

Syria's Salafi Networks

More Local Than You Think

BY WALEED AL-RAWI AND STERLING JENSEN

One of the key factors contributing to the success of efforts to defeat al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was that “foreign” fighters, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and others primarily from Jordan and Syria, dominated the organization. These outsiders attempted to impose their influence in Iraq, alienating local Sunni communities and turning them against AQI. Will Syria’s extreme Islamists make the same mistakes, or will they build strong local connections? Will they play the role of spoilers in the political process, as suggested by announcements coming from the Nusra Front and others, or can they be convinced to participate in the political process? Reports indicate there are up to 10,000 foreign fighters, many affiliated with al-Qaeda, currently in Syria.¹ In what directions and how far will they pull the Syrian opposition?

Security analysts are raising questions about the organizational structure, ideology and potential unintended impacts of Salafi networks within the umbrella of Syrian Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime in Syria.² Whatever the post-conflict power sharing arrangement, important decisions must be made about these Salafi networks: will they be spoilers or will they be powerful political brokers? There is no question that battlefield heroes will wield significant sway; however the secular opposition groups supported by the West lack discipline, loyalty, and a united overarching vision for a post-Assad Syria. Meanwhile Syrian Salafi jihadists have set themselves apart from traditional armed groups like the Free Syrian Army (FSA), gaining popularity and credibility due to their bravery, guerrilla fighting capabilities, access to arms, financing and uniting ideology.³ As Salafi influence grows, the secular elements of the Syrian opposition still struggle to obtain strategic weapons, training, and international financing to help make tangible military advances on the ground.

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Yet, while Salafists are united fighters, they lack political flexibility and maturity.⁴ They are not like their fellow Islamists in the Muslim Brotherhood who have a deeper history in political Islam and are well structured. Salafists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood share the same historical sources of Sunni jurisprudence, but in the 20th century divisions arose in Egypt during the Nasserist era that led to the radicalization of disillusioned members of the Brotherhood—most notably Egyptian Sayed Qutb.⁵ Sayed Qutb’s writings and interpretation of jihad are an important source for contemporary Salafi jihadists. Since the Nasserist era, the Muslim Brotherhood has remained more vertically structured and political than the Qutbists, while the Qutbists have been more clandestine and horizontally structured.

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As seen in Iraq after 2003, Salafi networks were useful when the Iraqi national resistance needed fighters, resources and expertise to fight the U.S. occupation, but they were highly disruptive and divisive when the Iraqi Sunni resistance wanted to get more involved in the political process. Additionally, Salafists lack experience and know-how in international finance and economics, and therefore cannot offer their constituencies a prosperous life once their struggle, whether armed or not, has ended. Egypt recently experienced this with Salafists, who aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, but have become spoilers in Egyptian efforts to revitalize the economy. Finally, Salafists are generally adverse to non-Islamic state structures, and therefore often

form stronger ties with foreigners sharing similar Salafi views, than with their own national compatriots. This aversion to internationally accepted state structures such as a secular autocracy or democracy becomes an obstacle during times of national reconciliation, especially in a country like Syria, which is multi-ethnic and sectarian.

Much has been written on Salafi groups in Syria; however, this article addresses the wide diversity among Salafists and likely scenarios that might emerge based on lessons learned from Iraq. Whether Syrian or foreign, many of the competent Salafists fighting in Syria have combat experience in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya. Each of these battlefields presented new challenges and opportunities that taught jihadists valuable lessons and will likely influence their behavior.

This article is structured as follows: first, a brief background of Salafism in Syria; then a look at the range of Salafists within the Syrian opposition; next, Salafi lessons from Iraq for Syria; and finally, an examination of three scenarios describing how Salafists might react when the Assad regime falls and a transitional government is proposed.

Salafism in Syria

Salafism has deep roots in Syria. Most modern Salafists look to the writings of fourteenth-century Syrian cleric Ibn Taymmiya who taught and was incarcerated in Damascus and wrote about fighting jihad against the Mongol occupation of Muslim lands. Ibn Taymmiya also wrote about those he viewed as heretics, in particular the Shiites, who Salafists do not recognize as Muslims. Additionally, in the last century a few Syrian Salafi scholars have helped shape the actions of Salafi

jihadists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

Following the Iranian Revolution, from 1979 to 1982 Syria endured a brutal crackdown on political Islam.⁶ Inspired by the rise of Islamic revolutionaries across the region, the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to overthrow the Assad regime and was crushed. Many of Syria's Salafists learned from this failure that they could not rely on political Islam to confront a dictator. To survive they either needed to not threaten the authoritarian or to be better organized, experienced and trained to confront the state militarily. They distanced themselves from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and sought alternative adaptations of political Islam. Many Syrian Salafists went to the jihad in Afghanistan after the 1982 crackdown partly as a means to gain valuable military experience.

