetoric concerning Syrian minorities.[61] 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 have 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 for private fundraising because of its lax regulatory environment and the political strength of *Salafis*.[62] The tiny oil-rich emirate was dubbed "the Arab world's main clearinghouse" for donations to radical Islamist rebels by the *Wall Street Journal*[63] and "a virtual Western Union outlet for Syria's rebels" by the *New York Times.*[64]

In 2013, the Kuwaiti government prohibited some prominent *Salafis* from preaching to the public[65] and passed new laws bolstering the power of public prosecutors to monitor suspicious transactions and freeze funds.[66] By August 2014, the U.S. government had sanctioned Hajaj al-Ajmi and Shafi al-Ajmi, two prominent Kuwaiti financiers.[67] As a result of these steps, together with UN sanctions and Kuwaiti regulations, their importance has been greatly diminished.

Closer domestic regulation of *Salafi* fundraising may have been intended to pave the way for patronage of Islamic Front factions by the Arab Gulf governments. One of the leading Islamic Front groups, *Jaysh al-Islam*, was formed in October 2013 by the merger of Liwa al-Islam and numerous smaller, Saudi-backed *Salafi* groups operating in the suburbs of Damascus. The Saudi government reportedly offered funding to those who joined, with the apparent intention of halting the expansion of J*abhat al-Nusra* and ISIS.[68] Liwa al-Islam leader Zahran Alloush, the son of Saudi-based Syrian religious scholar Abdullah Mohammed Alloush, became leader of Jaysh al-Islam. He was subsequently killed in an airstrike in December 2015, succeeded by Issam Bwaydhani. The more "mainstream" outlook of Jaysh al-Islam- that is, operating more within a national framework in comparison with the *jihadist* groups (clearly a result of Saudi influence)- is shown by the fact that the group participated in the opposition body known as High Negotiations Committee that was formed in Saudi Arabia, with the aim of working towards brokering a political solution to the Syrian civil war in 2016. Mohammed Alloush served as the representative on this body. Even so, the group has faced criticism in its main area of influence- the Eastern Ghouta

enclave- for running secret prisons and monopolizing power at the expense of other factions, even as it played the leading role in ensuring the Islamic State could not have a foothold in Eastern Ghouta. The group has also had a history of employing harsh sectarian rhetoric and gained further notoriety in late 2015 for an incident of apparently parading Alawite prisoners in cages.[69]

Perhaps more ambiguous in characterization is *Ahrar al-Sham*, which is strongest in Idlib province and the leading faction there alongside *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*. Founded in late 2011 and led by Hassan Abboud, a former Sednaya 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 from this predicament. Strongly backed by Turkey and Qatar, the group is 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 (aka Abu Izz al-Deen), who is seen as embodying the more "moderate" wing of *Ahrar al-Sham*. On the other hand, a lecture by Ali al-Omar, who was then the group's deputy and has since become the overall leader, also situates *Ahrar al-Sham* within the Islamic movements that seek the revival of the Caliphate, framed the conflict in Syria in highly sectarian terms in stressing the need to come together to fight the *'Rafidites'* (a derogatory term for the Shi'a), 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). Historically, the group had in its ranks Abu Khalid al-Souri, who was appointed by Zawahiri to act as a mediator between *Jabhat al-Nusra* and ISIS, but who was killed in February 2014. In addition, *Ahrar al-Sham* offered condolences on the revelation of the death of Mullah Omar in 2015.

At the present time, the group maintains closer military alliances with *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* than *Jaysh al-Islam* (Ahrar al-Sham being only a minor group in Eastern Ghouta and the wider south of Syria), 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* often acts as a local counterbalance to harsher actions by *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*. The two groups have also supported rival judiciary structures: while *Ahrar al-Sham* is linked with the Islamic Commission, *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* backs 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 aims to serve as a single, ostensibly independent judiciary body for the various factions. This development fits 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 immediate 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* does not appear to have fundamentally changed its conduct or ideological end goals, even as those who rejected the rebranding have feared ideological compromise of the jihadist project. This gave rise to

suspicion that the rebranding is more of a tactical move rather 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 have continued to participate in Turkey's "Euphrates Shield" operations in the north Aleppo countryside against the Islamic State, despite criticism that the "Euphrates Shield" has drawn manpower away from fronts against the regime, allowing the fall of Aleppo city to the regime.