Differences between Salafi camps, as well as their relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood, crystallized in Afghanistan during the fight against the Soviets beginning in 1979. Two main jihadist schools of thought emerged from the Afghanistan experience. The first advocated exporting jihad to countries in which Muslims were repressed, including their own countries. They believed the Afghanistan experience provided a training ground for jihadists to fight any government they deemed un-Islamic, regardless of there being a foreign presence or not. This was popular among the extremist elements such as Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian *Gamaa al-Islamiya*. Salafi jihadists of this school either stayed in Afghanistan with the Taliban or joined jihadist causes in other countries.

The second school of thought, predominantly supported by the Muslim Brotherhood and traditional Salafists, generally argued that armed jihad is not permissible in Muslim countries where no foreign occupation exists. Instead of fighting their own regimes, these jihadists were encouraged to return to their home countries and either be examples of Islamic living in their local communities, or organize politically to prepare, non-violently, for more Islamic governments. Traditional Salafists largely returned to Gulf countries, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates found modest space for Islamic activism in Algeria and Jordan.

Two prominent Syrian thinkers emerged from the Afghan experience and represent the two different schools of Salafist thinking. The first, Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Setmariam Naser, also known as Abu Musab al-Suri, was heavily critical of the Muslim Brotherhood and the role of political Islam. In his 1989 work, *The Islamic Jihadi Revolution in Syria*, then his 2004 opus, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, al-Suri argues that the Muslim Brotherhood's approach of political Islam failed in Syria in 1982 and will fail in other countries.⁷ A second prominent Syrian Salafist thinker, Mohammed al-Saroor, developed a niche between the Salafi jihadist camp and the Muslim Brotherhood camp. Born in 1938, Saroor joined many Syrian Salafists in distancing himself from the Muslim Brotherhood after its uprising failed in 1982. After the brutal assault on the religious community, particularly in Hama, Saroor sought refuge in Saudi Arabia then England. Saroor developed an approach to Salafism that is both academic and practical: willing to accommodate Muslim leaders even if they are aligned with Western and secular governments. While followers of Saroor may share the



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Nusra Front fighters in Aziza, near Aleppo in April, 2013

revolutionary fervor and sectarianism of Salafi jihadists, they fall more closely in line with the Muslim Brotherhood approach of a political Islam willing to work within a democratic political system.

The Syrian government has also played a role in developing the Salafi networks in Syria. Despite the Baathist government's distrust of Salafists, after the U.S.-led Coalition Forces invaded Iraq in 2003 the Syrian government nurtured relations with foreign jihadists seeking to fight the Americans in Iraq. This relationship developed through the years and played an important role in the rise of al-Qaeda's offshoot the Islamic State of Iraq, as Syria became its main safe-haven in the region, along with Syria's ally Iran.⁸

The Syrian uprising in 2011 ushered in the "activation" and return of many Syrian Salafists who previously were involved in jihadist adventures abroad. In the past the secular Syrian government has been hostile to Salafists and practitioners of political Islam, therefore

the more active Syrian Salafists have moved abroad, whereas the less active Salafists remained in Syria but supported Salafist causes abroad.

Three Types of Salafi Groups Operating in Syria

Today there are three main Salafi camps operating in Syria: 1) the moderates, 2) the traditional and scientific, and 3) the radical jihadists. Moderate and traditional Salafists largely fall within the school of thought which, like the Muslim Brotherhood, did not advocate revolutionary and violent jihad in their native countries after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The moderate or *al-muataadhila* or *al-wasitiya* Salafists are now the most liberal of the three camps. Moderate Salafists resemble the Muslim Brotherhood with their adoption of political Islam. These moderate Salafists traditionally do not advocate the use of violence against their governments as the radical Salafi jihadists do, but accept organizing politically

to participate in the political process of their countries. While moderate Salafists are similar to the Muslim Brotherhood in disavowing the use of violence, moderate Salafists compete with the Muslim Brotherhood as the voice of political Islam. The group *Harikat al-Muminoon Yusharikoon* (The Believers Participation Movement) fits the moderate mold: this is a Salafi group that does not support the Muslim Brotherhood, but believes in using the democratic political process to achieve its Islamic goals. Members of this movement are concentrated in the southern Syrian city of Dera'a as well as the outskirts of Damascus. They claim to have 3700 active fighters and 2300 fighters on reserve.⁹ This group is led by Sheikh Louay al-Zabi, a Syrian veteran jihadist from Afghanistan who followed Osama Bin Laden to Sudan as one of his drivers. He also participated in the jihadist fight in Bosnia in 1995. Sheikh Louay joined those within the Salafi jihadist camp who opposed the September 11, 2001 attacks. He was subsequently imprisoned in Syria. In an interview with Asharq al-Awsat in September 2011, Sheikh Louay estimated that 60% of Syria's Salafists support the principle of a democratic political system.¹⁰

Then there are the *taqlidiya* (traditional) and *al-salafia al-elmiya* (scientific) Salafists who share the end goal of other Salafi jihadists, but do not believe in *jama*, or organizing the Islamic community, to overthrow Muslim governments. Traditional Salafists participated in the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but did not continue radical jihadist activities in their home countries or adopt the Muslim Brotherhood's political model. Islamic purists believe the Quran prohibits political parties other than Allah's. Traditional and scientific Salafists support jihadist efforts, but traditionally do not actively participate or organize

themselves because they do not want to be seen as political parties or opposing their government. They generally avoid confrontation with government leaders in Muslim countries. Most believe that a Muslim ruler, even if flawed, must be obeyed. These likely represent the largest group of Syrian Salafists. Many traditional Salafists follow the teachings of Syrian thinker Mohammed al-Sarooreen and are called the Sarooreen. While the Sarooreen don't have an official armed group, their philosophy and interpretation of Islam is spread out in different groups ranging from those oriented toward the Muslim Brotherhood to the radical Salafi jihadists. Sarooreen are well represented in units of the new Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). The SIF was announced on December 21, 2012 and comprises eleven armed Salafi groups working in Syria. These Salafi groups, including the Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham (Liberators of the Levant Brigades), seek the downfall of the Assad regime and a future government based on Islamic principles for all Syrians.¹¹ The SIF is led not by one leader, but by a coalition of different armed Salafi groups seeking the ouster of the Assad regime and a modern Syrian state based on *sharia* law. The SIF plans to organize politically and join the political process of a future government.¹²

Finally the radical Salafi jihadists espouse the revolutionary spirit of Egyptian scholars Sayed Qutb and Ayman al-Zawahiri and strongly advocate the use of violence to bring *sharia* law to Islamic countries, eventually turning them into parts of an Islamic caliphate. The radical Salafi jihadists likely represent the smallest, yet most impactful and noteworthy Salafi group. These are aligned with *Jabhat al-Nusra*, or the Nusra Front. In January 2012 the Nusra Front's leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani claimed responsibility for suicide

bombings in Damascus and announced the formation of the Nusra Front for Syria, which is believed to have originated in Iraq.¹³ The Nusra Front seeks to unite Syrian jihadists, many of whom had previously fought in Iraq, but had since left for Syria or other countries.¹⁴ Al-Golani insists that Syrian veterans of jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries lead the Nusra Front, as opposed to the foreign fighter-led resistance efforts headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi against U.S. forces in Iraq after 2003. Yet, there are reports of some Jordanian leaders in the Nusra Front. The Nusra Front's declared objective is to "restore Allah's Sultan and revenge innocent blood."¹⁵

Radical Salafi jihadists condemn any effort at bringing a political system to Syria other than an Islamic state. They believe not only that a democratic system is un-Islamic, but that it will be compromised by corrupt and Western-backed leaders who will suppress the

Islamic community.¹⁶ A statement by a group of al-Qaeda-affiliated Salafi jihadists on October 10, 2012 highlights differences between the moderate and traditional Salafists who adopt political Islam as does the Muslim Brotherhood, and the more radical Salafi jihadists. This statement, published on the International Jihad Network's website, lambasts the Muslim Brotherhood and its approach of supporting a future democratic Syrian government and constitution based on popular elections. It claims the Muslim Brotherhood does this to appease the West and that they are willing to join hands with the enemies of Allah to gain power. The statement says: "Oh you people of Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Iraq, wherever the 'Bankrupt' Brotherhood [Muslim Brotherhood] is found, your choice is either with them where you will receive international support and military and financial aid and only have benefit in this



ANONYMOUS

Syrian rebels stand atop Sham II, a homemade armored vehicle

short life [or with Allah] because in the next life you will be harshly punished with the pains of the fire of hell."¹⁷ These radical Salafi jihadists seek to build an Islamic State in Syria, similar to the Islamic State in Iraq. In fact, in early April of this year the head of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) announced the ISI and Nusra Front would be merging into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.¹⁸ Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has since clarified that ISI and the Nusra Front should remain separate entities, but that they should cooperate on shared goals. Even though members of the Nusra Front do not expect to be able to control all of Syria's territory, they wish to establish safe havens as ISI has done in Iraq. They will use Syria as a base for future attacks against Israel, as "liberating" Palestine will be a main calling card.¹⁹

Regional Ties to Salafi Groups in Syria

The ongoing conflict in Syria has given local and regional Salafi networks an opportunity to undermine the Alawite-led (Shiite) and Iranian-backed Assad regime. As a result a full spectrum of Salafists is currently rallying in support of regime change. Syria has become their gathering point partly because the international community, including their own countries, is interested in regime change and

condones or turns a blind eye to jihadist efforts against the regime. This has caused a flooding of foreign fighters into Syria. Foreign fighters in Syria are called *muhajereen*, reminiscent of the followers of the prophet Mohammed during the *hijra*, or escape from Mecca to Medina.