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham's premise for unity talks appears to be 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—has intensified discussions surrounding a larger merger between factions in the north of the country, the success or failure of which depends heavily on the roles of *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham*. In effect, two rival unity initiatives appear to have emerged. One of these initiatives is 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.[70] 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 is operating within a clear national framework.

The other unification movement represents 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 finds itself caught in the middle between these two unity initiatives. Many 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, reject siding with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham as an act of political suicide.[71] There is also a hint of a third-way option in reviving a structure known as the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), which was set up in late 2014 as the largest alliance attempt at the time between various factions, but came apart over the course of 2015.

Islamism and Society

Notwithstanding the steady growth of radical Sunni Islamist forces over the past five years, there was little sign of violent extremism within Syrian society prior to the uprising. However, the spread of radical Islamism has been facilitated by socio-economic conditions in much of Syria on the eve of the uprising, sectarian polarization during the war, and the influx of resources from external sponsors.

Syria is an extraordinarily diverse country. Sunni Arabs are by far the largest ethno-sectarian group, comprising 67 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 12 percent of the population, Christians of various denominations 10 percent, Druze three percent, and various Shi'a denominations around one percent.[72] 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.

Alawis, an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, arguably suffered the most prior to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the close of World War I. Branded as heretics by most Sunnis, shunned as deviants by religious Shi'a, and lacking powerful co-religionist regional allies, Syrian Alawis were poor, under-educated, and socially isolated in roughly four dozen remote villages in northwestern Syria.[73]

During the French mandate period (1920-1943), many Alawis and other minorities joined the military as a means of socio-economic advancement, whereas their Sunni counterparts tended to shun cooperation with colonial authorities. Consequently, minorities were overrepresented in the military when Syria gained independence. Many of these officers flocked to the Ba'ath Party, which espoused a secular, non-sectarian, socialist agenda. By 1963, Alawis comprised 65 percent of noncommissioned officers in the Syrian army, which helped pave the way for the Ba'ath coup that year and Hafez al-Assad's subsequent ascent to the presidency in 1971.[74] In the decades that followed, Alawi domination of the security apparatus became even more pronounced.

But Syria was not an "Alawi state." The ruling party's ideology was rigidly non-sectarian – with even references to sect avoided in state-run media. Indeed, in its zeal to erase the appearance of sectarian differences, the Assad regime pushed its own Alawi community to adopt the outer trappings of Sunni Islam (e.g., building mosques, even though Alawis don't customarily use them).[75]

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.[76]

For most Syrians, opposition to the regime was not primarily rooted in matters of faith. The Assad regime's statist economic development and social welfare policies gave it sufficiently strong base of rural support cutting across sectarian lines that lasted through the turn of the century.[77] "It is quite plain that the conflict is not about

religion," noted historian Hanna Batatu wrote in 1982 as the Brotherhood-led revolt reached its climax. "It is not the beliefs of the Sunnis that have been in danger or under attack since the Ba'thist take-over in 1963, but the social interests of the upper and middle elements of their landed, mercantile, and manufacturing classes."[78] Representing similar constituencies, many traditionalist Sufi preachers in Hama and Aleppo supported the Brotherhood-led revolt against the Assad regime (and in Hama their followers took up arms).[79]

Islamism was an effective tool for mobilizing and channeling mass dissent against an Alawi-dominated regime. Once the leaders using this tool were killed, imprisoned, and exiled, however, Syria enjoyed nearly three decades of relative domestic tranquility, with only sporadic outbreaks of Islamist and sectarian violence. Some observers point to this long stretch of stability as evidence that religious extremism had declined among ordinary Syrians – that bad memories of the Brotherhood's folly had inoculated the country against the appeal of radical Islamism. However, the unrivalled power of the Ba'athist state during this era is sufficient to account for the scarcity of internal Islamist opposition.

Like the rest of the region, Syria began experiencing an Islamic revival during the 1990s, evident in growing mosque attendance, more women wearing the *hijab*, and more men growing beards. Islamic bookshops proliferated and restaurants in many areas of the country stopped serving alcohol.[80]

Hoping to safely channel this religiosity away from political activism, the Assad regime allowed some quietist *Sufi* currents to begin relatively freely, such as the abovementioned Zaydis. For example, a women's charitable organization known as the *Qubaisiaat*—named after the female religious leader, Munira al-Qubaisi, who runs it—saw its influence spread rapidly.[81]

Assad also allowed some traditional *Salafi* charities, funded by donors in the Arab Gulf and Syrian expatriates working there, to operate in rural areas during the mid-2000s, though *Salafism* was a "relatively negligible component of the country's religious scene" at the time of the uprising, notes the International Crisis Group (ICG).[82]