Regional support for Salafi networks in Syria is largely non-state sponsored. Support to the Syrian opposition from key state sponsors, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the UAE is primarily monetary and is funneled through Muslim Brotherhood networks, as well as the Syrian National Coalition. To date, the state sponsors are not directly providing arms to Salafists, though their financial support is likely being used to buy arms. However, wealthy Salafists in the Gulf countries, Lebanon and Turkey are giving both financial and armed support to Salafi networks in Syria. These wealthy Salafists also support jihadists from their own countries trying to enter the fight in Syria. Most foreign fighters have to go through Lebanon or Turkey to enter Syria, as it is difficult for them to enter and exit through Jordan and Iraq.²⁰

Salafi groups in Iraq, Jordan and Syria have an interconnected history. These ties began in the 1970s with the rise of the *dawa*, or evangelical Salafists who sought to revive

Table 1: Three types of Salafi groups operating in Syria

Moderates	<i>The Believers Participation Movement</i> led by Sheikh Louay al-Zabi
Traditional & Scientific	<i>The Syrian Islamic Front</i> led by a coalition of armed Salafi groups leaning toward the philosophy of Mohammed al-Saroor
Radical Jihadists	<i>The Nusra Front</i> led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani

religiosity in their communities in response to the rise of Arab Communist parties. Ties between Salafists in these countries were not organized, but groups were nonetheless united by common beliefs. They exchanged pamphlets and recorded sermons of Salafi thinkers. The Salafi jihadist migration to Afghanistan in the 1980s solidified some of these relationships. After the first Gulf War in 1990, a number of Iraqi Salafists moved to Jordan and Arab Gulf countries for refuge and refined their religious thought, mostly as unaffiliated Salafists without a clear political platform. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, many of Iraq's Salafists moved to and from Syria.²¹

Many Jordanian influences are active in Syria.²² In fact, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's brother-in-law Ayad al-Tubaysi, also known as Abu Jalybib al-Tubaysi, commanded a unit in the Nusra Front until his death. There are over 700 Jordanian jihadist fighters currently in Syria. The Nusra Front's *Shura* council reportedly appointed the Jordanian Mustafa Abdul Latif, aka Abu Anas al-Sahaba, as Emir of the Nusra Front.²³ Salafists organize themselves in *shuras*, or religious councils, because the Quran mentions this as the mode of political leadership. When Zarqawi was in Afghanistan, he concentrated his efforts on bringing jihadists into *bilad al-sham*, or the Levant. When he later formed a *shura* council in Iraq, he largely did it with like-minded jihadists from the Levant, such as Abu Muslim al-Lubnani, to establish recruitment networks in Lebanon and Syria.²⁴ Establishing a foothold in Iraq after the U.S. invasion in 2003 was a means to increase their depth in the Levant. Zarqawi was named an Emir of al-Qaeda when he swore allegiance to Osama Bin Laden in the fall of 2004 and was given responsibility over Iraq. The Jordanians have since had a prominent role in the *shura*

council that Zarqawi established and in 2011 it ordered the *shura's* affiliate ISI to send resources to aid the fighters in Syria. This same Jordanian-oriented *shura* council has also named the leader of the Nusra Front and is the body behind a new Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The presence of Zarqawi's close associates—including his former brother-in-law—in the leadership of the Nusra Front suggests that elements within this radical group come from the same highly sectarian line of thought as Zarqawi, and would push for an increase in sectarian violence and possibly forbid political participation.²⁵

Some leaders of the Nusra Front reportedly forged relations with other Arab jihadists in Afghanistan during the late 1980s, then during the reign of the Taliban in the 1990s, and in Iraq after 2001.²⁶ This is where they worked with Zarqawi,²⁷ and likely with other well-known jihadists such as Libyan Abdul Hakim Belhadj who is now commander of the Libyan Military Council. In fact, at the beginning of the Syrian uprising Abdul Hakim Belhadj sent a Libyan combat group with volunteers from members of Libya's Ansar al-Sharia and other Islamic groups to assist fighters in Syria. He sent those fighters with money and weapons.²⁸ Belhadj likely worked and fought closely with Syrian jihadists in Afghanistan where they developed their ideas of political Islam and jihad. Lebanese author Camille Tawil documented similar jihadist ties in his seminal 2010 book, *Brothers in Arms*.²⁹

Another notorious Libyan jihadist group relocated to Syria under the direction of Mahdi al-Harati, a member of al-Qaeda, who commanded the Tripoli Battalion in Libya. In the northern Syrian city of Edlib, al-Harati formed the Military Umma Brigade that provides cover for Libyan fighters.³⁰ Al-Harati is assisted by a

British-Libyan jihadist named Hissam, whose father is Libyan and mother Irish.³¹

One of Osama Bin Laden's former chauffeurs, Sefian al-Kumi, is also commanding a unit in Syria. Al-Kumi commands the Abu Salim brigade, which consists largely of fighters from the Libyan city of Darna.³² The majority of Libya's Ansar al-Sharia fighters who went to Syria joined the Nusra Front.