The 2011 Revolt

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 23 million was the youngest in the Middle East outside of the Palestinian territories,[83] with 53 percent below the age of 20.[84]

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."[85] 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 chance of Syria turning into an Islamic state is almost nil."[86] But the secular democratic orientation of the uprising steadily eroded as the violence escalated and prospects of a peaceful solution evaporated.[87] This 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."[88] 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 greatest personal risks in challenging Assad. Consequently, regime repression further tilted the demographic composition of uprising by weeding out minorities and those of little religious faith.[89] 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,[90] 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.[91] 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.[92]

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, conditions in Syria are perfect 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, giving rise to ideological indoctrination. In addition, the large-scale Shi'a 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,[93] while preaching outside of the mosques or outside of appointed prayer times was prohibited. With 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.

Only heavily vetted *ulema* (religious scholars) loyal to the regime and willing to actively legitimate it were allowed to preach. The most prominent was Ahmed Kaftaro, head of the Naqshbandi Sufi order and Grand Mufti of Syria from 1964 until his death in 2004. Sermons were typically designed to discourage politicization of religious faith.

The resurgence of Islamic revivalism throughout the Arab world in the 1990s led the Assad regime to take a new direction aimed at endowing Syria with a more authentic Islamic look and feel. The regime released large numbers of Brotherhood members who had been held in Syrian prisons since the early 1980s,[94] while cultivating close ties with Sunni Islamists in the Palestinian territories and elsewhere in the Arab world (its relations with most non-Syrian branches of the Muslim Brotherhood were quite cordial).

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,[95] and allowed mosques to remain open between prayer times.[96] He began favorably referencing religion in public speeches,[97] while state universities held Koran reading competitions.[98] The Syrian military even announced that Islamic clergy would be allowed to give lectures to military cadets for the first time in 43 years, a decision that Defense Minister Hassan Tourkmani called a response to "the thirst for God in the barracks."[99]

Rather than seeking to defuse Islamist militancy, state-vetted preachers now sought to harness it in support of the regime. A notable voice was Mohammad Said Ramada al-Bouti, whose televised sermons made him one of the most recognized figures in Syria in the 2000s. Bouti and other state-sanctioned clerics preached that enemies of Islam were conspiring to sow the seeds of *fitna* (civil strife) in Syria and the broader Middle East, using agents ranging from women's rights activists to the Muslim Brotherhood to set brother against brother.[100] In 2003, the aging Kaftaro even issued a *fatwa* calling for resistance to U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq.

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.[101]

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 Qaqaa (aka 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 Qaqaa 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.[102]

In addition to directly sponsoring *jihadist* violence for political and strategic reasons, the regime used its close connections to the Islamist underworld to stage false flag operations designed to cast blame on Islamists. The most infamous is the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in Beirut, which was intended to pin responsibility on *Salafi-jihadists* (the Syrian *mukhabarat*, or secret police, even recruited a real, unwitting *jihadist* to make the video-taped claim of responsibility).

During the height of the Assad regime's support for *jihadists* in Iraq, Syria experienced a number of suspicious and ultimately foiled or minimally destructive "terrorist attacks" that were likely orchestrated by the regime to bolster its diplomatic efforts to present itself as a victim of al-Qaeda, notably an April 2004 attack on an abandoned UN building in Damascus.[103]

In the aftermath of the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the Assad regime allowed numerous Syrian veterans of the Iraq war to infiltrate the country, presumably to create the impression that Lebanon was less secure. There they started a group called *Fatah al-Islam* that fought a bloody 2007 battle with the Lebanese Army that left much of the Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in ruins.

As part and parcel of the regime's Islamic "awakening," the *mukhabarat* organized periodic demonstrations designed to give the appearance that Islamists are allowed to assemble and express themselves publicly. In February 2006, as the controversy over a Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad was sparking Muslim protests worldwide, the regime engineered large riots outside the Danish and Norwegian embassies (both of which were torched).[104]

During the first four months of the 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, including 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).[105]

Some interpreted the releases as a horribly botched effort to win the support or at least quiescence of *jihadists*. Others believe that the releases were intended to have precisely the result they had – jumpstarting a violent Islamist insurgency that will 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.

Having blamed foreign *jihadists* for the uprising from the very start, the emergence of the Islamic State—a *jihadist* organization full of foreigners that makes no effort to appear civilized—was a blessing for Assad. 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.[106] 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 is 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.

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