International assistance for the Libyan revolt provided an opportunity for many disparate Libyan jihadists to come together to fight for a common cause. They used that opportunity to become acquainted and establish ties. These ties are being used in Syria.

Apart from the Libyans and Jordanians, jihadist fighters in Syria also came from Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco and European countries.³³ Those on the front lines of the Syrian opposition welcome these *muhajereen*, though it is reportedly difficult for them to move around in Syria as they fear being captured or kidnapped.³⁴ In the absence of international support to halt Assad's carnage or armed support for the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian opposition has gravely needed brave men with combat experience and skills in urban warfare. It is yet to be seen who these Salafi fighters, both Syrian and *muhajereen*, will follow when and if a transitional government is established. Based on their experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and other countries, a fundamental issue they will face is whether to accept or reject a pluralistic and democratic political process.

Iraq and Syria

The future of Syria's Salafists can be read in Iraq's present struggle. After Saddam's regime fell in 2003, Sunni resistance fighters

soon fought the U.S. occupation. Foreign fighters, many of them Salafi jihadists, entered Iraq mainly from Syria and joined the resistance. Up until the first Fallujah operation in April 2004, most Islamic and nationalist resistance groups were unorganized, but united in fighting U.S. troops. Both nationalist and religious Iraqi resistance groups welcomed the help of the *muhajereen*. However, as Zarqawi's radical group Tawheed wal-Jihad gained regional prestige and significant financing during the summer of 2004 and later swore allegiance to al-Qaeda in the fall, many of Iraq's Islamists felt sidelined. The majority of Iraq's Islamists, especially affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as many Salafists, wanted

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to join the nascent political process while maintaining attacks against U.S. troops. Sunni clerics, including Salafists, also called on Iraq's Sunnis to join the new Iraqi Police and Army in order to protect their communities. However, Zarqawi and his radical Salafi jihadist shura council forbade anyone from joining the political process or the security forces and ultimately targeted any Salafi cleric, tribal leader or politician that openly took a different stance. At the height of al-Qaeda in Iraq's power, in October 2006, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was announced, bringing together Salafi jihadists who had aligned with Zarqawi.

Today the ISI's survival has largely relied on the sectarian policies of the present Iraqi government, which sideline Iraqi Sunnis and

fuel grievances that provide the ISI safe havens. In 2011 when the crackdown on Sunni protesters in Syria became violent and protestors called for armed opposition, the ISI saw an opportunity not only to help future allies in Syria, but also to rally its base in Iraq. Iraqi Sunnis view regime change in Syria as a welcome relief that they assume will weaken Baghdad's pressure on them. Since 2003, Iraq's Sunnis have felt sandwiched between Shiite Iran to the east, its sectarian ally Syria to the west, and the new Shiite government in Baghdad.

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The ISI now seeks to exploit weakened Sunni support for the Iraqi government and to assist in whatever ways it can in Syria. Iraqi Sunni demonstrations that sparked in Anbar province after the arrest warrant of Sunni Minister of Finance Rafi al-Essawi's security guards were issued in December 2012 have given ISI new hope for a more established safe haven. While the peaceful Sunni demonstrations have condemned al-Qaeda, some Sunnis are preparing for a "New Iraqi Army" patterned after the Free Syrian Army if the Iraqi government uses the security forces against demonstrators as Assad did in Syria. If the Iraqi Army starts to clash with Sunni demonstrators, ISI will again rebrand itself as the protector of the people, as the Nusra Front has done in Syria, and support a "New Iraqi Army." ISI's rebranding has already started with its attempted

merger with the Nusra Front. It wants the Nusra Front's success in Syria to foreshadow a rebirth for al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was significantly weakened by the Iraqi Sunni Awakening from 2006 to 2009.

Many Syrians now fighting with the Nusra Front have combat experience in Iraq and some witnessed first hand how al-Qaeda overplayed its hand with not only the Sunni community, but with other Salafists in Iraq. Only a few of Iraq's Salafists were radical jihadists. When Saddam's regime fell in 2003, the majority of Salafists were traditional and moderate and many initially did not choose armed confrontation with U.S. forces.³⁵ And the leaders of armed Iraqi Salafi groups, such as units from the Islamic Army of Iraq, Abu Bakr Army and the Saad Army followed the teaching of Syrian Mohammed al-Saroor, not Ayman al-Zawahiri or Osama Bin Laden. These traditional and scientific Salafists did not join the al-Qaeda sponsored Islamic State of Iraq in 2006. Starting in 2005 many Iraqi resistance groups fought against Zarqawi's efforts to create a sectarian war and build an Islamic state. Muslim Brotherhood affiliates such as the Islamic Party of Iraq participated in the Iraqi elections and were active members in parliament because they believed that they could "fight the occupation" through political means. In fact, some Iraqi Salafi jihadists opened political wings of their organizations secretly to be involved in the political process, while denouncing it publicly.³⁶ Traditional Salafists did not prevent affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood and anti-al-Qaeda Sunni tribes from taking the armed fight against Zarqawi's network in 2006 and 2007. Traditional Salafists generally did not agree with Zarqawi's assassinations of Sunni tribal and religious leaders, nor the slaughter of

Iraq's Shiite communities. While they agreed with Zarqawi on the apostasy of some Sunni sheikhs for working for the occupation, or Shiites being heretics, they did not advocate using violence to confront them.³⁷ While traditional Iraqi Salafists generally did not join the Sunni Awakening, neither did they work against it. The relationships between radical, traditional and moderate Salafists in Syria will likely be tested by similar disagreements and challenges concerning political participation as were faced by their counterparts in Iraq. However traditional and moderate Salafists will have this confrontation with the radical Salafists before the Assad regime falls because those supporting the political process do not want the radical Salafists to be seen as the winners on the ground when Assad leaves power.

It is important to note a significant difference between the post-Saddam government in Iraq and any future post-Assad government in Syria. Many radical Salafi jihadists in Iraq rejected the new Iraqi government because it came through a foreign invasion and subsequent occupation. The prospect of a long-term presence of foreign forces in Iraq united many Salafists with other Islamists to fight the new Iraqi government because there was a clear religious precedent for fighting an occupation. This will not likely be the case in Syria as foreign forces are not expected to occupy Syria in order to change the government. As long as the international community does not heavily influence the new government in Syria, Salafi jihadists will be less effective in violently opposing those Syrians who join the political process as happened in Iraq. Additionally, the prospect of the U.S. striking Syrian chemical weapons capabilities will not be interpreted by Salafists in Syria as a foreign invasion and will likely be welcomed by them because it will

strengthen their positions against the Assad regime—similar to how Libyan Salafists welcomed NATO airstrikes against Gaddafi air capabilities in 2011.

Syrian Salafists post-Assad

How Assad falls will largely determine how Syrian Salafi networks cooperate with or fight against a future Syrian government. Those credited for bringing down Assad and ushering in the transitional government will expect representation in the next government commensurate with their achievement. Before and after the transitional government, radical Salafi jihadists will likely not join coalitions or committees receiving direct assistance from non-Muslim countries. However, they will not bar cooperation with coalitions and committees that do receive this outside assistance.³⁸ The harshness of the radical Salafist response to international assistance will have an inverse relationship to the degree to which Salafists believe they alone brought down the Assad regime. That is, if the international community increases its role in ousting Assad and ushering in a transitional government, whether through a political settlement, limited air strikes or arming the Free Syrian Army with strategic weapons, radical Salafists will be less harsh and violent in their response to an international role in the future government. On the other hand, if the international community fails to reach a political settlement or does not give the FSA a strategic advantage in the armed conflict, then radical Salafists will be much more harsh and violent in response to any international role in the future government. They do not want the international community to benefit from the sacrifices they believe they made to topple Assad. With this said,

there are three post-Assad scenarios for the Salafi networks during the transitional period.

First scenario “equals among many”: Moderate and traditional Salafists of armed coalitions such as the SIF and the Believers Participation Movement align with the Muslim Brotherhood to strengthen the hand of political Islam and use their wide popular Islamist base and backing from Arab Gulf governments to out-manuever the radical Salafi jihadists. This scenario will be somewhat reminiscent of the scenario in Iraq in 2007 during the Sunni Awakening when Salafists aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood with a shared interest of expelling radical Salafi jihadists from Sunni areas. This scenario would not begin with the ouster of Assad, but rather before a transitional government is negotiated. Moderate and tradi-

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tional Salafists would want to prevent radical Salafists from having leverage in the negotiations, which they would clearly reject.

The Arab Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, are heavily invested in regime change in Syria. Aside from Qatar, these monarchies and emirates are greatly skeptical of the Muslim Brotherhood. For years both the Muslim Brotherhood and radical Salafi jihadists have worked to undermine Arab Gulf governments: they see them as puppets of the West that do not properly use their oil wealth for Islamic causes. However, the traditional Salafists are more in line with the Arab Gulf's foreign and domestic policies because they usually do not have political or revolutionary

agendas. They simply seek more Islamic societies and are more pragmatic in seeking to achieve those goals. As such, the traditional Salafists have received the most financial and armed support from Arab Gulf countries.

Once Assad leaves power and Syria goes through the process of a transitional government, the moderate and traditional Salafists will likely throw their support to political parties that match their ideology and thus align with the Muslim Brotherhood. In turn, these Islamic coalitions will gain significant backing from Arab Gulf countries and will likely be key players in the post-Assad power-sharing dynamic. This scenario would be similar to the coalition, during the Egyptian national elections in 2012, between the Salafi Nour Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. Arab Gulf backing and relative unity between the moderate and traditional Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood will divide the radical Salafi jihadists. Foreign fighters will likely return to their home countries, or to other regions of conflict, such as Iraq, Yemen or Mali if the Syrian Salafi jihadists are divided. Divisions among Salafists will strengthen emphasis on nationalist loyalties rather than Islamic ones. Some Syrian Salafi jihadist groups will compromise and organize politically, while others, the most radical, will likely leave Syria with foreign fighters. Those who remain in Syria will also look for safe havens in areas of sectarian conflict where the new government's security forces are unable to protect Sunni communities, especially along Syria's eastern coast. They might try to act as spoilers as al-Qaeda affiliates in Libya have done since its transition, but they will not be able to derail the transitional government as long as the traditional and moderate Salafists are actively participating in the political process.

Second scenario “strong Salafi hand”:

Syrian Salafi jihadists organize politically in line with the traditional Salafists, undermine the Muslim Brotherhood and moderate Salafists, and push an Islamic agenda in the transitional government with international consequences. This would be similar to Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. While the Taliban was not a Salafi government, radical elements of the Taliban and other radical groups outmaneuvered and fought more moderate voices within the Muslim Brotherhood camp to form a radical government.

In this scenario, elements within the Salafi jihadist community willing to work with a democratically elected government see an opportunity to undermine the Muslim Brotherhood and will align with the traditional Salafists backed by the anti-Muslim Brotherhood Arab Gulf countries. This could occur if a significant number of Syrians credit radical Salafi jihadists with toppling the regime. This Salafi coalition would antagonize minorities or secular coalitions, but it will not dominate the new government. It will merely dominate the Sunni Islamist bloc of government. Through their presence in the government, they will oppose significant Western aid efforts for reconstruction. They will rely on support from the Arab Gulf countries to rebuild communities. Under this scenario, Syria will face less of a threat of radical Salafi jihadist attacks because Salafi jihadists in the government will prevent them from happening. However, Syria's relations with non-Muslim countries will not be smooth. Their interaction with the international community will be purely based on immediate interests and they will not want to support any international initiatives that might make Syria more secular.

Third scenario “inter-Sunni civil war”:

Radical Salafi jihadists remain violent during the transitional period, which causes significant infighting between political Islam and radical Salafi jihadists and derails any hopes for the transitional government. This would basically be an inter-Sunni civil war.

In this scenario, radical Salafi jihadists use the political capital they gained on the battlefield to build the case that only they will protect the Sunni community from corrupting outside influences. They will likely establish safe havens in rural areas, from which they will base future attacks. These extremists will not compromise or participate in a transition government that is facilitated by the international community and will become spoilers. Because of this hard line, they will cause divisions among other Salafi groups and violence will occur between them. The constant fighting between Salafists will destabilize the country and there will be no alternative strongman with credibility in all camps to lead the country out of civil strife. This scenario will likely spark discussions about dividing Syria into separate regions or even states.

Conclusion

The first scenario is the most likely. While there are differences between the moderate and traditional Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood, they have the largest following among Syria's Islamist groups. They also have significant backing from the Arab Gulf countries and Turkey. Generally, Turkey and Qatar support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates support the traditional Salafists. Radical Salafi jihadists also receive backing from the Arab Gulf, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, but their support is not

state-sponsored and is only connected to international jihadists networks. A transitional government in Syria will require tremendous backing from Turkey and the Arab Gulf for reconstruction, rebuilding the economy and ultimately for its political process to succeed.

Radical jihadists currently fighting in Syria are tolerated and in some areas welcomed because of their courage and combat capabilities at a time the Syrian opposition does not receive military backing from the international community. However, Syrians in general, and Syria's Islamists in particular, do not agree with the radical Salafi jihadist revolutionary agenda and rejection of political Islam. Moreover, Syrian Islamists may tolerate the sectarian attacks by radical Salafi jihadists as long as Iran and Hezbollah organize and arm Syrian Shiite militias in areas with Sunnis, Christians and Shiites. Radical foreign fighters, or *muhajereen*, seeking to undermine political Islam through terrorism will find it very difficult to find safe havens in Syria and will have to flee the country once the fighting has stopped and a transitional government is formed. Syria's radical Salafi jihadists will likely compromise by providing tacit support to an Islamic agenda in Syria's new government, partly because they know they will never have a majority voice in the future government. However, they will harp on any violence inspired by revenge, corruption or sectarianism post-Assad to protect and defend Sunni communities in Alawite and Christian areas. Radical Salafists' future in Syria will look like their future in other multi-sectarian and politically diverse countries such as Iraq and Yemen: oppressed Sunni communities without protection will provide them their safe-havens. **PRISM**

NOTES

¹ Nada Bakos, "Terrorist Group Fills Power Vacuum Among Syria Rebels", CNN, January 10, 2013

² Note on terms: there are many types of Islamists, including Salafists, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Shiites (Lebanese Hezbollah is an Islamist group), Sufis, Ismailis and Islamic-oriented activists.

³ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra li-ahl al-Sham min Mujahedi al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad: A Strategic Brief" The Quilliam Foundation, January 2013; link <http://www.quilliam-foundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>

⁴ There is a wide range of Salafists. The term "salafi" originates from the "salaf al-saleh" or "righteous ancestors" who claimed to be companions of the prophet Mohammed. They consider themselves part of the old tradition of Islam and adhere to the Hanbali school of Islamic law. Some self-proclaimed Salafists choose to express their Puritanism simply through outward appearance, i.e., a beard, a shorter dishdasha to keep their clothes clean, and they do not visit religious shrines. Whereas Salafi jihadists, who follow thinkers such as the Egyptian Sayed Qutb, believe that they must be revolutionary in jihad, espouse violence for political change and reject the rise of Islamic offshoots, such as Shiites.

⁵ For more on the difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists, see March Lynch, "Islam Divided Between Salafi-jihad and the Ikhwan," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33:6, p. 467-487; May 2010

⁶ Al-Jazeera, "Political Islam and the Syrian Revolution," 10 June 2012, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/06/2012610962880192.htm>

⁷ For more on al-Suri see Brynjar Lia's *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri*, Columbia University Press; New York; 2008.

⁸ From 2002 to 2005 Iran was an important conduit for jihadist fighters coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan into Iraq. Depending on the temperature of Al-Qaeda rhetoric, the Iranian regime periodically allowed Al-Qaeda members free passage through their country depending on the impact of Al-Qaeda's activities in areas of mutual interest such as Iraq and Yemen. See Waleed al-Rawi's 2012 book

Dawla al-Iraq al-Islamiya (The Islamic State of Iraq) for more information.

⁹ Al-Gad TV Channel interview with Sheikh Louy al-Zabi on its Suriya al-Yum program on February 5, 2013

¹⁰ Asharq al-Awsat, "amin am 'aluminumoon yusharikoon' al-salafiya: al-adu al-haqiqi lana Khamenai thuma Hezbollah fa Bashar al-Assad" September 26, 2011 no. 11990

¹¹ Zvi Bar'el, "World awaits Assad's head, but Syrian president is hell-bent on war of attrition," Haaretz, December 22, 2012. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/world-awaits-assad-s-head-but-syrian-president-is-hell-bent-on-war-of-attrition.premium-1.489275>

¹² Aaron Zelin, "The Syrian Islamic Front's Order of Battle," Al-Wasat, January 22, 2013 <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/01/22/syrian-islamic-fronts-order-of-battle/>

¹³ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra..."

¹⁴ One source claims the Nusra Front has no formal ties with the Islamic State of Iraq, but that many of its fighters have jihadist experience in Iraq. See Time article by Rania Abouzeid "Syria: Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's Islamist Militia Group"

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Shabakah al-Jihad al-'Aleml, October 10, 2012.

¹⁸ BBC, "Syria's al-Nusra Front 'part of al-Qaeda,'" April 9, 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22078022>

¹⁹ Sterling Jensen interview with Islamist leader in the Free Syrian Army, January 2013.

²⁰ It is easier for Jordanian and Iraqi jihadists, largely with tribal ties, to enter and exit Syria.

²¹ Waleed al-Rawi interview with Abu Wael, Emir of the Iraqi Ansar al-Sunna group, 2007.

²² Taylor Luck, "Over 700 Jordanian jihadists fighting in Syria," The Jordan Times; July 13, 2013.

²³ On December 13, 2012 Al-Jazeera TV reported Abu Anas al-Sahaba as Emir, but then on January 6, 2013 reported he was just a unit commander in the Nusra Front.

²⁴ Rum Online, April 10, 2010 "hafaya jadida min haya abu musab al-zarqawi takshif awal marra"

²⁵ Al-Hayat, January 8, 2013 "jabhat al-nusra," <http://alhayat.com/Details/470180> see English translation: Al-Monitor January 2013 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html>

[al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html)

²⁶ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra..."

²⁷ Waleed al-Rawi interview with senior Libyan academic, December 2012.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Camille Tawil, Brothers in Arms: the story of Al-Qaeda and the Arab jihadists, SAQI Books, London, 2010.

³⁰ Waleed al-Rawi interview with senior Libyan academic, December 2012.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra..."

³⁴ Sterling Jensen interview with Islamist leader in the Free Syrian Army, January 2013.

³⁵ Sterling Jensen interview with Mullah Nadem al-Jabouri, December 2010.

³⁶ Waleed al-Rawi interview with Abu Wael, Emir of Ansar al-Sunna, 2007

³⁷ Sterling Jensen and Waleed al-Rawi interviews with various leaders of the Islamic Army of Iraq and Ansar Al-Sunna.

³⁸ Al-Hayat, January 8, 2013 <http://alhayat.com/Details/470180> see English translation: Al-Monitor <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/jabhat-al-nusras-goals-extend-beyond-syria.html>



A close-up view of the Za'atri camp for Syrian refugees as seen on July 18, 2013